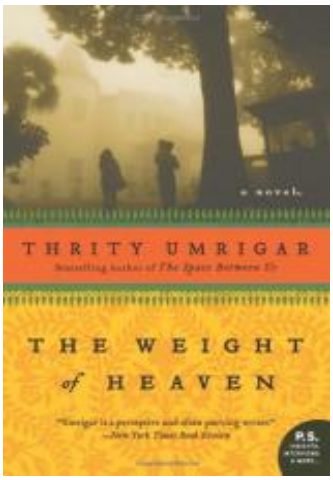
The Weight of Heaven

by Thrity Umrigar



About the Book

When Frank and Ellie Benton lose their only child, 7-year-old Benny, to a sudden illness, the perfect life they?d built is shattered. Filled with wrenching memories, their Ann Arbor home becomes unbearable and their marriage founders. But an unexpected job half a world away offers them an opportunity to start again. Life in Girbaug, India, holds promise --- and peril --- when Frank befriends Ramesh, a bright, curious boy who quickly becomes the focus of the grieving man?s attentions. Haunted by memories of his dead son, Frank is consumed with making his family right--a quest that will lead him down an ever-darkening path with stark repercussions.

Filled with satisfying real characters and glowing with local color, **The Weight of Heaven** is a rare glimpse of a family and a country struggling under pressures beyond their control. In a devastating look at cultural clashes and divides, Thrity Umrigar illuminates how slowly we recover from unforgettable loss, how easily good intentions can turn evil, and how far a person will go to build a new world for those he loves.

Discussion Guide

1. What does the title **The Weight of Heaven** mean?

2. Who are Ellie and Frank Benton? What kind of people are they? What do they believe in? What were they like before and after their son Benny?s death?

3. When Ellie learns of the job in Girbaug, India, she sees it as ?a chance to save her marriage. To start clean in new place.? Is this a false hope? Is it possible to start again after suffering a terrible tragedy?

4. What are Ellie and Frank?s perceptions of India before they moved? How do their ideas compare with the real India they discover?

5. How does their adopted culture change the American couple? Though they live in the same house, interact with many of the same people, do they experience the same India? How do their experiences affect their behavior?

6. Consider Edna and Prakash, the housekeeper and cook. How do they compare to Ellie and Frank? If you were in Edna and Prakash?s place, how would you feel about Frank?s interest in Ramesh?

7. How did Frank?s money and attention affect Ramesh? Is Frank wrong to want to give the boy a better life?

8. What kind of a father is Frank? What about Prakash? How do their childhood experiences influence the men --- and the fathers --- they are?

9. In **The Weight of Heaven**, Thrity Umrigar explores interwoven themes of marriage, love, family, home, jealousy, fear, guilt, responsibility, class, power. How do these themes drive the story?

10. The conflict between rich and poor is central to the novel. How is the struggle between Frank and Prakash reflective of the battle between the factory workers and the executives who run HerbalSolutions? Between America and India?

11. The ideas of Eden and paradise are interwoven throughout **The Weight of Heaven**. How are they manifested in the stories of Ellie and Frank and Edna and Prakash? How do ignorance and knowledge guide their happiness and despair?

12. What is the role of Ellie and Frank?s friends, Shashi and Nandita?

13. What are your impressions of Gulab Singh? Why do you think he was so willing to side with Frank against his own people?

14. Think about Ellie and Frank?s experiences as foreigners adapting to a strange new land. Can you imagine the reverse --- what it might be like for Edna, Prakash, and Ramesh to make a new life in America?

15. When a young Indian journalist interviews Frank, she asks, ?Do you think it is ethical for a foreign company to own natural resources in another country?? How would you answer this? What if another nation owned some of America?s natural resources?

16. The journalist also raises the notion of moral responsibility. Does the West have a moral obligation to developing nations? How does moral responsibility differ from legal responsibility?

17. Frank questions and redefines his faith, first when he learns that Benny is seriously ill, and later when he has pneumonia in India. How do these philosophical crises influence his actions?

18. Frank offered the promise of a different life for Ramesh. What do you think will ultimately happen to the boy? What do you think the future holds for Frank?

Author Bio

Thrity Umrigar is the bestselling author of such novels as HONOR, which was a Reese's Book Club pick, as well as three picture books and a memoir. Her books have been published in over 20 countries and in several languages. A former journalist, she has contributed to the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and other newspapers. She is a recipient of the Nieman Fellowship to Harvard, and winner of the Cleveland Arts Prize, the Seth Rosenberg prize and a Lambda Literary award. She is currently a Distinguished University Professor of English at Case Western Reserve University.

Critical Praise

"Rich prose and vibrant descriptions of India?**The Weight of Heaven** is a bold, beautifully rendered tale of cultures that clash and coalesce."

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