

# The Space Between Us

## by Thrity Umrigar

### About the Book

Poignant, evocative, and unforgettable, *The Space Between Us* is an intimate portrait of a distant yet familiar world. Set in modern-day India, it is the story of two compelling and achingly real women: Sera Dubash, an upper-middle-class Parsi housewife whose opulent surroundings hide the shame and disappointment of her abusive marriage, and Bhima, a stoic illiterate hardened by a life of despair and loss, who has worked in the Dubash household for more than twenty years. A powerful and perceptive literary masterwork, author Thrity Umrigar's extraordinary novel demonstrates how the lives of the rich and poor are intrinsically connected yet vastly removed from each other, and how the strong bonds of womanhood are eternally opposed by the divisions of class and culture.

### Praise for the Book

"Umrigar is a skilled storyteller, and her memorable characters will live on for a long time."

— *Washington Post Book World*

"Remarkable. . . . What makes *The Space Between Us* so engrossing is its ability to make readers feel empathy for its subjects."

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

"[*The Space Between Us*] is a great book; I love it. . . . I couldn't stop reading. . . . It is so precious to have a book about a woman one rarely even 'sees' in society, whether Indian or American."

— **Alice Walker**

"[*The Space Between Us*] is provocative and disturbing."

— *Boston Globe*

"Umrigar is a perceptive and often piercing writer. . . . Her portrait of Sera as a woman unable to transcend her middle-class skin feels bracingly honest."

— *New York Times Book Review*

"[An] eloquent tale, whose heart-stopping plot twists reveal the ferocity of fate."

— *Booklist* (starred review)

*Courtesy of Harper Perennial*

## About the Author

### Thrity Umrigar

(1961–)

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**Personal Information:** Born 1961, in Bombay (now Mumbai), India; immigrated to United States, 1982, naturalized citizen.

**Education:** Ohio State University, M.A., 1983; Kent State University, Ph.D., 1997.

**Politics:** Liberal.

**Addresses:** Home: Cleveland Heights, OH. Office: Case Western University, Guilford Hall, Cleveland, OH 44106.

**Career:** Journalist, author, critic, and educator. *Lorain Journal*, journalist, 1985–87; *Akron Beacon*, Akron, OH, journalist, 1987–2002; Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH, 2002–, became assistant professor of English, 2003.

**Awards:** Nieman fellowship, Harvard University, 1999; awards from the Society of Professional Journalists and the Press Club of Cleveland.

### WRITINGS

- *Bombay Time*, Picador (New York, NY), 2001.
- *First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood*, HarperCollins Publishers (New Delhi, India), 2004.
- *The Space between Us*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2005.
- *If Today Be Sweet*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2007.

Contributor to periodicals, including the *Washington Post*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and the *Boston Globe*.

### Sidelights

Thrity Umrigar was born in India but moved to the United States when she was twenty-one to study journalism at Ohio State University. She then worked as a journalist in Ohio for seventeen years before joining the staff of the English Department at Case Western Reserve University. Umrigar was an only child, but she grew up in a large extended family with several aunts and an uncle, as well as her parents. In an online interview included on her Web site, she stated: “I never felt I belonged only to my parents but to this larger group of people.” The experience, she said, taught her to get along with many different kinds of people, and it also gave her an expanded definition of family. “So,” she said, “I keep ‘adopting’ new family members along the way.”

Umrigar noted in the online interview that she came to the United States because she realized that if she remained in India, “I would never be totally independent and would never discover who exactly I was as a person. I wanted to live in a place where I would rise or fall based on my own efforts and talents.” Her father encouraged her to follow her dream. She chose Ohio State University because, as she explained it: “I was sitting in my living room in Bombay, checking off a list of American universities that offered an M.A. in journalism when my eyes fell on ‘Ohio State University.’ There was a Joan Baez record playing . . . her song, ‘Banks of the Ohio.’ . . . I looked up and thought, ‘It’s a sign,’ and decided to apply there.”

Umrigar writes every day. She explained in the interview on her Web site that “it helps to take the mystique out of fiction writing — which I think is a healthy thing — and to approach it as a job, with a more roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-to-work kind of attitude.” She has always been interested in stories “that buck the trend, that take the minority position. And for fiction to be startling and fresh, I think that posture — of telling the unpopular truth — is almost essential.”

Umrigar’s novel *Bombay Time* depicts the lives of people in the closely knit Parsi community of Wadia Baug. The Parsis, a minority in India, are the descendants of people who fled Persia a thousand years ago. Set at a wedding, the book allows the reader to observe each of the guests arriving and hear their disparate stories of love, loss, and betrayal. In the *Washington Post*, Helen C. Wan wrote: “Umrigar is at her best when imagining each character’s colorful history and circumstances, and vividly portraying jealousies, passion and unfulfilled ambitions,” and that she “displays an impressive talent for conceiving multidimensional, sympathetic characters with life-like emotional quandaries and psychological stumbling blocks.” A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called the book “an impressive debut offering a glimpse into a cultural world . . . that most Westerners know only in its barest outlines.” In *Booklist*, Bonnie Johnston described the book as “sweet, frightening, poignant, and chaotic.” *Library Journal* reviewer Michelle Reale wrote that the novel “poignantly explicates” the Parsi community in a “startling contemporary portrait.”

*The Space between Us* takes a look at life in two different households in Bombay, showing how even in modern times the nation is ruled by class and social structure firmly rooted in traditions and in the perceived difference between the sexes. One example is the relationship between Sera Dubash, who is an upper-class Parsi homemaker, and her servant, Bhima. The two may share a cup of tea and chat as if they are close friends, and yet, Sera is seated in a chair while Bhima is left to sit on the floor and must use her own cup for her tea. However, Umrigar also illustrates that, while class separates the women, they are united in their treatment at the hands of men, who consider all women inferior. Joy Humphrey, in a review for *Library Journal*, wrote that “Umrigar beautifully and movingly wends her way through the complexities and subtleties of these . . . relationships.” A reviewer for the *Economist* commented that “the author prevents her story from descending into emotional soup by tackling, across the span of her characters’ lives, many of the issues affecting India today.”

In *If Today Be Sweet*, Umrigar depicts the painful choices before grieving widow Tehmina, who following the death of her husband goes to visit her son and his family in their home in Ohio, where her son moved following graduate school in the United States. Tehmina must determine if she should also move to Ohio and stay with her son, or if she should return to Bombay, her true home and the place where she lived with her husband, to continue her life alone. *Booklist* reviewer Allison Block called the book “a sublime, cross-cultural tale about lives driven by tradition and transformed by love.”

Umrigar told *CA*: “Indian-American writers have a wonderful canvas to draw on. A larger-than-life city like Bombay is a fiction writer’s dream come true because the city throbs with drama and pathos and humanity and passion and tragedy and comedy. There are stories around every corner in a place like that. And we are lucky enough to live in an age where at last there is an interest in hearing the stories of people living on the other side of the globe. My purpose in writing *Bombay Time* was to make sense of the lives of the people I grew up with because, like the main character Rusi, many of them believe that their lives have ended in failure. And I refuse to believe that. So I saw the book as the act of gathering in all their stories like flowers, and turning them into art, into a bouquet, if you will, and handing it back to them.”

## **FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

### **PERIODICALS**

- *Booklist*, May 15, 2001, Bonnie Johnston, review of *Bombay Time*, p. 1734; May 15, 2007, Allison Block, review of *If Today Be Sweet*, p. 20.
- *Economist*, January 28, 2006, “Distance and Intimacy: New Fiction,” p. 82.
- *Library Journal*, June 1, 2001, Michelle Reale, review of *Bombay Time*, p. 219; December 1, 2005, Joy Humphrey, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 117.
- *New York Times Book Review*, January 22, 2006, Ligaya Mishan, “The Clash of Caste,” p. 14.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 2, 2001, review of *Bombay Time*, p. 51.
- *Washington Post Book World*, July 22, 2001, Helen C. Wan, review of *Bombay Time*, p. T05.

### **ONLINE**

- *Thrity Umrigar Home Page*, <http://www.umrigar.com> (January 21, 2008).

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2008.

**Source Database:** Literature Resource Center

## Author Interview

**Q: Tell us a little bit about your growing up years.**

**Thrity Umrigar:** Well, I was born in Bombay and lived there until I was 21, when I came to the U.S. I was raised in a joint family, which meant I grew up around very loving aunts and uncles. And since I was an only child, it helped to have all those extra adults in my life, for love and guidance. I've always had many sets of parents and even today, have a knack for "adopting" parents.

**Q: What do you remember most about growing up in Bombay?**

**TU:** I have two overriding childhood memories or impressions: One, was always being excruciating aware of the poverty around me. Now, as a middle-class kid, you're not supposed to be that aware of — or certainly not supposed to be tortured by — the poverty around you. It's a defense mechanism of sorts, to be able to ignore it. For whatever reason, I was never able to ignore it and to some extent, it really affected my childhood, made me a hypersensitive child.

Two, I always wrote. Writing was my way to make sense of the world outside and inside my home. Despite the recollections of the adults in my life, I don't think I was a terribly articulate child. Writing was a way to give wings to the inchoate emotions and feelings inside of me.

**Q: When did you know you were a writer?**

**TU:** Well, I was writing poems at a very young age. As a child, I would write 'anonymous' poems to my parents whenever I felt wronged by them and then secretly pin them on their closet door. So I learned early on that writing was a good way to get rid of pent-up feelings.

All through my teen years I wrote poetry and short stories and essays. I think I knew I was a writer — not that I was necessarily a good writer, just that I was a writer — one evening when I was 14 or so. I remember sitting in my living room and writing this long poem called "The Old Man" that came out of me as if someone was dictating it. It was a terribly sappy poem but I felt compelled to write it and when I was done, I was exhausted but I knew something about myself that I didn't before.

**Q: Why did you decide to come to the U.S.?**

**TU:** I've never had an easy answer to that question. In some sense, my whole life prepared me for moving to the U.S. I was a product of an educational system that was very colonial and very Western in its orientation. I still remember my fourth-grade

composition teacher telling the class not to create characters who were blond and blue-eyed. Her statement came as a shock because that was all we knew, you know? When I was a child, I read everything ever written by the British children's writer Enid Blyton and later, the Billy Bunter and William series of novels. And as I got older, all I was reading was Western literature. American pop culture was a big influence, also. I mean, until I picked up Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, I had hardly ever read a novel by an Indian writer. Rushdie was a revelation for me.

So that's the "sociological" answer. But of course, there were also a hundred personal reasons — wanting to travel, wanting an adventure, wanting to be independent, wanting to get away from certain aspects of my life, not knowing what the heck to do with myself after I'd finished college. I remember the day when it occurred to me very clearly that if I lived in India, I would never be totally independent and would never discover who exactly I was as a person. I wanted to live in a place where I would rise or fall based on my own efforts and talents. And I was very lucky to have a father, who, despite his immense sadness at having me so far away from home, always encouraged me to reach for my dreams and never held me back. . . . But I'm not even sure it was this complicated. Remember, I was 21. Weird as it may sound, not much thought went into it.

**Q: So you came to Ohio State? Why Ohio State?**

**TU:** Well, that's a funny story. It's indicative of how so many major decisions in my life have been made. I was sitting in my living room in Bombay, checking off a list of American universities that offered a M.A. in journalism, when my eyes fell on "Ohio State University." There was a Joan Baez record playing on the turntable and right then, her song, *Banks of the Ohio*, came on. I looked up and thought, "It's a sign", and decided to apply there.

**Q: Hmmm. Well, I hope the experience there was worth it.**

**TU:** Oh, OSU was a blast. Two of the happiest years of my life. Within days of being there, I made friendships that have lasted till today. Those two years taught me that one can make new families at any point in one's life. I had such positive experiences there that it made me want to live in the U.S. forever. That one line in *Bombay Time*, where Jimmy Kanga feels like he loved Oxford so much he felt he could've gone to war for it, that's what it used to feel like to me. I'll always be grateful.

After OSU, I worked for two years at the *Lorain Journal*, a small but feisty little paper near Cleveland. It was a grueling experience, long hours, all that, but when I left there, I knew I could tackle anything that daily journalism threw my way.

**Q: So you came to the Akron Beacon Journal when?**

**TU:** In 1987. *The Beacon* had the reputation of being a real writer's paper and had just won yet another Pulitzer. It was a great paper to work at. Still is.

**Q: How did *Bombay Time* come about? Were you writing it in Akron?**

**TU:** I had started the novel a few years ago under a very different plot structure. The first incarnation of the novel was much more 'plot-heavy'. Then, I arrived at a crossroads in that I had to decide between finishing the novel or my Ph.D. dissertation (while working full-time as a journalist) and I opted to finish the dissertation. The novel was discarded but not forgotten. Then, in 1999 I won the Nieman fellowship, which allows journalists a year of study at Harvard. When I found out I'd gotten the Nieman, I promised myself that I would pick up the novel again and I did. I salvaged odds and ends from the abandoned manuscript and wrote some new chapters during the first semester.

But it was during the second semester that the novel really took off. I went home to Bombay during the Christmas break and was struck by how many people there led such sad lives. I remember lying on the couch in my father's apartment one afternoon and vowing to finish the novel. I felt a desperate, burning urge to tell the story of the people I'd grown up around.

I kept that promise to myself when I returned to Cambridge. I was actually grateful for jetlag, because it was easy to wake up at 4 a.m. I would write each morning for a few hours before starting my work day. On some days, the writing flowed so easily — almost compulsively, you could say — that I would skip school and write for eight to 10 hours straight. The bulk of the novel was written in less than two months. I liked having the lonely, solitary experience of writing juxtaposed against the socially hectic and busy life I had as a Nieman fellow. I worked hard and partied hard during this period and that balance was somehow very important.

**Q: What's *Bombay Time* about?**

**TU:** Good question. I'm still trying to figure that out myself. Basically, it's a story about this group of middle-aged people who are residents of an apartment building in Bombay. All the characters are Parsis or Zoroastrians, — which is the religion I was raised in. Parsis are members of a small ethnic minority who came to India as political refugees from Persia over 900 years ago, and who went on to become one of India's most affluent and Westernized ethnic communities.

So, against the backdrop of a wedding reception, I tell the life stories of the individual residents — who they were in their youth, what has made them who they are today — and ask the question of how does one live a middle-class existence in a city of so much poverty? That's it, in a nutshell. Hopefully, the novel is more interesting than my summary of it.

**Q: What was the inspiration for *Bombay Time*?**

**TU:** Growing up in India exposed me to many stories of startling pathos and tragedy. Daily life for so many people seemed like an endless struggle and yet, I watched these people live their lives with a typically Bombay brand of humor, with bravado and courage. I wanted to commemorate their lives with my novel. I am also fascinated by the insider-outsider status of the Parsis of India. I wanted to examine their love-hate relationship with Bombay, torn as they are between disdain and a helpless love for the city of their birth. In a sense, you can say that that's the story of the middle-class in any city around the world that's besieged with corruption and violence and poverty.

**Q: Who are your favorite authors?**

**TU:** I draw inspiration from everywhere. I'm one of those people who even reads cereal boxes. But my favorite authors are Salman Rushdie (I recently re-read *Midnight's Children* and wept in awe and gratitude), Toni Morrison and Jamaica Kincaid. But influence is a hard thing to account for — I think Bob Dylan and Emily Dickinson have probably influenced my writing — in terms of making me crazy about words — as much as anybody.

**Q: So how hard was it finding a publisher? It happened during your Nieman year, right?**

**TU:** Although my friends tell me how lucky I was to find a publisher, I tell them that that wasn't the miraculous part. Because that was the result of effort, a cause-and-effect kind of thing. The truly miraculous part was finding an agent.

What happened was, I was attending a lecture at Emerson College in Boston and asked the speaker a question. Based on my question, my agent-to-be approached me and asked me if I was writing anything. Believe me, my question was not terribly brilliant or clever or anything. My agent has since told me that she has tried analyzing why she approached me instead of the other people who asked questions that evening but has been unable to come up with an answer. She says it was just a hunch. Anyway, I started mailing her chapters as fast as I wrote them and pretty soon, we had a book.

**Q: What about your second book, how long did it take you to write *The Space Between Us*?**

**TU:** Well, I wrote the book — or at least, a solid first draft — in about six months in 2003. But as I always say, I’ve been writing this book forever.

**Q: What do you mean?**

**TU:** I grew up in a middle-class home in Bombay where we always employed servants. And even as a child I was always aware of what a complicated, emotionally charged relationship it was between the mistress of the household and the domestic servant — who was almost always a woman. I mean, it is impossible to have two human beings work and live in a contained domestic space all day long and not form some kind of a bond or human connection. And I thought that this was rich literary territory to explore. So in some sense — in the sense of being aware of these issues and thinking about them, I’ve been writing this novel at least since I was a teenager.

**Q: The whole issue of employing servants is so alien to most contemporary Americans. Can you talk about this some?**

**TU:** Sure. The first thing to understand is that, unlike, say, the aristocrats of England or something, in India, you don’t have to be terribly rich to have servants. Almost every middle-class home employs someone to come in to help with the cooking, washing, cleaning, etc. Sometimes it’s more than one person. And the reason for this is simple — labor is cheap in India. And until very recently, most people didn’t have washers and dryers, vacuum cleaners — all the labor-saving devices that we take for granted in the West.

So the way it works is that someone comes into your home early in the morning and basically spends the day performing household chores. And if the mistress is a housewife like Sera Dubash, if she’s not a working woman, she will work alongside the servant. For instance, she may cook while the servant is chopping up the vegetables or washing the dishes. And the women talk. Often, the servant may unload her burdens onto the mistress — tales of wayward husbands, children who refuse to attend school, oppressive mothers-in-law — you know, the normal things that women all over the world talk about. And the servant is in the home for seven, eight, nine hours a day — she is a witness, she observes everything that happens in the home. She knows the family secrets, all the hidden things about relationships, problems, things that even the family’s neighbors or friends may be unaware of. And so a kind of unlikely friendship, a trust, an unspoken language of understanding, springs up between the women. But there is always the elephant in the room, and that elephant, of course, is class. There is always a formality, a ritualized “space” that can never quite be bridged. Each woman is governed and restricted by class divisions.

**Q: In the novel, Sera won't let Bhima sit on the furniture or drink out of the family's glasses. Is that because of the caste system that one hears about in India? Is Bhima an untouchable?**

**TU:** Sera Dubash is a Parsi, not a Hindu. And the caste system that you refer to — you know, the system where there are four different castes and each caste is governed by its own rules and traditions — is something that's unique to the Hindu faith. And no, Bhima is not meant to be an untouchable — that is, a member of the lowest caste.

I don't think this is a book about caste at all. Rather, it's a book about class divisions. All the things that you noticed — Bhima not being able to use the family dishes, sit at the table — are simply manifestations of how class issues have polarized people in India and how those polarizations have gotten codified into traditions. Do you know what I mean? In that sense, it's not so different from the American South fifty years ago, when the black maid always had to enter from the back door and took all her meals in the kitchen. I was doing a book reading in California earlier this year when a woman who grew up on the Upper West Side in New York said the book reminded her of how her family treated the nanny who had raised her. So these strange, dehumanizing traditions are not unique to India.

**Q: How have Western audiences reacted to the book?**

**TU:** You know, when the book came out, my biggest concern was that Western readers would read *The Space Between Us* as a book about a distant, faraway, alien culture with weird customs — you know, the usual “exotic East” syndrome — and not get that the themes of the book are universal. At its most basic, *The Space Between Us* is a book about what brings us together and what divides us as human beings. So it has been particularly gratifying to have smart, thoughtful, insightful readers make their own connections and apply the themes of the book to their own conditions and lives. So many of them have talked about their own encounters with the kinds of issues that Bhima and Sera face.

My Indian editor, Nandita Agarwal, coined a fantastic phrase — she said the novel was about the “Indian apartheid.” She was referring to this unfortunate attitude that middle-class Indians have toward domestic help that allows them to not see and to marginalize the people who sweat and work in their homes. And at each book reading we talk about this and I ask the inevitable question: what is the American apartheid — what biases, prejudices do we suffer from, what are the areas of our society that we refuse to face? And almost always, people tell personal stories or talk about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and how that exposed unpleasant truths about our own culture in America.

**Q: You now live in the United States. Does that help or hurt when you're writing about India?**

**TU:** I think for the most part it's helpful. I mean, you have the inevitable worries about being accurate, getting the details right. I usually solve that by staying away from what's current and immediate — you know, what the latest movies are, what the big hit songs are — and writing about things that are more timeless. Like the spirit and resiliency of Bombayites. Like the Arabian Sea — which is as polluted and gray and beautiful as ever. Like those fabulous Bombay skies at dusk.

But I think the distance also helps me gain a certain critical perspective that's essential for good writing. It makes it possible to be more truthful in my writing, to speak some harsh truths. And being an immigrant in America, always having this outsider-insider thing going on, is such great training for being a writer. Because that's what writers are — outsiders want to get on the inside and insiders longing to burst out.

**Q: What are you working on now?**

**TU:** I'm writing a novel, my first book set in the United States. It's a story about immigration, what it means to be an outsider-insider, to belong to several worlds all at the same time.

*Courtesy of [www.bookbrowse.com](http://www.bookbrowse.com)*

## Discussion Questions

1. At the end of *The Space Between Us*, Sera has a tough choice to make. Can you envision a scenario where she could've made a different choice? What would it have taken for her to have made a different choice? And what would be the consequences of that choice?
2. The novel deals with a relationship that, despite all the good will in the world, is ultimately based on the exploitation of one human being by another. Has this novel caused you to look at any situations in your own life where you may be benefiting from the labor or poverty of another?
3. Remarking on the fact that Bhima is not allowed to sit on the furniture in Sera Dubash's home, or drink from the same glass, it could be said that the novel is about a kind of "Indian Apartheid." Do you think that's putting it too strongly? If not, can you identify any parallels in contemporary America?
4. The novel tracks the lives of two women. Trace some of the ways in which their lives resemble each other's. What are the points of departure?
5. Neither Sera nor Bhima end up with happy, successful marriages. Why? Trace the factors that cause each marriage to fail. And for all its failings, which woman has the better marriage?
6. Sera's mother-in-law, Banu, makes life miserable for the young Sera. Is Banu the kind of mother-in-law that many American women can identify with? Examine the ways in which she is or isn't the typical in-law.
7. The Afghani balloonwalla is a minor but pivotal character in the novel. What is his role? What does he symbolize or represent?
8. The novel is told from the points of view of the two women, Bhima and Sera. Should it have included more points of view? For instance, should Viraf have had his own "voice"?
9. How do you read the ending of the book? Is it a hopeful ending? Do you think the ending is justified, given what awaits Bhima the next day?
10. What is your opinion about Sera, especially given the choice she makes in the end. Is she a sympathetic character? Or is she part of the problem?
11. This is a novel about the intersection of class and gender. Can you think of ways in which gender bonds the two women and ways in which class divides them?

12. Is Gopal justified in being furious at Bhima for having signed the contract that the accountant puts before her during the cab ride to the hospital? Would the family's fate have been different if she hadn't signed that paper?
13. Two characters who help Bhima — Hyder, the boy in the hospital and the Afghani balloon seller, both happen to be Muslims. Why? What does the novel say about the issues of religious and communal divisions in India?
14. What does this novel say about the importance of education? Think of some examples where the lack of education hurts a character and conversely, instances of where having an education benefits someone.
15. In some ways, the city of Bombay is a character in the novel. What are your impressions of Bombay after having read this novel? Does the author portray the city with affection or disdain?
16. What societal changes and/or personal choices would need to be different in order for us to envision the possibility of someone like Bhima having a better life?
17. The author has said that although the plot of *The Space Between Us* is a work of fiction, the character of Bhima is based on a woman who used to work in her home when the writer was a teenager. Is there any person in your own life who has inspired you enough to want to write a book about them? What is it about that person that had a deep impact on you?

*Courtesy of Harper Perennial*