

Interpreter of Identity

WITH A NEW SHORT STORY COLLECTION AND A ROCK STAR'S ALLURE, PULITZER WINNER JHUMPA LAHIRI REMAINS FOCUSED ON LOVE, FAMILY, AND FINDING A PLACE TO BELONG BY JESSICA ULLIAN

The ticket holders' line outside the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline stretched down the alleyway, around the back of the building, and into the parking lot. A long standby line ran parallel, with hopeful fans casting envious glances at the yellow slips of paper that guaranteed admission. Inside the theater, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri was preparing to read from *Unaccustomed Earth*, her latest collection of short stories. It was April, and the book would debut at number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list later that month. ■ It was not exactly your typical literary reading. These days, Lahiri (GRS'93, UNI'95,'97) draws crowds and the media — from the *Times* to *Vogue* — like a rock star. Afterwards, she fielded questions from an audience searching for insights. Their queries circled around themes the author has explored in each of her three books: the struggle between parents and children, the difficulty of being both American and Indian, the immigrant's triumphs and failures in America. ■ Finally, one young woman, so nervous she had to repeat her question, asked Lahiri how she balances the conflicts and navigates the dilemmas of everyday life. "I don't look to answer the question," Lahiri responded. "I'm just trying to understand the situation."



Jhumpa Lahiri's new collection shows a writer maturing, grappling with divorce, aging, and dependent parents.



A decade into her career, Lahiri is still surprised by her fame.

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TAPPING UNIVERSAL EMOTIONS

“The situation,” in Lahiri’s work, can mean a young woman beginning a love affair with a married man, two families reuniting after years apart only to find that their friendship has changed, or a sister’s realization that she has set her brother on the path to addiction. Although her fiction focuses on Indian-American families, critics praise Lahiri for a sure-footed ability to tap into emotions and experiences that go beyond cultural lines. But a decade into her career as one of the country’s more renowned contemporary writers, her own situation remains deliberately unexplored. Despite the lines of eager readers waiting to meet her, the movie adaptation of her novel, *The Namesake*, and the profiles in glossy magazines, she still doesn’t acknowledge, or even comprehend, her success and fame.

“I always think it’s happening to somebody else,” she says. “All of these things were very good and exciting, but I just let other people be excited — my parents, for example. I always feel that that’s not why a writer writes, so it really doesn’t matter.”

Lahiri’s ability to detach from her suc-

cess as a writer has been a part of her nature since her time at Boston University, where, over the course of six years and three advanced degrees, she quietly amassed a group of short stories that she rarely spoke of to anyone. When she received a fellowship to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in 1997, she brought printouts of those stories and read them over, thinking, “Okay, this was good, this was practice, this was getting my feet wet.” To her surprise, those pieces became *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), her debut collection, which sold more than half a million copies and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction — making Lahiri, then thirty-two, the youngest winner since the fiction category was established in 1948.

The stories, set in India and New England, are by and large about Bengali people: recent immigrants from Calcutta dealing with life in the United States, the children of immigrants breaking away from their parents’ culture and traditions, and even young Americans falling in love with Bengali-American men or women. It is a cultural setting that she further explored in *The Namesake* (2003) and now in *Unaccustomed*

Earth, earning her a devoted following among Indian-Americans. After her reading at the Coolidge, in a scene that could have come directly from her work, men and women who claimed to know her *mashis* and *meshos* — maternal aunts and uncles — surrounded her.

Her readership is clearly not limited to any one race, ethnicity, or age group, however. Instead, fans of her work cut a broad swath through cultural boundaries and find common ground with characters in situations far removed from their own.

“I see bits and pieces of myself in her characters,” says Jordan Coriza (GRS’09), a student in BU’s Creative Writing Program, who left his home in Argentina for Brazil at age fourteen, then came to the United States at nineteen. “One thing I think she does really well is that whole issue of not fully belonging to either culture or either place. But what’s more compelling is what she’s best at: re-creating those situations where, even if you can’t relate to the meat and bones of it, you relate because you understand the feelings. The mother in *The Namesake*, who comes to this country to marry a man she didn’t know — I don’t think any of us can understand how that must feel, but we don’t have to be Indian-American, or in an arranged marriage, to get it. The feelings are so real it doesn’t matter.”

Lahiri rejects the notion that she is a writer representing one ethnic group or one population’s circumstances. Instead, she points to writers she admires, such as Flannery O’Connor, Thomas Hardy, and Anton Chekhov, for the way they “localize” universal issues.

“They’re all trying to figure out the same sorts of things about life and what it’s about and how we can get through it,” she says. “I’ve never felt particularly Bengali or particularly Indian — I’ve always felt on the outside of all those terms and what they mean. When I write, I am thinking about general things. I suppose I put them in a particular context, the way so many other writers do.”

In that sense, *Unaccustomed Earth*, the new collection, is not a departure. Most of the characters are placed in a context familiar to Lahiri: they are the children of Bengali immigrants, students in Boston or in New York, families with rebellious teenagers settling down in suburban New England. But as ever, she uncovers universal experiences in even the most culturally centered situations. “She celebrates hybridity in her own muted way,” says Susan Mizruchi, a College of Arts and Sciences professor of English, who teaches Lahiri’s work in her Critical Studies in Literature and Gender course. “It’s what makes her work powerful. You feel this is someone looking in a balanced manner at everything she takes up, whether it’s an American character or an Indian character, and their different preoccupations.”

EXPLORING A LIFETIME OF EVENTS

Although her characters inhabit familiar worlds, Lahiri’s writing is evolving to reflect the changes in her life over the past decade. Themes of aging, dependent parents, divorce, and second marriage are a part of the new collection. Small children, too, are a presence throughout *Unaccustomed Earth*, just as they are in Lahiri’s own life. She married journalist Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush in 2001; their son, Octavio, is six, and their daughter, Noor, three. Her family, which she lovingly describes as a “big mountain” in her previously unimpeded day-to-day writing life, has opened her eyes to a whole new series of human experiences.

“If you have children, there’s a point in time where it’s how you thought of yourself in life and the world before, and how you thought of these things after,” she says. “Thinking about these grand topics of life — I think about them much more, now that I’m a mother.”

Those who knew Lahiri at the start of her writing career say that she always had a drive to take on those grand topics. Leslie Epstein, a CAS professor of English and director of the Creative Writing Program, says that she has a deep sense of feeling and empathy for both the great and the small events that make up a lifetime and the ability to carefully reveal the resulting emotions. “That is what allows her to accept the large things in life — births, deaths, marriages, lost loves, and found loves, too — and fit them into a pattern so smooth and so beautiful that we only sense them as we do in real life, as interruptions in time,” he says.

Many other aspects of Lahiri’s post-Pulitzer life remain unchanged. Her writing routine, she says, is best described as sporadic — there are stretches when she puts her writing aside for a time to deal with some other concern, just as she did at Boston University, when she was completing her dissertations on Bengali poetry and Jacobean-era literature or focusing on her academic programs. She still grapples with the issues that affect people and families around the world, viewed through the lens of her childhood as an American daughter of Bengali parents. She is still somewhat surprised to find her face on magazine covers and her books in shop displays — much as she was surprised, she claims, to be accepted to the Creative Writing Program in the first place.

Most of all, she is still simply considering the situations that present themselves from day to day.

“I hope my writing has matured, but at the same time, I think many of the things I was struggling to understand are things I’m still struggling to understand,” she says. “And one thing is growing from the previous thing.” ■

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—JHUMPA LAHIRI
(GRS’93, UNI’95, 97)