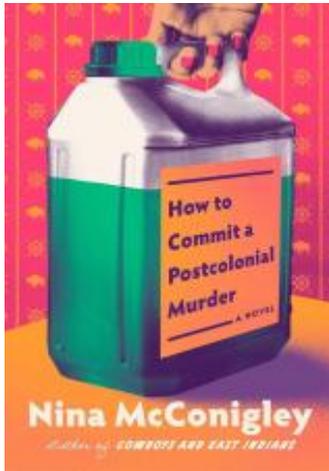


How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder

by Nina McConigley



About the Book

A bold, inventive and fiercely original debut novel that begins with an uncle dead and his tween niece's private confession to the reader --- she and her sister killed him, and they blame the British.

Summer, 1986. The Creel sisters, Georgie Ayyar and Agatha Krishna, welcome their aunt, uncle and young cousin --- newly arrived from India --- into their house in rural Wyoming where they'll all live together. Because this is what families do. That is, until the sisters decide that it's time for their uncle to die.

According to Georgie, the British are to blame. And to understand why, you need to hear her story. She details the violence hiding in their house and history, her once-unshakeable bond with Agatha Krishna, and her understanding of herself as an Indian-American in the heart of the West. Her account is, at every turn, cheeky, unflinching and infectiously inflected with the trappings of teendom, including the magazine quizzes that help her make sense of her life. At its heart, the tale she weaves is:

- a) a vivid portrait of an extended family
- b) a moving story of sisterhood
- c) a playful ode to the '80s
- d) a murder mystery (of sorts)
- e) an unexpected and unwaveringly powerful meditation on history and language, trauma and healing, and the meaning of independence

Or maybe it's really:

- f) all of the above

Discussion Guide

1. What makes the murder of Vinny Uncle 'postcolonial'? Discuss how Georgie orients the reader to her world of being an Indian American in Wyoming in the late 1980s and the unique struggles of being the first generation in her interracial family born in America.
2. How does Georgie, and the book overall, suggest overlaps in the two meanings of 'Indian' that are relevant to her hometown in the American West? In America, did the family leave the world of colonizers and colonialism?
3. How does Amma's marrying a white man change her relationship to India and to her family? Does their settling down in America offer her any more freedom than what she would have had back home? Consider what Georgie asks in relation to her mother's obsession with the British: 'How could someone be the ultimate white woman and the ultimate Indian daughter all at once?' (125).
4. Who is the 'you' to whom some of the chapters are addressed? When Georgie spoke to 'you,' did it cause you, the reader, to feel more or less involved in the story itself?
5. How do Georgie and Agatha Krishna's names --- homages to famous British writers --- affect their connection to their Indian culture, the colonization of that culture, and the American culture into which they're born? Do you think that their names, and the way they have to balance so many selves in and out of their home, make them more or less 'American'?
6. Consider how Georgie describes the American trope of the 'pioneer': 'What do pioneers do? They colonize. They take things that aren't theirs. A pioneer is a person who claims they are the first to go. Claims they are the first to explore. First to settle' (135). What do the sisters do first? What are they (likely) not the first to experience?
7. Discuss the ways in which Vinny Uncle's abuse 'splits' the girls. Besides this specific incident, what else about their circumstances contributes to a divided/disintegrated sense of self?
8. It's rare to read such a clear description of dissociation in the moment of experiencing a trauma, which is what George describes happening whenever Vinny Uncle takes her into the bathroom. What aspect of her personality allows her to return to herself solidly enough to take action with her sister? How does she convey the totality of the situation even without stating it explicitly?
9. How do you think AK Akka would have relayed her version of this story? Georgie shares how devastated she is when her sister pulls away from her after the death. Do you think AK Akka felt the same way about losing Georgie?
10. Are there hints or glimmers of joy and true innocence among any of the children in the book? Besides the abuse, what factors in their lives require that they grow up early?
11. Great-grandfather Thomas supports the establishment of a universal language called Esperanto, which ultimately never takes off. How do the girls carry on this tradition of using language to both subvert authority and redeem a sense of truth and integrity? In the book overall, how does the ability to access language --- versus being silenced --- divide the generations, especially among women? Would a shared language really lead to unity among different groups and

cultures, per the meaning of the word: "the one who hopes?" (37)

12. When the girls believe they successfully killed Vinny Uncle, is the aftermath all that they (and you, the reader) expected? Are they truly freed from his presence and influence? Discuss in particular how they later understand the effects on Narayan. What does the grief and loss he experiences suggest about the wide-reaching trauma within the family? How is his loss of a father different from the girls' absent one?

13. Georgie shares that there were several times when she considered telling Amma about what was going on in the bathroom. What do you think Amma's reaction would have been to hearing this truth? Consider what Georgie says about the story of the tree girl, whether she thinks she and her sister have escaped this fate, and how their actions affected their mother's world: "It was a woman's fate to stay quiet and hope everything worked out. In all the stories Amma would tell us, the girls never rose up. They accepted their fate, they married. They were dutiful and obeyed. They never killed a man" (178).

14. Why do you think Georgie's story includes the teen magazine-style quizzes? How do the questions (and answers) reveal her thoughts and aspects of her personality? Did you participate in the quizzes, and were you surprised by the "scores" you received?

15. Do you think, on the whole, that Georgie saw her life as "a good life in spite of. In spite of bad ancestors. In spite of your skin. In spite of colonialism. In spite of capitalism. In spite of nationalism. In spite of the internet. In spite of war. In spite of the patriarchy. In spite of lists of things you want. In spite of a man who came in the dark and did things that he shouldn't. In spite. In spite? --- or does she see her life as bad because of these things (198)?"

16. Were you surprised to learn about Auntie Devi's actions? Why do you think she chose to protect the girls (and perhaps her own son) over honoring her husband per tradition? At first, Georgie describes her aunt as a "ghost-Amma [...] as if she had only half come to America" --- but do her actions suggest she was more or less "American" than the others (7)?"

17. When the girls bring their mother's ashes to Kanyakumari at the end of the book, what are they seeking to cleanse themselves of by diving into the water themselves?

18. Have you ever had a secret in your family or community like the one in this story? Was it ever revealed, or was it kept under wraps? If you're comfortable, discuss the complexities of the situation, and the layers hurt that come from both keeping and telling a secret about being hurt, on any level. Consider your narrative in the context of the blessing of the throats for St. Blaise: "Is it a blessing to be able to speak? Is it a blessing to tell the truth?" (46)

Author Bio

Nina McConigley is the author of the story collection *COWBOYS AND EAST INDIANS*, which was the winner of the PEN/Open Book Award and the High Plains Book Award. She has received grants and fellowships from the NEA, the Radcliffe Institute, Bread Loaf, Vermont Studio Center, and the Sewanee Writers' Conference. She was a recipient of

the Wyoming Arts Council's Frank Nelson Doubleday Memorial Writing Award and a finalist for a National Magazine Award for her columns in *High Country News*. Her work has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *Orion*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and *Salon*, among other outlets. Born in Singapore and raised in Wyoming, she now lives in Colorado.

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