

Unaccustomed Earth

by Jhumpa Lahiri

About the Book

These eight stories by beloved and bestselling author Jhumpa Lahiri take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand, as they explore the secrets at the heart of family life. Here they enter the worlds of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers. Rich with the signature gifts that have established Jhumpa Lahiri as one of our most essential writers, *Unaccustomed Earth* exquisitely renders the most intricate workings of the heart and mind.

Praise for the Book

“Jhumpa Lahiri already has carved out a distinctive literary niche . . . her tales of Indians encountering contemporary American lives have resonated with a wide swath of readers. *Unaccustomed Earth* will only burnish that estimable reputation. It’s an emotionally astute, character-driven assortment of stories that carry forward and deepen the themes she’s explored in her previous works. . . . Her prose style is graceful, elegant, understated. Like Alice Munro, Lahiri is adept at handling chronology, ranging backward and forward in time, compressing lifetimes into a single artfully crafted paragraph. Relish this gorgeous collection.”

—Harvey Freedenberg, *Bookpage*

“A testament to Lahiri's emotional wisdom and consummate artistry as a writer.”

—*The New York Times*

“Lucid and revelatory. . . . Both universal and deeply felt.”

—*The Washington Post Book World*

“Beautifully rendered. . . . Reading [Lahiri's] stories is hypnotizing-like falling into a dream.”

—*People* (four stars)

“Lahiri steps back from the action, gets out of the way, so the people and things in her stories can exist the way real things do: richly, ambiguously, without explanation.”

—*Time*

Courtesy of Random House

About the Author

Title: Jhumpa Lahiri

American Short story writer (1967 -)

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Personal Information

Born 1967, in London, England; daughter of a librarian and a teacher; married Alberto Vourvoulis (a journalist), January 15, 2001; children: two. Education: Barnard College, B.A.; Boston University, M.A. (English), M.A. (creative writing), M.A. (comparative literature and the arts), Ph.D. Addresses: Home: New York, NY.

Career

Writer.

Awards

O. Henry Award, 1999, for "Interpreter of Maladies"; Pulitzer Prize for fiction, 2000, for *Interpreter of Maladies*; Transatlantic Review Award, Henfield Foundation; fiction prize, *Louisville Review*; fellow, Fine Arts Work Centre, Provincetown; Best Book Award, Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Europe and South Asia region), 2009, for *Unaccustomed Earth: Stories*.

Writings

- *Interpreter of Maladies* (short stories), Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1999.
- (Author of introduction) Xavier Zubizarro, *India Holy Song* (photography collection), Rizzoli (New York, NY), 2000.
- *The Namesake* (novel), Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2003.
- *Unaccustomed Earth: Stories*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2008.

Media Adaptations

The Namesake was adapted for a film directed by Mira Nair.

“Sidelights”

London-born writer Jhumpa Lahiri, the daughter of Bengali parents, has spent considerable time with her extended family in Calcutta, India. This locale serves as the setting for three of the nine stories in her debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. The stories in the collection, three of which had already appeared in the *New Yorker*, deal with such themes as marital problems, experiences of Indian immigrants to the United States, and translations of not only language, but experience. *Newsweek* reviewer Laura Shapiro wrote that Lahiri "writes such direct, translucent prose you almost forget you're reading." Caleb Crain wrote in the *New York Times* that Lahiri's collection "features marriages that have been arranged, rushed into, betrayed, invaded, and exhausted. Her subject is not love's failure, however, but the opportunity that an artful spouse (like an artful writer) can make of failure--the rebirth possible in a relationship when you discover how little of the other person you know. In Lahiri's sympathetic tales, the pang of disappointment turns into a sudden hunger to know more."

The stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* include the title story, which earned an O. Henry Award in 1999, as well as "A Temporary Matter" and "This Blessed House," among others. "This Blessed House" is the story of Indian newlyweds Twinkle and Sanjeev, who are at odds over Twinkle's laid-back habits and her fascination with the Christian knickknacks left by the previous homeowners. They include a Nativity snow globe, a paint-by-number picture of the wise men, and a Virgin Mary lawn ornament. Crain wrote that Lahiri "is not out to convert Hindus here, nor is she indulging in sarcasm at the expense of sincere belief. But not even religion is sacred to her writerly interest in the power of a childlike sympathy, going where it ought not go."

Other stories featured in the collection include "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," the story of ten-year-old Lilia who learns about the politics and hardships of India from a family friend; "Third and Final Continent," which tells of a librarian putting together the basics in his rented room in anticipation of the arrival of his wife; and "Mrs. Sen," the story of a lonely Indian wife trying to make do in the United States. She wears her beautiful saris as she prepares fresh fish, which reminds her of her native Calcutta. She is sustained by aerograms from her family, who envy her, and the little boy she cares for, who learns what it's like to be isolated and lonely. In an interview in *Newsweek*, Lahiri told Vibhuti Patel that Mrs. Sen is based on her mother, who babysat in their home. "I saw her one way," she explained, "but imagined that an American child may see her differently, reacting with curiosity, fascination, or fear to the things I took for granted."

Because Lahiri was not born in India, her stories set in India have been criticized by some reviewers as inauthentic and stereotypical. *Time* reviewer Nisid Hajari wrote that two of the stories set in Calcutta "survive on little more than smoothness. ... The reader is lulled by Lahiri's rhythmic sentences and, for her Western audiences, no doubt by the Indian setting. Lahiri hits her stride closer to home--on the uncertain ground of the immigrant." Other reviewers, however, have offered Lahiri nothing but praise. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer wrote: "Lahiri's touch in these nine tales is delicate, but her observations remain damningly accurate, and her bittersweet stories are unhampered by nostalgia." Hajari, too, offered praise, saying: "The whole is assured and powerful, and it is perhaps not too harsh a criticism to say that readers should look forward

to Lahiri's second book." Prema Srinivasan, writing for *Hindu*, called *Interpreter of Maladies* "eminently readable," and noted that its author "talks about universal maladies in detail, with a touch of humour and sometimes with irony which is never misplaced." In a *New York Times* article, Michiko Kakutani called *Interpreter of Maladies* an "accomplished collection. ... Ms. Lahiri chronicles her characters' lives with both objectivity and compassion while charting the emotional temperature of their lives with tactile precision. She is a writer of uncommon elegance and poise, and with *Interpreter of Maladies* she has made a precocious debut."

Lahiri's much-praised debut into the world of fiction led to a lot of speculation surrounding the appearance of her second effort, a novel titled *The Namesake*, which deals with identity, the importance of names, and the effect the immigrant experience has on family ties. Gogol Ganguli finds himself saddled with a pet name, rather than a proper Bengali first name. Since he does not find out the significance of his name and its connection to a major incident in his father's life until he is older, the name seems empty to him. Gogol too feels somehow incomplete, and this feeling adds to his confusion and insecurity as an outsider trapped between two cultures: that of India, his parents' homeland, and that of the United States, his country of birth. While Gogol's parents followed the conventions of an arranged marriage, their son does not hold his family's cultural heritage in that high a regard, and he wants more than his parents seem to have. Gogol's inner turmoil is also reflected in his unsuccessful romantic relationships. It is not until Lahiri's dissatisfied young protagonist comes to understand who his parents are that things begin to come together for him.

Women's Review of Books critic Mendira Sen wrote that this "beautifully crafted and elegantly written novel will speak to many." In the *Antioch Review*, Ed Peaco noted that, despite the lack of action on the part of the novel's fictional protagonist, "Lahiri's delicate details and soft rhetorical touch create an absorbing reading experience in which characters become friends in the sense that we can rely on them for wit, insight, and affirmation." Praising the author for her "sparse, lyrical prose," *Herizons* contributor Irene D'Souza added that *The Namesake* is a "wondrous, gentle book" whose major strength is that it "demystifies a culture that often finds itself at odds with the majority."

In 2008, Lahiri's second collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth: Stories*, was published. This collection of eight short stories, like *The Namesake*, deals with the theme of being of being trapped between two cultures. This time, however, it is from the perspective of the American-born children of immigrants who must navigate between the traditional values of their parents and the modern American values of their peers. The first five stories in this book stand on their own, while the last three are grouped together as "Hema and Kaushik." These three stories explore the intertwined histories of the title characters, a girl and boy from two Bengali immigrant families, at three different points in their lives.

Unaccustomed Earth was met with praise by many critics, although some complained about the fact that several of the stories had already been published in the *New Yorker*. *Mostly Fiction* reviewer Poornima Apte claimed that, with this book, Lahiri "delivers her best work yet," adding that "this new collection feels more mature and the topics Lahiri tackles reflect more complicated issues that the immigrant community must deal with in a new land. Topics such as teen

alcoholism that she explores beautifully in the story 'Only Goodness' are especially sensitive for the usually conservative Indian American community--one that is often labeled a 'model minority.'" "Lahiri's voice, always distinct, grows deeper and more masterful. Her strength is the short story form, and these stories shine with insights into human behavior, deftly illustrated, never highlighted," wrote Sudheer Apte in a review of the book for *Mostly Fiction*. The *Village Voice* reviewer Lenora Todaro felt that "her new stories are better, stronger--evidence of a writer pushing herself to a deeper level." "Lahiri handles her characters without leaving any fingerprints. She allows them to grow as if unguided, as if she were accompanying them rather than training them through the espalier of her narration. Reading her stories is like watching time-lapse nature videos of different plants, each with its own inherent growth cycle, breaking through the soil, spreading into bloom or collapsing back to earth," observed Liesl Schillinger in her review of the book for the *New York Times*.

Further Readings About the Author

Periodicals

- *Antioch Review*, summer, 2004, Ed Peaco, review of *The Namesake*, p. 581.
- *Atlantic Monthly*, March 18, 2008, Isaac Chotiner, interview with Jhumpa Lahiri; April 1, 2008, review of *Unaccustomed Earth: Stories*, p. 107.
- *Booklist*, June 1, 2003, Donna Seaman, review of *The Namesake*, p. 123; November 15, 2003, Donna Seaman, "Voices of India," p. 574; February 1, 2008, Donna Seaman, review of *Unaccustomed Earth*, p. 5.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, September 19, 2003, Gregory Kirschling, review of *The Namesake*, p. 40; September 19, 2003, Jennifer Reese, "A Name to Remember," p. 88.
- *Esquire*, October, 2000, Sean Flynn, "Jhumpa Lahiri," p. 172.
- *Explicator*, summer, 2001, Simon Lewis, review of *Interpreter of Maladies*, p. 219; winter, 2004, Jennifer Bess, review of *Interpreter of Maladies*, p. 125.
- *Herizons*, summer, 2001, Irene D'Souza, review of *Interpreter of Maladies*, p. 32; summer, 2004, Irene D'Souza, review of *The Namesake*, p. 36.
- *Hindu*, April 12, 2000, "Pulitzer for Jhumpa Lahiri"; February 5, 2001, "Beyond Bengal and Boston."
- *Kenyon Review*, summer, 2004, David H. Lynn, "Virtue of Ambition," p. 160.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, June 1, 2003, review of *The Namesake*, p. 773; February 1, 2008, review of *Unaccustomed Earth*.
- *Library Journal*, July, 2003, Starr E. Smith, review of *The Namesake*, p. 123; February 1, 2008, Sybil Kollappallil, review of *Unaccustomed Earth*, p. 65.
- *Marie Claire*, April 1, 2008, Sarah Z. Wexler, review of *Unaccustomed Earth*, p. 100.
- *Nation*, October 23, 2004, David Bromwich, "The Man without Qualities," p. 36.
- *New Leader*, September-October, 2003, Benjamin Austen, "In the Shadow of Gogol," p. 86.
- *Newsweek*, July 19, 1999, Laura Shapiro, "India Calling: The Diaspora's New Star," p. 67; September 20, 1999, Vibhuti Patel, "Maladies of Belonging"; August 25, 2003, Barbara Kantrowitz, review of *The Namesake*, p. 61.

- *New York Times*, July 11, 1999, Caleb Crain, "Subcontinental Drift: Most of the Characters in These Stories Move between India and the United States," p. 11; August 6, 1999, Michiko Kakutani, review of *Interpreter of Maladies*; April 11, 2000, Felicity Barringer, "Author's First Book Wins Pulitzer for Fiction"; September 28, 2003, Stephen Metcalf, "Out of the Overcoat," p. 11; April 6, 2008, Liesl Schillinger, review of *Unaccustomed Earth*.
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- *Spectator*, January 17, 2004, Lee Langley, "Cola versus Curry," p. 39.
- *Time*, September 13, 1999, Nisid Hajari, "The Promising Land," p. 49; April 7, 2008, "India Ink," p. 63; May 19, 2008, "The Quiet Laureate," p. 40.
- *Times of India*, April 16, 2000, Ratnottama Sengupta, "Mira Nair to Film Jhumpa Lahiri Story."
- *USA Today*, April 3, 2008, "Lahiri Leaves No 'Earth' Untilled," p. 5.
- *Village Voice*, April 1, 2008, Lenora Todaro, review of *Unaccustomed Earth*.
- *Washington Post Book World*, September 14, 2003, Christopher Tilghman, review of *The Namesake*, p. 10.
- *Women's Review of Books*, March, 2004, Mendira Sen, "Names and Nicknames," p. 9.
- *World and I*, January, 2004, Linda Simon, review of *The Namesake*, p. 230.

Online

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- *Houghton Mifflin Web site*, <http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/> (July 1, 2008).
- *Mostly Fiction*, <http://www.mostlyfiction.com/> (April 24, 2008), Poornima Apte, review of *Unaccustomed Earth*; Sudheer Apte, review of *Unaccustomed Earth*.
- *PBS Web site*, <http://www.pbs.org/> (August 3, 2004), Elizabeth Farnsworth, interview with Lahiri.
- *PIF Magazine Online*, <http://www.pif.com/> (August 3, 2004), Arun Aguiar, interview with **Lahiri**.
- *Slate Magazine*, <http://www.slate.com/> (April 3, 2008), Ann Hulbert, review of *Unaccustomed Earth*.*

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Author Interview

Jhumpa Lahiri talks about UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

In this audio interview, Jhumpa Lahiri talks with Knopf about Unaccustomed Earth.

Q: The New York Times once said that your “plots are as elegantly constructed as a fine proof in mathematics.” How does that feel to you—after the initial ideas are there and you’re working things out on paper do you feel as if you’re working on a math problem or a puzzle? Or is it much less rational and linear?

A: "Well, I'll start by saying that I think that those very kind and generous words..."

Q: You have said that some of the stories in this book had been in rough draft form for several years, and that in some cases you were going back to them after long periods away. What was it like going back to pieces that you’d written several years ago, and trying to delve back in to those worlds?

A: "I think in a way to be able to go back to very early inchoate ideas..."

Q: The final three stories are about Hema and Kaushik. This is the first time you have carried a character from one story to another. Do you think there’s any accounting for why that happened, why you wanted to know more, or write more, about Hema and Kaushik after the first story?

A: "It is the first time that I came to the end of a story..."

Q: You have two young children, which must make it difficult to find blocks of time in which to write. Does that, in turn, have any effect on your writing process, or your drive to write, or other aspects of your writing?

A: "Having children has made things more challenging in a logistical sense..."

Q: Several of your stories—and also a large part of *The Namesake*—take place in the Boston area. You lived there yourself; what kind of impression did the area leave on you, and why do you think it appears in many of your stories?

A: "I think I return to Boston for a number of reasons..."

Q: Can you talk about the epigraph for the book, which contains the phrase “unaccustomed earth”? That quotation from Hawthorne’s *The Custom-House*, the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, is so beautiful. Why did you choose it?

A: I was re-reading *The Scarlet Letter* probably three or four years ago..."

Q: What were you reading while you were working on these stories?

A: "Other than *The Scarlet Letter* I was doing a lot of re-reading when I was working on these stories..."

Q: Your first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was also a book of short stories. How do you think this collection differs from *Interpreter*?

A: "I think this collection to me feels like the consequence of having written a book of stories and then having written a novel..."

Courtesy Random House

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the relevance of the epigraph from Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" not just to the title story but also to the collection as a whole. In which stories do the children successfully "strike their roots into unaccustomed earth"? Why do others find themselves unable to establish roots? How do their feelings of restlessness and insecurity stem from growing up in two cultures? What other more universal problems do they experience? In what ways does their lack of attachment to a place or culture reflect a more general trend in society?
2. In "Unaccustomed Earth," what underlies the tension in the relationship between Ruma and her father as the story opens? What aspects of the family's history inhibit their ability to communicate with each other? How do their memories of Ruma's mother and the life she led influence the paths they choose for the next stages in their lives? Do you feel more sympathy for either character's point of view?
3. In what ways does "Hell-Heaven" echo the themes explored in "Unaccustomed Earth"? How does the way the story unfolds add to its power and its poignancy? What parallels are there between the narrator's mother's "crush" on Pranab and her own infatuation with him and Deborah?
4. What is the significance of the title "A Choice of Accommodations"? What does it imply about Amit and Megan's marriage? Why do you think Lahiri chose to set the story at Amit's old prep school? Do you think the events of the weekend bring Amit a better sense of who he is, what he wants and needs from Megan, and his role as a husband and father? Will the weekend change anything for Amit and Megan and their relationship?
5. "Only Goodness" traces the impact of parental expectations on a sister and brother. Why did Sudha and Rahul develop in such different ways? Discuss such factors as the circumstances surrounding their births and earliest years; the obligations Sudha takes on both as the "perfect daughter" and in response to the combination of love, envy, and resentment Rahul's attitudes and behavior arouse in her; and the siblings' awareness of and reactions to the "perplexing fact of [their] parents' marriage" [p. 137]. Compare and contrast the siblings' choice of partners. What attracts Sudha to Roger, and Rahul to Elena?
6. Why does Paul, the American graduate student in "Nobody's Business," find his roommate, Sang, the recipient of frequent marriage proposals, so intriguing? Does Paul really want to help Sang, or does he get involved in her relationship with Farouk for more selfish reasons? Why do you think Lahiri titled this story "Nobody's Business"—and what does the title mean to you?
7. In "Once in a Lifetime," Hema addresses Kaushik directly as she recalls the time they spent together as teenagers. How does this twist on the first-person narration change your

experience as a reader? Does it establish a greater intimacy between you and the narrator? Does it have an effect on the flow of the narrative? On the way Hema presents her memories? Is it comparable, for example, to reading a private letter or diary? Are the same things true of Kaushik's narrative in "Year's End"?

8. In an interview with *Bookforum*, Lahiri, whose parents immigrated to London and then to the United States, said, "My parents befriended people simply for the fact that they were like them on the surface; they were Bengali, and that made their circle incredibly vast. There is this de facto assumption that they're going to get along, and often that cultural glue holds them, but there were also these vast differences. My own circle of friends is much more homogenous, because most of my friends went to college—Ivy League or some other fine institution—and vote a certain way." How is this mirrored by the friendship between the two sets of parents in "Once in a Lifetime," who are close friends despite the differences in their backgrounds? Why does this attachment deteriorate when the Choudhuri family returns from India? Which of their habits or attitudes do Hema's parents find particularly reprehensible and why? What is the significance of Kaushik's breaking his family's silence and telling Hema about his mother's illness?

9. How would you describe the tone and style of Kaushik's account of his father's remarriage in "Year's End"? Does his conversation with his father [pp. 253-255] reveal similarities between them? Why does Kaushik say, "I didn't know which was worse—the idea of my father remarrying for love, or of his actively seeking out a stranger for companionship" [p. 255]? Does the time he spends with his father's new family offer an alternate, more complex, explanation for his father's decision?

10. What role do his stepsisters play in Kaushik's willingness to accept his father's marriage? Why is he so outraged by their fascination with the pictures of his mother? He later reflects, "in their silence they continued both to protect and to punish me" [p. 293]. In what ways does their silence and the reasons for it mirror Kaushik's own behavior, both here and in "Once in a Lifetime"?

11. How do "Once in a Lifetime" and "Year's End" set the stage for "Going Ashore," the final story in the trilogy? What traces of their younger selves are visible in both Hema and Kaushik? In what ways do the paths they've chosen reflect or oppose the journeys their parents made as immigrants?

12. Why does Hema find the idea of an arranged marriage appealing? How has her affair with Julian affected her ideas about romantic love? What does her description of her relationship with Navin [pp. 296-298] reveal about what she thinks she wants and needs in a relationship? What role do her memories of her parents' marriage play in her vision of married life?

13. What motivates Kaushik's decision to become a photojournalist? In what ways does the peripatetic life of a photojournalist suit his idea of himself? In addition to the many

moves his family made, what other experiences make him grow up to be an outsider, "away from the private detritus of life" [p. 309]?

14. What does the reunion in Rome reveal about the ties that bind Hema and Kaushik despite their many years of separation? What does it illustrate about their attempts to escape from the past and their parents' way of life? What do they come to realize about themselves and the plans they have made as the intimacy between them escalates? Why does Lahiri introduce Hema's voice as the narrator of the final pages?

15. In what ways does "Going Ashore" bring together the themes threaded through the earlier stories? What does the ending demonstrate about realities of trying to find a home in the world?

16. The stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* offer a moving, highly original perspective on the clash between family and cultural traditions and the search for individual identity. How does the sense of displacement felt by the older, immigrant generation affect their American-born children? What accommodations do the children make to their parents' way of life? In trying to fit in with their American friends, do they sacrifice their connections to their heritage? In what ways are the challenges they face more complex than those of their parents?

17. Several stories feature marriages between an Indian-American and an American-and in once case, English-spouse. What characteristics do these mixed marriages share? In what ways does becoming parents themselves bring up (or renew) questions about cultural identity? What emotions arise as they contemplate the differences between the families they're creating and those in which they grew up?

Courtesy Random House