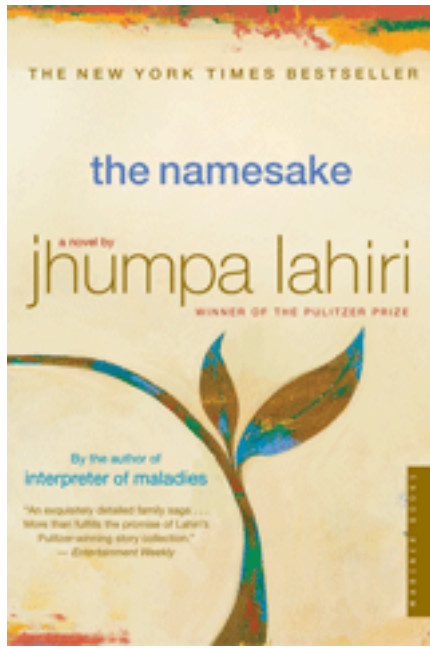


A Reader's Guide



The Namesake

by Jhumpa Lahiri

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About The Namesake

Major National Bestseller

Best Book of the Year: *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Newsday*, *San Jose Mercury News*

New York Magazine Book of the Year

"Dazzling . . . An intimate, closely observed family portrait. — *New York Times*

"Lahiri handles issues of assimilation and belonging with her trademark mix of quiet observation and heartbreaking honesty." — *Elle*

From the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri's critically acclaimed first novel is a finely wrought, deeply moving family drama that illuminates her signature themes: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the tangled ties between generations.

The Namesake takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of an arranged marriage, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Ashoke does his best to adapt while his wife pines for home. When their son, Gogol, is born, the task of naming him betrays their hope of respecting old ways in a new world. And we watch as Gogol stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs.

Video Of Jhumpa Lahiri

Attention, All Reading Groups — See and hear the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri reading from *The Namesake* and answering the most frequently asked questions. This video was designed to complement our readers' guide and further explore themes for discussion.

If you have RealAudio Player, use the following links:

- [RM Full Video](#)

RM High Speed Modem (300K DSL/Cable):

- [Part 1](#)
- [Part 2](#)
- [Part 3](#)
- [Part 4](#)
- [Part 5](#)
- [Part 6](#)
- [Part 7](#)
- [Part 8](#)

RM Dial up Users (56K):

- [Part 1](#)
- [Part 2](#)
- [Part 3](#)
- [Part 4](#)
- [Part 5](#)
- [Part 6](#)
- [Part 7](#)
- [Part 8](#)

For best sound and picture quality, we suggest using Internet Explorer and [the latest RealAudio player](#) and a 28.8 Kbps or faster connection. If you are experiencing problems in listening to these audio excerpts, please refer to the [RealAudio help page](#).

If you have Windows Media Player, use the following links:

- [WMV Full Video](#)

WMV High Speed Modem (300K DSL/Cable):

- [Part 1](#)
- [Part 2](#)
- [Part 3](#)
- [Part 4](#)
- [Part 5](#)
- [Part 6](#)
- [Part 7](#)
- [Part 8](#)

WMV Dial up Users (56K):

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Please let us know if you would like a VHS copy of this video by emailing us at trade_publicity@hmco.com.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *The Namesake* for every reader.

1. *The Namesake* opens with Ashima Ganguli trying to make a spicy Indian snack from American ingredients — Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts — but "as usual, there's something missing." How does Ashima try and make over her home in Cambridge to remind her of what she's left behind in Calcutta? Throughout *The Namesake*, how does Jhumpa Lahiri use food and clothing to explore cultural transitions — especially through rituals, like the *annaprasan*, the rice ceremony? Some readers have said that Lahiri's writing makes them crave the meals she evokes so beautifully. What memories or desires does Lahiri bring up for you? Does her writing ever make you "hunger"?
2. The title *The Namesake* reflects the struggles Gogol Ganguli goes through to identify with his unusual names. How does Gogol lose first his public name, his *bhalonam*, and then his private pet name, his *daknam*? How does he try to remake his identity, after choosing to rename himself, and what is the result? How do our names precede us in society, and how do they define us? Do you have a pet name, or a secret name — and has that name ever become publicly known? Do different people call you by different names? Did you ever wish for a new name? How are names chosen in your family?
3. *Newsweek* said of Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize–winning collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, "Jhumpa Lahiri writes such direct, translucent prose you almost forget you're reading." *The Namesake* is also subtle in style, elegant, and realistically paced. How are the events of the novel simultaneously dramatic and commonplace? What details made the characters real to you? Did you ever lose yourself in the story?
4. When Gogol is born, the Gangulis meet other Bengali families with small children, and Ashima finds that with a new baby "perfect strangers, all Americans, suddenly take notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she's done." How, for all of us, do children change our place in the community, and what we expect from it? Have you ever connected with someone you may have otherwise never spoken to — of a different ethnic background or economic class — through his children or your own?
5. In his youth, Ashoke Ganguli is saved from a massive train wreck in India. When his son, Gogol, is born, Ashoke thinks, "Being rescued from that shattered train had been the first miracle of his life. But here, now, reposing in his arms, weighing next to nothing but changing everything, is the second." Is Ashoke's love for his family more poignant because of his brush with death? Why do you think he hides his past from Gogol? What moments define us more — accidents or achievements, mourning or celebration?
6. Lahiri has said, "The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are . . . who grow up in two worlds simultaneously." What do you think Gogol wants most from his life? How is it different from what his family wants for him, and what they wanted when they first came to America to start a family? How have expectations changed between generations in your own family? Do you want something different for your own children from what your parents wanted for you?
7. Jhumpa Lahiri has said of *The Namesake*, "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." Did *The Namesake* allow you to think of America in a new way? Do you agree that America is a real presence in *The Namesake*? How is India also a presence in the book?

8. The marriage of Ashima and Ashoke is arranged by their families. The closest intimacy they share before their wedding is when Ashima steps briefly, secretly, into Ashoke's shoes. Gogol's romantic encounters are very different from what his parents experienced or expected for their son. What draws Gogol to his many lovers, especially to Ruth, Maxine, and eventually Moushumi? What draws them to him? From where do you think we take our notions of romantic love — from our family and friends, or from society and the media? How much does your cultural heritage define your ideas and experience of love?

9. Lahiri explores in several ways the difficulty of reconciling cross-cultural rituals around death and dying. For instance, Ashima refuses to display the rubbings of gravestones young Gogol makes with his classmates. And when Gogol's father suddenly dies, Gogol's relationship with Maxine is strained and quickly ends. Why do you think their love affair can't survive Gogol's grief? How does the loss of Gogol's father turn him back toward his family? How does it also change Sonia and Ashima's relationship?

10. Did you find the ending of *The Namesake* surprising? What did you expect from Moushumi and Gogol's marriage? Do you think Moushumi is entirely to blame for her infidelity? Is Gogol a victim at the end of the book? In the last few pages of *The Namesake*, Gogol begins to read "The Overcoat" for the first time — the book his father gave him, by his "namesake." Where do you imagine Gogol will go from here?

A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri

As a child of immigrants in America, would you discuss the conflicts you felt growing up?

For me, 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 placed 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.

Do you think there is anything particular to the Indian immigrant experience that differentiates it from the experience of other immigrants to America?

I have always been interested in why so many Indians come to America, because typically it is for very different reasons from, say, those of many of the European groups who have come, and those of many non-European groups as well. On the whole, Indians are not escaping some sort of dire political situation, a war, a famine, or social or religious persecution. These are the reasons so many of the great immigrant groups came historically: the Jews during World War II, the Irish, even the Puritans. Nothing is driving Indians out the same way. Certainly, India is a poor country with more limited scope for personal advancement, but I know that if my parents had stayed in India they would have led a perfectly fine life, they wouldn't have suffered. In many ways they would have been happier because they wouldn't have had to go through the enormous effort of figuring out life in a new country, which remains an ongoing and draining and difficult process for them.

In my parents' case, therefore, the distinction is that they didn't have to come here for their very existence, their survival. They were here for the sake of greater opportunities, perhaps a better standard of living. And yet it was tough, because they had taken such a huge step and left so much behind. The way my parents explain it to me is that they have spent their immigrant lives feeling as if they are on a river with a foot in two different boats. Each boat wants to pull them in a separate direction, and my parents are always torn between the two. They are always hovering, literally straddling two worlds, and I have always thought of that idea, that metaphor, for how they feel, how they live. It is an enriching experience if you look at it in positive ways. I think being an immigrant must teach you so much about the world and about human beings, things you can't understand if you are born and raised and live your whole life in one place. It must be an amazing experience in many ways, but it has a price.

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

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 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, no matter how complex, always have a ruthless, distilled quality. They require more control than novels. I hope I can continue to write both.

Did you have an audience in mind when you wrote *The Namesake*?

I never think of an audience as I am writing. I am really, really writing for myself and to make sense of something for myself. That is the ultimate impetus behind what I do. I am trying to understand things about life, about human beings, about the human condition, about what I both have experienced and haven't experienced and am afraid of experiencing and perhaps will never experience. All of those things fuel my desire to write. I certainly write about what I know, but I write a lot about my fears, my worries, my concerns, my worst nightmare. I try to write about experiences that are foreign to me: What might it be

like to lose a parent or a child? What might it be like to immigrate? Certainly the novel is very much a collage of things I have gone through and have never gone through. But I can't possibly think of a reader as I am writing because so much of the process to me is answering a question. I am terrible at math, but it is sort of like a math problem in which you are just trying to figure out the answer for yourself, to understand what the equation means in the end. I think because I feel very much a part of two worlds, I am always trying to explain things to myself and to reconcile those two sides in my writing.

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

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 in India had the pet name Gogol. I had 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.

About the Author

Jhumpa Lahiri was born 1967 in London, England, and raised in Rhode Island. She is a graduate of Barnard College, where she received a B.A. in English literature, and of Boston University, where she 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, the Rhode Island School of Design, and the New School University. Her debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It was translated into twenty-nine languages and became a bestseller both in the United States and abroad. It received the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New Yorker Debut of the Year award, an American Academy of Arts and Letters Addison Metcalf Award, and a nomination for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Lahiri was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002.

Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake*, was a major national bestseller and was named the New York Magazine Book of the Year. She lives in New York with her husband and son.

For Further Reading

The following titles may be of interest to readers of *The Namesake*.

[Interpreter of Maladies](#) by Jhumpa Lahiri

[The Book of Salt](#) by Monique Truong

[Fasting, Feasting](#) by Anita Desai

[The Guru of Love](#) by Samrat Upadhyay