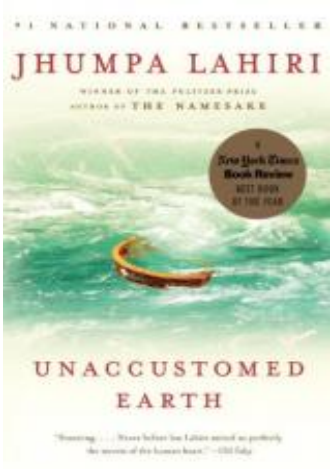
Unaccustomed Earth

by Jhumpa Lahiri



About the Book

From the internationally best-selling, Pulitzer Prize?winning author, a superbly crafted new work of fiction: eight stories?longer and more emotionally complex than any she has yet written?that take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand as they enter the lives of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers.

In the stunning title story, Ruma, a young mother in a new city, is visited by her father, who carefully tends the earth of her garden, where he and his grandson form a special bond. But he?s harboring a secret from his daughter, a love affair he?s keeping all to himself. In ?A Choice of Accommodations,? a husband?s attempt to turn an old friend?s wedding into a romantic getaway weekend with his wife takes a dark, revealing turn as the party lasts deep into the night. In ?Only Goodness,? a sister eager to give her younger brother the perfect childhood she never had is overwhelmed by guilt, anguish, and anger when his alcoholism threatens her family. And in ?Hema and Kaushik,? a trio of linked stories?a luminous, intensely compelling elegy of life, death, love, and fate?we follow the lives of a girl and boy who, one winter, share a house in Massachusetts. They travel from innocence to experience on separate, sometimes painful paths, until destiny brings them together again years later in Rome.

Unaccustomed Earth is rich with Jhumpa Lahiri?s signature gifts: exquisite prose, emotional wisdom, and subtle renderings of the most intricate workings of the heart and mind. It is a masterful, dazzling work of a writer at the peak of her powers.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the relevance of the epigraph from Hawthorne?s ?The Custom House? not just to the title story but also to the collection as a whole. In which stories do the children successfully ?strike their roots into unaccustomed earth?? Why do others find themselves unable to establish roots? How do their feelings of restlessness and insecurity stem from growing

up in two cultures? What other more universal problems do they experience? In what ways does their lack of attachment to a place or culture reflect a more general trend in society?

2. In ?Unaccustomed Earth,? what underlies the tension in the relationship between Ruma and her father as the story opens? What aspects of the family?s history inhibit their ability to communicate with each other? How do their memories of Ruma?s mother and the life she led influence the paths they choose for the next stages in their lives? Do you feel more sympathy for either character?s point of view?

3. In what ways does ?Heaven-Hell? echo the themes explored in ?Unaccustomed Earth?? How does the way the story unfolds add to its power and its poignancy? What parallels are there between the narrator?s mother?s ?crush? on Pranab and her own infatuation with him and Deborah?

4. What is the significance of the title ?A Choice of Accommodations?? What does it imply about Amit and Megan?s marriage? Why do you think Lahiri chose to set the story at Amit?s old prep school? Do you think the events of the weekend bring Amit a better sense of who he is, what he wants and needs from Megan, and his role as a husband and father? Will the weekend change anything for Amit and Megan and their relationship?

5. ?Only Goodness? traces the impact of parental expectations on a sister and brother. Why did Sudha and Rahul develop in such different ways? Discuss such factors as the circumstances surrounding their births and earliest years; the obligations Sudha takes on both as the ?perfect daughter? and in response to the combination of love, envy, and resentment Rahul?s attitudes and behavior arouse in her; and the siblings? awareness of and reactions to the ?perplexing fact of [their] parents? marriage? [p. 137]. Compare and contrast the siblings? choice of partners. What attracts Sudha to Roger, and Rahul to Elena?

6. Why does Paul, the American graduate student in ?Nobody?s Business,? find his roommate, Sang, the recipient of frequent marriage proposals, so intriguing? Does Paul really want to help Sang, or does he get involved in her relationship with Farouk for more selfish reasons? Why do you think Lahiri titled this story ?Nobody?s Business??and what does the title mean to you?

7. In ?Once in a Lifetime,? Hema addresses Kaushik directly as she recalls the time they spent together as teenagers. How does this twist on the first-person narration change your experience as a reader? Does it establish a greater intimacy between you and the narrator? Does it have an effect on the flow of the narrative? On the way Hema presents her memories? Is it comparable, for example, to reading a private letter or diary? Are the same things true of Kaushik?s narrative in ?Year?s End??

8. In an interview with *Bookforum*, Lahiri, whose parents immigrated to London and then to the United States, said, ?My parents befriended people simply for the fact that they were like them on the surface; they were Bengali, and that made their circle incredibly vast. There is this de facto assumption that they?re going to get along, and often that cultural glue holds them, but there were also these vast differences. My own circle of friends is much more homogenous, because most of my friends went to college?Ivy League or some other fine institution?and vote a certain way.? How is this mirrored by the friendship between the two sets of parents in ?Once in a Lifetime,? who are close friends despite the differences in their backgrounds? Why does this attachment deteriorate when the Choudhuri family returns from India? Which of their habits or attitudes do Hema?s parents find particularly reprehensible and why? What is the significance of Kaushik?s breaking his family?s silence and telling Hema about his mother?s illness?

9. How would you describe the tone and style of Kaushik?s account of his father?s remarriage in ?Year?s End?? Does his conversation with his father [pp. 253-255] reveal similarities between them? Why does Kaushik say, ?I didn?t know which was worse?the idea of my father remarrying for love, or of his actively seeking out a stranger for companionship? [p. 255]? Does the time he spends with his father?s new family offer an alternate, more complex, explanation for his father?s decision?

10. What role do his stepsisters play in Kaushik?s willingness to accept his father?s marriage? Why is he so outraged by their fascination with the pictures of his mother? He later reflects, ?in their silence they continued to both protect and punish me? [p.293]. In what ways does their silence and the reasons for it mirror Kaushik?s own behavior, both here and in ?Once in a Lifetime??

11. How do ?Once in a Lifetime? and ?Year?s End? set the stage for ?Going Ashore,? the final story in the trilogy? What traces of their younger selves are visible in both Hema and Kaushik? In what ways do the paths they?ve chosen reflect or oppose the journeys their parents made as immigrants?

12. Why does Hema find the idea of an arranged marriage appealing? How has her affair with Julian affected her ideas about romantic love? What does her description of her relationship with Navin [pp. 296-298] reveal about what she thinks she wants and needs in a relationship? What role do her memories of her parents? marriage play in her vision of married life?

13. What motivates Kaushik?s decision to become a photojournalist? In what ways does the peripatetic life of a photojournalist suit his idea of himself? In addition to the many moves his family made, what other experiences make him grow up to be an outsider, ?away from the private detritus of life? [p. 309]?

14. What does the reunion in Rome reveal about the ties that bind Hema and Kaushik despite their many years of separation? What does it illustrate about their attempts to escape from the past and their parents? way of life? What do they come to realize about themselves and the plans they have made as the intimacy between them escalates? Why does Lahiri introduce Hema?s voice as the narrator of the final pages?

15. In what ways does ?Going Ashore? bring together the themes threaded through the earlier stories? What does the ending demonstrate about realities of trying to find a home in the world?

16. The stories in **Unaccustomed Earth** offer a moving, highly original perspective on the clash between family and cultural traditions and the search for individual identity. How does the sense of displacement felt by the older, immigrant

generation affect their American-born children? What accommodations do the children make to their parents? way of life? In trying to fit in with their American friends, do they sacrifice their connections to their heritage? In what ways are the challenges they face more complex than those of their parents?

17. Several stories feature marriages between an Indian-American and an American?and in once case, English--spouse. What characteristics do these mixed marriages share? In what ways does becoming parents themselves bring up (or renew) questions about cultural identity? What emotions arise as they contemplate the differences between the families they?re creating and those in which they grew up?

Author Bio

Jhumpa Lahiri, a bilingual writer and translator, is the Millicent C. McIntosh Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at Barnard College (Columbia University). She received the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for INTERPRETER OF MALADIES, her debut story collection. She is also the author of THE NAMESAKE, UNACCUSTOMED EARTH and THE LOWLAND, which was a finalist for both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award in fiction.

Since 2015, Lahiri has been writing fiction, essays and poetry in Italian. She has translated three novels by Domenico Starnone and is the editor of *The Penguin Classics Book of Italian Short Stories*, which was published in Italy as RACCONTI ITALIANI. Lahiri received the National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama in 2014, and in 2019 she was named Commendatore of the Italian Republic by President Sergio Mattarella.

Critical Praise

?Stunning. [Lahiri] delves deeply and richly into the lives of immigrants. [But though] immigrants may be the stories? protagonists, their doubts, insecurities, losses and heartbreaks belong to all of us. Never before has Lahiri mined so perfectly the secrets of the human heart. . . . In part, Lahiri?s gift to the reader is gorgeous prose that bestows greatness on life?s mundane events and activities. But it is her exploration of lost love and lost loved ones that gives her stories an emotional exactitude few writers could ever hope to match.?

? *Carol Memmott, USA Today*

?Jhumpa Lahiri?s characters tend to be immigrants from India and their American-reared children, exiles who straddle two countries, two cultures, and belong to neither: too used to freedom to accept the rituals and conventions of home, and yet too steeped in tradition to embrace American mores fully. . . . Ms. Lahiri writes about these people in **Unaccustomed Earth** with an intimate knowledge of their conflicted hearts, using her lapidary eye for detail to conjure their daily lives with extraordinary precision . . . A Chekhovian sense of loss blows through these new stories: a reminder of Ms. Lahiri?s appreciation of the wages of time and mortality and her understanding too of the missed

connections that plague her husbands and wives, parents and children, lovers and friends. [Lahiri] deftly explicates the emotional arithmetic of her characters? families . . . showing how some of the children learn to sidestep, even defy, their parents? wishes. But she also shows how haunted they remain by the burden of their families? dreams and their awareness of their role in the generational process of Americanization. . . The last three overlapping tales tell a single story about a Bengali-American girl and a Bengali-American boy, whose crisscrossing lives make up a poignant ballad of love and loss and death. They embark on a passionate affair that concludes not with a fairy-tale happy ending but with a denouement that speaks of missed opportunities and avoidable grief. . . . an ending that possesses the elegiac and haunting power of tragedy?a testament to Lahiri?s emotional wisdom and consummate artistry as a writer.?

? *Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times*

?Splendid . . . The fact that America is still a place where the rest of the world comes to reinvent itself?accepting with excitement and anxiety the necessity of leaving behind the constrictions and comforts of distant customs?is the underlying theme of Jhumpa Lahiri?s sensitive new collection of stories, **Unaccustomed Earth**. . . . .

Lahiri?s epigraph . . . from ?The Custom-House,? by Nathaniel Hawthorne, [is] an apt, rich metaphor for the transformations Lahiri oversees in these pages, in which two generations of Bengali immigrants to America?the newcomers and their hyphenated children?struggle to build normal, secure lives. . . . .

Except for their names, ?Hema and Kaushik? [the title characters of the final trilogy of stories] could evoke any American?s ?70s childhood, any American?s bittersweet acceptance of the compromises of adulthood. The generational conflicts Lahiri depicts cut across national lines; the waves of admiration, competition and criticism that flow between their two families could occur between Smiths and Taylors in any suburban town; and the fight for connection and control between Hema and Kaushik?as children and as adults?replays the tussle that has gone on ever since men and women lived in caves.

Lahiri handles her characters without leaving any fingerprints. She allows them to grow as if unguided, as if she were accompanying them rather than training them through the espalier of her narration. Reading her stories is like watching time-lapse nature videos of different plants, each with its own inherent growth cycle, breaking through the soil, spreading into bloom or collapsing back to earth.?

? *Liesl Schillinger, The New York Times Book Review (cover review)*

?Shimmering . . . The literary prize committees should once again take note . . . To read [**Unaccustomed Earth**] and only take away an experience of cultural tourism would be akin to reading Dante only to retain how medieval Italians slurped their spaghetti. Lahiri?s fiction delves deep into the universal theme of isolation. . . . Lahiri is a lush writer bringing to life worlds through a pile-up of detail. But somehow all that richness electrifyingly evokes the void. . . . It?s customary when reviewing short story collections to adopt a ?one from column A, two from column B? kind of structure?you know, the title story always gets a ritual nod, followed by a run-down of which stories are the strongest, which have just been included for filler. But another stereotype-confounding aspect of Lahiri?s writing is that there aren?t any weak stories here: every one seems like the best, the most vivid, until you read the next one. . . . Lahiri ingeniously reworks the situation of characters subsisting at point zero, of being stripped down like Lear on the heath. [

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] certainly makes a contribution to the literature of immigration, but it also takes its rightful place with modernist tales from whatever culture in which characters find themselves doomed to try and fail to only connect.?

? *Maureen Corrigan, ?Fresh Air?*

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