

# Leave It to Me

by Bharati Mukherjee

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## About the Book

Debby DiMartino: saved from death in infancy by Gray Nuns at an Indian desert outpost; adopted as a toddler by Manfred and Serena DiMartino of Schenectady, New York; coming of age an inherently exotic girl in an inherently American town, never sure if she was someone special or just a special kind of misfit. Now, at 23, she's decided that it's time to find out: time to track down her biological parents. She knows only the barest facts about them: her mother was a California flower child; her father, an 'Asian national' serving life in an Indian prison for murder. She knows that they were 'lousy people who'd considered me lousier still and who'd left me to be sniffed at by wild dogs, like a carcass in the mangy shade.' Her only inheritance from them is a literally haunting past ('white-hot sky and burnt-black leaves...star bursts of yearning'), but now she wants revenge too. 'When you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything,' Debby says as she leaves home for San Francisco, where, if she can't find her mother, she suspects she can appropriate what she needs. Yet, once there, living the life of her newly named persona, Devi Dee ("Tenderloin prowler, all allure and strength and zero innocence"), she senses that she may have inherited more than she imagined: a legacy of shocking idea and impulse begins to reveal itself as Debby/Devi focuses her sights on the woman who may be her 'bio-mom,' or just a dangerously unprepared proxy.

## Discussion Guide

1. What attitude does *Leave It to Me* take toward adoption? How do you feel when Faustine/Debby/Devi abandons the DiMartinos so early in the novel?
2. When Debby starts her search for her "other life, [her] real life," Serena DiMartino tells her daughter that her biological father had a police record. Debby recognizes that a police record will help her find her bio-parents: "That's a break for me, Mama. If they had a police record, that's something to go on." "Being a criminal is a break? What kind of talk is that?" "Just kidding, Mama. You brought me up to be decent." The dialogue suggests that Debby's search for her

bio-parents might prove to be "indecent." Does it? How does Debby feel about abandoning stable Schenectady society to embrace the Haight's counterculture? How do you feel about it?

3. In the first conversation between Ham and Devi, Ham remarks, "You have to come up with just the right name....Names count." In what ways do names count in **Leave It to Me**? Why are names constantly being changed? mispronounced? misunderstood? Originally named Faustine "after a typhoon," Debby renames herself after a Hindu goddess, Devi. Why? What impact does changing her name have on her identity?

4. Despite this interest in her own name, Devi seems to seek out employment in which her name and identity simply don't matter. First, she works as a telemarketer for Frankie Fong where she "tried out thirty personas" nightly. Later, she works for Jess DuPree's **Leave It to Me** knowing that "A ME doesn't have personal problems. A ME doesn't have a life." Why does Devi want these kinds of jobs? Does this work bring her closer to or drive her farther away from discovering her real identity, her real "me"?

5. Why is the novel titled **Leave It to Me**? What is left up to Devi to accomplish? Does she accomplish what she needs to?

6. When Devi reveals to Frankie Fong how little she knows about herself, she makes a statement intended for Frankie, but heard only by the reader: "I want you to know that we've both invented ourselves." What does Devi mean? Later in their relationship, Frankie actually turns Devi into a secretary, while Devi recognizes that she has "made [Frankie] up out of needs I didn't know I had." Is identity always "invented"? What are the dangers of inventing identity, one's own or someone else's?

7. Devi tries to leave her Schenectady past behind when she enters California. However, the individuals she meets seem vaguely familiar. Gabe, a neighbor, "looked like Wyatt, and kind of talked like Wyatt, too." Devi immediately recognizes that Ham Cohan's film series is a "rip-off of Flash's Boss Tong of Hong Kong." Is Gabe a second Wyatt? Is Ham a second Flash? Is Devi able to abandon her past, or is this entrance into California a reincarnation not only of herself, but of her past as well?

8. While working at **Leave It to Me**, Devi encounters several individuals who, unlike Frankie, seem to know exactly who they are. Devi describes Stark Swann as a man who is comfortably "the center of his universe." Devi seduces and drugs Stark in order to carve "an endearment on his left buttock: CW. My homage to my neighborhood graffitiste, Cee-Double-You." "CW" expresses Devi's critique of Swann's tendency to see (Cee) only a reflection of himself (Double-You) in everyone he meets. She insists that her revenge is an act of the "real women." What does she mean by "real women"? Does Devi achieve real woman status in the novel? Does this mean that she does in fact have an identity that cannot be manipulated by someone else?

9. Devi hires Fred Pointer to point the way to her parents. The evidence that piles up to prove that her parents are Jess DuPree and Romeo Hawk seems officially convincing: conversation transcripts, death notices, court records, a photograph, passports. Romeo claims his daughter immediately. Jess, however, denies her relationship to Devi to the novel's end. Is Devi ever able to feel certain about her parentage? Are you?

10. "When you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything: that's the Devi Dee philosophy." Devi's search for her identity reveals remarkable similarities between herself and her bio-parents. Devi and Jess both seduce the same man,

work at the same job, and drug inconvenient lovers with Mandrax. Devi and Romeo wield the same cleaver to violent ends. Are these similarities a result of Devi's inheritance or her entitlement? Is she responsible for her actions? Do you excuse her because of her parentage, because of the actions of her bio-parents, or not at all?

**11.** Sex complicates Devi's relationships with her bio-parents. What impact does the fact that Jess and Devi share a lover have upon Devi's attempts to relate to Jess as a mother? Why does her bio-father, Romeo, enter Devi's life dressed as a woman? Why does he undress "with the taunting efficiency of a professional stripper" to reveal to his daughter that he is actually a man?

**12.** Devi believes that her search for her own identity was "started" by a poem. She discovers her bio-Dad by reading "poetic pensees," and believes that she hears the story of her conception while listening to Jess quote an Emily Dickinson verse: "My beginning....I've just heard my beginning." Later Devi realizes that her life reflects a "romance novel off a rack" more than an Emily Dickinson poem. Still, her identity seems to reflect literary productions: poems, romances, movies. How does Devi discover her identity through literature? Do you think of Devi as a real person or as a literary creation--a myth/fantasy?

**13.** In the prologue of **Leave It to Me** old Hari tells the children a bedtime story in which the Hindu goddess Devi slays the Buffalo Demon. Despite the disturbing violence of old Hari's tale, the children are "comforted by story" and "curl into sleep." They aren't troubled by the violence because they "already know the story's ending," and because it is story and not reality. The novel is just as violent as the prologue. Are you troubled by the violence of the novel, or does it leave you, like the children, comforted? In what ways does the violent prologue foreshadow the novel?

**14.** Why does **Leave It to Me** include a catalogue of acts of violence, seemingly unrelated to the story, that reads as realistically as a newspaper?

**15.** In the promotional material that introduces Devi to Romeo Hawk, Devi discovers a potent one-liner: "Destruction is creation's necessary prelude." What does this mean? Does the violence in **Leave It to Me** lead to creation?

**16.** Devi travels to Berkeley to find her bio-parents, but once she arrives she realizes that she can't enter "that Berkeley" in which Ham and Jess live. Devi suggests that it is the Vietnam War that separates "that Berkeley" from the place she visits: "Vietnam wasn't a war; it was a divide. On one side, the self-involved idealists; on the other, we the napalm-scarred kids"? How does the war shape Devi's experiences? Do the war veterans--Loco Larry, Pete Cuvo, Chuck Stanko--act in ways that she can or can't understand? Why does she ally herself with the napalm-scarred kids? Do her actions demonstrate this alliance?

**17.** Ham's houseboat is called Last Chance. What last chance does it represent? Does Devi lose this last chance or take advantage of it at the conclusion of the novel?

**18.** Only the conclusion reveals that the novel begins exactly where it ends: "in the cabin of this houseboat off Sausilto as curtains of flame dance in the distance and a million flash-bulbs burn and fizzle, and I sit with the head of a lover on my lap." Why does the novel begin at its ending? How does this impact the way you think about Devi's experience?

## Author Bio

Bharati Mukherjee is the author of five novels, two nonfiction books, and a collection of short stories, *THE MIDDLEMAN AND OTHER STORIES*, for which she won the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is currently a professor at the University of California at Berkeley.

## Critical Praise

"In **Leave It to Me**, Mukherjee takes the themes she has previously explored a step further. Destroying the concept of ethnicity altogether, she creates a complex new, transnational definition of self....Devi will know who she is no matter what or whom she has to destroy. But the discovery does not prove to be easy in a region where ethnic boundaries slide over each other like snakes in a basket and many people have discarded the names they were born with....The novel becomes a meditation on the Indian concept of karma and the Greek idea of destiny. "

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