A Reading Group Toolbox
for the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri
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A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri
“Interpreter of the Second Generation”

Pulitzer-winner Jhumpa Lahiri talks about being “between the cracks of two cultures,” her wedding in Kolkata, and ideas that shaped her new book.

Sandip Roy-Chowdhury. Nov. 03, 2003

On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing she had mustard oil to pour into the mix.

The year is 1968 and it’s hard to make a satisfying jhaal muri in an apartment in Massachusetts, no matter if it’s the one thing you crave in your pregnancy. Reading the exceptional detail in her first full-length novel, *The Namesake*, it’s easy to forget that Jhumpa Lahiri probably doesn’t remember much of Bengali life in Boston or Cambridge in the late 1960s. She was born in 1967 in London and moved with her parents to the United States soon after. Unlike the Amy Tans and Chitra Divakarunis and Bharati Mukherjees with whom she is often compared, Lahiri is very much the “second-generation” writer. That’s why, though *The Namesake* starts with Ashima in her kitchen in Central Square, its real protagonist is the son she is pregnant with – Gogol. Lahiri was in San Francisco recently talking about Gogol, the Pulitzer, and the sounds of Bengali.

After winning the Pulitzer for your first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, everyone has been waiting to see if you could live up to that promise and write a full-length novel. Does *The Namesake* feel a bit like the child star’s first movie as an adult?

I tried not to think about what other people were going to think about my next book. I had already started the book when I got the Pulitzer and just stuck to the path. I knew I couldn’t live up to any expectation that once you write a successful book the next one has to be as successful or more successful. As a writer I just want to grow and learn from each book.

Do you remember the moment you heard you had won the Pulitzer?

Yes, I was in my apartment. We had just come back from a short trip to Boston and I was heating up some soup for my lunch. My suitcases were still not unpacked. And the phone rang. It was one or two in the afternoon. The person who called me
was from Houghton Mifflin, my publisher, but no one I knew, and she said "I need to know what year you were born." And then she asked some other fact like where I was born. I just told her. Sometimes people need some information for a reading for a flyer or something. And then she said: “You don’t know why I am calling, do you?” And I said, “No, why are you calling?” And she said, “You just won the Pulitzer.” And that’s how I found out from a person I had never spoken to in my life.

Your given name was Nilanjana but the name that stuck was your nickname Jhumpa. Gogol, your protagonist was supposed to have a “good name” sent by his grandmother in India which gets lost in the mail. And now you spend every interview explaining this Bengali custom of a public and private name. Did you want to play with names in this book?

The whole book started with a name – Gogol. It belonged to a friend of one of my cousins in Kolkata. I was made aware of it on one of my visits there many years ago. The idea made its way to a notebook I keep of story ideas. And I just jotted down “a boy named Gogol.” And slowly, subconsciously I was sort of meditating on the idea of names and what they mean, like the whole idea of having two names, which I didn’t really have, but so many people around me including my sister and friends did. I took it for granted in my life but knew that it was so inexplicable to other people in my life.

Another thing we take for granted is the way our parents (and many of us) were married. Gogol calls his parents' arranged marriage “unthinkable and unremarkable.” When were you aware that that was something different about your parents?

From a very early age. In school my friends would say their parents met in college or at a high school dance. And I was always aware my parents had married in a very different way. And when people asked me: “Oh, did your parents have an arranged marriage?” in a very bewildered and mildly horrified tone of voice, I was aware it was regarded as a sort of barbaric, unthinkable concept.

There are still people who feel, oh my God, it’s such an exotic old-fashioned sort of idea and it’s hard to explain that it’s very much a living, thriving tradition. It’s a way of being married as opposed to the romantic falling-in-love way that also exists in India.

At the same time, these were my parents and it seemed so normal and I knew so many people whom I was close to and loved who had gotten married this way. So I felt both very protective and defensive of my parents and their tradition and also sort of worried that this might happen to me and that might not be something I wanted.

Speaking of marriage, your own wedding in Kolkata was quite a mob scene with daily newspaper articles. How was that experience?

I was totally overwhelmed by the level of attention. I just didn’t realize there would be so much interest in our wedding. I wasn’t thrilled by it. I am a very private person and felt my marriage should be a private event. I tried to resist it. But then we realized it was an avalanche and it was going to happen. So we just tried to sort of accept the attention and have as private a wedding as possible.

When your parents moved to Cambridge, MA and then to Rhode Island in the late ’60s, what was the community like?

From the stories I hear, it’s similar to the world I depict in the novel. My mother was always wandering around the streets of Harvard in Central Square pushing me in my stroller and every time she would see someone who looked Bengali there was this instant “who are you, where are you from, let’s be friends.” They sort of gathered a community that way literally from spotting each other on the streets. There were enough Bengalis to have a growing circle of friends over the years and my parents are still tied to many of those people, which I think is really remarkable.

But in the book, Gogol, as he grows older, is annoyed by the constant weekend parties with other Bengalis. He describes how his 14th birthday is just an excuse for his parents to have friends from three states visit and cook food, make sandesh out of ricotta cheese and play cards and chat while the bored kids watch television.

It’s true I was always of two minds. On one hand I found these get-togethers tedious and monotonous and not what I would choose to do with my weekends every weekend. It was very clear it was very much about the parents and their need to really relax on the weekends. When you are a foreigner and still getting used to the culture, you are walking a fine line. The parties on the weekend allowed them to forget all that and just speak in Bengali and eat food and celebrate in a way that they weren’t allowed to on a daily basis.

Once my parents moved to Rhode Island they were still crossing state borders to attend these parties – it was a huge priority in their lives, especially for my mother who was more isolated since she didn’t work for a long time.
At one point Gogol goes home and his father starts talking to Manhattanites about how you have to be careful where you park in their quiet suburban towns and Gogol is irritated by his parents’ “perpetual fear of disaster.” For me that was a telling moment of how immigrants, no matter how long they live here, never quite feel safe.

Yes, absolutely. I have observed that with my parents. Here is one of the things that tipped me off early. None of my friends’ parents locked their doors. We grew up in a safe town, a sleepy neighborhood, and I’d go to my friends’ homes and their front doors were open and back doors were open. My parents were always locking the door, locking the garage, closing the windows, locking the windows every night, and I think it’s just a sense of not feeling on firm ground. And you want to feel protected somehow.

Why have you said you inherited a sense of exile from your parents?

I think that I never feel fully part of the world I was brought up in. My parents were always very resistant in many ways to living in America and missed India so much and had a lot of misgivings about their lives here. It was hard for me to think of myself as fully American. I thought it would be very much a betrayal of my parents and what they believed and who they are. My parents feel less foreign now than they did 30 years ago but they still feel like outsiders.

How then did you feel when you experienced your parents on trips to India? How were they transformed? Gogol is amazed as his mother roams around Kolkata with ease, shopping at New Market, going to films with her friends.

My parents turned into different people. It was like those weekend parties, but even more. It was truly a transformation. They were so much more relaxed, so much more at ease and I felt there was happiness that they were deprived of in their normal lives and that they could finally connect to. When I think of it now and I try to imagine what it would be like to see my parents and my sister once every two or three years, I am amazed at what my parents dealt with.

When I was growing up, the separation felt so great, so insurmountable. There was no e-mail. Phone lines were dreadful and so expensive, and every call from India was bad news. The world seemed so much more vast and so much more difficult to navigate.

But does that put a weird pressure on people like you, the second generation, to see your parents so palpably happy in India and realizing that in some ways they gave up this happiness for a better life for you?

This was one of the things that really separated me from my parents. I could try to sympathize, empathize the best that I could, but the fact of the matter is that my connection to India will never be what my parents’ is. I always feel I both belong and don’t belong there. But the older I’ve gotten the more I realize I do belong more to America than India just because I have spent so much more of my life here.

But I have often wondered why did my parents really come here. So many of these Bengali immigrants don’t really come to America for a life and death situation. Most of them have not escaped excruciating war, poverty, or political persecution that many other immigrants have experienced. Not to say their experiences were not painful, but my parents were so ambivalent and so guilt-ridden about coming here. That’s because they came essentially for opportunity and a better life. But my parents could easily have stayed in Kolkata and raised a family and had a nice home. Coming to America was a choice to have a better life for themselves and their children, thereby sacrificing connections to their families.

But though you now feel more American than Indian, are you surprised that the first stories you wrote were set in India? I read you wrote your first novel when you were seven. Was that set in India?

(Laughs) I called them novels but they weren’t very long. They were just stories about girls having various adventures in boarding schools. Some of them were with supernatural powers.

The first stories I wrote from Interpreter of Maladies were set in India. But before that I wrote many other stories I was not happy with. Maybe it was the distance that allowed me to write about India. Often, for a writer the hardest things to write about are the things that are closest because you have to be objective. It’s a greater challenge for me to tell a story like the one in The Namesake.

Your work is so tied to ethnicity and roots. Yet your husband is Guatemalan-born of Greek heritage. What do you think of roots and knowing where you come from when you look at your son?

I have never felt a strong affiliation with any nation or ethnic group. I always felt between the cracks of two cultures. So much of it was about where I was and who was viewing me. When I went to Calcutta my relatives would think of me so much as American. A foreigner. In America it’s always, you are Indian, when did you come here.

I hope for my son that it will be something he may be confused about for a time but that he will accept it and just understand that this is what can happen and it’s neither a good thing nor a bad thing to be a little mixed up.
But you have held on to your roots. Though you never grew up in Kolkata, you have retained your mother tongue – Bengali.

I don’t know, but it must be hardwired. When I first saw my son I didn’t say “How cute!” It just came out in Bengali. That’s the language of tenderness for me.

Sandip Roy-Chowdhury is on the editorial board of India Currents, and host of UpFront, a newsmagazine show on KALW 91.7, produced by New California Media. This article first appeared in India Currents in Nov 2003. For more details, see www.indiacurrents.com. Reprinted with permission.

Bibliography

*Interpreter of Maladies* (1999)

Maladies both accurately diagnosed and misinterpreted, matters both temporary and life changing, relationships in flux and unshakeable, unexpected blessings and sudden calamities, and the powers of survival – these are among the themes of Jhumpa Lahiri’s Pulitzer Prize-winning debut collection of stories. Traveling from India to New England and back again, Lahiri charts the emotional voyages of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations, cultures, religions, and generations. Imbued with the sensual details of both Indian and American cultures, they also speak with universal eloquence and compassion to everyone who has ever felt like an outsider.


The *Namesake* takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Ashoke does his best to adapt while his wife pines for home. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world. Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name. He stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs.
The Namesake

1. *The Namesake* explores things we inherit from our parents, including our names: their meaning, why we have them, who gave them to us. What are the similarities and differences in naming practices in Bengali and American cultures? Other cultures?

2. How do Gogol’s “good” public name and private pet name color the way he views his world, how he defines himself, and how he shapes his life? Why is it important for him to accept his name?

3. In what ways are Ganguli family members forced to separate themselves from their homeland? How does Gogol, over the years, try to separate himself from his parents and their heritage?

4. Ashima compares being a foreigner to a perpetual pregnancy where one feels out of sorts and elicits curiosity from strangers: “It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding.” (Page 49.) What do you think of Ashima’s view of being a foreigner?

5. On page 78, Gogol’s father quotes Dostoyevsky by saying “We all came out of Gogol's overcoat.” What did Dostoyevsky mean, and why does Ashoke quote him?

6. How does the inscription in Gogol’s book from his father, “The man who gave you his name from the man who gave you your name,” reflect one of the book’s main themes?

7. In what ways does the train wreck Ashoke Ganguli experiences in early adulthood influence his life? How does this situation work as a metaphor in the story?

8. There are many vivid food scenes throughout *The Namesake*, beginning with a scene of Ashima combining Rice Krispies, peanuts, and red onion in a bowl to approximate an Indian snack she craves. Later, Gogol has his first solid food in a rice ceremony (annaprasan). In what ways do the descriptions of food and its preparation enhance the story and our understanding of characters?

9. Think about Gogol’s relationships with the women in his life: Ashima, Sonia, Maxine, and Moushumi. How does each relationship reflect the changes in him as he becomes a young man?

10. Lahiri wrote *The Namesake* in present tense. How does this choice shape the story and the reader’s relationship to it?

Interpreter of Maladies

1. In “A Temporary Matter,” a married couple drifts apart in the aftermath of their child’s death. During the blackout in their neighborhood, how do the stories and truths that they share draw them together and further apart?

2. “This Blessed House” tells the story of Sanjeev and Twinkle, a newly married Indian American couple, who discover a treasure-trove of Christian iconography in their new home. What do these discoveries and how they react to them say about the couple and their marriage?

3. In “Mrs. Sen’s,” we see the immigrant experience through a young American boy’s eyes. Why does the author choose this boy as the narrator? What do Mrs. Sen’s struggles with assimilation show us about life in a new country?

4. A woman has an affair with a married Indian man in “Sexy.” What does the woman learn about herself through this affair? What does she learn from her lover and from the young boy who comes to visit her for an afternoon?

5. In the title story, an American tourist shares an intimate secret with her tour guide, thinking that his job as a medical interpreter makes him qualified as an interpreter of emotional ailments, too. Why does the woman draw this conclusion? What is she looking for in the tour guide? What does the tour guide see in her? What does this story say about attraction and knowledge?

6. Community and class relations in India are portrayed differently in “A Real Durwan” and “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar.” How do the communities differ? What does each story illustrate about class structure in India?

7. What different kinds of narrative techniques does the author use? How does her choice of narrator or perspective affect each story?

8. Disconnection is a major theme in Lahiri’s short story collection. How does she illustrate this theme? What other common themes emerge throughout the stories?

9. Are these stories unique to South Asian immigrants and Indian Americans or are they also applicable to other groups?

10. Following *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri published a novel, *The Namesake*. Do you as a reader wish the material of these stories could be fleshed out to novel length? Which stories do you think could work as novels?
Recommended Reading from The Seattle Public Library

Fiction
Brought from Bangladesh to London for an arranged marriage with an older, frog-faced man, devout Muslim Nazneen grows within and beyond the strictures of her faith towards wisdom and self-understanding.

Two siblings, countries, cultures and perspectives are juxtaposed and contrasted. Uma takes care of overbearing parents in India while her indulged brother Arun studies freely in the suburban U.S.

This Pulitzer Prize winner follows one Greek American family's tangled history and immigration to Detroit as told by Calliope (Cal), a 1970s teenager who realizes that she is a hermaphrodite (intersex).

Caught between worlds, French chef Sterling Lung dismays his immigrant parents who want him to become a doctor and wed a Hong Kong picture bride, and disappoints his Anglo employers who assume he cooks Chinese.

This story collection illuminates a new world of people in migration that has transformed the meaning of “America.”

Rahel and her twin brother Estha reunite in Kerala, India, in the 1960s where a family tragedy will rend their lives in what has been called an “Indian Wuthering Heights.”

An entertaining epic set in post-World War II London, about two families whose hilarious and tortured lives capture the optimism and absurdity of the past half century.

As the servant Vishnu lies dying on a staircase landing, life in the separate apartments proceeds apace: with feuds and gossip, love and grief all continuing as though nothing were happening outside their walls.

This Pulitzer Prize winner follows one Greek American family's tangled history and immigration to Detroit as told by Calliope (Cal), a 1970s teenager who realizes that she is a hermaphrodite (intersex).

Memoirs
The reminiscences of this Indian-born poet and novelist are both evocative and moving as the author examines issues of identity and a sense of displacement in both her own life and those of her children.

A narrative about a sect few Westerners have heard of – the Bene Israel, an ancient community of Indian Jews. This memoir should appeal not only to Jews and Indians, but to anyone compelled by the mingling of cultural identities.

Dutta explores the multiple paradoxes of Calcutta, giving personal insight into the city's history and modern identity.

Jadhav's (Monetary Economics for India) family memoir covers a period of great change for India's most downtrodden people, once called Untouchable and now referred to as Dalit. The addendum by his daughter, a college student at Johns Hopkins, brings the story right into the American Dream.
Jaffrey, one of the best-known writers on Indian cuisine, writes of growing up in a huge “joint family” of aunts, uncles and cousins in Delhi and Kampur. Family photographs and recipes are included.

Journalist Kalita, the daughter of immigrants from the Indian state of Assam, focuses on the stories of three Indian families who settled in Middlesex County in central New Jersey.

Kamdar traces the Indian diaspora through this fascinating memoir of her tattoos, grandmother’s world, and her own bicultural upbringing in the American West and Bombay.

Australian radio personality and host Macdonald spent two years living in and traveling around India. Her narrative depicts present-day India, her Indian friends, arranged marriages, New Delhi’s disco and club scene, and Bollywood actors.

A memoir chronicling Miro’s first trips back to her native land of India since being adopted in Barcelona in 1974 at the age of six. Her moving attempt to create a personal history from two distant worlds and a few scattered facts illustrate the emotional journey many adopted children undertake when searching into their past.

Living in exile since 1994, Nasarina writes hauntingly of a childhood of confusion and pain.

Author of the international bestseller, *A Suitable Boy*, tells the story of a century, a friendship, love affair and marriage of his great uncle and aunt.

The authors reflect on that captivating and elusive Indian city, Calcutta.

**Books for Teens**

Dimple is torn between two cultures – not Indian enough for Indians or American enough for Americans. Now her family wants to arrange her marriage. Dimple resists, but when she finds out that her potential husband is a cute D.J. who mixes traditional Bhangra with electronica, she thinks her parents may be onto something. Unfortunately, her gorgeous best friend may think so, too.

Amina and her family have settled in the U.S. after fleeing from political violence in Venezuela. Sarah, adopted, is desperate to know her Korean birth parents. Adrian’s new friends have some spooky, and hilarious, misconceptions about his Romanian origins. Whether they’ve transitioned from Mexico to the U.S. or from Ramallah to New Mexico, the characters in these short stories have all ventured far and faced innumerable challenges.

A family of immigrants from a faraway land arrive in America. Like other immigrant families, they struggle to survive and adapt while still holding on to the traditions of their homeland. But this family’s native country happens to be in another dimension, and because they can’t fully explain their past, they face an uncertain future.

Jazz must spend the summer away from her best friend (and secret crush) to go to India to help her do-gooder mother set up a clinic. When Jazz befriends Danita, she begins to understand the magic of the monsoons and of India itself.

Jeeta’s mother wants her to live like a traditional girl in Mumbai, India – learning how to cook, not talking to strange boys, and eventually having her marriage arranged by her parents. Jeeta has other ideas, especially after she begins studying harder and noticing one of the boys in her neighborhood.

Yoo, David. *Girls for Breakfast* (2005)
On the day after his high school graduation, Korean-American teen Nick Park looks back at his many misadventures as “the only non-Anglo-Saxon student in suburban Connecticut.”
Books for Children

Maya was born in India, is living in Canada, and now her parents want to move to California. With a little help from Ganesh, the elephant god, Maya gains self-awareness and clarity on her feelings towards parents, her heritage, and boys. Recommended for Grades 5-7

Eight-year-old Anu is mourning the death of his grandfather. The boy yearns to be with his Bapu again, and he believes that if he becomes a sadhu, an Indian holy man, he can bring him back home where he belongs. Told with humor and pathos, Anu learns to accept his Bapu's death and hold him always in his heart. Recommended for Grades 4-6

Godfather Snake dresses Cinduri in gold cloth and jeweled anklets to the Navaratri festival to win the heart of a prince. Adapted from the East Indian story "Nagami" (Jewel of the Snake), this tale is rich in tradition and culture. Recommended for Grades 3-6

This true story is inspired by the life of Noor Nobi, a tailor from Kolkata, India, who lost his family in a tragic accident. After despairing of his loss, he began his life anew by caring for sick birds left behind at the public market. He is now a folk hero to the people who gather to watch him release the birds he has restored to health. Recommended for Grades K-3

Shoba and her monkey, Patel, go on a magical journey to Mumbai in order to attend a monkey wedding. They travel by flying bed, desert camel, a crowded bus, and walk across an elephant's back, meeting new friends along the way. Recommended for Preschool to Grade 3

Known as the Bindi Babes, sisters Amber, Geena, and Jazz have everything, it seems: great clothes, adoring friends, and a father who buys them anything. What they don't have is their mum who died one year ago. When Auntie comes from India to provide a woman's touch at home, the Bindi Babes are shocked and can’t imagine anything good coming from the arrangement. Recommended for Grades 4-7

A little girl lovingly shares all of the beauty and uses for her mother's saris as she weaves them through her daily activities, real and imagined. A step-by-step demonstration of how to wrap a sari is included. Recommended for Preschool to Grade 3

Singh, Vandana. *Younguncle Comes to Town* (2004)
Ravi, Sarita, and the baby, have an eccentric uncle who has come to visit. Charming and witty, Younguncle brings adventure and humor into their household. A perfect introduction to Indian culture, family life, lore, and legend. Recommended for Grades 3-5

Prince Rama is exiled by his father at the behest of his jealous stepmother. Rama's wife, Sita, and brother go with him to the forest where all is well until Ravana, the ten-headed Demon King, steals Sita for himself. The prince battles the beast with the help of Hanuman, the Monkey King and his army. This legend from the Ramayana is told simply and enhanced with dramatic illustrations. Recommended for Preschool to Grade 3

A young boy floats paper boats down the stream near his home and dreams of what lies beyond his village. The poem, originally published in 1913 by Indian Nobel laureate Tagore, features paper illustrations that evoke the boy's natural surroundings and his rich imagination. Recommended for Preschool to Grade 2

In this biography of Mohandas Gandhi, arguably the most influential Indian leader and peace activist to ever live, readers will learn about his extraordinary life and the times in which he rose to prominence as India's liberator. Many photographs and illustrations bring the Indian subcontinent to bustling and vivid life, as well. Recommended for Grades 4-6.
Book Club How-To’s

Ideas for setting up a book discussion group from the Washington Center for the Book at The Seattle Public Library

Before you get started

Once you figure out these details, the fun begins – reading and talking about good books!

- When, how often, and where will your book club meet?
- How long will the meetings last?
- Will you serve food?
- What’s the role of the leader, or will you even designate a leader?
- What types of books do you want to read – fiction, memoirs, nonfiction, a combination? Contemporary works, classics, both?
- Who makes up the questions for the group to discuss?

Choosing books for discussion

Choosing what books to read is one of the most enjoyable, often frustrating, and certainly one of the most important activities the group will undertake. One of the best parts of belonging to a book discussion group is that you will be introduced to authors and books you’re unfamiliar with, and books that fall outside your regular areas of interest. This is good! Remind people that there can be a big difference between “a good read” and “a good book for a discussion.” (See next section.) It’s always a good idea to select your group’s books well in advance (at least three months works well). You don’t want to have to spend time at each meeting deciding what to read next.

What makes a particular book a good one for a discussion?

Probably the most important criteria are that the book be well written and that it explores basic human truths. Good books for discussion have three-dimensional characters dealing with life issues readers can identify with – characters who are forced to make difficult choices, under difficult situations, whose behavior sometimes makes sense and sometimes doesn’t.

Good book discussion books present the author’s view of an important truth and sometimes send a message to the reader.

During a book discussion, what you’re really talking about is everything that the author hasn’t said. For this reason, books that are heavily plot driven (most mysteries, westerns, romances, and science fiction/fantasy) don’t lend themselves to book discussions. In genre novels and some mainstream fiction (and often in nonfiction),

Recommended Reading

from University of Washington
Asian Languages and Literature

The Namesake concerns the immigrant experience of a Bengali Hindu couple, the Gangulis, who move to the U.S. from Kolkata in the Indian state of West Bengal, and their two American-born children, son Gogol, the protagonist of the story, and daughter Sonali. The region, Bengal, comprises two parts: present day Bangladesh and the state of West Bengal in northeastern India. It has a rich literary tradition written in Bangla (also called Bengali).

Among the many great modern Bangla writers, the most important and well known literary figure is the 1913 Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Tagore was a giant who wrote in a wide variety of literary genres, who influenced not only Bangla literature but South Asian literature as a whole. The experiences of transplants from Bengal in adapting to life in the West has been the subject of many works of literature.

Some recommended readings: translations of works by Rabindranath Tagore:
Selected Short Stories. Translated by William Radice (1991)
the author spells out everything for the reader, so that there is little to say except, “I loved the book” or “I hated it” or “Isn’t that interesting.”

(Incidentally, this “everything that the author hasn’t said” idea is why poetry makes such a rich topic for discussion.)

Other good choices for discussions are books that have ambiguous endings, where the outcome of the novel is not clear. For example, there is no consensus about what actually happened in Tim O’Brien’s *In the Lake of the Woods*, Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, or James Buchan’s *The Persian Bride*.

It’s important to remind the group that not every member is going to like every book the group chooses. Everyone may read the same book, but in fact, every member is reading a different book. Everyone brings her own unique history, memories, background, and influences. Everyone is in a different place in his life when he reads the book. All of these differences influence the reader’s experience of a book and why she may like or dislike it.

There are also pairs of books that make good discussions. These can be discussed at one meeting or read and discussed in successive months. Some examples include *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi and *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Truth and Beauty* by Ann Patchett and *Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy, and *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* by Marjane Satrapi.

Finally, there are some books that raise so many questions and issues that you just can’t stop talking about them. These may not be enjoyed by everyone in the group, but they’re bound to lead to spirited discussions: Ernest Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*, Russell Banks’ *The Sweet Hereafter*, and Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*.

For specific recommendations, see Recommended Books for Discussion, http://www.spl.org/default.asp?pageID=collection_readinglists

**How to read a book for a book discussion**

The best books are those that insinuate themselves into your experience; they reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths deepen the reader’s appreciation of the book.

Reading for a book discussion – whether you are the leader or simply a participant – differs from reading purely for pleasure.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work’s value and the discussion potential for your group.

1. **Make notes and mark pages as you go.**

   Ask questions of yourself and mark down pages you might want to refer back to. Making notes as you go slows down your reading but saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

2. **Ask tough questions of yourself and the book.**

   Asking questions of yourself as you read means you don’t know the answer yet, and sometimes you never will discover the answers. Don’t be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose. Look for questions that may lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the book more meaningful.

3. **Analyze the themes of the book.**

   Try to analyze the important themes of a book and to consider what premise the author started with. Imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking himself, “what if … “ questions.

4. **Get to know the characters.**

   When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Are the tone and style of their dialogue authentic? Read portions aloud to get to know the voices of the characters.

5. **Notice the structure of the book.**

   Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are chapters prefaced by quotes? If so, how do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Is it written in flashbacks? Does the order the author chose make sense to you?

6. **Make comparisons to other books and authors.**

   Compare the book to others by the same author, or to books by other authors that have a similar theme or style. Often, themes run through an author’s works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author’s work with another’s can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.
Leading the discussion

Research the author using resources such as Current Biography, Contemporary Authors, and Something About the Author. Find book reviews in Book Review Digest and Book Review Index. The Dictionary of Literary Biography gives biographical and critical material. These resources are probably available at your local library. Reviews of the book, interviews with and biographical information about the author, and questions for discussion can also be found online.

1. Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions. Questions that can be answered "yes" or "no" tend to cut off discussion quickly.

2. Alternatively, ask each member of the group to come with one discussion question. Readers will focus on different aspects of the book, and everyone will gain new insights as a result.

3. Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. Often you'll find that the questions you have prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.

4. Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.

5. Don't be afraid to criticize a book, but try to get beyond the "I just didn't like it" statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that you liked better? Did it remind you of another book that you liked or disliked? Some of the best book discussions center on books that many group members disliked.

6. Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Of course, every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his or her background, upbringing, experiences, and view of the world. A book about a senseless murder will naturally strike a chord in a reader whose friend was killed. That's interesting, but what's more interesting is how the author chose to present the murder, or the author's attitude toward the murderer and victim. It's often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences. If that's what the whole group wants to do, that's fine, but keep in mind that then it's not a book discussion.

Sample questions for your discussion

1. How does the title relate to the book?

2. How believable are the characters? Which characters do you identify with?

3. What themes – motherhood, self-discovery, wilderness, etc. – recur throughout the book? How does the author use these themes?

4. Why do certain characters act the way they act? What motivates a character to do something that she would not normally do? Is there anything that you would call "out of character"?

5. What types of symbolism are in this novel? What do these objects really represent?

6. Think about the broader social issues that this book is trying to address. For example, what does the author think about anarchy versus capitalism as a means of life? How is a particular culture or subculture portrayed? Favorably? Unfavorably?

7. Where could the story go from here? What is the future of these characters' lives?

8. How is the book structured? Flashbacks? From one or multiple points of view? Why do you think the author chose to write the book this way?

9. How does this book relate to other books you have read? Would this book make a good movie? If there is a film adaptation of this book, what is brought out or played down in the film version?

10. What did the author attempt to do in the book? Was it successful?

11. How believable were the plot and subplots? What loose ends, if any, did the author leave?

12. What is the great strength – or most noticeable weakness – of the book?
Seattle Reads

The Washington Center for the Book at The Seattle Public Library invites everyone to take part in “Seattle Reads” (formerly “If All of Seattle Read the Same Book”), a project designed to deepen an appreciation of and engagement in literature through reading and discussion.

Each year the Washington Center for the Book hosts an author for a series of free programs. Prior to the visit, the Library hosts programs, panel discussions, film screenings, and other events around the themes of the featured work. The Library develops background material and study guides (called “reading group toolboxes”) and encourages book groups and individuals throughout the region to read and discuss the featured book.

Featured Works
2004: Seattle Reads Isabel Allende
   City of the Beasts (HarperCollins, 2002)
   Paula (HarperCollins, 1995)
   The Infinite Plan (HarperCollins, 1993)
   The Stories of Eva Luna (Atheneum, 1991)
   Eva Luna (Knopf, 1988)
   The House of the Spirits (Knopf, 1985)
Note: The 2004 series featured seven titles from Allende’s body of work
2002: Wild Life by Molly Gloss (Mariner Books, 2001)
2001: Fooling with Words: A Celebration of Poets and Their Craft by Bill Moyers
   (Morrow, 1999)

Reading Group Toolboxes

Reading group toolboxes are designed to enhance a book group’s discussion of the author's work. Toolboxes are available at all Seattle Public Library locations as well as at many local bookstores. Toolboxes are also available on The Seattle Public Library's web site: www.spl.org.

Books for Book Groups

The Washington Center for the Book at The Seattle Public Library
bookgroups@spl.org
(206) 615-1747

For more information, contact:
Washington Center for the Book
at The Seattle Public Library
1000 Fourth Ave.
Seattle, WA 98104-1109

Chris Higashi, Program Manager
chris.higashi@spl.org
(206) 386-4650

Contributors to this toolbox include Jennifer Baker, Hayden Bass, Jennifer Bisson, Ann Dalton, Susan Fort, Chris Higashi, Linda Johns, Jane Lopez-Santillana, Hannah Parker, Carol Salomon, Misha Stone, and Brenda Tom.

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Jhumpa Lahiri