



The Namesake: A Novel

By Jhumpa Lahiri

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Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* established this young writer as one the most brilliant of her generation. Her stories are one of the very few debut works - - and only a handful of collections -- to have won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Among the many other awards and honors it received were the New Yorker Debut of the Year award, the PEN/Hemingway Award, and the highest critical praise for its grace, acuity, and compassion in detailing lives transported from India to America. In *The Namesake*, Lahiri enriches the themes that made her collection an international bestseller: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the conflicts of assimilation, and, most poignantly, the tangled ties between generations. Here again Lahiri displays her deft touch for the perfect detail -- the fleeting moment, the turn of phrase -- that opens whole worlds of emotion.

The Namesake takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of their arranged wedding, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by training, Ashoke adapts far less warily than his wife, who resists all things American and pines for her family. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world. Named for a Russian writer by his Indian parents in memory of a catastrophe years before, Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name. Lahiri brings great empathy to Gogol as he stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs. With penetrating insight, she reveals not only the defining power of the names and expectations bestowed upon us by our parents, but also the means by which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves. *The New York Times* has praised Lahiri as "a writer of uncommon elegance and poise." *The Namesake* is a fine-tuned, intimate, and deeply felt novel of identity.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Any talk of *The Namesake*--Jhumpa Lahiri's follow-up to her Pulitzer Prize-winning debut, *Interpreter of Maladies*--must begin with a name: Gogol Ganguli. Born to an Indian academic and his wife, Gogol is afflicted from birth with a name that is neither Indian nor American nor even really a first name at all. He is given the name by his father who, before he came to America to study at MIT, was almost killed in a train wreck in India. Rescuers caught sight of the volume of Nikolai Gogol's short stories that he held, and hauled him from the train. Ashoke gives his American-born son the name as a kind of placeholder, and the awkward thing sticks.

Awkwardness is Gogol's birthright. He grows up a bright American boy, goes to Yale, has pretty girlfriends, becomes a successful architect, but like many second-generation immigrants, he can never quite find his place in the world. There's a lovely section where he dates a wealthy, cultured young Manhattan woman who lives with her charming parents. They fold Gogol into their easy, elegant life, but even here he can find no peace and he breaks off the relationship. His mother finally sets him up on a blind date with the daughter of a Bengali friend, and Gogol thinks he has found his match. Moushumi, like Gogol, is at odds with the Indian-American world she inhabits. She has found, however, a circuitous escape: "At Brown, her rebellion had been academic ... she'd pursued a double major in French. Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge--she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind." Lahiri documents these quiet rebellions and random longings with great sensitivity. There's no cleverness or showing-off in *The Namesake*, just beautifully confident storytelling. Gogol's story is neither comedy nor tragedy; it's simply that ordinary, hard-to-get-down-on-paper commodity: real life. --*Claire Dederer*

From Publishers Weekly

This recording features a spare, elegant reading by Choudhury of a story about identity, cultural assimilation and the burden of the past. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli move from Calcutta to Cambridge, Mass., where they have a son who ends up being tagged with the strange name of Gogol. How he gets the name serves as an important theme as he deals with it and his heritage. The fact that Choudhury herself is half Indian aids her narration, as characters with that country's accent abound here. But much more important to this project is her lovely, mellifluous voice and even tone, which complements the text's own lush imagery. Perhaps owing to her English pronunciation, she is also adept at putting a polished spin on the voices of the upper-crust Manhattanites with whom Gogol becomes intertwined for a while. With such an excellent narrator, the recording neither needs nor includes much in the way of musical embellishment. The book itself makes several jumps in time and occasionally seems disjointed, but this production is a treat for the sheer combination of Lahiri's striking, often enchanting descriptions and Choudhury's graceful rendering of them. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From School Library Journal

Adult/High School--A novel about assimilation and generational differences. Gogol is so named because his father believes that sitting up in a sleeping car reading Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" saved him when the train he was on derailed and most passengers perished. After his arranged marriage, the man and his wife leave India for America, where he eventually becomes a professor. They adopt American ways, yet all of their friends are Bengalis. But for young Gogol and his sister, Boston is home, and trips to Calcutta to visit relatives are voyages to a foreign land. He finds his strange name a constant irritant, and eventually he changes it to Nikhil. When he is a senior at Yale, his father finally tells him the story of his name. Moving to

New York to work as an architect, he meets Maxine, his first real love, but they separate after his father dies. Later, his mother reintroduces him to a Bengali woman, and they fall in love and marry, but their union does not last. The tale comes full circle when the protagonist, home for a Bengali Christmas, rediscovers his father's gift of Gogol's short stories. This novel will attract not just teens of other cultures, but also readers struggling with the challenges of growing up and tugging at family ties.

Molly Connally, Chantilly Regional Library, VA

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Users Review

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