

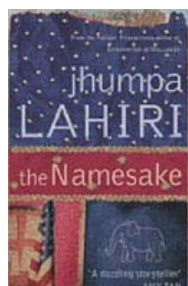
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What's in a name?

Jhumpa Lahiri's subtle style and neat asides enchant Julie Myerson in *The Namesake*

Julie MyersonThe Guardian, Saturday 17 January 2004

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The Namesake

By Jhumpa Lahiri

304pp, Flamingo, £15.99

Take a boy, born in the late 1960s to Indian parents living in the American suburbs, far from their native Calcutta. Chart his progress from babyhood to confused, faintly rebellious teenage years and on to an Ivy League university, fulfilling work as an architect, an apartment in 90s Manhattan. All as far as possible from his parents' life of saris and sandals and doggedly maintained Bengali ritual.

Punctuate gently with a clutch of standard human-condition events and tragedies - first loves, sudden heart attacks, anguished long-distance phone calls, divorces, nothing more dramatic than that. And write it all in a third person present tense which, with guileless vocabulary and an appealing lack of stylisation, somehow conjures a bleak, arm's-length mood, a sense of a life spooling inevitably on. And then, having mixed it all nicely, make your reader care so fiercely and ardently that they laugh, weep, hold their breath and can barely bring themselves to put the novel down. This is Jhumpa Lahiri's achievement in her fantastically readable, warm and profound first novel.

The Namesake simply spans the first three decades of a young man's life - but it would be misleading to suggest there isn't a theme of sorts running through it. It's there in the title, though it's absolutely not the reason you read on. Our hero's father is only a young man when he survives a near-fatal train crash. He is pulled from the wreckage with a much-loved copy of Gogol's *The Overcoat* in his pocket. In the months of pain and injury that follow, both author and book take on a peculiar significance. So when he and his wife have a baby boy and need a temporary "petname" while they wait for the "good" one (Ashima's elderly grandmother is sending her choice via airmail) they alight on "Gogol" as a sufficiently noble, if quirky, compromise.

But the grandmother expires before she can name the child, and "Nikhil" - which the parents are forced to choose in a hurry for an official document - never properly sticks. Almost two decades later, Gogol is finding his strange name - neither Bengali nor American - a burden, an embarrassment and a bore. He makes an official, legal change to Nikhil and is relieved when college friends - and, more importantly, girlfriends - don't question it. And, though he can't ignore a deep-rooted sense that he has somehow betrayed his parents, "It is as Nikhil ... that he grows a goatee, starts smoking Camel Lights at parties and, while writing papers and before exams, discovers Elvis Costello and Brian Eno and Charlie Parker."

And yes, this is certainly a novel that explores the concepts of cultural identity, of rootlessness, of tradition and familial expectation - as well as the way that names subtly (and not so subtly) alter our perceptions of ourselves - but it's very much to its credit that it never succumbs to the clichés those themes so often entail. Instead, Lahiri turns it into something both larger and simpler: the story of a man and his family, of his life and hopes, loves and sorrows.

But the clue to what makes Lahiri's writing unexpectedly zing and crackle lies in that slightly comical mention of Gogol/Nikhil's goatee: this prose is as modern and throwaway as it is real. All Lahiri's observations jolt your heart with their freshness and truth. Her skill at deploying small physical details as a path into character is as exceptional as it is enjoyable. When Gogol meets Maxine, soon to be a girlfriend, she is kneeling on the floor at a party talking about a movie and "spreading a generous amount of Brie on a cracker". Unexceptional, but perfect. When he goes home to dinner with her glamorous liberal parents, her father later "remembers a bar of French chocolate he bought on his way home and this is unwrapped, broken apart and passed around the table".

This is dropped in as an incidental, but those few casual words say everything there is to say about the contrast between Maxine's home life and Gogol's. When Maxine mentions the Metropolitan Museum of Art to Gogol's mother and she looks perplexed and he says, "You've been there, Ma ... With all the steps, I took you there to see the Egyptian temple, remember?" then, even though it's the first we've heard of this expedition, we get a vital sense of lives and events lived off the edge of these pages. And we believe in them without question. Nothing, absolutely nothing, in this novel seems artificial. Nothing seems remotely made-up.

Lahiri is barely more than three decades old herself, and won a Pulitzer prize for her short-story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. It's easy to see why. She has a talent - magical, sly, cumulative - that most writers would kill for. Peer closely at any single sentence, and nothing about it stands out. But step back and look at the whole and you're knocked out.

• Julie Myerson's most recent novel, *Something Might Happen*, is published by Cape.