

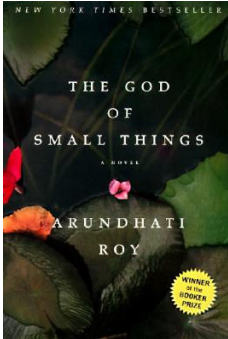


GOD OF SMALL THINGS
BY
ARUNDHATI ROY

SUMMARY..... 1
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....2
BOOK REVIEWS.....3
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....7
AUTHOR INTERVIEW.....9
FURTHER READING..... 14



SUMMARY



Set in Kerala, India, during the late 1960s when Communism rattled the age-old caste system, the story begins with the funeral of young Sophie Mol, the cousin of the novel's protagonists, Rahel and her fraternal twin brother, Estha. In a circuitous and suspenseful narrative, Roy reveals the family tensions that led to the twins' behavior on the fateful night that Sophie drowned. Beneath the drama of a family tragedy lies a background of local politics, social taboos and the tide of history -- all of which come together in a slip of fate, after which a family is irreparably shattered. Roy captures the children's candid observations but clouded understanding of adults' complex emotional lives. Rahel notices that "at times like these, only the Small Things are ever said. The Big Things lurk unsaid inside." Plangent with a sad wisdom, the children's view is never oversimplified, and the adult characters reveal their frailties -- and in one case, a repulsively evil power -- in subtle and complex ways.

SOURCE: WWW.AMAZON.COM



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Arundhati Roy (born November 24, 1961) is an Indian novelist, author of *The God of Small Things*, for which she won the Booker Prize. Born in Shillong, Meghalaya to a Keralite Christian mother and a Bengali Hindu father, she spent her childhood in Aymanam in Kerala. She left Kerala for Delhi at age 16, and embarked on a bohemian lifestyle, staying in a small hut with a tin roof and making a living selling empty beer bottles. She then proceeded to study architecture at the Delhi School of Architecture.

Arundhati met her film-maker husband in 1984, under whose influence she moved into films. She acted in the role of a village girl in the award-winning movie *Massey Sahib*, and wrote the screenplays for *In Which Annie Gives it Those Ones* and *Electric Moon*.

Roy is also a well known peace activist. One of her first essays was in response to India's testing of nuclear weapons in Pokhran, Rajasthan. The essay, titled *The End of Imagination*, is a critique against the Indian government's nuclear policies.

In 2002 she was convicted of contempt of court by the Supreme Court in New Delhi for accusing the court of attempting to silence protests against the Narmada Dam project, but received only a symbolic sentence of one day in prison.

SOURCE: WWW.WIKIPEDIA.COM



BOOK REVIEWS

New York Times Book Review:

There is no single tragedy at the heart of Arundhati Roy's devastating first novel. Although "The God of Small Things" opens with memories of a family grieving around a drowned child's coffin, there are plenty of other intimate horrors still to come, and they compete for the reader's sympathy with the furious energy of cats in a sack. Yet the quality of Ms. Roy's narration is so extraordinary -- at once so morally strenuous and so imaginatively supple -- that the reader remains enthralled all the way through to its agonizing finish.

This ambitious meditation on the decline and fall of an Indian family is part political fable, part psychological drama, part fairy tale, and it begins at its chronological end, in a landscape of extravagant ruin. When 31-year-old Rahel Kochamma returns to Ayemenem House, her former home in the south Indian state of Kerala, its elegant windows are coated with filth and its brass doorknobs dulled with grease; dead insects lie in the bottom of its empty vases. The only animated presence in the house seems to be great-aunt Baby Kochamma's new television set -- in front of which she and her servant sit day after day, munching peanuts.

Rahel has come back to Ayemenem not to see her great-aunt, however, but because she has heard that her twin brother, Estha, has unexpectedly returned. Estha and Rahel were once inseparable, but now they have been apart for almost 25 years -- ever since the winter of 1969, when their English cousin, Sophie Mol, drowned in the river with their grandmother's silver thimble in her fist.

"Perhaps it's true that things can change in a day," Ms. Roy's narrator muses. "That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house -- the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture -- must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for." And this is precisely Ms. Roy's undertaking as, throughout her book, she shuttles between the twins' past and present, continually angling in, crabwise, toward the night of Sophie Mol's death.

Unlike most first novels, "The God of Small Things" is an anti-Bildungsroman, for Estha and Rahel have never properly grown up. Whatever the nature of their crimes, it is almost immediately apparent that they have never recovered from their punishments, and present-day Ayemenem -- with its toxic river fish and its breezes stinking of sewage -- seems to reflect their poisoned and blighted lives. The Ayemenem of the twins' aborted childhood, however, is a rich confusion of competing influences. Bearded Syrian priests swing their censers while kathakali dancers perform at the temple nearby; the Communists are splintering, the Untouchables are becoming politicized and "The Sound of Music" is wildly popular. Life has an edgy, unpredictable feel.

The twins are only 7 years old in 1969, and -- affectionate, contentious, indefatigable -- they still live almost entirely in a world of their own making. They are at Ayemenem House because their proud and beautiful mother, Ammu, made the unforgivable mistake of marrying badly: when her husband began hitting the children as well as her, she returned, unwelcome, to her parents' home.

Ammu's status within the family is tenuous because of her marital disgrace, but a certain aura of eccentricity and defeat clings like a smell to all the residents of Ayemenem House, rendering them alternately comic, sympathetic and grotesque. There is the twins' elegant grandmother, Mammachi, with her skull permanently scarred from her dead husband's beatings and her bottle of Dior perfume carefully locked up in the safe. Then there is scheming Baby Kochamma, who once tried to become a nun but -- her faith inspired less by God than by a certain Father Mulligan -- lasted only a year in the convent. And there is the house servant, Kochu Maria, who thinks that Rahel is ridiculing her when she announces that Neil Armstrong has walked on the moon.

Finally, there is the twins' charming uncle, Chacko, the Oxford-educated Marxist who has returned from his failed marriage in England and taken over Mammachi's chutney business -- which, with cheerful ineptitude, he is running into the ground. Comrade Chacko means to organize a trade union for his workers, but he never quite gets around to it; instead he philosophizes, flirts with his female employees and assembles tiny balsa airplanes that immediately plummet to the ground. Chacko commends his ex-wife, Margaret, for leaving him, but he pines for her and their little daughter, Sophie Mol, just the same. It gradually becomes clear to the reader that only Velutha, an Untouchable who serves as the family carpenter, is competent enough to transform life rather than simply endure it -- but, of course, as he's an Untouchable, endurance is supposed to be all he's good for. Velutha fixes everything around Ayemenem House, from the factory's canning machine to the cherub fountain in Baby Kochamma's garden. He is both essential and taken for granted in the twins' existence, like breathing. He is "the God of Small Things."

Estha and Rahel are accustomed to life under the umbrella of their elders' discontent; it is only after Chacko invites Margaret and Sophie Mol to come to India for Christmas that the twins gain a fresh appreciation for their second-class status. Baby Kochamma makes Estha and Rahel memorize a hymn and fines them whenever they speak in Malayalam instead of English. Kochu Maria bakes a great cake; Mammachi plays the violin and allows Sophie Mol to make off with her thimble. When Chacko angrily refers to the children as millstones around his neck, Rahel understands that her light-skinned cousin, on the other hand, has been "loved from the beginning."

In the following weeks, the smoldering longings and resentments at Ayemenem House will be ignited by larger historical pressures -- the heady promises of Communism, the pieties of Christianity, the rigidities of India's caste system -- and combust with catastrophic results. And if the events surrounding the night of Sophie Mol's death form an intricate tale of crime and punishment, Ms. Roy's elaborate and circuitous reconstruction of those events is both a treasure hunt (for the story itself) and a court of appeals (perhaps all the witnesses were not heard; perhaps all the evidence was not considered).

Are the twins responsible for Sophie Mol's death? Why is Baby Kochamma so terrified of the Communists? What happened to Velutha at the police station? Why does jolly Chacko batter down the door to Ammu's room, threatening to break every bone in her body?

What sustains us through this dread-filled dance between the calamitous past and the bleak present is the exuberant, almost acrobatic nature of the writing itself. Ms. Roy refuses to allow the reader to view the proceedings from any single vantage point: time and again, she lures us toward some glib judgment only

to twist away at the last minute, thereby exposing our moral laziness and shaming us with it. But Ms. Roy's shape-shifting narrative is also tremendously nourishing, crammed not only with remonstrances but also with inside jokes, metaphors, rogue capital letters, nonsense rhymes and unexpected elaborations. Even as the Kochamma family seems to be withering before our eyes, the story of the family is flourishing, becoming ever more nuanced and intricate.

Very early on in "The God of Small Things," the grown-up Estha is caring for an ancient dog when he glimpses the shadow of a bird in flight moving across the dying animal's skin: "To Estha -- steeped in the smell of old roses, blooded on memories of a broken man -- the fact that something so fragile, so unbearably tender had survived, had been allowed to exist, was a miracle." The end of this novel also describes a brief interlude of intense happiness, and it evokes in the reader a similar feeling of gratitude and wonderment: it's as if we had suddenly stumbled upon something small and sparkling in all this wreckage. By now we know what horrors await these characters, but we have also learned, like Estha, to take what we can get. And so we hold on to this vision of happiness, this precious scrap of plunder, even as the novel's waters close over our heads.

WORLD LITERATURE TODAY:

How does one write a novel that can fetch a \$1 million advance? Arundhati Roy shows the way, as did Vikram Seth earlier. Roy's *God of Small Things* is a story of a large, sprawling Syrian Christian family living in a small village called Ayemenem in Kerala, the members of which are tossed from Ayemenem to England, then to America, Shillong, and Delhi and back to Ayemenem, badly battered, badly bruised. It is also a story of profane love between an untouchable and a respectable lady, as it is a story of painful childhood and broken marriages.

Bennan John Ipe, an entomologist in government service, retires as director in the Department of Entomology and returns to his village, where his wife makes pickles. Baby Kochamma, his sister, is sent to a convent school, where she has a crush on a priest called Father Mulligan and returns to the family with unrequited love. Chacko, Ipe's son, a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, fails the exams, takes to dishwashing, marries a maidservant called Margaret, is divorced by his pregnant wife, and returns to Ayemenem to turn his mother's fondness for pickles commercially profitable. His sister Ammu marries a Shillong-based laborer and gives birth to twins. Her husband hits the bottle, and she leaves him and returns to Ayemenem with her twins Estha and Rahel; there she soon feels drawn toward an untouchable worker called Velutha, who lives across the river. Ammu makes nightly visits to his house, whereas Estha and Rahel visit it during the day, because they love the man in their own way. Margaret visits Ayemenem with her daughter Sophie Mol (from her first marriage) for a change after her second husband Joe dies in an accident. On one occasion Ammu loses her temper and calls her children a millstone round her neck. The children decide to protest and leave the house. Sophie Mol also insists on accompanying them as a mark of her solidarity with her cousins. As they are crossing the river, their boat overturns. Estha and Rahel reach the shore safely, but Sophie drowns. In the meantime, Velutha's father tells Mamachi and Baby Kochamma of his son's affair with Ammu, and all hell is let loose.

Complications arise when Baby Kochamma implicates Velutha with a charge of abduction and murder. The police, all touchables, close in on Velutha and lock him up. The children testify to the charge to save their mother. The story ends with Velutha dying in custody, leaving Ammu to fantasize the details of their lovemaking in the forsaken hut. Estha is returned to his father in Calcutta, only to be rereported to Ayemenem after twenty-three years. Rahel wins admission into a mediocre college of architecture in Delhi. She remains there for eight years without finishing the undergraduate course. But she does get

married to Larry McCaslin, an American in India completing a doctoral thesis, and follows him to Boston. The marriage falls apart. Rahel works as a waitress for some time, then returns home to Ayemenem. The failures and misfortunes of the Ipe family touch the heart, but the most remarkable aspect of the novel is that it eschews sentimentality or romanticizing altogether. On the contrary, the narrative is splashed with humor and irony and is reminiscent of Rushdie's felicity and freedom in using English. Roy's depiction of the cross-cultural encounter between Chacko and Margaret reminds one of Jhabvala's exquisite stories in this genre. She is at her best when she describes the sky-blue Plymouth with chrome tailfins surrounded by slogan-shouting communist processionists, the family's fondness for the film *The Sound of Music*, a vendor forcing Estha to hold a bottle of Coca-Cola in one hand and his penis in the other, and Mr. Pillai's mix of communist jargon with caste. Roy, like Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, and a host of other Indian writers in recent times, confirms the fact that English is no longer a straitjacket for Indians and that they are no longer required to be staid and proper while using it. Yes, all this deserves praise, unqualified praise, no doubt.

KIRKUS REVIEWS:

A brilliantly constructed first novel that untangles an intricate web of sexual and caste conflict in a vivid style reminiscent of Salman Rushdie's early work. The major characters are Estha and Rahel, the fraternal twin son and daughter of a wealthy family living in the province of Kerala. The family's prosperity is derived from a pickle factory and rubber estate, and their prideful Anglophilia essentially estranges them from their country's drift toward Communism and their "inferiors' " hunger for independence and equality. The events of a crucial December day in 1969--including an accidental death that may have been no accident and the violent consequences that afflict an illicit couple who have broken "the Love Law"--are the moral and narrative center around which the episodes of the novel repeatedly circle. Shifting backward and forward in time with effortless grace, Roy fashions a compelling nexus of personalities that influence the twins' "eerie stealth" and furtive interdependence. These include their beautiful and mysteriously remote mother Ammu; her battling "Mammachi" (who runs the pickle factory) and "Pappachi" (an insufficiently renowned entomologist); their Oxford-educated Marxist Uncle Chacko and their wily "grandaunt" Baby Kochamma; and the volatile laborite "Untouchable" Velutha, whose relationship with the twins' family will prove his undoing. Roy conveys their explosive commingling in a vigorous prose dominated by odd syntactical and verbal combinations and coinages (a bad dream experience during midday nap-time is an "aftermare") reminiscent of Gerard Manly Hopkins's "sprung rhythm," incantatory repetitions, striking metaphors (Velutha is seen "standing in the shade of the rubber trees with coins of sunshine dancing on his body") and sensuous descriptive passages ("The sky was orange, and the coconut trees were sea anemones waving their tentacles, hoping to trap and eat an unsuspecting cloud"). In part a perfectly paced mystery story, in part an Indian *Wuthering Heights*: a gorgeous and seductive fever dream of a novel, and a truly spectacular debut.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who-or what-is the God of Small Things? What other names and what divine and earthly attributes are associated with this god? What-or who-are the Small Things over which this god has dominion, and why do they merit their own god?
2. What are the various laws, rules, and regulations-familial, social, cultural, political, and religious-including "the Love Laws," to which Roy makes repeated references?
3. Various dwellings are important to the unfolding of Roy's story. How is each described? To what extent does each embody or reflect the forces and burdens of history, social order, and custom?
4. How does the river that flows through Ayemenem in 1969 differ from the river in 1992? What is its importance in the lives and histories of the two families and in the twins' childhood?
5. To what extent are race, social class, and religion important? What specific elements of each take on predominant importance, and with what consequences? How do the concept and the reality of "the Untouchable" function in the novel?
6. Why does Roy switch back and forth among time present and various times past?
7. Is Time as destroyer the novel's most insistent theme? How are the blue Plymouth, the pickle factory, Rahel's toy wristwatch (which always reads "ten to two"), the children's boat, and other objects related to this theme?
8. "He was called Velutha-which means White in Malayalam-because he was so black;" and at age 11 he "was like a little magician." What is the full extent of Velutha the Untouchable's role in the story?
9. To what extent do even the most fantastical events result from everyday passions? What feelings and passions are predominant, and how do they determine key events? Which emotions are strongest among the children, the adults?
10. How does Roy portray the twins' extraordinary spiritual connection, their "single Siamese soul," the fragile, wonder-filled world of their childhood, their often magical vision, and their differences? Is her re-creation of the child's world convincing?
11. What importance does Roy ascribe to story, storytelling, and playacting, including the Kathakali dances and stories? To what extent is the telling of a story more important than the story itself?

- 12.** In what ways are the Kochamma women subjected to male dominance, indifference, and even cruelty, and in what ways are they decisive in their own lives, the life of their family, and the affairs of their community?
- 13.** Baby Kochamma's harbors an "age-old fear of being dispossessed." What kinds of dispossession occur in the novel, and in association with which characters and which events? With what consequences?
- 14.** "Some things come with their own punishments," Roy writes. "They would all learn more about punishments soon. That they came in different sizes." What "sizes" of punishment are specified, and who decides those "sizes"?
- 15.** Rahel reveals to Sophie Mol a list of those she loves; and we learn that this list was an attempt to order chaos. She revised it constantly, torn forever between love and duty." What other attempts are there "to order chaos"?
- 16.** Roy writes that Inspector Mathew and Comrade Pillai "were both men whom childhood had abandoned without a trace. Men without curiosity. Without doubt. Both in their own way truly, terrifyingly adult." Can this be said of others?
- 17.** Is there anything truly shocking about Estha and Rahel's lovemaking in the next-to-final chapter? What does Roy mean when she writes, "There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mammachi's book) would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings"?
- 18.** Roy has said that her architectural studies determined her novel's structure. In what ways can we view the novel's plan and construction as architectural? In what ways is the novel's "architecture" related to actual buildings in the novel?
- 19.** Does a single moment of true, intense love compensate for centuries of oppression, cruelty, and madness?
- 20.** Why does Roy end the novel with a detailed depiction of Ammu and Velutha's first night of lovemaking and the promise of "Tomorrow"?

SOURCE: WWW.READINGGROUPGUIDES.COM



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

She claims she never rewrites or revises. Her first novel, "The God of Small Things," has just won the English-speaking world's most premier honor, the Booker Prize, is published in more than 20 nations, has hit No. 1 on the Sunday Times of London's bestseller list and is climbing the New York Times list. It has earned her in excess of \$1 million so far and international media attention as she faces obscenity charges in her native India for a sensual description of inter-caste lovemaking that serves as the novel's coda. And beyond all this, she's good. Real good. Butt-kicking good. So good, in fact, that John Updike, when reviewing "The God of Small Things" for the New Yorker, compares her mind-boggling debut to that of Tiger Woods.

She's Arundhati Roy, and she's remarkably tiny -- hovering around 5-foot-2 -- despite the black platform shoes she's wearing and new literary lioness persona. An explosion of curly black hair frames her face, which showcases nearly childlike, saucer eyes and cheekbones that erupt the moment she talks or smiles. Now in her mid-30s, Roy grew up in Kerala, the Marxist Indian state in which "The God of Small Things" is set. The novel is a vertiginously poetic tale of Indian boy-and-girl twins, Estha and Rahel, and their family's tragedies; the story's fulcrum is the death of their 9-year-old half-British cousin, Sophie Mol, visiting them on holiday.

The daughter of a Syrian Christian mother, a divorcee who managed a tea plantation (just like the character of Ammu in Roy's novel), Roy didn't attend school until she was 10. "I was my mother's guinea pig," she explains. "She started her own school, and I was her first student." As a teenager, Roy went on to attend boarding school in southern India and wound up at Delhi's School of Planning and Architecture. And now, after years of supporting herself as an aerobics instructor in New Delhi, she's one of the world's most celebrated novelists. We forgive her for not rewriting or revising "The God of Small Things." Thank God she didn't. Where would the world be without such a display of raw gifts for simile and metaphor, rhythm and lyric? Without Roy's dizzying microcosm of modern India? Without such an honest and wildly creative (her word plays would drive William Safire and any self-respecting dictionary reader mad) expression of human yearning and joy? Let's not think about a world without "The God of Small Things." Let's ask Roy about the world with it.

All eyes are on India right now, with the 50th anniversary celebration of its independence. At the same time, all eyes are on you and this novel. People around the world are asking, "What does it mean to be an Indian novelist today? What does it mean to be Indian?" Will readers find the answers to these questions in "The God of Small Things"?

You know, I think that a story is like the surface of water. And you can take what you want from it. Its volubility is its strength. But I feel irritated by this idea, this search. What do we mean when we ask, "What is Indian? What is India? Who is Indian?" Do we ask, "What does it mean to be American? What does it mean to be British?" as often? I don't think that it's a question that needs to be asked, necessarily. I

don't think along those lines, anyway. I think perhaps that the question we should ask is, "What does it mean to be human?"

I don't even feel comfortable with this need to define our country. Because it's bigger than that! How can one define India? There is no one language, there is no one culture. There is no one religion, there is no one way of life. There is absolutely no way one could draw a line around it and say, "This is India" or, "This is what it means to be Indian." The whole world is seeking simplification. It's not that easy. I don't believe that one clever movie or one clever book can begin to convey what it means to be Indian. Of course, every writer of fiction tries to make sense of their world. Which is what I do. There are some things that I don't do, though. Like try to make claims of what influenced my book. And I will never "defend" my book either. When I write, I lay down my weapons and give the book to the reader.

Speaking of influences and defenses, your work has been compared to Salman Rushdie's. And now, in India, you face charges of obscenity in India for the erotic ending of "The God of Small Things" - a controversy reminiscent of (but not as severe as) Rushdie's fatwa (death sentence).

I think that the comparison to Salman has been just a lazy response. When in doubt, if it's an Indian writer, compare them to Salman, because he's the best-known Indian writer! When I say this, I feel bad, because I think it sounds like I don't think very highly of him, because I do. He's a brilliant writer. I think critics have a problem when a new writer comes along, because they want to peg an identity on them. And Salman is the most obvious one for me. But then readers begin to assume the influence, and this isn't fair.

The comparisons emerge from the need to create an analogy, a metaphor for readers to understand the unknown writer's work ...

I understand that need. But then I don't understand when readers assume that Indian writers are "magical realists" and suddenly I'm a "magical realist," just because Salman Rushdie or other Indian writers are "magical realists." Sometimes people can misread because of such pegging. For example, when Baby Kochamma is fantasizing or Rahel is observing something as a child or Ammu is dreaming in my book, it is not me, the writer, creating the "magical realism." No, what I am writing is what the characters are experiencing. What the reader is reading is the character's own perceptions. Those images are driven by the characters. It is never me invoking magic! This is realism, actually, that I am writing.

Actually, it's not just Rushdie I'm compared to. There's García-Márquez, Joyce ... and Faulkner, always Faulkner. Yes, I'm compared to Faulkner the most. But I've never read Faulkner before! So I can't say anything about him. I have, however, read some other writers from the American South -- Mark Twain, Harper S. Lee -- and I think that perhaps there's an infusion or intrusion of landscape in their literature that might be similar to mine. This comparison is not that lazy, because it's natural that writers from outside urban areas share an environment that is not man-made and is changed by winds and rivers and rain. I think that human relationships and the divisions between human beings are more brutal and straightforward than those in cities, where everything is hidden behind walls and a veneer of urban sophistication.

The obscenity charges brought forth by an individual lawyer, Sabu Thomas, that you face are in Kerala, the same Indian region you depict in your book. Is this what you mean by "the divisions between human beings are more brutal and straightforward" in non-urban areas? And how are you coping with such a reception to your book in the very place that inspired its writing?

When the charges were first made, I was very upset. Actually, the individual who accused me of obscenity first did so when I was on my first book tour in the U.S. in June, and no one told me about it because they didn't want me to be upset on tour. Now, I realize that this is what literature is about. This is the fallout of literature. It's more important for me to argue that -- on my territory. To state MY case for literature, and freedom of speech. It's far more important for me to do that than to go to book parties or on tours. That's the real fight, what it's all about. And that is MY territory, no matter what he is trying to do, what he is trying to say against my book. And I am not afraid, I'm capable of dealing with this and doing myself justice. I am going to stake my claim. In fact, last week, I made an appeal to the high court, and they decided to give the case to a lower court. It's a criminal case, you know; and in India, even though a private citizen charged me, the case becomes "the state" vs. me! It's so unfair, the person who is accusing me of obscenity only photocopied the last three pages of my book and presented them to the court.

The vernacular press in India has dealt with this with viciousness; my mother, who lives in Kerala, hears of the controversy and cannot just be happy for the international success of the book. This has been a strain. But one cannot hide from the glare of one's own writing.

When I started to read "The God of Small Things," it took me some time to figure out who the protagonist was -- and then I started to feel it was the place: India, Kerala.

That quest is interesting -- that quest for one main character. There is no reason for there to be one. In fact, I think the center is everyone, Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Velutha, Estha, Rahel ... they all are the core.

Another "core" of the book is the lyricism of your prose. The Indian-American writer (and Salon columnist) Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has confessed to writing to the rhythms of Indian music; sometimes she reads her work out loud in public with the music playing in the background to enhance the musicality. Do you have a similar approach?

I don't listen to music when I write. It's about design to me. I'm trained as an architect; writing is like architecture. In buildings, there are design motifs that occur again and again, that repeat -- patterns, curves. These motifs help us feel comfortable in a physical space. And the same works in writing, I've found. For me, the way words, punctuation and paragraphs fall on the page is important as well -- the graphic design of the language. That was why the words and thoughts of Estha and Rahel, the twins, were so playful on the page ... I was being creative with their design. Words were broken apart, and then sometimes fused together. "Later" became "Lay. Ter." "An owl" became "A Nowl." "Sour metal smell" became "sourmetal smell."

Repetition I love, and used because it made me feel safe. Repeated words and phrases have a rocking feeling, like a lullaby. They help take away the shock of the plot -- death, lives destroyed or the horror of the settings -- a crazy, chaotic, emotional house, the sinister movie theater.

How do you react to reviews that analyze your wordplays as "writerly" or self-conscious?

Language is something I don't think about. At all. In fact, the truth is that my writing isn't self-conscious at all. I don't rewrite. In this whole book, I changed only about two pages. I rarely rewrite a sentence. That's the way I think. Writing this novel was a very intuitive process for me. And pleasurable. So much more pleasurable than writing screenplays. I get so much more pleasure from describing a river than writing "CUT TO A RIVER."

You know, I always believe that even among the best writers, there are selfish writers and there are generous ones. Selfish writers leave you with the memory of their book. Generous writers leave you with the memory of the world they evoked. To evoke a world, to communicate it to someone, is like writing a letter to someone that you love. It's a very thin line. For me, books are gifts. When I read a book, I accept it as a gift from an author. When I wrote this book, I presented it as a gift. The reader will do with it what they want.

This is your first novel. How did you start writing it? What was your process? How did you guide yourself through it?

If someone told me this was how I was going to write a novel before I started writing it, I wouldn't believe them. I wrote it out of sequence. I didn't start with the first chapter or end with the last chapter. I actually started writing with a single image in my head: the sky blue Plymouth with two twins inside it, a Marxist procession surrounding it. And it just developed from there. The language just started weaving together, sentence by sentence.

How did you arrive at the final sequence that became the novel in its finished form?

It just worked. For instance, I didn't know, when I started writing, that this book would take place in exactly one day. I kept moving back and forth in time. And then, somehow, I realized that in some of the scenes, the kids were grown up, and sometimes they weren't. I wound up looking at the scenes as different moments, moments that were refracted through time. Reconstituted moments. Moments when Estha is readjusting his Elvis puff of hair. When Estha and Rahel blow spitballs. When Ammu and Velutha make love. These moments, and moments like these in life, I realized, mean something more than what they are, than how they are experienced as mere minutes. They are the substance of human happiness.

Your biography on the book's dust jacket says you are "trained as an architect and the author of two screenplays." By other published accounts you are an aerobics instructor. Why and how did you decide to write a novel?

From the time I was a very young child, I knew in my heart that I wanted to be a writer. I never thought I would be able to become one -- I didn't have the financial opportunities to be a writer. But then I started writing for film, and this started my writing career. Still, when I was studying architecture, or teaching aerobics, these were things I really wanted to do, things I focused on completely. No matter what I did or what I do, I become absorbed in it. And that was what happened when I started writing "The God of Small Things." I worked for a long time, and finally, when I saved enough money to take time off and take the risk of writing a novel -- which took me four and a half years of my life, once again I was able to focus on it completely and really enjoy writing it. I was as involved in being an architect as I was writing this novel, and vice versa. I never spent time just dreaming of becoming a writer and resenting my present state. No, my secret was to live my life refusing to be a victim. Failure -- no, I shouldn't say "failure," rather, the "lack of success" never frightened me. Even if this book never sold or caught any attention, it would still be the same book. This book is this book. At every point in my life, I decided what I could do and then did it.

There is no way for any publisher or writer to know what will sell and why, even though they are all looking for formula. People are asking me if I am feeling pressure now, and they ask me if I will repeat what I achieved in "The God of Small Things." How I hope I do not! I want to keep changing, growing. I

don't accept the pressure. I don't believe I must write another book just because now I'm a "writer." I don't believe anyone should write unless they have a book to write. Otherwise they should just shut up.

So you aren't working on another book?

No. Not now, I am totally free. Right now it's important for me to accept my own peace; I have no idea what I must do next. I don't care. I don't feel I must "follow the path." I don't believe in rules. One of the worst books I've ever read was "The Craft of Novel Writing." I don't write reviews, even though people are asking me to now. I don't want to analyze too much. I had no idea that all of this would happen. For me, what made writing "The God of Small Things" so worthwhile is that people all around the world are connecting with this book, that it's somehow hitting some deeply human chord.



FURTHER READING

IF YOU LIKED GOD OF SMALL OF SMALL THINGS, YOU MIGHT TRY:

Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri

Navigating between the Indian traditions they've inherited and the baffling new world, the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's elegant, touching stories seek love beyond the barriers of culture and generations. In "A Temporary Matter," published in *The New Yorker*, a young Indian-American couple faces the heartbreak of a stillborn birth while their Boston neighborhood copes with a nightly blackout. In the title story, an interpreter guides an American family through the India of their ancestors and hears an astonishing confession. Lahiri writes with deft cultural insight reminiscent of Anita Desai and a nuanced depth that recalls Mavis Gallant. She is an important and powerful new voice. --Amazon.com

Death of Vishnu by Manil Suri

Vishnu, the odd-job man in a Bombay apartment block, lies dying on the staircase landing: Around him the lives of the apartment dwellers unfold: the warring housewives on the first floor, lovesick teenagers on the second, and the widower, alone and quietly grieving on the top floor of the building. In a fevered state Vishnu looks back on his love affair with the seductive Padmim and wonders if he might actually be the god Vishnu, guardian of the entire universe. --Amazon.com