

## Boy, Interrupted

The Boston Globe

### In The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri traces the path of a life tugged in different directions, as cultures collide

By Gail Caldwell, 9/14/2003

*The Namesake*, By Jhumpa Lahiri, Houghton Mifflin, 291 pp., \$24

With its characters poised between the old world of India and the perpetual, unnerving newness of America, Jhumpa Lahiri's debut story collection, "Interpreter of Maladies," displayed a commendable grasp of biculturalism as well as an authoritative grace. Both qualities were extraordinary for a first effort from a relatively young writer -- she was 32 at the time of its publication, in 1999 -- and the book's acclaim eventually crested with the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. But as much as Lahiri's careful prose seemed to encompass and embrace her heart-weary expatriates, it was the domestic dilemmas she bestowed upon them that had such weight. Where other contemporary portraits of the assimilation experience, particularly Indian, have tended toward complex plots with simple denouements, Lahiri's went after the opposite circumstance -- tales told from a sad, straightforward point of view, where nothing necessarily worked out for the best and where external dramas served as stand-ins for a core human sorrow. This nervy sensibility called to mind the 19th-century Russians, and it blessed the collection with a staying power both delicate and enduring.

Her much-anticipated first novel, "The Namesake," owes its conceit, at least marginally, to Nikolai Gogol, whose storming of the palace gates of Russian letters would pave the way for the Russian realists. ("We have all come out from under Gogol's 'Overcoat,'" Dostoyevsky said famously.) Lahiri's young protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, is given the writer's name only when his Indian-born parents are forced to fill in his birth certificate before leaving the hospital in Cambridge. This ordinary rite of passage is something that would never happen in India, where babies have intimate names different from the legal (and public) one they will receive later. So, a tricultural collision awaits Gogol from his first few days of life. He has to endure a Russian name he cannot bear in an America he cannot penetrate with Indian parents he cannot fully accept or understand. All these ambiguities make for a novel of exquisite and subtle tension, spanning two generations and continents and a plethora of emotional compromises in between. Lahiri's subject, here and in her stories, is the loneliness of dislocation, and part of the reason her work succeeds is that her voice is as quiet as the atmosphere of displacement she evokes. When Gogol's mother, Ashima, joins her new husband (a virtual stranger) in a snowy New England 8,000 miles from home, she is shocked by the ways in which she must go it alone -- all in a country where "life seems so tentative and spare." No American would describe life at MIT in the 1960s that way, and yet for a young Bengali woman from Calcutta, the phrase is precise. Ashoke Ganguli, Gogol's father, fled Calcutta far more willingly, though the experience that brought him to study engineering in Cambridge was at least as traumatic. Urged by his grandfather, a professor of European literature, to read the Russians ("They will never fail you," he said), Ashoke was immersed in Gogol's stories when the train he was riding outside Calcutta derailed. To say that Gogol the writer saved his life is true in every sense; part of Ashoke's deliverance from this accident will be to leave the India he loves.

Gogol the boy will thus come of age bearing the burdens and freedoms of both parents: the privilege of an upbringing in a Boston suburb, where his father is an engineering professor; the dissonance of swerving between hip, fey American pop culture and the oppressive warmth of the extended Bengali community. On Gogol's 14th birthday, in 1982, swarms of Bengalis arrive bearing presents: calculators, dictionaries, Cross pen-and-pencil sets. He ducks upstairs to listen to the "White Album." He suffers with his sister through obligatory family trips to India, eschews the expected engineering study for architecture, dates American girls, goes to Yale. The week he arrives in New Haven, he has his name legally changed from Gogol to Nikhil.

"The Namesake" is a story of guilt and liberation; in this sense, it speaks to the universal struggle to extricate ourselves from the past -- from family and obligation and the curse of history. Sometimes Lahiri is heavy-handed in evoking the chasms between two cultures, and she has a tendency to leap elliptically from one of Gogol's life changes -- his girlfriends, his life in New York as a young man -- to the next. But more often the narrative displays an intelligence and care that reveal the depths of her characters and the hurdles they face with intricate ease. "Dida, I'm coming," Ashima had said to her grandmother upon parting; then we learn that this is the phrase Bengalis use instead of good-bye.

Because the devotion within Gogol's family is portrayed here with such subtlety and complexity, the whole of "The Namesake" assumes a poignancy even before loss rears its head. Which it will, of course; as with that train journey that nearly took, then defined, Ashoke's own life, we know from the outset that his son will have to make his way

alone. And though he hoped to begin his departure by ridding himself of "Gogol" forever, Lahiri presents her protagonist throughout the novel as Gogol, only calling him Nikhil when he's perceived through the eyes of an assimilated lover. This understated shift in viewpoint is perfectly executed, and it speaks to Lahiri's empathic grasp of the bargains and sorrows that accompany the flight of any phoenix. Humbled by the twists and turns across two continents that have all but defined the Gangulis, Gogol thinks to himself toward the end of the novel that "his family's life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended." But then this is the definition of any life lived outside the strictest margins of safety -- all of us victims of circumstance and of the mere blink of time. In its generous, exacting portrait of the clash between cultural dictates and one man's heart, "The Namesake" manages to transcend the limits of both.

*Gail Caldwell is chief book critic of the Globe. She can be reached at [caldwell@globe.com](mailto:caldwell@globe.com).*

I & R S \ U J K W I I I I \* @ E H I I H Z V S D S H U & R P S D Q I

I & R S \ U J K W I I I I 7 K H I I H Z I < R U N 7 I P H M & R P S D Q