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## Interpreting Indian Culture With Stories

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### Interpreter of maladies

by Jhumpa Lahiri Houghton Mifflin, 198 pages,  
\$12

It's easy to imagine a new generation of Americans, born of Indian immigrant parents, greeting the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri with the same astonished greediness that the early fiction of Philip Roth once elicited from young American Jews. Someone understands! Someone finally gets all the tiny bargains that assimilation asks of us! Someone knows how awful my mother's kitchen smells!

Lahiri's first collection of nine stories, "Interpreter of Maladies," has just come out as a paperback original. The New Yorker published the last story in it, "The Third and Final Continent," as the capstone to its fiction issue this year, naming her one of the 20 best young writers in the United States.

Young though she is, Lahiri imagines her way inside characters of all ages and attitudes. She doesn't filter life through the single, steady prism of a young sarcastic wisenheimer, as Roth's apprentice work did. Nor does she attempt his meshugge humor.

Instead, Lahiri writes about the Indian American experience from all angles in indelible, lifelike stories that are completely predictable -- but only in retrospect. A story called "Sexy" nears its conclusion with a 7-year-old child of divorce explaining to his baby-sitter, a young woman involved with a married man, that the grown-up word "sexy" means "loving someone you don't know." It's exactly what a kid might say, and exactly what a reluctant home-wrecker might not want to hear.

That both characters are a generation or less removed from the Subcontinent complicates their story but should alienate no one. Like Roth's novella and five stories in "Goodbye, Columbus," like Lan Samantha Chang's novella and five stories in last year's collection "Hunger," Lahiri's fiction transcends mere ethnic exoticism.

She accomplishes this with simple, familiar tools -- subtle characterization, meaningful but never portentous detail. In places she suggests one of those artists who can capture a likeness with two or three pencil strokes. But Lahiri keeps sketching until the face begins to breathe and change before our eyes. Here she is in "A Temporary Matter," another New Yorker story, describing a couple's leery courtesies in the months following a miscarriage: "She replaced a missing button on his winter coat and knit him a beige and brown scarf, presenting it to him without the least bit of ceremony, as if he had only dropped it and hadn't noticed."

It's typical of Lahiri's humane, attentive style that her best similes describe not things but gestures. The point of that scene resides not in the scarf, but in how she hands it to him.

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Lahiri achieves a comparable effect in the next story, ``When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine." Mr. Pirzada is a Pakistani botanist on leave in New England when that country's civil war breaks out in 1971. Separated from his wife and seven daughters, whose fates are uncertain, he takes his meals with the only other Indian family in their small college town. The family's teenage daughter narrates the story, observing Mr. Pirzada as he scrutinizes war footage from home on the network news: ``As he watched he had an immovable expression on his face, composed but alert, as if someone were giving him directions to an unknown destination."

Here again Lahiri uses the subjunctive to describe human behavior with heartbreaking clarity. She may have single-handedly won back the phrase ``as if' from the forces of cluelessness.

Lahiri only stumbles when she tries to describe an unsympathetic character. Dev, the faithless husband from ``Sexy," not only smokes, but he's also an investment banker.

It's a demonstrable fact that no writer since the 1980s has ever escaped an institution of higher learning without hearing, at least once, of the MBA's infinite superiority to the MFA as a path to prosperity. As a result, Dev's profession telegraphs his finkery from the word go, and any suspense in the matter is shot to hell.

Sanjeev, the newlywed husband of ``This Blessed House," is an engineer, not a banker, but within two pages he has affixed Post-its to the baseboards where they need retouching, made fun of his wife's taste in art, noted where the mantel wants dusting and alphabetized all his old textbooks. He wouldn't be, an insufferably anal prig would he?

It's testament to Lahiri's prodigious gift of empathy that we wind up feeling sorry for the poor stooge. Sanjeev has bowed to his mother's relentless hints and found a wife, ``a pretty one, from a suitably high caste, who would soon have a master's degree. What was there not to love?"

Ultimately we can't help liking both him and his vivacious bride, and fearing for the god-awful mismatch they make. This, like all the short narratives gathered here, represents storytelling of surpassing kindness and skill. As Sanjeev rightly asks -- or would ask, if his parents had spoken Yiddish instead of Bengali -- what's not to love?

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