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## "Interpreter of Maladies"

**In a stunning debut collection about Asians in America, an author casts an empathetic eye on assimilation.**

BY CHARLES TAYLOR

The impulse that courses through Jhumpa Lahiri's beautiful debut, "Interpreter of Maladies," might be called the ardor of empathy. In the 10 stories that make up this collection, Lahiri displays a steadfast curiosity about human behavior and a healthy respect for its mystery. Shrewd but not judgmental, she has the grace to make us feel close even to foolishness and timidity and naivety and the wit to make actions logical without being predictable. (The most hapless of her characters, the maltreated shopgirl in "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" who dreams hopelessly of winning a husband, surprises us with her unexpected tenacity.)

The best humanist artists have the gift of erasing boundaries between character and audience and the concomitant power to wound us by making us share the characters' tragedies. If Lahiri hasn't yet fully achieved that kind of power, it may be because she hasn't yet placed her characters in the direst circumstances. But you can't read "Interpreter of Maladies" without imagining that someday soon she'll write something that scars us with its beauty of perception.

Her characters are Asians, many of whom have come to America for a job or for school (she's note-perfect on the academic life of Boston and its suburbs) or because of a political crisis. As you might expect, the way people assimilate is a major theme. In one story, a young girl can't believe that her American school teaches nothing about the Pakistani civil war that preoccupies her parents and the gentleman who joins them every night for dinner. But Lahiri doesn't write jeremiads about the loss of cultural identity; her characters are both relieved when they adjust to their new world and regretful at the separation from their original cultures.

Food in these stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to. Spices and flavors waft through like themes in a piece of music:

From the kitchen my mother brought forth the succession of dishes: lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce. I followed with the water glasses, and the plate of lemon wedges, and the chili peppers, purchased on monthly trips to Chinatown and stored by the pound in the freezer, which they liked to snap open and crush into their food.

The whole fresh fish that the young woman in "Mrs. Sen's" purchases almost daily from a seafood store is the only recognizable signpost left in her life. The connection Lahiri makes between that lonely woman and the friendless American boy she cares for may be too explicit, but it's never calculated or sentimental.

If I haven't said anything about Lahiri's style, that's because the identification she establishes between her readers and her characters requires the kind of simple, direct prose whose refinement is invisible. In the last words of the collection's last story, "As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination." Lahiri's gift is to invest the ordinary with an emotion that makes us feel we're seeing it anew. What is beyond her empathy is not yet apparent.

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-- By Charles Taylor