

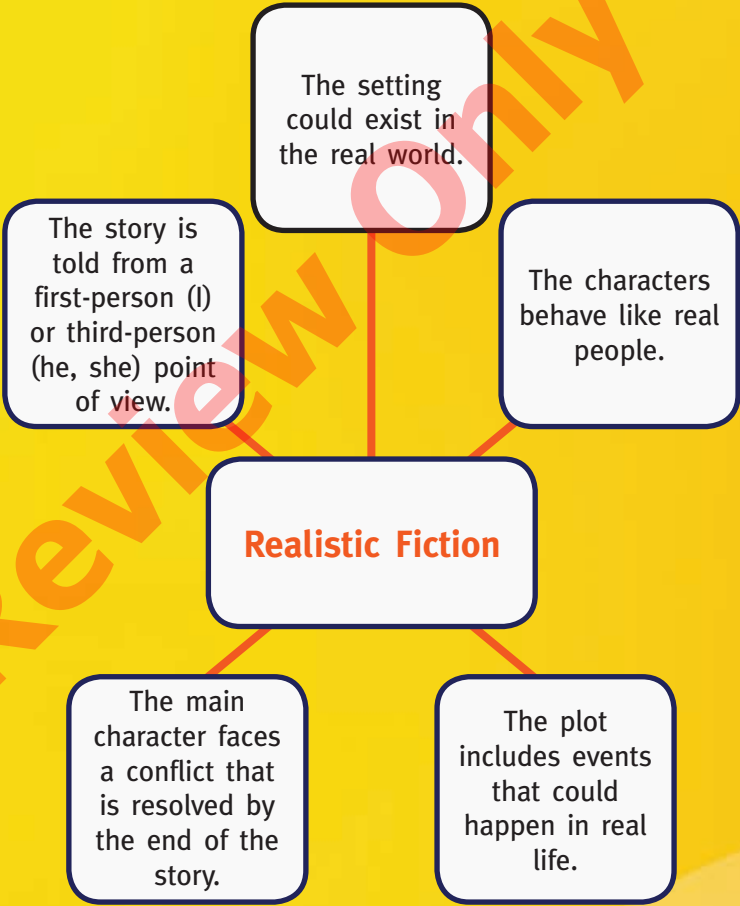
PONGAL

IN PENNSYLVANIA



Realistic Fiction

Look for the genre features noted below as you read this book. Use the features to help you understand the text.



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Jet Lag

Anu's clock said 2:23 a.m. Outside, the January wind was howling. She padded into the kitchen, where Amma sat at the table, looking through a photo album.

"Amma, I can't sleep," Anu complained.

"Me neither," her mom said. "We're jet-lagged. We've been back in Pennsylvania only one day, and our bodies still think we're in India."

Anu, Amma, and Anu's brother, Ram, had spent winter break at the house of Amma's parents in Tamil Nadu, a southern state in India.

"Tomorrow is your first day back at school," Amma said. "You shouldn't go tired. Let's drink some turmeric milk. That always makes me sleepy."

Amma mixed turmeric, sugar, and black pepper into a pot of hot milk. Anu loved the earthy smell of the spices.

Anu opened the photo album.

"Those are pictures of Pongal in my village," Amma said. Then she sighed.

"What's the matter, Amma?"

“Pongal is my favorite holiday,” Amma said. She put two steaming mugs on the table. “It’s full of beautiful traditions. Thinking about it makes me miss India.”

“Pongal,” Anu said. “You used to tell us stories about it. You said it’s like Thanksgiving in Tamil Nadu.”

“It is!” Amma said. “Starting on January 14, we celebrate the work farmers do to grow our food. Except, unlike Thanksgiving, Pongal is three days long.”



“January 14? That’s this Saturday!” Anu exclaimed.

“Yes, that’s the first day. It’s called *Bogey*,” Amma said. “People light a bonfire and burn their old clothes.”

“Doesn’t that cause air pollution?” Anu asked.

“You’re right,” Amma said. “Our family gives our clothes to charity instead.”

“The second day is *Mattu Pongal*. *Mattu* means ‘cow,’ Amma said. “We decorate cows and feed them treats to thank them for plowing our fields.”



Amma showed Anu a photo of two cows with dots of color on their foreheads and ribbons tied around their horns. They wore garlands of yellow and orange marigolds around their necks. The ground under their hooves was covered in colorful designs.



“Is this *kolam*?” Anu pointed at the floor drawings of suns, clay pots, and palm trees.

“Yes,” Amma smiled. “During Pongal, we use rice flour to decorate the path to our house with things that remind us of the harvest.”

“Who’s that, Amma?” Anu pointed to a photograph of a woman stirring a clay pot over a fire.

“Silly! That’s my mother, your Paati, on the last day of Pongal,” Amma laughed. “She’s making *sakkarai pongal*. We cook it until the pot overflows. Then we yell out, ‘Pongalooooopongal!’ for good luck!”

“That sounds like fun,” Anu said. “Why don’t we celebrate Pongal?”

“In America, it’s just not the same,” Amma sighed again.

Anu wanted to cheer up Amma. But her eyelids felt droopy. She yawned.

“The turmeric milk worked.” Amma kissed Anu on the forehead. “Go to sleep.”

As Anu snuggled back into bed, she wished she could bring one of her mother’s favorite things about India to America. But how?



An American Pongal

On the bus the next morning, Anu and Ram shivered.

“It’s so cold outside,” Ram said, “and so quiet. I wish we were still on vacation in India.”

“Amma misses India, too,” Anu said. She told Ram all about her midnight chat with their mom about Pongal.

“Decorating cows?” Ram said. “Awesome!”

“Ram, Anu! You’re back!” Ram and Anu’s friends, Simon and Marisela, got on the bus.

“How was India?” Marisela asked.

“Did you just say you want to decorate a cow?” her brother, Simon, said.

Anu told Simon and Marisela about Pongal. “Pongal is a harvest festival in Tamil Nadu, where Amma was born, and where we just visited our grandmother. When she talked about it, she seemed so sad. I think missing Pongal makes her miss India.”

“I know! Let’s celebrate Pongal here this year,” Ram said.

“How?” Anu laughed. “We don’t have a cow!”

“It doesn’t have to be exactly the same,” Ram said.

Simon agreed. “Every year, our family celebrates the *Día de los Muertos*, or the Day of the Dead. In Mexico, we decorate graves to honor our ancestors.”

“Here, we set up a special area at home instead,” Marisela said. “We use the same decorations, just on a table in the family room. It makes our parents happy.”

Anu wasn’t so sure. “I don’t know if that kind of thing would make Amma happy.”

“What did you see in the photo album, Anu?” Ram asked.



As Anu told her friends about the photos,
Ram made a list of what they needed:

1. CLAY POT



2. KOLAM



3. SAKKARAI PONGAL



4. CLOTHES TO GIVE AWAY



5. COW



“It’s impossible,” Anu said. “Where are we going to get a cow? Where will we draw *kolam* if the sidewalk is covered in snow?”

“We’ll figure it out,” Ram said.

“And we’ll help you,” Marisela said. “It’ll be an American Pongal!”

“Pongal in Pennsylvania!” Simon said.

For the rest of the ride, the friends chattered excitedly—all except Anu.

Traditions are traditions because they stay the same for hundreds of years, Anu thought. She wasn’t sure if a bunch of kids should try to change them.

