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An Indian immigrant's son who is neither here nor there

Reviewed by David Kipen, Chronicle Book Critic

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The Namesake

By Jhumpa Lahiri

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN; 291 PAGES; \$24

Book collectors and literary scholars spend lifetimes chasing down writers' original manuscripts, but they could learn a lot just from the advance reading copies sent out by publishers. Often, perfectionist writers insist on making changes right up to press time. Deleted words can survive in these uncorrected proofs alongside their rephrasings until -- theoretically at least -- a copy editor's fresh eyes catch them at the first trade printing.

Just such a deleted variant shows up in the galley for Jhumpa Lahiri's assured, seemingly unambitious but, in the end, quite moving first novel, "The Namesake." Her protagonist, Nikhil Ganguli, has just made love with a charming childhood acquaintance his mother had, humiliatingly, fixed him up with: "[T]hey end up ordering in, feeding each other endless tart, tiny wedges of eating (sic) every last clementine as they wait for Chinese food to arrive."

It's not hard to hazard a guess about what might have happened in this confusing sentence. The clause probably once read, "eating every last clementine as they wait for Chinese food to arrive." Correcting her proofs, Lahiri must have noticed that "eating" was a pretty feeble, unvisual verb for such a romantic moment, unlikely to leave one of those lingering afterimages in the mind's eye that a writer wants -- especially, as here, just before a section break. So she changed "eating every last clementine" to "feeding each other tart, tiny wedges of clementines," conjuring a richer, sexier mental picture altogether. In all likelihood, somebody just forgot to lose the "eating."

The purpose of this protracted exercise in literary archaeology isn't to tweak the publisher but to give some idea of how Lahiri achieves the careful effects she does. As in her Pulitzer Prize-winning first story collection, "Interpreter of Maladies," Lahiri writes beautifully controlled prose. She resorts to unusual word choices only when she needs them to fix an important moment in the reader's mind. For instance, Nikhil and the woman he may marry don't just eat postcoital oranges, they eat clementines. When his first proper girlfriend picks him up on a train, she's wearing not just any overcoat, but one of "shearling." His father almost dies in a tangle, not of train carriages,

but of "bogies." And when Nikhil first meets a Flaubert scholar who will wind up betraying him, she's wearing her hair in a chignon -- the same bun favored by the faithless Madame Bovary. In Lahiri's sweetly unemphatic world, only extraordinary events call for extraordinary words.

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Theme-wise, "The Namesake" marks no special advance over "Interpreter of Maladies." It's a novel about an immigrant family's imperfect assimilation into America. The story opens in 1968, as Nikhil's pregnant mother is mixing herself a Bengali American concoction of green chili peppers and Planters peanuts. It closes just three years ago, with grown Nikhil -- born in the United States, yet in his way as hyphenated an American as his parents -- at last reconciled to reading a book once given to him by his father, who used to embarrass him.

The book in question is a collection of stories by Nikolai Gogol, after whom Nikhil was christened when his dying Indian great-grandmother's name for him got lost in the mail. An artful image, that: Nikhil's true identity, hung up somewhere between India and the United States.

Nikhil becomes doubly a namesake. At first his father named him "Gogol" as a placeholder, in lieu of the name from the old country that never arrived, and only later "Nikhil," when tradition dictated that a more formal handle was required. The young man comes to hate both names: Nikhil because he's grown used to Gogol, and eventually Gogol, too, because it sounds even more foreign and hard to explain than Nikhil did.

In zeroing in on her hero's name to epitomize his identity crisis, Lahiri is, as usual, right on the money. Names have always been contested territory in immigrant families. Any Ntshona who ever became a Washington, any Fernando who ever went by "Freddy," any Lefkowitzes or Shmulovitzes who became Lakes and Smalls, can take a seat at the Ganguli table and feel right at home.

As Nikhil/Gogol grows up, attends Yale, becomes an architect and gets married, he gradually outgrows his family, or at least thinks he does. Only as he ponders starting a family of his own does Nikhil/Gogol discover that birthrights, unlike short pants, can be handed down but never fully outgrown.

A certain sameness begins to creep in midway through the book -- explicable,

if not completely excusable, as its picaresque hero's compulsion to trace the same neurotic patterns over and over. Several times we watch the oddly friendless Nikhil/Gogol meet the perfect woman, then see it all go comically, excruciatingly wrong.

Only near the end do we see that we've been expertly set up, that what passed for deft if slightly repetitive misadventures may really be the painful,

Portnoyish loneliness of the immigrant's son. As at the end of "The Graduate," Lahiri gives us a romantic resolution and then leaves the camera running, overshooting her fairy-tale happy ending and granting us something wiser, darker, fuller.

Indirectly, Lahiri may be suggesting that assimilation's hyphen is not so easily straddled. Unlike word choices -- oranges or clementines? -- choices between the old country and the new world don't always stay made.

As for Lahiri's immigration from the subcontinent of short fiction to the novel's hectic mainland, her crossing could scarcely be smoother. Second books often suffer during this passage, creaking under the strain of leaving both brevity and autobiography behind. Not here. While autobiography is still a little too much with her -- the hero's gender and especially his career sometimes lack the particularity to transcend Lahiri's own, transposed -- she relaxes into the novel's form and rhythms as if born to

them. In the world of literature, Lahiri writes like a native.

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