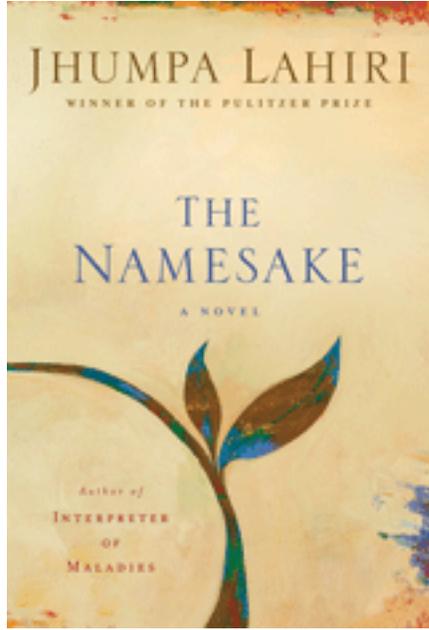


Press Release



The Namesake

by Jhumpa Lahiri

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri](#)

About the Book

The first novel from the author of *Interpreter of Maladies*, winner of the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction

In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri brings her poignant style and acute observations about what it means to be an immigrant, and what it means to be part of a family, to the cross-cultural, multigenerational story of the Ganguli family.

It is 1967 when Ashoke Ganguli and his wife, Ashima, newlyweds in a traditional arranged marriage, arrive in Boston. Ashoke is there to pursue a degree in engineering and to follow the directive of a man whom he met briefly on a tragic train trip: "Pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can." Ashima, meanwhile, pines for the family and the life she's left behind in Calcutta.

When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the conflicts and confusions the Gangulis encounter in building a family across continents. Intent on respecting old ways, Ashima and Ashoke rely on a letter from India bearing the name chosen by a grandmother. But the letter never arrives, and a name must be given before the baby is released, so he is named Gogol after the Russian author whose writing, the reader learns, played a part in saving Ashoke's life.

Lahiri follows the young Gogol as he stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with divided cultural loyalties, comic detours through an immigrant community, and wrenching relationships in and outside the home. Spanning three decades and crossing continents, *The Namesake* is at every moment intimate, as Lahiri swoops in on the perfect detail and emotion to reveal whole worlds in a phrase.

The half a million readers who flocked to *Interpreter of Maladies* will find *The Namesake* "equally triumphant" (*Booklist*).

About the Author

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in London, England, and was raised in Rhode Island. She received a B.A. in English literature from Barnard College, an M.A. in English, an M.A. in Creative Writing, an M.A. in Comparative Studies in Literature and the Arts, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University. Her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of stories, was published as a Mariner original paperback in June 1999 to overwhelming acclaim. *Interpreter of Maladies* won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the PEN/Hemingway Award, the American Academy of Arts & Letters Addison M. Metcalf Award, was a Los Angeles Times Book Award finalist, and was named Best Debut of the Year by *The New Yorker*. Lahiri was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 2002. Lahiri currently lives in Brooklyn with her husband and son.

A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri

Q) In your first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, some of the stories are set in India, others in the United States. *The Namesake* is set predominantly in the United States. Can you talk a bit about the significance of setting in your work?

A) When I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts were, for some reason, always set in Calcutta, which is a city I know quite well as a result of repeated visits with my family, sometimes for several months at a time. These trips, to a vast, unruly, fascinating city so different from the small New England town where I was raised, shaped my perceptions of the world and of people from a very early age. I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor as a former resident — a valuable position, I think, for a writer. The reason my first stories were set in Calcutta is due partly to that perspective — that necessary combination of distance and intimacy with a place. Eventually I started to set my stories in America, and as a result the majority of stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* have an American setting. Still, though I've never lived anywhere but America, India continues to form part of my fictional landscape. As most of my characters have an Indian background, India keeps cropping up as a setting, sometimes literally, sometimes more figuratively, in the memory of the characters. *The Namesake* is, essentially, a story about life in the United States, so the American setting was always a given. The terrain is very much the terrain of my own life — New England and New York, with Calcutta always hovering in the background. Now that the writing is done I've realized that America is a real presence in the book; the characters must struggle and come to terms with what it means to live here, to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here.

Q) *The Namesake* deals with Indian immigrants in the United States as well as their children. What, in your opinion, distinguishes the experiences of the former from the latter?

A) In a sense, very little. The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two

worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more I am aware that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are. In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. (This is of course complicated by the fact that I was born in London.) I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants — those with strong ties to their country of origin — is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This has been my experience, in any case. For example, I never know how to answer the question "Where are you from?" If I say I'm from Rhode Island, people are seldom satisfied. They want to know more, based on things such as my name, my appearance, etc. Alternatively, if I say I'm from India, a place where I was not born and have never lived, this is also inaccurate. It bothers me less now. But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged.

Q) Can you talk a little bit more specifically about the conflicts you felt growing up as the child of immigrants?

A) It was always a question of allegiance, of choice. I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society. It's a classic case of divided identity, but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less pronounced. My parents were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture when I was growing up. Maintaining ties to India, and preserving Indian traditions in America, meant a lot to them. They're more at home now, but it's always an issue, and they will always feel like, and be treated as, foreigners here. Now that I'm an adult I understand and sympathize more with my parents' predicament. But when I was a child it was harder for me to understand their views. At times I felt that their expectations for me were in direct opposition to the reality of the world we lived in. Things like dating, living on one's own, having close friendships with Americans, listening to American music and eating American food — all of it was a mystery to them. On the other hand, when I was growing up, India was largely a mystery to Americans as well, not nearly as present in the fabric of American culture as it is today. It wasn't until I was in college that my American friends expressed curiosity about and interest in my Indian background. As a young child, I felt that that the Indian part of me was unacknowledged, and therefore somehow negated, by my American environment, and vice versa. I felt that I led two very separate lives.

Q) Did you feel as rebellious as your character Gogol does early in your novel?

A) Neither Gogol nor I was terribly rebellious, really. I suppose I, like Gogol, had my moments. But even ordinary things felt like a rebellion from my upbringing — what I ate, what I listened to, whom I befriended, what I read. Things my American friends' parents wouldn't think to remark upon were always remarked upon by mine.

Q) In *The Namesake*, characters have both good names, used in public, and pet names, used by families. Is this still a tradition in Bengali families? Do you have both a public and a family name?

A) I can't speak for all Bengalis. But all the Bengalis I know personally, especially those living in India, have two names, one public, one private. It's always fascinated me. My parents are called by different names depending on what country they happen to be in; in India they're known by their pet names, but in America they're known by their good names. My sister, who was born and raised in America, has two names. I'm like Gogol in that my pet name inadvertently became my good name. I have two other names on my passport and my birth certificate (my mother couldn't settle on just one). But when I was enrolled in school the teachers decided that Jhumpa was the easiest of my names to pronounce and that was that. To this day many of my relatives think that it's both odd and inappropriate that I'm known as Jhumpa in an official, public context.

Q) You write frequently from the male point of view. Why?

A) In the beginning I think it was mainly curiosity. I have no brothers, and growing up, men generally seemed like mysterious creatures to me. Except for an early story I wrote in college, the first thing I wrote from the male point of view was the story "This Blessed House," in *Interpreter of Maladies*. It was an exhilarating and liberating thing to do, so much so that I wrote three stories in a row, all from the male perspective. It's a challenge, as well. I always have to ask myself, would a man think this? do this? I always knew that the protagonist of *The Namesake* would be a boy. The original spark of the book was the fact that a friend of my cousin's in India had the pet name Gogol. I wanted to write about the pet name / good name distinction for a long time, and I knew I needed the space of a novel to explore the idea. It's almost too perfect a metaphor for the experience of growing up as the child of immigrants, having a divided identity, divided loyalties, etc.

Q) Now that you've written both stories and a novel, which do you prefer? What was the transition like?

A) I feel attracted to both forms. Moving from the purity and intensity of the short story to the broader canvas of a novel felt liberating and, at times, overwhelming. Writing a novel is certainly more demanding than writing a story, and the stakes are higher. Every time I questioned something about the novel it potentially affected hundreds of pages of writing, not just ten or twenty. The revision process was far more rigorous and daunting. It was much more of a commitment in every way. And I was juggling much more than I ever have in a story, more characters, more scenes, more points of view. At the same time, there's something more forgiving about a novel. It's roomier, messier, more tolerant than a short story. The action isn't under a microscope in quite the same way. Short stories, now matter how complex, always have a ruthless, distilled quality. They require more control than novels. I hope I can continue to write both.

Q) Have you reevaluated any of your writing about men and/or marriage now that you are both a wife and mother?

A) Not really. The scenes about Ashima in labor and giving birth were written long before I became pregnant. I asked my friends and my mother and my mother's friends a lot of

questions, and I based Ashima's experiences on the answers I got. Being married doesn't make writing about men any easier, just as my being a woman doesn't make writing about women any easier. It's always a challenge. That said, the experiences of marriage and motherhood have changed me profoundly, have grounded me in a way I've never been before. Motherhood, in particular, makes me look at life in an entirely different way. There's nothing to prepare you for it, nothing to compare it to. And I imagine that my future work will reflect or otherwise be informed by that change.

Q) You quote Dostoyevsky as saying, "We all came out of Gogol's overcoat." Has Nikolai Gogol had any influence on you as a writer?

A) I'm not sure *influence* is the right word. I don't turn to Gogol as consistently as I do to certain other writers when I'm struggling with character or language. His writing is more overtly comic, more antic and absurd than mine tends to be. But I admire his work enormously and reread a lot of it as I was working on the novel, in addition to reading biographical material. "The Overcoat" is such a superb story. It really does haunt me the way it haunts the character of Ashoke in the novel. I like to think that every writer I admire influences me in some way, by teaching me something about writing. Of course, without the inspiration of Nikolai Gogol, without his name and without his writing, my novel would never have been conceived. In that respect, this book came out of Gogol's overcoat, quite literally.