
The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

Birth: 1967 in London, England

Occupation: Writer

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“Sidelights”

London-born writer Jhumpa Lahiri, the daughter of Bengali parents, has spent considerable time with her extended family in Calcutta, India. This locale serves as the setting for three of the nine stories in her debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. The stories in the collection, three of which had already appeared in the *New Yorker*, deal with such themes as marital problems, experiences of Indian immigrants to the United States, and translations of not only language, but experience. Newsweek reviewer Laura Shapiro wrote that Lahiri “writes such direct, translucent prose you almost forget you’re reading.” Caleb Crain wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that Lahiri’s collection “features marriages that have been arranged, rushed into, betrayed, invaded, and exhausted. Her subject is not love’s failure, however, but the opportunity that an artful spouse (like an artful writer) can make of failure—the rebirth possible in a relationship when you discover how little of the other person you know. In Lahiri’s sympathetic tales, the pang of disappointment turns into a sudden hunger to know more.”

The stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* include the title story, which earned an O. Henry Award in 1999, as well as “A Temporary Matter,” which was adapted as a film by Indian filmmaker Mira Nair, and “This Blessed House,” among others. “This Blessed House” is the story of Indian newlyweds Twinkle and Sanjeev, who are at odds over Twinkle’s laid-back habits and her fascination with the Christian knickknacks left by the previous homeowners. They include a Nativity snow globe, a paint-by-number picture of the wise men, and a Virgin Mary lawn ornament. Crain wrote that Lahiri “is not out to convert Hindus here, nor is she indulging in sarcasm at the expense of sincere belief. But not even religion is sacred to her writerly interest in the power of a childlike sympathy, going where it ought not go.”

Other stories featured in the collection include “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” the story of ten-year-old Lilia who learns about the politics and hardships of India from a family friend; “Third and Final Continent,” which tells of a librarian putting together the basics in his rented room in anticipation of the arrival of his wife; and “Mrs. Sen,” the story of a lonely Indian wife trying to make do in the United States. She wears her beautiful saris as she prepares fresh fish which reminds her of her native Calcutta. She is sustained by aerograms from her family, who envy her, and the little boy she cares for, who learns what it’s like to be isolated and lonely. In an interview in *Newsweek*, Lahiri told Vibhuti Patel that Mrs. Sen is based on her mother, who babysat in their home. “I saw her one way,” she explained, “but imagined that an American child may see her differently, reacting with curiosity, fascination, or fear to the things I took for granted.”

Because Lahiri was not born in India, her stories set in India have been criticized by some reviewers as inauthentic and stereotypical. *Time International* reviewer Nisid Hajari wrote that two of the stories set

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in Calcutta “survive on little more than smoothness. . . . The reader is lulled by Lahiri’s rhythmic sentences and, for her Western audiences, no doubt by the Indian setting. Lahiri hits her stride closer to home-- on the uncertain ground of the immigrant.” Other reviewers, however, have offered Lahiri nothing but praise. A Publishers Weekly reviewer wrote, “Lahiri’s touch in these nine tales is delicate, but her observations remain damningly accurate, and her bittersweet stories are unhampered by nostalgia.” Hajari, too, offered praise, saying, “The whole is assured and powerful, and it is perhaps not too harsh a criticism to say that readers should look forward to Lahiri’s second book.” Prema Srinivasan, writing for Hindu, called *Interpreter of Maladies* “eminently readable,” and noted that its author “talks about universal maladies in detail, with a touch of humour and sometimes with irony which is never misplaced.” In a New York Times Book Review article, Michiko Kakutani called *Interpreter of Maladies* an “accomplished collection. . . . Ms. Lahiri chronicles her characters’ lives with both objectivity and compassion while charting the emotional temperature of their lives with tactile precision. She is a writer of uncommon elegance and poise, and with *Interpreter of Maladies* she has made a precocious debut.”

Lahiri’s much-praised debut into the world of fiction led to a lot of speculation surrounding the appearance of her second effort, a novel titled *The Namesake*. *The Namesake* deals with identity, the importance of names, and the effect the immigrant experience has on family ties. Gogol Ganguli finds himself saddled with a pet name, rather than a proper Bengali first name. Since he does not find out the significance of his name and its connection to a major incident in his father’s life until he is older, the name seems empty to him. Gogol too feels somehow incomplete, and this feeling adds to his confusion and insecurity as an outsider trapped between two cultures: that of India, his parents’ homeland, and that of the United States, his country of birth. While Gogol’s parents followed the conventions of an arranged marriage, their son does not hold his family’s cultural heritage in that high a regard, and wants more than his parents seem to have. Gogol’s inner turmoil is also reflected in his unsuccessful romantic relationships. It is not until Lahiri’s dissatisfied young protagonist comes to understand who his parents are that things begin to come together for him.

A contributor to Time magazine praised Lahiri’s *The Namesake* as “delicate, moving,” as did Women’s Review of Books critic Mendira Sen, who wrote that this “beautifully crafted and elegantly written novel will speak to many.” In the Antioch Review, Ed Peaco noted that, despite the lack of action on the part of the novel’s fictional protagonist, “Lahiri’s delicate details and soft rhetorical touch create an absorbing reading experience in which characters become friends in the sense that we can rely on them for wit, insight, and affirmation.” Praising the author for her “spare, lyrical prose,” Herizons contributor Irene D’Souza added that *The Namesake* is a “wondrous, gentle book” whose major strength is that it “demystifies a culture that often finds itself at odds with the majority.”

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born 1967, in London, England; daughter of a librarian and a teacher; married Alberto Vourvoulias (a journalist), January 15, 2001; children: Octavio. Education: Barnard College, B.A.; Boston University, M.A. (English), M.A. (creative writing), M.A. (comparative literature and the arts), Ph.D. (Renaissance studies). Addresses: Home: New York, NY. Agent: c/o Author Mail, Houghton Mifflin, 222 Berkeley St., Boston, MA 02116-3764.

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AWARDS

O. Henry Award, 1999, for "Interpreter of Maladies"; Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, 2000, for Interpreter of Maladies; shortlisted for M. F. K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award, James Beard Foundation, 2001; Transatlantic Review Award, Henfield Foundation; fiction prize, Louisville Review; fellow, Fine Arts Work Centre, Provincetown; named one of the twenty best young writers in America by the New Yorker.

WRITINGS

- Interpreter of Maladies, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1999.
- (Author of introduction) Xavier Zimbardo, India Holy Song (photography collection), Rizzoli (New York, NY), 2000.
- The Namesake, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2003

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

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FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- New York Times Book Review, July 11, 1999, p. 11; August 6, 1999.
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- Time International, September 13, 1999, Nisid Hajari, "The Promising Land," p. 49.
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- Town and Country, January, 2004, p. 55.
- Washington Post Book World, September 14, 2003, Christopher Tilghman, review of The Namesake, p. 10.
- Women's Review of Books, March, 2004, Mendira Sen, "Names and Nicknames," p. 9.
- World and I, January, 2004, Linda Simon, review of The Namesake, p. 230.

ONLINE

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