

BOOK REVIEW

Read the following three reviews of Jhumpa Lahiri's book *The Namesake*. Read the book and then write a review. Follow the format that has been taught to you in the class.

The Namesake

Jhumpa Lahiri

Paperback, 291 pages

Published: September 1st 2004 by Mariner Books (first published 2003)

ISBN 0618485228 (ISBN13: 9780618485222)

Edition Language: English

Characters: Ashoke Ganguli, Ashima Ganguli, Gogol/Nikhil

Ganguli, Sonia/Sonali Ganguli, Maxine, Moushumi Mazoomdar

Literary Awards: Orange Prize Nominee for Fiction Longlist (2004)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* established this young writer as one of the most brilliant of her generation. Her stories are one of the very few debut works -- and only a handful of collections -- to have won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Among the many other awards and honours it received were the New Yorker Debut of the Year award, the PEN/Hemingway Award, and the highest critical praise for its grace, acuity, and compassion in detailing lives transported from India to America.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri enriches the themes that made her collection an international bestseller: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the conflicts of assimilation, and, most poignantly, the tangled ties between generations. Here again Lahiri displays her deft touch for the perfect detail — the fleeting moment, the turn of phrase — that opens whole worlds of emotion.

The Namesake takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of their arranged wedding, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by training, Ashoke adapts far less warily than his wife, who resists all things American and pines for her family. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world. Named for a Russian writer by his Indian parents in memory of a catastrophe years before, Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name.

Lahiri brings great empathy to Gogol as he stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs. With penetrating insight, she reveals not only the defining power of the names and expectations bestowed upon us by our parents, but also the means by which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves.

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/33917.The_Namesake Accessed on 6th May 2020 1130hrs

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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)

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-395-92721-2> Accessed on 6th may 2020 at 1145hrs

THE NAMESAKE

By Jhumpa Lahiri

291 pages. Houghton Mifflin. \$24.

Jhumpa Lahiri's quietly dazzling new novel, "The Namesake," is that rare thing: an intimate, closely observed family portrait that effortlessly and discreetly unfolds to disclose a capacious social vision.

It is a novel about two generations of the Ganguli family, and at the same time it is a novel about exile and its discontents, a novel that is as affecting in its Chekhovian exploration of fathers and sons, parents and children, as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of the American Dream.

It more than fulfils the promise of Ms. Lahiri's debut collection of stories, "Interpreter of Maladies," which won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

The novel begins in Boston in 1968, with the birth of a boy named Gogol Ganguli. Gogol comes by his name through a series of random accidents and

misunderstandings that will come to represent for him the unexpected trajectory of his family's life.

When a letter from his great-grandmother, suggesting a formal Indian name for him, fails to arrive from India, his father, Ashoke, impulsively settles on the name of Gogol, after the famous Russian writer whose book of short stories helped save his life many years ago in India. He had been reading the book when the train he was traveling on derailed; rescuers spotted him only because they saw a page of the book flutter from his hands in the dark.

It was on that same train that Ashoke met a stranger, who gave him the advice that would change his life: "Do yourself a favour," the man said. "Before it's too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late."

That is how Ashoke came to be a doctoral candidate in engineering in Boston, and that is how his new wife, Ashima -- whom he married in an arranged ceremony -- came to start a new life in a cold, grey city in New England. Ashima tries to hide her disappointment when she first sees the tiny three-room apartment that is their home: so different, she thinks, from the homes she remembers from American movies like "Gone With the Wind" and "The Seven-Year Itch."

She is terrified at the prospect of raising a child "in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare."

And yet slowly, cautiously, the Gangulis make their way in America. Ashoke becomes a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Ashima has a second child whom they name Sonali (soon to be called Sonia). And the family moves to the suburbs, buying a new house in a development.

"Their garage, like every other, contains shovels and pruning shears and a sled," Ms. Lahiri writes. "They purchase a barbecue for tandoori on the porch in summer. Each step, each acquisition, no matter how small, involves deliberation, consultation with Bengali friends. Was there a difference between a plastic rake and a metal one? Which was preferable, a live Christmas tree or an artificial one? They learn to roast turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne, at Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woollen scarves around snow men, to colour boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter and hide them around the house."

But while their house on Pemberton Road looks like all the other houses on the street, while the Ganguli children take bologna and roast beef sandwiches to school like all their friends, the family never feels quite at home in the cosy suburb. News of their relatives in India comes through the mail or noisily by phone in the middle of the night, and there is always the sense of making do and making substitutions.

Newly made Bengali friends fill in as aunts and uncles at holiday celebrations; Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts and onions are mixed together to approximate a favourite Calcutta snack.

Being a foreigner, Ashima thinks "is a sort of lifelong pregnancy -- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts."

"It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what has once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding."

Her son, Gogol, too, feels like a perennial outsider. In his youth he tries to distance himself from his Indian roots: he does not hang out with other Indian-American students, does not think of India as home, as his parents and their

friends do, but as "India," like his American friends. Yet at the same time he often feels a sense of detachment, a slight sense of apartness.

Gogol realizes, while living with a girlfriend named Maxine, that she and her well-to-do parents possess a confidence and sense of familial continuity that he and his parents will never possess. When he later begins dating a Bengali woman whom he has known since childhood, he embraces their shared ambivalence about their cultural heritage even as he realizes that their alliance is "fulfilling a collective, deep-seated desire" on the part of their families.

Although Ms. Lahiri's portraits of the women in Gogol's life are somewhat sketchy -- Maxine and her parents, in particular, seem more like New York stereotypes than real individuals -- she narrates the story of her hero's coming of age with enormous sympathy and aplomb, while cutting back and forth to fill in the lives of his parents, as they settle into the modest satisfactions of middle age.

She uses her unerring eye for detail to annotate their emotional lives: Ashoke's hatred of waste, which makes him complain "if a kettle had been filled with too much water;" Ashima's meticulous upkeep of three address books, which contain the names of all the Bengalis she and her husband have known over the years.

In chronicling more than three decades in the Gangulis' lives, Ms. Lahiri has not only given us a wonderfully intimate and knowing family portrait, she has also taken the haunting chamber music of her first collection of stories and reorchestrated its themes of exile and identity to create a symphonic work, a debut novel that is as assured and eloquent as the work of a long time master of the craft.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/02/books/books-of-the-times-from-calcutta-to-suburbia-a-family-s-perplexing-journey.html>