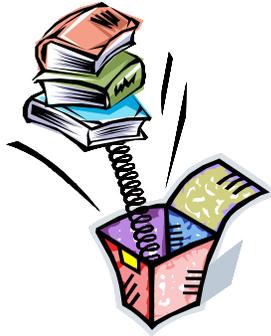




Whittier Public Library's

# Book Club in a Box



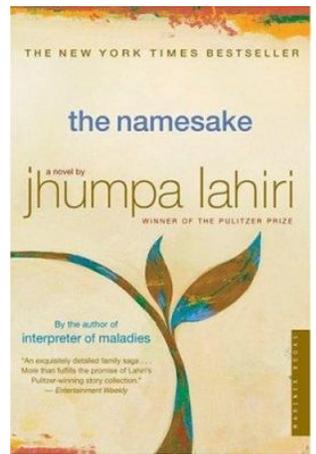
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## THE NAMESAKE

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### About the Book

*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. *The New York Times* has praised Lahiri as "a writer of uncommon elegance and poise." *The Namesake* is a fine-tuned, intimate, and deeply felt novel of identity.



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### About the Author



Jhumpa Lahiri (la-HAR-ee) was born in London on July 11, 1967, to Bengali parents originally from Calcutta. Her mother, a teacher, and her father, a librarian, immigrated to the United States when she was a child, and Lahiri grew up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. She was a shy child, uncomfortable in groups, who started writing ten-page "novels" during recess with friends, quiet girls like her who enjoyed stories. In one interview, Lahiri said she always hoped for rainy days so she could stay inside and write instead of having to run around the playground.

In high school, Lahiri stopped writing fiction, for she had no confidence in her ability in the form, and instead wrote articles for the high school newspaper. In college, she took some creative writing classes but still felt she might never succeed in writing fiction and thus decided to be an academic. After being turned down by a number of graduate schools, she

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got a job as a research assistant at a nonprofit organization, discovered the ease of writing with a computer, and began writing fiction again.

A second-generation immigrant, Lahiri found it difficult having parents who, even after living abroad for thirty years, still considered India home. She said she inherited a sense of exile from her parents, even though she felt more American than they. Lahiri, realizing that loneliness and a sense of alienation are hard for immigrant parents, thought that the problem for their children was that they feel neither one thing nor the other. Having visited India often, Lahiri said she never felt any more at home there than she did in the United States.

Much of Lahiri's time spent in Calcutta as a child was with her grandmother, which she said made it possible for her to experience solitude and which also encouraged her to see things from different points of view. Being a second-generation American did not make her want to be a writer so much as it made her want to write, to seek solace by recording her observations in a place where she answered only to herself. The act of writing made it possible, she said, to withdraw into herself.

Because Lahiri went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor as a former resident, she learned to observe things as an outsider, even though she felt she belonged there in some fundamental way. She said her first stories were set in Calcutta as a result of this combination of distance and intimacy. However, she claimed never to have thought consciously of trying to deal with questions of cultural identity in her writing as much as simply beginning with a conflict in a character's life.

Lahiri received her B.A. from Barnard College in New York City in 1989 and subsequently enrolled in Boston University's creative writing program, from which she received her M.A. in 1993. Lahiri also received an M.A. in English and an

M.A. in comparative literature and the arts from Boston University. She earned her doctorate in Renaissance studies from Boston University in 1997 but decided she wanted to write fiction. She said that she worked for the Ph.D. out of a sense of duty and practicality, but pursuing it was never something she loved. She wrote stories on the side while doing the research for her dissertation. Lahiri worked in the summer of 1997 at *Boston* magazine as an intern, doing routine tasks and writing news stories. She received a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, where she studied in 1997 and 1998. The experience at Provincetown changed everything: In seven months' time she got an agent, had a story published in *The New Yorker*, and got a book contact.

The title story of Lahiri's collection of stories was included in both *Best American Short Stories* and *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*. *The New Yorker* named her one of the twenty best writers under the age of forty. She won the Transatlantic Review award from the Henfield Foundation, the Louisiana Review Award for Short Fiction, a fiction prize from *The Louisville Review*, the PEN/Hemingway Award, and ultimately the Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000. Lahiri has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design.

May, Charles E., and May Charles E. "Jhumpa Lahiri." *Cyclopedia Of World Authors, Fourth Revised Edition* (2003): 1. *Biography Reference Center*. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.

### Further Reading

#### If you liked *The Namesake*, you might like:

*Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje

*A Free Life* by Ha Jin

*House of Sand and Fog* by Andre Dubus III

*The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini

*A Map of Home* by Randa Jarrar

**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 their 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?

## Discussion Questions

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?