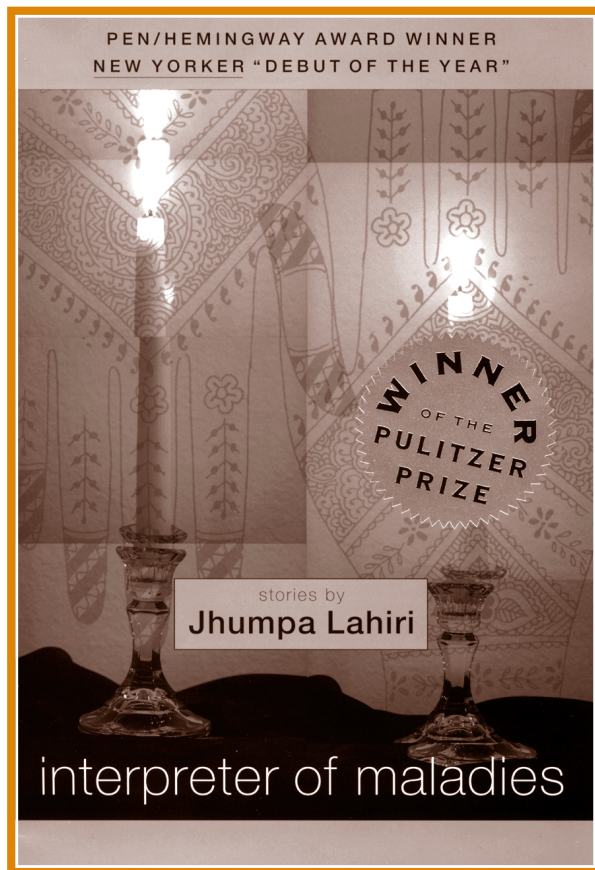




MARINER BOOKS  
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

# A Reader's Guide



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**WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE FOR FICTION**

**WINNER OF THE PEN/HEMINGWAY AWARD**

**THE NEW YORKER'S BEST DEBUT OF THE YEAR**

**FINALIST FOR THE LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK PRIZE**

**AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS,  
ADDISON M. METCALF AWARD WINNER**

## —INTERPRETER OF MALADIES: STORIES—

“Storytelling of surpassing kindness and skill.”

—San Francisco Chronicle

Maladies both accurately diagnosed and misinterpreted, matters both temporary and life changing, relationships in flux and unshakable, unexpected blessings and sudden calamities, and the powers of survival—these are among the themes of Jhumpa Lahiri’s extraordinary, Pulitzer Prize–winning debut collection of stories. Traveling from India to New England and back again, Lahiri charts the emotional voyages of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations, cultures, religions, and generations. Imbued with the sensual details of both Indian and American cultures, these stories speak with universal eloquence and compassion to everyone who has ever felt like an outsider. Like the interpreter of the title story—selected for both the O. Henry Award and *The Best American Short Stories*—Lahiri translates between the ancient traditions of her ancestors and the sometimes baffling prospects of the New World. Including three stories first published in *The New Yorker*, *Interpreter of Maladies* introduces, in the words of Frederick Busch, “a writer with a steady, penetrating gaze. Lahiri honors the vastness and variousness of the world.” Amy Tan concurs: “Lahiri is one of the finest short story writers I’ve read.”

## A CONVERSATION WITH JHUMPA LAHIRI

### WHAT INSPIRED THE BOOK’S TITLE?

The title came to me long before the book did, or, for that matter, the story to which it refers. In 1991, during my first year as a graduate student at Boston University, I bumped into an acquaintance of mine. I barely knew him, but the year before, he had very kindly helped me move to a one-bedroom apartment. When I asked him what he was doing with himself, he said he was working at a doctor’s office, interpreting for a doctor who had a number of Russian patients who had difficulty explaining their ailments in English. As I walked away from that brief conversation, I thought continuously about what a unique position it was, and by the time I’d reached my house, the phrase “interpreter of maladies” was planted in my head. I told myself, One day I’ll write a story with that title. Every now and then I struggled to find a story to suit the title. Nothing came to me. About five years passed. Then one day I jotted down a paragraph containing the bare bones of “Interpreter of Maladies” in my notebook. When I was putting the collection together, I knew from the beginning that this had to be the title story, because it best expresses, thematically, the predicament at the heart of the book—the dilemma, the difficulty, and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction to others, as well as expressing it to ourselves. In some senses I view my position as a writer, insofar as I attempt to articulate these emotions, as a sort of interpreter as well.

## SOME OF YOUR SETTINGS ARE IN INDIA, OTHERS IN THE UNITED STATES. WHY THIS COMBINATION?

When I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts, for some reason, were always set in Calcutta, which is a city I know quite well from repeated visits with my family. 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 learned that there was another side, a vastly different version to everything. I learned to observe things as an outsider, and yet I also knew that as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in ways I didn't seem to belong in the United States. As I gained a bit more confidence, I began to set stories in the United States and wrote about situations closer to my own experiences. For me, that has been the greater challenge.

## WHAT DISTINGUISHES THE EXPERIENCES OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES FROM THOSE OF THEIR AMERICAN-BORN CHILDREN?

In a sense, very little. The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially 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 aware I am that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways—superficial ones, largely—I am so much more American than they are. In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. 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. The feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up. It bothers me less now.

## WHEN DID YOU BEGIN WRITING?

I was seven. Although I now associate being a writer with solitude, as a child writing formed the basis of my friendships. My closest friend in elementary school and I used to coauthor stories during recess. We thought them aloud, sentence by sentence. We set an example, and sometimes we had a group going, as many as four or five people, all working on a “book.” I always hoped for rainy days, so I could stay inside and write instead of having to run around the playground. We were terribly prolific until high school, when the traumas of adolescence took over. I wrote for the school newspaper, but I stopped writing fiction. In college I took a few workshops, but I had no confidence in myself as a fiction writer, and by the time I graduated, I had decided to be an academic. I applied to graduate English programs and was rejected by all of them. Now I know this was a blessing in disguise. I decided to apply again, but meanwhile I got a job as a research assistant at a nonprofit institution in Cambridge. For the first time I had a computer of my own at my desk, and I started writing fiction again, more

seriously. Eventually I had enough material to apply to the creative writing program at Boston University. But once that ended, unsure of what to do next, I went on to graduate school and got my Ph.D. In the process, it became clear to me that I was not meant to be a scholar. I still wrote stories on the side, publishing things here and there. The year I finished my dissertation, I was also accepted to the Fine Arts Center in Provincetown, and that changed everything. It was something of a miracle. In seven months I got an agent, sold a book, and had a story published in *The New Yorker*. I've been extremely lucky. It's been the happiest possible ending.

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## FOR DISCUSSION

We hope the following questions, together with the “Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri,” will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Interpreter of Maladies* for every reader.

1. What kinds of marriage are presented in the stories? One reviewer has written that Lahiri's “subject is not love's failure, ... but the opportunity that an artful spouse (like an artful writer) can make of failure.” Do you agree or disagree?
2. Lahiri has said, “As a storyteller, I'm aware that there are limitations in communication.” What importance do miscommunication and unexpressed feelings have in the stories?
3. In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” what does the ten-year-old Lilia learn about the differences between life in suburban America and life in less stable parts of the world? What does she learn about the personal consequences of those differences?
4. For Mrs. Sen, “Everything is there” (that is, in India). What instances are there in these stories of exile, estrangement, displacement, and marginality—both emotional, and cultural?
5. What characterizes the sense of community in both the stories set in India and those set in the U.S.? What maintains that sense, and what disrupts it?
6. Another reviewer has written, “Food in these stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to.” How do food and meal preparation maintain links to the characters' homelands? What other talismans—items of clothing, for example—act as “reassuring bits of the homeland”?

**FOR DISCUSSION** (continued from overleaf)

7. The narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” ends his account with the statement, “Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept.” In what ways are Lahiri’s characters bewildered?
8. What are the roles and significance of routine and ritual in the stories? What are the rewards and drawbacks of maintaining long-established routines and ritual?
9. In “Interpreter of Maladies,” Mr. Kapasi finds it hard to believe of Mr. and Mrs. Das that “they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves.” What instances of selfishness or self-centeredness do you find in these stories?
10. “In “Interpreter of Maladies,” visitors to Konarak find the Chandrabhaga River dried up, and they can no longer enter the Temple of the Sun, “for it had filled with rubble long ago.” What other instances and images does Lahiri present of the collapse, deterioration, or passing of once-important cultural or spiritual values?
11. What does Mrs. Sen mean when, looking at the traffic that makes “her English falter,” she says to Eliot, “Everyone, this people, too much in their world”? What circumstances of life in both America and India account for people being “too much in their world”?
12. Rather than leave his weekly rent on the piano, the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” hands it to Mrs. Croft. What similar small acts of kindness, courtesy, concern, or compassion make a difference in people’s lives?



Jerry Bauer

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London and grew up in Rhode Island. She has traveled several times to India, where both her parents were born and raised and where a number of her stories are set. Lahiri received her B.A. from Barnard College; and from Boston University she has received 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. She has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design and has been a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Lahiri’s fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Agni*, *Epoch*, *The Louisville Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Story Quarterly*, and elsewhere. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, she has received the PEN/Hemingway Award, the O. Henry Award, a *Transatlantic Review* award from the Henfield Foundation in 1993, and a fiction prize from *The Louisville Review* in 1997. She was also a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and was named one of the “20 best young fiction writers in America” in *The New Yorker’s* summer 1999 fiction issue.

Jhumpa Lahiri lives in New York City, where she is working on a novel, to be published by Houghton Mifflin.

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