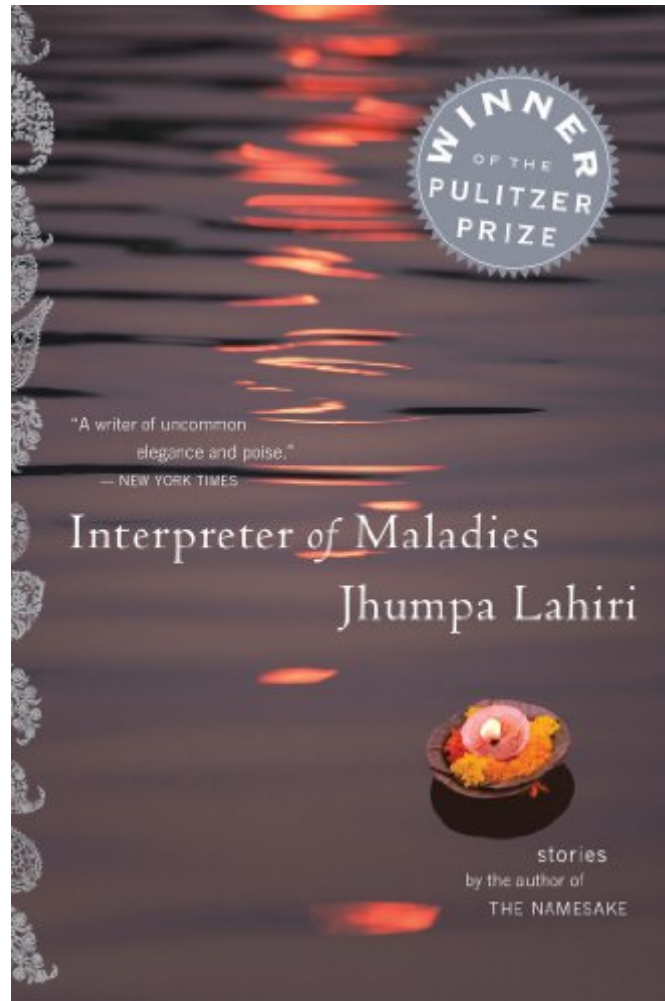




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# Interpreter Of Maladies



## Synopsis

Navigating between the Indian traditions they've inherited and the baffling new world, the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's elegant, touching stories seek love beyond the barriers of culture and generations. In "A Temporary Matter," published in The New Yorker, a young Indian-American couple faces the heartbreak of a stillborn birth while their Boston neighborhood copes with a nightly blackout. In the title story, an interpreter guides an American family through the India of their ancestors and hears an astonishing confession. Lahiri writes with deft cultural insight reminiscent of Anita Desai and a nuanced depth that recalls Mavis Gallant. She is an important and powerful new voice.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Short stories. Some were decent; others were pointless. Of the decent ones, they intrigued me, not because of their Indian nature, but because of the discovery of life. If you are born and raised in America, there is still hope of acquiring a good life, even when you start out with nothing. If new, clueless immigrants can do it ...

Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, explores the tales of ten different characters, all of whom bear some connection to India. Having been raised by Indian parents in a small town in Rhode Island, Lahiri is able to punctuate her writing with her own personal Asian-American background. She uses her background directly in creating characters such as Shukumar, the protagonist in "A Temporary Matter," who possesses Indian roots, but an American upbringing. Indeed, many of Lahiri's stories in the collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, are focused on more Americanized characters with only a small exposure to India. The protagonist in "Sexy" is an American Northerner infatuated with a married Indian man, while the focus of "Mrs. Sen" is on an 11-year old American boy, looked after by a young Indian housewife. Lahiri does extend from the bounds of her Asian-American upbringing in stories such as "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar," a tale of an Indian woman whose spastic condition can supposedly only be remedied with marriage. This short story embraces a unique relation to India, as do the other nine tales in the collection. Lahiri makes use of different settings and cultural backgrounds to create a broad range of experiences; but rather than emphasize the ethnicity of each character, she taps into a specific human emotion to show how people are defined more by their humanitarianism than their culture. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," for example, Lahiri marks the distinctly young narrator, Lilia, by her intuition and empathy rather than her Indian-American background. As her parents welcome a local Muslim professor to their home, Lilia is challenged to define her Indian culture, but mistakenly does so using certain surface-level qualities: "It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same" (Lahiri, 25). Lahiri uses the lens of a child to show the instinctual nature of grouping people by their appearances. Lilia is defined by this cultural naiveté, as well as a feeling of powerlessness in worldly issues. She dwells on how she can do little for Mr. Pirzada's family in war-struck Dacca: "I wanted to join them, wanted, above all, to console Mr. Pirzada somehow. But apart from eating a piece of candy for the sake of his family and praying for their safety, there was nothing I could do" (Lahiri, 34). This quote shows the depth of Lilia's character as she yearns to help a people she knows little about. Her upbringing as an Indian-American has no influence on her desire to help a struggling people, nor does it stop her from instinctively aligning herself with Mr. Pirzada based on their outward appearances. Basic human emotions dominate each of Lahiri's characters, including the main character in the short story that shares the collection's title, "Interpreter of Maladies." Though the protagonist Mr. Kapasi

is a native of India, Lahiri defines him more by his desire to escape the banality of life than by his Indian homeland. She includes a significant amount of information on Mr. Kapasi's strained marriage and how he views his medical interpreting job as a sign of his failings (Lahiri, 52). Overshadowing Mr. Kapasi's Indian background are these basic human emotions of disappointment and desperation. Perhaps most central to Mr. Kapasi's character is how he desperately clings to the small doses of intimacy offered by Mrs. Das, an Indian-American woman on his tour who depicts his job as some heroic deed. Her sudden interest in him, Mr. Kapasi found was mildly intoxicating. (pg. 51) As Mrs. Das inquires about his job, Mr. Kapasi blows every hint of interest out of proportion "imagining a day where he will exchange intimate letters with this woman he hardly knows. As Mr. Kapasi becomes more infatuated with Mrs. Das, his Indian background takes a backseat to his resolution of using love as an escape. In defining Lilia by her intuition and empathy and Mr. Kapasi by his belief in love, Lahiri gracefully demonstrates how human emotions supersede cultural barriers. We do not see Mr. Kapasi merely as an Indian tour guide or Lilia as another Indian-American child. Lahiri brings to light the individuality of each character, showing how culture is an important, but not defining feature of any one person. She purposefully weaves culture into small details of the story, such as the food Lilia's mother prepares and the marriage customs forced on Mr. Kapasi, but she leaves the core of her characterization to explore basic human sentiments.

Hard to get invested in the characters. Yes, Indians settling in America is believably a tough transition, especially back in the 70's, but Ms. Lahiri makes it feel more like a farm girl from Nebraska matriculating at Smith College: an initial shock followed by a settling in and ultimately successful integration. There are cultural specifics, but the anguish doesn't feel all that deep to me. I like the stories, but with the exception of Mr. Pirzada, I don't find myself caring very much for the characters. It all feels too light and fluffy and to come from an over-privileged place.

I have had this book for a number of years, and finally got around to reading it. A most charming collection of stories, dealing with cross-cultural experiences of various characters either in India or from India.

I enjoyed most of the stories in this collection of short stories. The writing is superb. Some of the stories were more interesting than others to me but that's going to be true in any collection of stories.

“Brimming bowls and colanders lined the countertop, spices and pastes were measured and blended, and eventually a collection of broths simmered over periwinkle flames on the stove.” (p. 117) With the sizzling descriptions of Indian food and eye-opening moments portraying the juxtaposition of American and Indian culture, the award-winning Jhumpa Lahiri crafts a collection of 9 breathtaking stories that make up the *Interpreter of the Maladies*. With its beautiful writing, plot twists, and personal significance in my own life, I fell in love with the novel. Its craftsmanship and cultural significance outweighs the minor flaws it has. Beautiful writing and twists in the plot, along with its personal significance in my own life, adds to my love of the book, outweighing the minor flaws it has. Throughout the story Lahiri uses clever imagery and diction to both capture moments in the novel and reveal underlying problems of dysfunctional relationships. As Shoba, the newly miscarried wife of Shukumar, refuses to put her shoes in the closet Lahiri tells of her reluctance to continue living as a wife. Mr. Pizarda, a Bengali man stuck in America as his wife and children suffer from the Pakistan war, gives a young girl Lilia a “steady stream of honey-filled lozenges, raspberry truffles, slender rolls of sour pastilles,” telling her about his grief and longing for his own children (p. 29). Spot-on descriptions of the daily life of both Americans and Indians combine together in her stories yet are made fresh and insightful in their shocking endings. Her shrewd, but not judgmental tone, captures both the flaws and perfection of Indian culture, creating a true page-turner. The stories, in their individuality, are weaved together in their themes of accepting American culture and loving Indian culture. This thread of unification continues in the stories’ emphasis on love, and the toll that these moves take on relationships. Throughout the novel, characters such as Mrs. Das deal with the guilt of having a boy after an affair, Miranda choose to stop her affair with the married Dev, and Elliot struggle to adapt to life with the carefree Twinkle. The couples struggle with the stress of adapting to a chaotic and foreign life in America in contrast to the culturally rich and slow life of India. Yet the relationships born from love, lust, and arrangement overcome their flaws at the end of each story either with a tough ending or a rebirth. Personally, this stress deeply resonates with my own life. I’ve also had to face this move from a foreign country to America. This chaos and unfamiliarity easily can take a toll on all of my relationships, with both family and friends. My favorite story in the book, *The Third and Final Continent*, reflects this move in my life as a man moves from India to England and then to America. He struggles with noise “constantly distracting, at times suffocating” with “the simply chore of buying milk,” and with very new relationship of an arranged marriage (p. 175) While reading the chapter I couldn’t help but smile as I identified with his adjustment to

America. As the story progresses, he develops a relationship with an old woman, Mrs. Croft, yet is grieved by her death. Even so he pushes on and becomes closer to his wife, taking steps every day to love his new life in America; it became an inspiration for me to take life one meal at a time (p. 198). Every relationship has its flaws, as does every book. Even with its beautiful and smooth writing, the Interpreter of the Maladies at times can drone on. The emphasis of describing settings and one broken relationship after another can at times cause the stories to feel as they were, in the words of a customer on Amazon, "written from recipe." Shocking endings can leave readers in confusion. Personally I cannot think of a sentence that describes exactly what Jhumpa Lahiri was trying to convey or reveal in her book; true themes and meanings are very hard to find. Her diction and stirring statements can distract from the plot and add to this confusion. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (p. 198) Even with its minor flaws, Jhumpa Lahiri's beautiful description of Indian cultures, the struggle of living in America, and truths of relationships along with its personal significance in my life adds it to my list of my favorite books. Ending with this impactful sentence that gives me personal motivation, I recommend it for anyone with a love for truth, relationships, and culture.

These are all wonderful, extremely well written stories. I found myself saving the next story for when I needed a bit of an uplift. Highly recommend. I'll read anything this author writes.

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