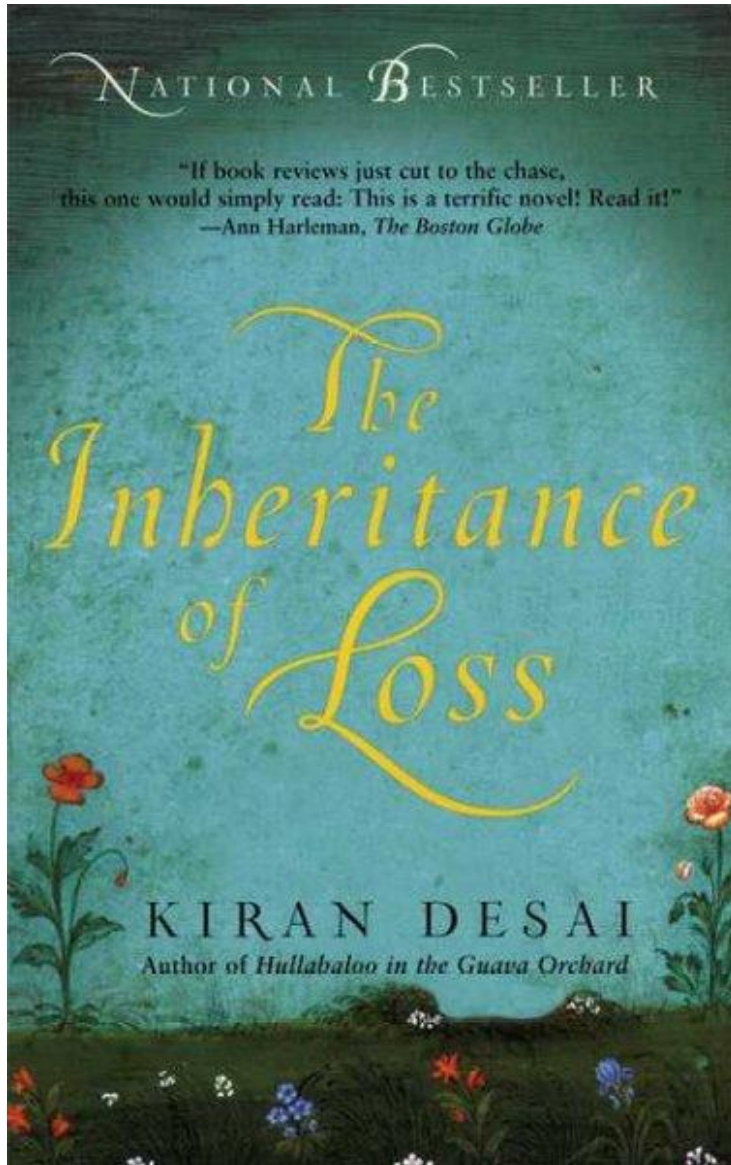


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

### About the Book



In a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas, lives an embittered judge who wants only to retire in peace from a world he has found too messy for justice, when his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, arrives on his doorstep. The judge's cook watches over her distractedly, for his thoughts are claimed by his son, Biju, who is hopscotching from one gritty New York restaurant to another, trying to stay a step ahead of the INS on an elusive search for a green card that "was not even green."

When an Indian-Nepali insurgency in the mountains interrupts Sai's exploration of the many incarnations and facets of a romance with her Nepali tutor, and causes their lives to descend into chaos, they are forced to consider their colliding interests. The cook witnesses the hierarchy being overturned and discarded. The judge must revisit his past, his own journey and role in their intertwining histories.

## About the Author Source: *BookBrowse.com*

Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971, she lived in Delhi until she was 14, then spent a year in England, before her family moved to the USA. She completed her schooling in Massachusetts before attending Bennington College; Hollins University and Columbia University, where she studied creative writing, taking two years off to write *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*.

Her mother is Anita Desai, author of many books, three of which have been short listed for the Booker Prize (*Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Anita Desai currently teaches writing at MIT. Her maternal grandmother was German, but left before the World War II and never returned. Her grandfather was a refugee from Bangladesh. Her paternal grandparents came from Gujarat, and her grandfather was educated in England. Although Kiran has not lived in India since she was 14, she returns to the family home in Delhi every year.

She first came to literary attention in 1997 when she was published in the *New Yorker* and in *Mirrorwork*, an anthology of 50 years of Indian writing edited by Salman Rushdie - *Strange Happenings in the Guava Orchard* was the closing piece. In 1998, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, which had taken four years to write, was published to good reviews. She says, "I think my first book was filled with all that I loved most about India and knew I was in the inevitable process of losing. It was also very much a book that came from the happiness of realizing how much I loved to write."

Eight years later, *The Inheritance of Loss* was published in early 2006, and won the 2006 Booker Prize. When talking of the characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, and of her own life, she says, "The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance."

*The Inheritance of Loss* is set partly in India and partly in the USA. Desai describes it as a book that "tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant," and goes on to say that it also explores at a deeper level, "what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West" - which happened during the British colonial days in India, and is happening again

"with India's new relationship with the States." Her third aim was to write about, "What happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere, a political sphere, over time?"

As she says, "These are old themes that continue to be relevant in today's world, the past informing the present, the present revealing the past."

## Awards

*The Inheritance of Loss* won the Man Booker Prize (<http://www.themanbookerprize.com/>) and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award (<http://www.nationalbook.org/>).

## Reviews

*Publishers Weekly* \*Starred Review\*

This stunning second novel from Desai (*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*) is set in mid-1980s India, on the cusp of the Nepalese movement for an independent state. Jemubhai Popatlal, a retired Cambridge-educated judge, lives in Kalimpong, at the foot of the Himalayas, with his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, and his cook. The makeshift family's neighbors include a coterie of Anglophiles who might be savvy readers of V.S. Naipaul but who are, perhaps, less aware of how fragile their own social standing is—at least until a surge of unrest disturbs the region. Jemubhai, with his hunting rifles and English biscuits, becomes an obvious target. Besides threatening their very lives, the revolution also stymies the fledgling romance between 16-year-old Sai and her Nepalese tutor, Gyan. The cook's son, Biju, meanwhile, lives miserably as an illegal alien in New York. All of these characters struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of modernization while trying to maintain their emotional connection to one another. In this alternately comical and contemplative novel, Desai deftly shuttles between first and third worlds, illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post-colonialism and the blinding desire for a "better life," when one person's wealth means another's poverty.

*Library Journal*

A shell of his once imposing self, retired magistrate Patel retreats from society to live on what was previously a magnificent estate in India's Himalayas. Cho Oyu is as far away from the real world as the embittered

Patel can get. Owing to neglect and apathy, its once beautiful wooden floors are rotted, mice run about freely, and extreme cold permeates everything. The old man isn't blind to the decay that surrounds him and in fact embraces it. But the outside world intrudes with the arrival of his young granddaughter—a girl he never even knew existed. Predictably, the relationship between the two builds throughout the narrative. A parallel story about love and loss is told through the voice of Patel's cook. After the success of her debut, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Desai—the daughter of one of India's most gifted writers, Anita Desai—falls short in her second attempt at fiction. She fails to get readers to connect and identify with the characters, much less care for them. The story lines don't run together smoothly, and the switching between character narratives is very abrupt. Not recommended.

#### *Booklist* \*Starred Review\*

Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) introduced an astute observer of human nature and a delectably sensuous satirist. In her second novel, Desai is even more perceptive and bewitching. Set in India in a small Himalayan community along the border with Nepal, its center is the once grand, now decaying home of a melancholy retired judge, his valiant cook, and beloved dog. Sai, the judge's teenage granddaughter, has just moved in, and she finds herself enmeshed in a shadowy fairy tale-like life in a majestic landscape where nature is so rambunctious it threatens to overwhelm every human quest for order. Add violent political unrest fomented by poor young men enraged by the persistence of colonial-rooted prejudice, and this is a paradise under siege. Just as things grow desperate, the cook's son, who has been suffering the cruelties accorded illegal aliens in the States, returns home. Desai is superbly insightful in her rendering of compelling characters and in her wisdom regarding the perverse dynamics of society. Like Salman Rushdie in *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), Desai imaginatively dramatizes the wonders and tragedies of Himalayan life and, by extension, the fragility of peace and elusiveness of justice, albeit with her own powerful blend of tenderness and wit.

#### **Literary Criticism**

In her brilliant second novel, Desai takes as her landscape the air of India rather than its ground soil. She is not after a depiction of the geography and history of her forbears' country, but in the essence of a state shadowing its descendants. Her grasp is on the inheritance India bestows.

This theme of rootedness--or lack of it--pervades the novel. It is summed up in one of its many ironic and affecting scenes. Father Booty, the

Catholic priest who, in his eager pursuit of natural beauty snapped a photograph of a beautiful butterfly, is charged with spying and ordered out of the country. Unfortunately for him the butterfly had landed near a military installation. Father Booty has lived in India for 45 years, and is a stranger to the Europe now assigned as his forced destination. Yet as Desai shows, he is not an Indian citizen--he is a visitor who has never applied for Indian citizenship and even has forgotten to renew his working permit. A transplant for decades, he has assumed a family position to his land. Now he finds himself a displaced person ordered into exile to his native country. The paradox of globalism is put in these words by Desai:

... each of them [Sai, Father Booty, and Uncle Potty] separately remembered how many evenings they'd spent like this ... how unimaginable it was that it would soon come to an end. Here Sai had learned how music, alcohol, and friendship could create a grand civilization... .

There were concert halls in Europe to which Father Booty would soon return, opera houses where music molded entire audiences into a single grieving or celebrating heart.

But could they feel [Father Booty among the Europeans] as they did here? Hanging over the mountains; hearts half-empty, half-full, longing for beauty, for innocence that now knows. With passion for the beloved or for the wide world or for worlds beyond this one....

Earlier, Desai describes Lola and Noni, two "aunties" as lovers of an old India where civilization had an order of finery lacking in the new democratic country. Lola, whose daughter has moved to England and is working for the BBC in London, characterizes the "new England" as a "cosmopolitan" society where lack of a British inheritance does not impede a person's chances at a successful life. Lola and her sister Noni, however, are not fond of the new England. They prefer the old one along with the old India. They feel at home in that past, in a world of tradition they have learned to accept as natural rather than historical.

Setting young and old against a shifting portrait of India, Desai explores the conflicts raging and inherent in a world where national identity no longer suffices in any one guise. Desai's heroine wants to be Indian; she wants as well to be a part of the modern world (or rather, knowing she is a part of

modernity, she wants not to lose the past that has cradled her). Her journey to maturity must pass through several stations of conflicting loyalties, of demanding allegiances, and of losses that will prove a gain of illuminating experience.

Raised in a convent in India after her parents are killed in an automobile accident in the Soviet Union while on a professional tour, Sai journeys on her sixteenth birthday to the home of her maternal grandfather. He is now a retired eminent judge in the former Indian Colonial Service. Jemu has no liking for the new India because he feels he is no part of it; the irony lies in the correctness of his judgment. Having been a colonial tool for so long, he does not know how to apply himself to working without colonial machinery. His estate has disintegrated in all ways--he is a lonely man whose sole recipient of his affection is his dog, ironically named Mutt for an owner-master so keen on pedigree. His granddaughter is unable to break the wall between them, though each observes an architecture of manners; each finds in this manner a way of holding back awareness of loss in a plenty of ritual.

Parallel to the relationship of Sai and her grandfather, and Indian consciousness, is the story of the judge's cook and the cook's son. The cook has never attempted to shed his servant identity, even in a new state where caste has supposedly been cast away; he is content to remain a loyal worker dependent on his master (Desai does not even give him a name till the end of the novel, for until that climactic moment he has been only a part of an institution, a depersonalized person without individuality. The cook, however, has other plans for his son, Biju. He sends him to America where the son will make a fortune and become a person, a new Indian. Again, the old and the new, the privileged and the underprivileged, the individual and the person-less society, are given parts in Desai's fiction.

Sai has several roads on which she travels, though she never leaves the continent of India. At the conclusion of the novel, she knows she belongs to the country whose hold she has doubted. The cook's son must also find his way in his journey from India to America, and back/forward to maturity. In giving up what might be gained, both Sai and the cook's son, Biju, inherit loss, but that loss will prove a lasting gain.

Along with these parallel passages of journey Desai allows her heroine the experience of romance, friendship, trust and betrayal. Sai learns her lesson in romance with a young tutor, who has conflicting loyalties to progressive thuggery and conservative decency. She learns to cope with compassion

and rejection, and to comprehend the reasons for prejudice; she learns as well that to accept the prejudice she has come to comprehend is a continuation of that prejudice.

Desai ends her novel in a shocking scene that suggests a Voltaire-like garden in which, like *Candide*, the cook's son and the young heroine Sai assume satisfaction with their biographies--circumstance becomes fate. The ending is provocative, since it comments on the paths facing modern India. Which road will be taken? What will be excluded? Will cosmopolitan, global progress change the fabric of India so that the veils of the past no longer provide alluring shelter? Will India turn from a world view back to an insular nationalism? Sai (and Desai) know these big words--cosmopolitanism, globalism, nationalism, materialism--are giant and vague concepts that must be personified to have meaning. A mixed horizon awaits Desai's young and new Indians. Freedom is their gain to be shared with a loss of certitude.

Source: Tucker, Martin. "Kiran Desai. *The Inheritance of Loss*." *Confrontation* (2007): 329+. Literature Resource Center.  
<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

### **Discussion Questions** Source: *BookBrowse.com*

1. *The Inheritance of Loss* is preceded by a poem by Jorge Luis Borges. Given what you know of Borges, why do you think Kiran Desai chose his work as an epigraph? Who are "the ambitious . . . the loftily covetous multitude"? Why are they "worthy of tomorrow"? Who is "I"?
2. The first evening that Sai was at Cho Oyu, "she had a fearful feeling of having entered a space so big it reached both backward and forward" (p. 34). Discuss this observation. Could this be a description of the novel itself?
3. Discuss the terms *globalization* and *colonialism*. What does it mean to introduce an element of the West into a country that is not of the West, a person from a poor nation into a wealthy one? What are examples of this in the novel? Discuss them in political and economic terms. How are Noni and Lola stand-ins for the middle class the world over? See page 242.

4. Why did the judge lead such a solitary life in England? The judge returned to India a changed man. “He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both” (p. 119). Discuss the effect that the prejudice and rejection he experienced in England had on the judge for the rest of his life.
5. Bose was the judge’s only friend in England. “A look of recognition had passed between them at first sight, but also the assurance that they wouldn’t reveal one another’s secrets, not even to each other” (p. 118). Compare and contrast the two men. Who was the optimist? How did Bose help the judge when they were in England? When they met again, thirty-three years later, Bose had changed. How? Why did he want to see the judge again?
6. Nimi attended a political rally unknowingly. Who took her to the rally? Explain why the judge was enraged at this. After independence, he found himself on the wrong side of history. What was happening politically in India at this time? What was the Congress Party?
7. The judge’s marriage to Nimi was destined to fail. Did the judge ever have any tender feelings for his wife? Why and how did her family pay for him to go to school in England? What finally happened to Nimi? What did the judge choose to believe about it? And finally, did the judge have regrets that he abandoned his family “for the sake of false ideals” (p. 308)?
8. Discuss the judge’s feelings for Sai, who was “perhaps the only miracle fate had thrown his way” (p. 210). The cook treated Sai like a daughter. Discuss their relationship.
9. Discuss the role that Mutt played in the judge’s life.
10. Sai’s parents left her at St. Augustine’s Convent, and she never saw them again. Why were they in the Soviet Union? How does their journey to and years in another country parallel the stories of Biju and the judge? How do India’s allegiances to other countries prompt this kind of immigration?

11. Describe Noni, who was Sai's first tutor. What advice did Noni give Sai? Why? See page 69.
12. Compare Gyan's and Sai's homes. Gyan's home is "modernity proffered in its meanest form, brand-new one day, in ruin the next" (p. 256) and Sai's home had been a grand adventure for a Scotsman, but is now infested with spiders and termites, and the walls sail out from the humidity (p. 7). How do their homes illustrate the differences between them?
13. Compare Gyan and the judge. Both were the chosen sons of the family; much was sacrificed for their success and much expected of them. They are both lonely and feel that they don't fit in anywhere. If they are so similar, why don't they get along? Do you think they would raise their sons the way they had been raised?
14. How is it that the judge's father realized that the class system in India would prevent his son from realizing his potential, but that colonialism offered a chink in that wall? Why does the judge not work in his own province once he returns to India? What are the different types of immigration that take place in the novel? There is Biju, Saeed Saeed, the judge, Sai's mother and father, Father Booty and Uncle Potty, the Tibetan monks, the workers in the New York restaurants, and all the people in the Calcutta airport when Biju arrives back home (chapter 48). What does all this immigration mean?
15. Was Gyan a strong person? How did he become involved with a "procession coming panting up Mintri Road led by young men holding their kukris aloft and shouting, 'Jai Gorkha' " (p. 156)? Gyan was not totally convinced at the rally. Later at Ex-Army Thapa's Canteen "fired by alcohol" (p. 160), what decision did Gyan reach? Explain his reasons. What did Gyan think about his father?
16. The next day Gyan went to Cho Oyu. What had changed? He returned to the canteen after leaving Cho Oyu. Discuss his reasons for betraying Sai. "You hate me," said Sai, as if she read his thoughts, "for big reasons, that have nothing to do with me" (p. 260). Discuss why Gyan rejected Sai.

17. Discuss the unrest, betrayals, and eventual violence that separate Gyan and Sai. How are their troubles, and those of the cook, the judge, Father Booty, and Lola and Noni, related to problems of statehood and old hatreds that will not die? Does Noni's statement, "Very unskilled at drawing borders, those bloody Brits," (p. 129) fully explain the troubles?
18. Biju's time in New York City is not what he had expected. How do the earlier immigrants treat him? How do the class differences in India translate into class differences in the United States, where there were supposed to be none? Saeed Saeed is a success in America: "He relished the whole game, the way the country flexed his wits and rewarded him; he charmed it, cajoled it, cheated it, felt great tenderness and loyalty toward it. . . . It was an old-fashioned romance" (p. 79). Why is he so successful, and Biju is not?
19. Most of the examples of Americans and other tourists in India are extremely unflattering (pp. 197, 201, 237, 264). Most of the Indians in America are also not impressive, such as the students to whom Biju delivers food (pp. 48–51) and the businesspeople who order steak in the restaurant in the financial district (p. 135). How do they judge themselves? How does Biju judge them?
20. How did the cook get his job with the judge? Did the cook accept his position in society? Did he fulfill his responsibilities despite the judge's treatment? Why did the cook embellish the stories he told about the judge?
21. Why did the cook want his son, Biju, to go to America? Discuss Biju's experiences there. How did he feel about the possibility that he might never see his father again? Why did Biju return to India? Describe how he felt when he stepped out of the airport.
22. Did Sai mature or change over the months of both personal and political turmoil? "The simplicity of what she had been taught wouldn't hold. Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that narrative belonged only to herself" (p. 323). Explain what she means by this statement. Will Sai leave Cho Oyu?
23. The cook is not referred to by name until the next to last page of the novel. Why?

24. Which of the characters achieved, in Gyan's words, "a life of meaning and pride" (p. 260)?

## Multimedia

### ***Kiran Desai Reads 'The Inheritance of Loss'* (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10662383>

The author discusses her book with NPR on their *Book Tour* feature.

### ***Kiran Desai – The Inheritance of Loss* (Video Clip)**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvK3X7U5d54>

The author explains this novel draws on her own life experience but it is not thinly veiled autobiography.

## Further Reading

### ***Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1137083>

(Call number: Fiction Desai)

Sampath Chawla is born into a family slightly off kilter, to a mother not quite like her neighbors, in a town not quite like other towns. After years of failure at school, failure at work, it does not seem as if Sampath is going to amount to much. Then Sampath climbs up a guava tree in search of a life of peaceful contemplation -- and becomes famous as a hermit. Written with rich humor and an eye for the eccentric, this is a magical tale of a world gone slightly mad.

## Read-Alikes

### ***The Point of Return* by Siddhartha Deb**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1206187>

(Call number: Fiction Deb)

Set in the remote northeastern hills of India, the story revolves around the father-son relationship of a willful, curious boy, Babu, and Doctor Dam, an enigmatic product of British colonial rule and Nehruvian nationalism. Told in reverse chronological order, the novel examines an India where the ideals that brought freedom from colonial rule are beginning to crack under the pressure

of new rebellions and conflicts. For Dr. Dam and Babu this has meant living as strangers in the same home, puzzled and resentful, tied only by blood. As the father grows weary and old and the son tries to understand him, clashes between ethnic groups in their small town show them to be strangers to their country as well. Before long Babu finds himself embarking on a great journey, an odyssey through the memories of his father, his family, and his nation."

***The Unknown Errors of Our Lives: stories*** by Chitra Divakaruni

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1176182>

From acclaimed and beloved author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni comes a new collection of moving stories about family, culture, and the seduction of memory. With the rich prose and keen insight that made *Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* national bestsellers, these tales of journeys and returns, of error, of loss and recovery all resound with her unique understanding of the human spirit.

***Interpreter of Maladies: stories*** by Jhumpa Lahiri

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1155546>

The nine stories in this stunning debut collection unerringly chart the emotional journeys of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations and generations. Imbued with the sensual details of Indian culture, these stories speak with passion and wisdom to everyone who has ever felt like a foreigner. Like the interpreter of the title story, Lahiri translates between the strict traditions of her ancestors and a baffling new world.

***The Mango Season*** by Amulya Malladi

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1208144>

From the acclaimed author of *A Breath of Fresh Air*, this beautiful novel takes us to modern India during the height of the summer's mango season. Heat, passion, and controversy explode as a woman is forced to decide between romance and tradition. Every young Indian leaving the homeland for the United States is given the following orders by their parents: Don't eat any cow (It's still sacred!), don't go out too much, save (and save, and save) your money, and most important, do not marry a foreigner. Priya Rao left India when she was twenty to study in the U.S., and she's never been back. Now, seven years later, she's out of excuses. She has to return and give her family the news: She's engaged to Nick Collins, a kind, loving American man. It's going to break their hearts. Returning to India is an overwhelming experience for Priya. When she was growing up, summer was all about mangoes--ripe, sweet mangoes, bursting with juices that dripped down your chin, hands, and

neck. But after years away, she sweats as if she's never been through an Indian summer before. Everything looks dirtier than she remembered.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*

