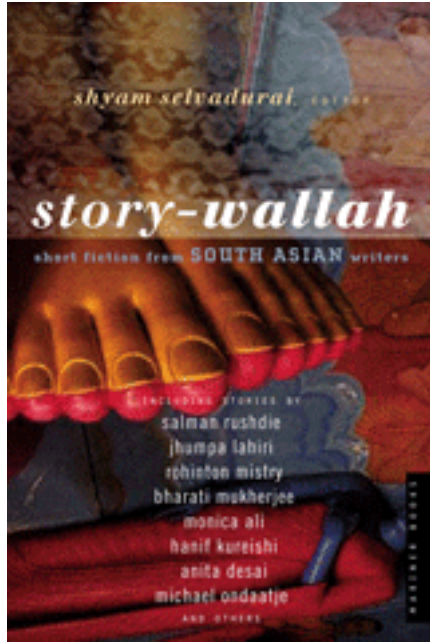


A Reader's Guide



Story-Wallah

edited by Shyam Selvadurai

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About *Story-Wallah*

Story-Wallah gathers the finest South Asian voices in fiction for the first time in a single volume. In this book, some of the world's best fiction writers hawk their wares from different parts of the South Asian diaspora — Sri Lanka, India, the United States, Great Britain, Guyana, Malaysia, Trinidad, and Fiji — creating a virtual map of the world with their tales. These stories explore universal themes of identity, culture, and home. *Story-Wallah* includes a rich array of experiences: a honeymoon in Sri Lanka, the trials of a Bangladeshi refugee in England, life on a sugar plantation in Trinidad, and the attempts of an Indian family to arrange a marriage for their rebellious daughter.

As Shyam Selvadurai writes in his introduction, "The stories jostle up against each other . . . The effect is a marvelous cacophony that reminds me of . . . one of those South Asian bazaars, a bargaining, carnival-like milieu — the goods on sale in this instance being stories hawked by story-traders: story-wallahs."

Questions for Discussion

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

1. In "Karima," the family of the title character flees to Pakistan during the war for Bengali independence. "They called us refugees," Karima says. "But how could we be? If the only home we'd ever known had cast us away because we were suddenly foreigners, how come we were foreigners here, too, in Pakistan, the country where we were supposed to belong?" (294) Why is she treated as a foreigner? And how does Karima deal with this

double alienation?

2. In Zulfikar Ghose's "The Marble Dome," a family struggles to block out the imposition of an increasingly fundamentalist regime. In Ghose's story, how do the characters adapt their behavior to live in the new, hostile environment? Consider Parvez's feelings about the marble dome: What do they reveal about his attitude toward the current regime? And in what ways does this attitude change by the end of the story?

Hanif Kureishi and Aamer Hussein also write about people who face political and religious changes at home. What do you see as the risks of staying in such adverse circumstances? Of leaving?

3. Anita Desai, Farida Karodia, and Ginu Kamani all write about pairs of siblings who are almost polar opposites. How, after sharing so many experiences and facing similar parental pressures, do the brothers and sisters in these stories emerge with such different attitudes, opinions, and lifestyles? How do some siblings bond with each other despite their dissimilarities, and how do others let the differences drive a wedge between them?

4. In his introduction, Shyam Selvadurai writes that he views himself not as a Sri Lankan–Canadian or Canadian–Sri Lankan, but as a member of a South Asian diaspora. He notes that a person is defined not only by nationality, but by numerous other affiliations, including social class, religion, and sexuality. How do you see Selvadurai's ideas at work in "Pigs Can't Fly," his own contribution to the collection?

Issues of identity also abound in Ginu Kamani's "Just Between Indians." While Sahil trumpets his multinational identity—saying, "I wouldn't exactly call myself 'Indian.' We were raised everywhere" (323)—Daya seems to struggle with her own. Does she come to a firmer sense of herself by the end of the story? After her interaction with the Greek hotdog vendor, she laughs and says, "This is what I came for, this is what brought me here" (342). What do you think she means?

What other characters do you see struggling with issues of identity? As some of them move away from their homelands, how do they form a new sense of themselves in their adopted countries? What problems do they encounter in the process of self-construction?

5. In "Winterscape," Rakesh's mother and aunt bring an array of foods on their visit to Canada. Desai writes, "To them, he was still . . . a child, and now he ate, and a glistening look of remembrance covered his face like a film of oil on his fingers" (84). How does food, for many of the immigrant characters, serve as a link to childhood and their homeland?

Food also embodies traditions in "The Celebration," and cultural identity in "Just Between Indians." Why do you think it serves as such a powerful symbol? In "Out on Main Street," what does the narrator's knowledge of food reveal about her, and what does she mean when she says, "Mostly, back home, we is kitchen Indians" (304)?

6. In "Chokra," the plight of two homeless children takes center stage; In "Karima," the title character says, "And Lord, your floods and storms, they respect no one, but love us poor best of all" (297). How are the poor affected differently by the world's ills? What do their struggles reveal about the societies in which they live? What role does the threat of poverty or financial collapse play in the lives of the better-off characters in the stories? Does this

final story alter your perception of them?

7. What value do the characters in "The Marble Dome" and "The Collectors" find in their respective communities? And how are those communities constructed? For those characters arriving in new countries, how do their new social worlds differ from the ones "back home"? How do immigrants like Nanzeen in "Dinner with Dr. Azad" cope with the absence of a strong community? What small acts of kindness, compassion, and concern make a difference in such people's lives?

8. In "The Celebration," a mother-in-law gives some marriage advice: "Make the most of your happy moments, and pray that the hard times are few. That's the only way to endure a lifetime together" (127). Is the mother-in-law's suggestion really the only way to deal with an arranged marriage? How do other characters handle such forced partnerships? Do any of the characters' struggles with marriage correspond to your own?

Consider the different models of marriage in Anita Desai's "Winterscape." How do Asha and Anu's marriages differ, and in what ways do they contrast with Rakesh's marriage to Beth, a Canadian woman? In Jhumpa Lahiri's "This Blessed House," how are the dynamics of Sanjeev and Twinkle's marriage different from those in the other stories?

9. What did you discover about the nature of relationships between masters and servants in these stories? In "The Perfection of Giving," what do you learn about Big Auntie from her treatment of her servant, Kusuma? How do the children in Salman Rushdie's "The Courter" view the hired helpers in their household? In what ways does the narrator's perception of Mecir change over the course of the story?

10. How does social class figure into the relationships in the stories? In M. G. Vassanji's "In the Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon," how does Baby's pedigree lead the narrator to resent her? What are the stigmas, like the narrator's potential pairing with Zarina attached to relationships, that cross class lines?

11. For some of the recent immigrants in the stories, what are the advantages and disadvantages of being able to visit "home"? What sorts of pressures do the characters in "Auld Lang Syne" and "Crossmatch" face when visiting their parents?

12. In "Cane Is Bitter," Sam Selvon writes, "Perhaps [Rookmin] might have been unfaithful to Ramlal if the idea had ever occurred to her. But like most of the Indians in the country districts, half her desires and emotions were never given a chance to live" (17). What does this passage reveal about the society in which Rookmin lives? Do think it's possible for her to break out of such a mindset? What other characters in the stories do you see stuck in particular situations or modes of thought? In "The Spell and the Ever-Changing Moon," what is the turning point at which Nisa decides to leave her husband? Do you think she will actually make the move for good?

For Further Reading

The following books may be of interest to readers of *Story-Wallah*.

Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri

Fasting, Feasting by Anita Desai

Arresting God in Kathmandu by Samrat Upadhyay

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh