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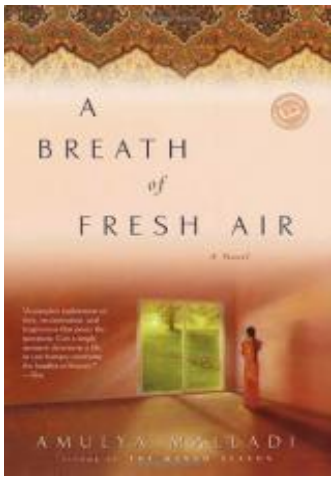
A Breath of Fresh Air

by Amulya Malladi



About the Book

On the night of December 3, 1984, Anjali waits for her army officer husband to pick her up at the train station in Bhopal, India. In an instant, her world changes forever. Her anger at his being late turns to horror when a catastrophic gas leak poisons the city air. Anjali miraculously survives. Her marriage does not.

A smart, successful schoolteacher, Anjali is now remarried to Sandeep, a loving and stable professor. Their lives would be nearly perfect, if not for their young son's declining health. But when Anjali's first husband suddenly reappears in her life, she is thrown back to the troubling days of their marriage with a force that impacts everyone around her.

Her first husband's return brings back all the uncertainty Anjali thought time and conviction had healed?about her decision to divorce, and about her place in a society that views her as scandalous for having walked away from her arranged marriage. As events unfold, feelings she had guarded like gold begin to leak away from her, spreading out into the world and challenging her once firm beliefs.

Rich in insight into Indian culture and psychology, **A Breath of Fresh Air** resonates with meaning and the abiding power of love. In a landscape as intriguing as it is unfamiliar, Anjali's struggles to reconcile the roles of wife and ex-wife, working woman and mother, illuminate both the fascinating duality of the modern Indian woman and the difficult choices all women must make.

Discussion Guide

1. Amulya Malladi chose to use the Bhopal gas leak of 1984, which killed 3,800 people and permanently disabled thousands more, as the key event within **A Breath of Fresh Air**. Given the license of a fiction writer to invent tragedy, why would an author like Malladi decide to use a real event instead?

2. Does the reality behind such an event enhance or distract from the fictional story?

3. Do you, as the reader, hold the author to different standards of verisimilitude when such an event appears in a novel?

4. What is the effect of starting the novel with this terrifying event?

5. How does Anjali's role as the victim of such a tragedy change her life in subtle, unexpected ways (in addition to the major changes she experiences)?

6. What is the meaning behind the title, beyond the obvious allusion to the gas leak?

7. Malladi narrates her novel through three voices: those of Anjali, Sandeep, and Prakash. Why might she have made this decision as an author? What are some of the inherent benefits and risks of such a choice?

8. Do you, as the reader, find the voice of each different character convincing?

9. Think of another novel in which the author engages more than one narrative voice. In comparison to **A Breath of Fresh Air**, how does the author distinguish the different voices from one another, and do you find it as effective, less effective, or more effective?

10. Given that the author grants more space to Anjali's voice than to the voices of Prakash and Sandeep, did you find Anjali's way of telling the story to be the most sympathetic? Or did you want to hear more from either or both of the other two?

11. After the three major characters, which minor character did you find most crucial to the story's central conflicts? Why?

12. How did Anjali, Sandeep, and Prakash either maintain or subvert traditional gender roles within modern Indian society?

13. What is the role of fantasy within the context of an arranged marriage such as Anjali's to Prakash? Once her fantasies are inverted, how do they continue to play a role in Anjali's life?

14. How does materialism affect each main character, and how does the author show its presence?

Author Bio

Amulya Malladi is the bestselling author of eight novels, including THE COPENHAGEN AFFAIR, A HOUSE FOR HAPPY MOTHERS and THE MANGO SEASON. Her books have been translated into several languages, including Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Danish, Romanian, Serbian and Tamil. She won a screenwriting award for her work on "Ø" ("Island"), a Danish series that aired on Amazon Prime Global and Studio Canal+. Currently living in California, she is a Danish citizen who was born and raised in India.

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