

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

Booklist Review: Lahiri's short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize, and her deeply knowing, avidly descriptive, and luxuriously paced first novel is equally triumphant. Ashoke Ganguli, a doctoral candidate at MIT, chose Gogol as a pet name for his and his wife's first-born because a volume of the Russian writer's work literally saved his life, but, in one of many confusions endured by the immigrant Bengali couple, Gogol ends up on the boy's birth certificate. Unaware of the dramatic story behind his unusual and, eventually, much hated name, Gogol refuses to read his namesake's work, and just before he leaves for Yale, he goes to court to change his name to Nikhil. Immensely relieved to escape his parents' stubbornly all-Bengali world, he does his best to shed his Indianness, losing himself in the study of architecture and passionate if rocky love affairs. But of course he will always be Gogol, just as he will always be Bengali, forever influenced by his parents' extreme caution and restraint. No detail of Nikhil's intriguing life is too small for Lahiri's keen and zealous attention as she painstakingly considers the viability of transplanted traditions, the many shades of otherness, and the lifelong work of defining and accepting oneself.

(Reviewed June 1, 2003) -- Donna Seaman

Library Journal Review: This first novel is an Indian American saga, covering several generations of the Ganguli family across three decades. Newlyweds Ashoke and Ashima leave India for the Boston area shortly after their traditional arranged marriage. The young husband, an engineering graduate student, is ready to be part of U.S. culture, but Ashima, disoriented and homesick, is less taken with late-Sixties America. She develops ties with other Bengali expatriates, forming lifelong friendships that help preserve the old ways in a new country. When the first Ganguli baby arrives, he is named Gogol in commemoration of a strange, life-saving encounter with the Russian writer's oeuvre. As Gogol matures, his unusual name proves to be a burden, though no more than the tensions and confusions of growing up as a first-generation American. This poignant treatment of the immigrant experience is a rich, stimulating fusion of authentic emotion, ironic observation, and revealing details. Readers who enjoyed the author's Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, will not be disappointed. Recommended for public and academic libraries. *[Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 5/15/03.]—Starr E. Smith, Fairfax Cty. P.L., VA (Reviewed July 15, 2003) (Library Journal, vol 128, issue 12, p123)*

Publishers Weekly Review: One of the most anticipated books of the year, Lahiri's first novel (after 1999's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Interpreter of Maladies*) amounts to less than the sum of its parts. Hopscotching across 25 years, it begins when newlyweds Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli emigrate to Cambridge, Mass., in 1968, where Ashima immediately gives birth to a son, Gogol—a pet name that becomes permanent when his formal name, traditionally bestowed by the maternal grandmother, is posted in a letter from India, but lost in transit. Ashoke becomes a professor of engineering, but Ashima has a harder time assimilating, unwilling to give up her ties to India. A leap ahead to the '80s finds the teenage Gogol ashamed of his Indian heritage and his unusual name, which he sheds as he moves on to college at Yale and graduate school at Columbia, legally changing it to Nikhil. In one of the most telling chapters, Gogol moves into the home of a family of wealthy Manhattan WASPs and is initiated into a lifestyle idealized in Ralph Lauren ads. Here, Lahiri demonstrates her considerable powers of perception and her ability to convey the discomfort of feeling "other" in a world many would aspire to inhabit. After the death of Gogol's father interrupts this interlude, Lahiri again jumps ahead a year, quickly moving Gogol into marriage, divorce and a role as a dutiful if a bit guilt-stricken son. This small summary demonstrates what is most flawed about the novel: jarring pacing that leaves too many emotional voids between chapters. Lahiri offers a number of beautiful and moving tableaux, but these fail to coalesce into something more than a modest family saga. By any other writer, this would be hailed as a promising debut, but it fails to clear the exceedingly high bar set by her previous work. *Agent, Eric Simonoff. (Sept. 16) — Staff (Reviewed July 7, 2003) (Publishers Weekly, vol 250, issue 27, p48)*