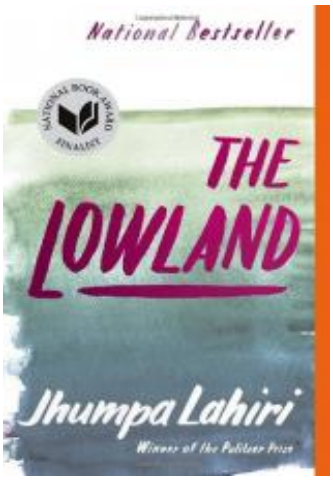
The Lowland

by Jhumpa Lahiri



About the Book

Born just 15 months apart, Subhash and Udayan Mitra are inseparable brothers, one often mistaken for the other in the Calcutta neighborhood where they grow up. But they are also opposites, with gravely different futures ahead. It is the 1960s, and Udayan --- charismatic and impulsive --- finds himself drawn to the Naxalite movement, a rebellion waged to eradicate inequity and poverty; he will give everything, risk all, for what he believes. Subhash, the dutiful son, does not share his brother?s political passion; he leaves home to pursue a life of scientific research in a quiet, coastal corner of America.

But when Subhash learns what happened to his brother in the lowland outside their family?s home, he goes back to India, hoping to pick up the pieces of a shattered family, and to heal the wounds Udayan left behind --- including those seared in the heart of his brother?s wife.

Masterly suspenseful, sweeping, piercingly intimate, THE LOWLAND is a work of great beauty and complex emotion; an engrossing family saga and a story steeped in history that spans generations and geographies with seamless authenticity. It is Jhumpa Lahiri at the height of her considerable powers.

Discussion Guide

1. ?Udayan was the one brave enough to ask them for autographs?He was blind to self-constraints, like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colors. But Subhash strove to minimize his existence, as other animals merged with bark or blades of grass? (p. 11). How do the differences between the boys both strengthen and strain the tie between them?

2. Does Subhash?s decision to make it ?his mission to obey (his parents), given that it wasn?t possible to surprise or impress them. That was what Udayan did? (p. 11) follow a pattern common among siblings? What part do their parents play in fostering the roles each boy assumes?

3. What does Udayan?s reaction to Subhash?s decision to go to America (p. 30) and Subhash?s admission that he wanted to leave Calcutta ?not only for the sake of his education but also . . . to take a step Udayan never would? (p. 40) convey about the balance between admiration and envy, support and competition, that underlies their relationship? Do you think that Udayan is manipulative, or does Subhash misread him (p. 31)?

4. What aspects of the immigrant experience are captured in Subhash?s first impressions of Rhode Island (p. 34)? How do his feelings about school and about his roommate, Richard, bring to light both his pleasure and his uncertainties about his new independence? In what ways does Udayan?s letter add to his ambivalence about the choice he has made (p. 47)?

5. What does Subhash?s affair with Holly convey about his transition to life in America (pp. 65-83)? What does it reveal about his emotional ties to his old life and family?

6. Why does the author describe the courtship and marriage of Udayan and Gauri from Gauri?s perspective (pp. 51-61)? To what extent does Gauri?s independence, rare for women in India, influence their decision to marry?

7. How do the descriptions of Calcutta (pp. 88-90, 91-2) and Subhash?s first glimpse of his parents (p. 91) capture the complex feelings Subhash experiences on returning home? How do the brothers? parents? expectations and beliefs shape their treatment of Gauri?

8. What emotions lie behind his mother does his mother?s reaction to Gauri?s pregnancy (p. 114)? Is it understandable in light of Gauri?s behavior and manner? Is Subhash right to believe that the only way to help the child is to take Gauri away (p. 115)? What other motivation might he have for marrying his brother?s widow?

9. From the start, Gauri and Subhash react differently to Bela and to parenthood. Gauri thinks, ?Bela was her child and Udayan?s; that Subhash, for all his helpfulness, for the role he?d deftly assumed, was simply playing a part. I?m her mother . . . I don?t have to try as hard? (p. 146). Although Subhash has a close, loving relationship with his daughter, he is troubled by his marriage: ?Almost five years ago they had begun their journey as husband and wife, but he was still waiting to arrive somewhere with her. A place where he would no longer question the result of what they?d done? (p. 159). What is the source of the underlying uneasiness of their marriage? To what extent are they haunted by their attachments to Udayan? What other factors make Gauri feel resentful and trapped? Is Subhash partially responsible for her unhappiness? How does Subhash?s insistence on hiding the truth from Bela influence Gauri?s behavior and the choices she makes?

10. How does the portrait of the brothers? mother, Bijoli, enhance the novel?s exploration of the repercussions of the family tragedy (pp. 179-89)? What effect does his visit to Calcutta and its many reminders of Udayan have on Subhash?as a son, a brother, and a father?

11. After Gauri the family, what does Bela rely on to make sense of the situation and to create a life for herself? Is her reclusiveness natural, given her family history, although much of it is unknown to her? In what ways do her decisions about her education and her work represent her need to separate and distinguish herself from her parents?

12. Why, despite his pride in Bela and his confidence in her affection, does Subhash feel ?threatened, convinced that . . . Udayan?s influence was greater? (p. 225)? How might Bela?s life have been different had Udayan raised her?

13. The novel presents many kinds of parents?present and absent, supportive and reluctant. What questions does the novel raise about the challenges and real meaning of being a parent?

14. What do you find most striking or surprising about Gauri?s reflections on her life (p. 231-40)? ?She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversations. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end? (p. 240). Is this an accurate and just self-assessment, or is Gauri too hard on herself?and if so, why?

15. Despite his accomplishments and relative contentment, Subhash remains in the grip of the deception that has dominated his life: ?He was still too weak to tell Bela what she deserved to know. Still pretending to be her father . . . The need to tell her hung over him, terrified him. It was the greatest unfinished business of his life? (p. 251-52). Why does Bela?s pregnancy move him to reveal the truth? Were you surprised by Bela?s reaction? How does learning about Udayan and the story of her parents? marriage change her feelings about herself? Why does she forgive Subhash and direct her anger toward Gauri?

16. The keeping of secrets plays a large part in the novel, from the facts of Bela?s parentage to Gauri?s long-hidden guilt about her role in Udayan?s fateful actions. To what extent are the continued deceptions fed by the love and sense of loyalty Gauri and Subhash feel toward Udayan even years after his death? Do they also serve Gauri?s and Subhash?s self-interest?

17. The details of the family?s history emerge through various retellings set in different times and seen from different perspectives. Why do you think Lahiri chose to tell the story in this way? How does this method increase the power of the narrative? Do your opinions of and sympathies for the characters change as more information is revealed?

18. Before reading TheLowland, were you aware of the Naxalite movement? (The group remains active: on May 25, 2013, Naxaliteinsurgents attacked a convoy of Indian National Congress leaders, causing the deaths of at least twenty-seven people.) What insights does Lahiri offer into the development of radical political groups? What role does history play in the creation of the Naxalite movement and, by extension, other uprisings around the world? What parallels do you see between the events described in the novel and recent activities in the Egypt and other countries torn by internal dissension and violence?

19. In an interview, Lahiri said, ?As Udayan?s creator, I don?t condone what he does. On the other hand, I understand the frustration he feels, his sense of injustice, and his impulse to change society? (NewYorker.com, June 3, 2013) Does the novel help you see more clearly the reasons for destruction and deaths revolutionary forces perpetrate to attain their goals? How do you feel about Udayan after reading the novel?s last chapter?

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

"Leave it to Jhumpa Lahiri to create yet another novel that?s as transporting and educational as it is beautiful and emotive . . . .**The Lowland** is among the biggest events of the season and the largest launch of her career."

? *ELLE* magazine, September 2013

"Pulitzer Prize-winner Lahiri?s unparalleled ability to transform the smallest moments into whole lives pinnacles in this extraordinary story of two brothers coming of age in the political tumult of 1960s India. . . . Lahiri is remarkable, achieving multilayered meaning in a simple act . . . [This is] is deservedly one of this year?s most anticipated books. Banal words of praise simply won?t do justice; perhaps what is needed is a three-word directive: *just read it* ."

? Terry Hong, *Library Journal* (starred review)

"A classic story of family and ideology at odds, love and risk closely twined. . . . Lahiri?s subject has always been the complex roots of families, cut and transplanted, trailing thwarted dreams and former selves. . . . **The Lowland**, her most ambitious work to date, marks the author?s shift in perspective toward that of a parent, with all its heightened vulnerability. . . . As the stripped-down sentences accrue with a kind of geologic inevitability, Lahiri renders the undertow of grief and loss . . . Novels are often elegies for things that would otherwise be lost to time. Here, over the passing decades, a sacred marshland is sold to developers; a daughter loses a mother, then becomes one. An author, at the height of her artistry, spins the globe and comes full circle."

? Megan O?Grady, *Vogue*

"I wait for Lahiri?s books as if they?re rare comets and hold them in my hands like my firstborn."

? Megan Angelo, *Glamour*

"A tale of two continents in an era of political tumult, rendered with devastating depth and clarity by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author. The narrative proceeds from the simplicity of a fairy tale into a complex novel of moral ambiguity and aftershocks, with revelations that continue through decades and generations until the very last page. . . . The story of two brothers in India who are exceptionally close to each other, and yet completely different, the novel spans more than four decades in the life of [their] family, shaped and shaken by the events that have brought them together and tear them apart. . . . Lahiri has earned renown for her short stories, [yet] this masterful novel deserves to attract an even wider readership."

? *Kirkus* (starred review)

"Haunting . . . A novel that crosses generations, oceans, and the chasms within families . . . Lahiri?s skill is reflected not only in her restrained and lyric prose, but also in her moving forward chronological time while simultaneously unfolding memory, which does not fade in spite of the years. A formidable and beautiful book."

? *Publishers Weekly* (boxed review)

"An absolute triumph. Lahiri uses a gorgeously rendered Calcutta landscape to profound effect. . . . As shocking complexities tragedies, and revelations multiply, Lahiri astutely examines the psychological nuances of conviction, guilt, grief, marriage, and parenthood, and delicately but firmly dissects the moral conundrums inherent in violent revolution. Renowned for her exquisite prose and penetrating insights, Lahiri attains new heights of artistry?flawless transparency, immersive intimacy with characters and place?in her spellbinding fourth book and second novel. A magnificent, universal, and indelible work of literature. . . . Lahiri?s standing increases with each book, and this is her most compelling yet."

? Donna Seaman, *Booklist* (starred review)

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