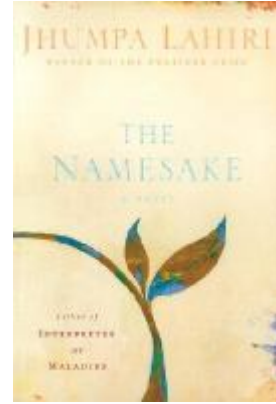


The Namesake

By Jhumpa Lahiri

About the Book...

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri enriches the themes that made her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* an international bestseller: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the conflicts of assimilation, and, most poignantly, the tangled ties between generations.



The Namesake takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of their arranged wedding, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by training, Ashoke adapts far less warily than his wife, who resists all things American and pines for her family. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world. Named for a Russian writer by his Indian parents in memory of a catastrophe years before, Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name.

Gogol stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs. Lahiri reveals not only the defining power of the names and expectations bestowed upon us by our parents, but also the means by which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves. The New York Times has praised Lahiri as "a writer of uncommon elegance and poise."

About the Author...



Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London and raised in Rhode Island. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and author of two previous books. Her debut collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the PEN/Hemingway Award and The New Yorker Debut of the Year. Her novel *The Namesake* was a New York Times Notable Book, a Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist and was selected as one of the best books of the year by USA Today and Entertainment Weekly, among other publications. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Discussion Questions...

1. The title *The Namesake* reflects the struggles Gogol Ganguli goes through to identify with his unusual names. How does Gogol lose first his public name, his *bhalonam*, and then his private pet name, his *daknam*? How does he try to remake his identity, after choosing to rename himself, and what is the result?

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How do our names precede us in society, and how do they define us? Do you have a pet name, or a secret name — and has that name ever become publicly known? Do different people call you by different names? Did you ever wish for a new name? How are names chosen in your family?

2. *Newsweek* said of Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, "Jhumpa Lahiri writes such direct, translucent prose you almost forget you're reading." *The Namesake* is also subtle in style, elegant, and realistically paced. How are the events of the novel simultaneously dramatic and commonplace? What details made the characters real to you? Did you ever lose yourself in the story?
3. When Gogol is born, the Gangulis meet other Bengali families with small children, and Ashima finds that with a new baby "perfect strangers, all Americans, suddenly take notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she's done." How, for all of us, do children change our place in the community, and what we expect from it? Have you ever connected with someone you may have otherwise never spoken to — of a different ethnic background or economic class — through his children or your own?
4. In his youth, Ashoke Ganguli is saved from a massive train wreck in India. When his son, Gogol, is born, Ashoke thinks, "Being rescued from that shattered train had been the first miracle of his life. But here, now, reposing in his arms, weighing next to nothing but changing everything, is the second." Is Ashoke's love for his family more poignant because of his brush with death? Why do you think he hides his past from Gogol? What moments define us more — accidents or achievements, mourning or celebration?
5. Lahiri has said, "The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are . . . who grow up in two worlds simultaneously." What do you think Gogol wants most from his life? How is it different from what his family wants for him, and what they wanted when they first came to America to start a family? How have expectations changed between generations in your own family? Do you want something different for your own children from what your parents wanted for you?
6. Jhumpa Lahiri has said of *The Namesake*, "America is a real presence in the book; the characters must struggle and come to terms with what it means to live here, to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here." Did *The Namesake* allow you to think of America in a new way? Do you agree that America is a real presence in *The Namesake*? How is India also a presence in the book?
7. The marriage of Ashima and Ashoke is arranged by their families. The closest intimacy they share before their wedding is when Ashima steps briefly, secretly, into Ashoke's shoes. Gogol's romantic encounters are very different from what his parents experienced or expected for their son. What draws Gogol to his many lovers, especially to Ruth, Maxine, and eventually Moushumi? What draws them to him? From where do you think we take our notions of romantic love — from

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our family and friends, or from society and the media? How much does your cultural heritage define your ideas and experience of love?

8. Lahiri explores in several ways the difficulty of reconciling cross-cultural rituals around death and dying. For instance, Ashima refuses to display the rubbings of gravestones young Gogol makes with his classmates. And when Gogol's father suddenly dies, Gogol's relationship with Maxine is strained and quickly ends. Why do you think their love affair can't survive Gogol's grief? How does the loss of Gogol's father turn him back toward his family? How does it also change Sonia and Ashima's relationship?
9. Did you find the ending of *The Namesake* surprising? What did you expect from Moushumi and Gogol's marriage? Do you think Moushumi is entirely to blame for her infidelity? Is Gogol a victim at the end of the book? In the last few pages of *The Namesake*, Gogol begins to read "The Overcoat" for the first time — the book his father gave him, by his "namesake." Where do you imagine Gogol will go from here?