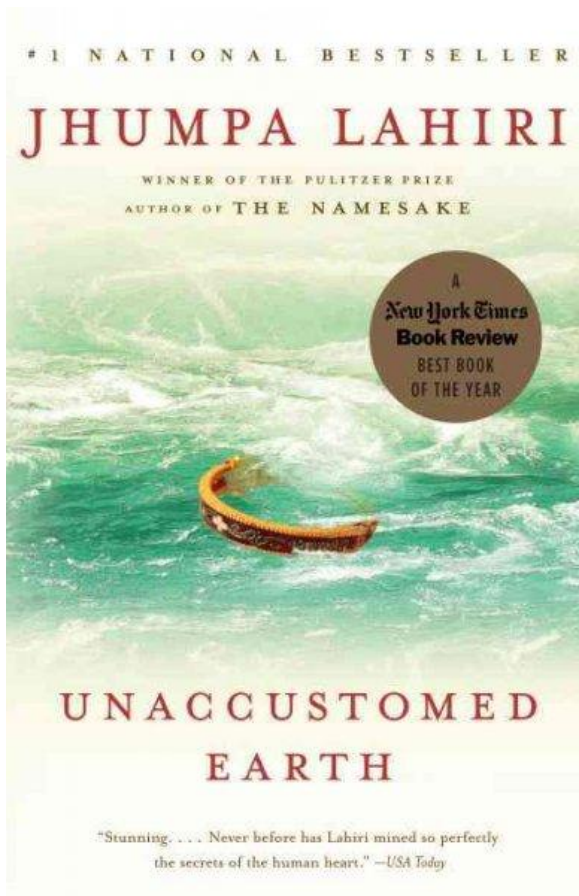


## About the book...



From the internationally best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, a superbly crafted new work of fiction: eight stories—longer and more emotionally complex than any she has yet written—that take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand as they enter the lives of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers.

In the stunning title story, Ruma, a young mother in a new city, is visited by her father, who carefully tends the earth of her garden, where he and his grandson form a special bond. But he's harboring a secret from his daughter, a love affair he's keeping all to himself. In "A Choice of Accommodations," a husband's attempt to turn an old friend's wedding into a romantic getaway weekend with his wife takes a dark, revealing turn as the party lasts deep into the night. In "Only Goodness," a sister eager to give her younger brother the perfect childhood she never had is overwhelmed by guilt, anguish, and anger when his alcoholism threatens her family. And in "Hema and Kaushik," a trio of linked stories—a luminous, intensely compelling elegy of life, death, love, and fate—we follow the lives of a girl and boy who, one winter, share a house in Massachusetts. They travel from innocence to experience on separate, sometimes painful paths, until destiny brings them together again years later in Rome.

*Unaccustomed Earth* is rich with Jhumpa Lahiri's signature gifts: exquisite prose, emotional wisdom, and subtle renderings of the most intricate workings of the heart and mind. It is a masterful, dazzling work of a writer at the peak of her powers.

## About the author...



Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London and raised in Rhode Island. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and author of two previous books. Her debut collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the PEN/Hemingway Award and *The New Yorker* Debut of the Year. Her novel *The Namesake* was a *New York Times* Notable Book, a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize finalist and was selected as one of the best books of the year by *USA Today* and *Entertainment Weekly*, among other publications. She lives in Brooklyn, New York

## **Awards**

New York Times Notable Books, 2008

Booklist Editors' Choice Best Fiction, 2008

ALA Notable Books, 2009

## **Reviews**

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

Following her thoughtful first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), which has been made into a meditative film, Lahiri returns to the short story, the form that earned her the Pulitzer Prize for her debut, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The tight arc of a story is perfect for Lahiri's keen sense of life's abrupt and painful changes, and her avid eye for telling details. This collection's five powerful stories and haunting triptych of tales about the fates of two Bengali families in America map the perplexing hidden forces that pull families asunder and undermine marriages.

"Unaccustomed Earth," the title story, dramatizes the divide between immigrant parents and their American-raised children, and is the first of several scathing inquiries into the lack of deep-down understanding and trust in a marriage between a Bengali and non-Bengali. An inspired miniaturist, Lahiri creates a lexicon of loaded images. A hole burned in a dressy skirt suggests vulnerability and the need to accept imperfection. Van Eyck's famous painting, *The Arnolfini Marriage*, is a template for a tale contrasting marital expectations with the reality of familial relationships. A collapsed balloon is emblematic of failure. A lost bangle is shorthand for disaster. Lahiri's emotionally and culturally astute short stories (ideal for people with

limited time for pleasure reading and a hunger for serious literature) are surprising, aesthetically marvelous, and shaped by a sure and provocative sense of inevitability.

### *Library Journal*

Four years after the release of her best-selling novel, *The Namesake*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Lahiri returns with her highly anticipated second collection of short stories exploring the inevitable tension brought on by family life. The title story, for example, takes on a young mother nervously hosting her widowed father, who is visiting between trips he takes with a lover he has kept secret from his family. What could have easily been a melodramatic soap opera is instead a meticulously crafted piece that accurately depicts the intricacies of the father-daughter relationship. In a departure from her first book of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri divides this book into two parts, devoting the second half of the book to "Hema and Kaushik," three stories that together tell the story of a young man and woman who meet as children and, by chance, reunite years later halfway around the world. The author's ability to flesh out completely even minor characters in every story, and especially in this trio of stories, is what will keep readers invested in the work until its heartbreaking conclusion. Recommended for all public libraries.

### *Kirkus Reviews* /\* Starred Review \*/

Lahiri (*The Namesake*, 2003, etc.) extends her mastery of the short-story format in a collection that has a novel's

thematic cohesion, narrative momentum and depth of character.

The London-born, American-raised author of Indian descent returns with some of her most compelling fiction to date. Each of these eight stories, most on the longish side, a few previously published in magazines, concerns the assimilation of Bengali characters into American society. The parents feel a tension between the culture they've left behind (though to which they frequently return) and the adopted homeland where they always feel at least a little foreign. Their offspring, who are generally the protagonists of these stories, are typically more Americanized, adopting a value system that would scandalize their parents, who are usually oblivious to the college lives their sons and daughters lead. Ambition and accomplishment are givens in these families, where it's understood that nothing less than attending a top-flight school and entering an honored profession (medicine, law, academics) will satisfy. The stunning title story presents something of a role reversal, as a Bengali daughter and her American husband must come to terms with the secrets harbored by her father. The story expresses as much about love, loss and the family ties that stretch across continents and generations through what it doesn't say, and through what is left unaddressed by the characters. Even "Only Goodness," the most heavy-handed piece in the collection, which concerns a character's guilt over her brother's alcoholism, sustains the reader's interest until the last page. The final three stories trace the lives of two characters, Hema and Kaushik, from their teen years through their 30s, when fate (or chance) reunites

them.

An eye for detail, ear for dialogue and command of family dynamics distinguish this uncommonly rich collection.

## **Literary Criticism**

Title: Jhumpa Lahiri. *Unaccustomed Earth*

Author(s): Catherine Rendon

Source: ***World Literature Today***. 83.1 (January-February 2009): p68. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Book review

Full Text:

Jhumpa Lahiri. *Unaccustomed Earth*. New York. Knopf. 2008. 333 pages. \$25. ISBN 978-0-307-26573-9

*Unaccustomed Earth* is Jhumpa Lahiri's second collection of short stories, and her third book. Her first collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), won her the Pulitzer and her second book, *The Namesake* (2003), a novel, was made into a film by Mira Nair in 2007. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri offers us eight stories that continue her examination of expatriate Bengalis abroad (mainly in the U.S.) and that of their children. Some of her characters break the rules and what is expected of them, others find themselves returning gratefully to familiar, prescribed terrain, particularly in the realm of marriage. These are contemporary tales that take many modern realities into account, including the increasingly multi-ethnic character of life in the U.S. and the dilemmas first-generation children of immigrants face.

Lahiri's stories appeal because she marries the experiences of these generally educated, ambitious, and upwardly mobile Bengalis with familiar and often successful symbols of the "American dream." In this way the pristine lawns of prep schools and Ivy League colleges, Roman cafes, libraries, and remote New England and Thai coastlines serve as attractive backdrops to these portraits of individual struggles to find meaning and happiness. On the whole, Lahiri's perspective and focus is lavished on her Bengali and Bengali American characters rather than on the non-Indians.

There are the usual intergenerational struggles of parents trying to keep their children in the fold of Bengali convention while at the same time negotiating the benefits of the possibilities offered by an American education-- despite the dangers of life in the U.S., which sometimes proves devastating for individual characters. This is the case in the weakest story of the lot, "Uncommon Good," in which the brother is unable to live up to his potential. In "A Choice of Accommodation," Lahiri explores the tensions between a bicultural couple and the cement that holds them together.

At other times, Lahiri switches her attention to elders. In the first story, "Unaccustomed Earth," which gives the collection its title, a father worries about his daughter getting upset about his developing bond with another Indian woman, after the death of his first wife, her mother, even though she has married a non-Indian and is making a new life for herself and her son in faraway Seattle. In the final trilogy, "Hema and Kaushik," Kaushik's father

remarries a much more traditional and less striking woman, after his mother's death.

"Hema and Kaushik" is the book's gem, strong and wellcrafted. The tautness of the tale in its entirety is dazzling, even though at moments Lahiri veers into cinematographic shorthand, with the inclusion of recent international tragedies that give the story an epic sweep. Again Lahiri shows a gift for storytelling and conjuring a variety of scenarios and outcomes. Her characters' dialogue is credible, as are their aspirations, even if at times they seem a bit pretentious. Sometimes she also delves into those hidden places we all have, regardless of nationality and upbringing, which define our most compartmentalized selves. Lahiri has created a world that not only exemplifies the specific variations of the Bengali expatriate and first-generation experience in the U.S. but also shows the difficult allegiances and choices many of their counterparts from other backgrounds also have to make.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Catherine Rendon

Savannah, Georgia

Rendon, Catherine

### **Source Citation**

Rendon, Catherine. "Jhumpa Lahiri. Unaccustomed Earth." *World Literature Today* 83.1 (2009): 68. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 31 July 2011.

## 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 "Heaven-Hell" 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 to both protect and 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?

## **Multimedia**

“Cultural Chasms in Lahiri’s ‘Unaccustomed Earth’”

Available through National Public Radio:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89236881>

“Transplanted Author Finds Roots In Writing” Available through National Public Radio:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89311782>

## **Read-Alikes**

Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006)

In a crumbling house in the remote northeastern Himalayas, an embittered, elderly judge finds his peaceful retirement turned upside down by the arrival of his orphaned granddaughter, Sai.

Monica Ali, *Alentejo Blue* (2006)

A collection of short stories set in the Alentejo province of Portugal features characters linked by a vivid sense of place and time, including Teresa, who yearns to see the world, and Vasco, a cafe owner who is losing business to a new Internet cafe.

Amit Chaudhuri, *Freedom Song* (1998)

Two of the three short novels collected in *Freedom Song*, Chaudhuri's first book published in the United States, have won literary awards. The Anglo-Indian author, noted for his evocative style, sets these novels of everyday middle class life in Calcutta, Bombay, and Oxford. Mostly descriptive, with little plot or dialog, the stories detail everyday scenes and routines in vivid, finely crafted prose.

Slightly longer and more structured than the other two-- *Afternoon Raag* and *A Strange and Sublime Address*--the title novel concerns traditional matchmaking in a climate of political and religious change.

Anita Desai, *The Snake Charmer* (1995)

An Italian man and a German woman set out on a pilgrimage to India in search of a sense of purpose in their lives. While there, they encounter a holy woman whose life parallels their own lives. Through her story, the young couple is forced to examine their relationship as well as their religious beliefs.

G.S. Sharat Chandra, *Sari of the Gods* (1998)

The world of the immigrant is an unusual, and often stressful, one. In this collection of stories, divided into three parts, the author looks at Indians who come to the United States in "Here," those who stay in India in "There" and those who come to the United States but return home in "Neither Here Nor There." In "Here" immigrants confront such problems as a drunk who ruins a woman's sari or the difficulty in understanding why Americans "kid around." For those who remain in India, the author portrays the poverty, ignorance and corruption that devastates the poor more than any other group. "Here and There" is the most poignant section for these people don't fit in anywhere and never feel that they have a home place.

Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999)

Two famous Indian rock musicians take the places of Orpheus and Eurydice in Salman Rushdie's retelling of the Greek myth about a man's attempt to save his wife from

Hades. During the late 1980s, singer Vina Apsara dies in an earthquake; in 1995, she reappears in another woman's body, validating her lover Ormus' faith in supernatural forces. A third character, photographer Rai Merchant, narrates these events and fills the reader in on the main characters' pasts. Besides the theme of immortality, Rushdie examines history, religion, sociopolitics, internationalism, and pop music in this wide-ranging novel.



*Ann Arbor District Library*