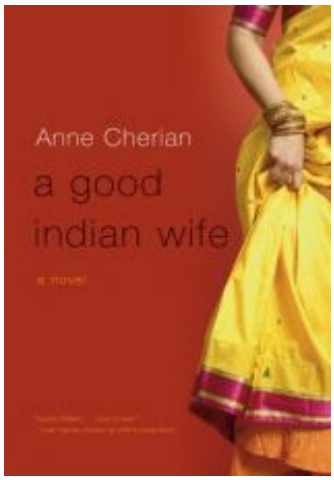
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A Good Indian Wife

by Anne Cherian



About the Book

?[A] luminous debut.? --Terry Hong, *The Bloomsbury Review*

Neel Sarath, an Indian-American anesthesiologist in San Francisco, believes he?s distanced himself from traditional Indian life with his blonde American girlfriend, his shiny Porsche, and his spotless condo. Called back to India to visit his ailing grandfather, Neel finds himself tricked into a marriage with Leila Krishnan, a local English teacher well past marrying age. But Leila is not a meek, traditional bride who can be set aside while life goes on as usual, girlfriend and all. As quick-witted Leila struggles to find her way in a new country, so too does Neel struggle with his desires and the expectations of others, both real and imagined. In this riveting tale of a transplanted arranged marriage, first-time novelist Anne Cherian explores how immigrants, caught between two worlds, have to learn to overcome their own suspicions of others in order to find themselves.

?Interesting and well-written.... Cherian tells a compelling story that will hold the reader?s attention throughout.? --Dinesh Ramde, *Associated Press*

Discussion Guide

1. The narrator frequently mentions that Neel has always wanted to marry ?up.? Considering that he marries an older woman of more limited means, how does this affect the story --- and Neel?

2. Neel?s infidelity is a major theme in the book. By the end, Leila decides to forgive him despite the fact that he is never completely honest with her. It is a decision women throughout the world continue to make. What are Leila?s reasons?

3. Caroline is portrayed as a needy social climber, while Neel seems unhealthfully interested in her whiteness. However, the pair do spend three years together. Do you feel that their relationship is genuine?

4. Do you think this book portrays arranged marriages in a positive light? Or do you feel that this is just a portrait of a single arranged marriage?

5. How is it that Neel, who so adamantly opposes having an arranged marriage, ends up marrying the first woman his family takes him to see? What does it tell us about his (lack of) knowledge of Indian customs?

6. What role do the other couples in the book --- Bob and Shanti, Oona and Sanjay, Rekha and her married lover --- play in framing Neel and Leila?s relationship?

7. Tattappa seems to be the only person in Neel?s family whom he truly respects. How does that relationship show us another side of Neel? Indeed, Neel is not the most sympathetic character. Do you empathize with him? If so, why?

8. The narrator frequently mentions Neel?s desire to move up, but always in terms of gaining the acceptance of the white community. He adamantly rejects the Indian way of life, going so far as to question Oona?s love for all things Indian. Why is this? And what does it say about his views of himself and his culture?

9. What does Rekha learn about arranged marriages from Leila? Does her contact with Leila change her perceptions?

10. Neel, like Leila, also came to the United States for the first time as an adult, yet we are under the impression that his transition was easier and more deliberate. What does this say about their perceptions of themselves as Indian?

11. Neel thinks his Aunty Vimla is a nosy, foolish woman interested in putting him down for the benefit of her own son. Aunty Vimla is very concerned about finding a ?good girl? for Neel and works hard to make sure that Leila can get a visa quickly and return to the States with Neel. What do you think are her motivations? Is she as bad as Neel thinks?

12. It is clear to us that Leila is proud of her heritage and Indian identity. Do you believe that Neel is equally proud? Why or why not?

13. The book has lots of twinnings: Neel and Sanjay, Leila and Oona, Leila and Shanti, Leila and Caroline, and Leila and Rekha, to name a few. How do these pairings highlight character in the novel?

14. What do you make of the last word in the novel, ?Okay.? What sort of ending can you anticipate with such word?

15. There are many types of racism in the novel --- for instance, Neel against Leila for not being an American, Caroline?s family against anyone who is not white. How do the various strains work out in the novel? Do the characters change or stay the same?

16. Compare the honeymoon scene (the spider?s lick) with the final hospital scene in the novel. Do you see any growth in the Neel and Leila? If so, how have they changed?

17. Why is it that Neel does not want to marry Caroline? Is his decision an Indian one? Or is he the kind of man who is always looking for someone better to come along?

18. What does Neel learn about himself when he rushes back to a dying Tattappa? What does Leila learn in that same period?

19. How does the pregnancy showcase their differences? And how, ultimately, does it affect the decisions they make?

20. While Neel often frets about Leila?s lack of Americanness, Leila is busy making comparisons between life back home and in America, with each one making her grow stronger. Can you chart those epiphanies?

Author Bio

Critical Praise

"This quietly brilliant novel is a joy to read. The melding of two vastly different cultures, tradition vies with the impermanence of America?s potpourri of choices, as acted out in the marriage of San Francisco anesthesiologist Suneel Sarath and his traditional Indian wife."

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Publication Date: June 8, 2009
Paperback: 400 pages
Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company
ISBN-10: 0393335291
ISBN-13: 9780393335293