



## Interpreter of Maladies

By Jhumpa Lahiri

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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.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Mr. Kapasi, the protagonist of Jhumpa Lahiri's title story, would certainly have his work cut out for him if he were forced to interpret the maladies of all the characters in this eloquent debut collection. Take, for example, Shoba and Shukumar, the young couple in "A Temporary Matter" whose marriage is crumbling in the wake of a stillborn child. Or Miranda in "Sexy," who is involved in a hopeless affair with a married man. But Mr. Kapasi has problems enough of his own; in addition to his regular job working as an interpreter for a doctor who does not speak his patients' language, he also drives tourists to local sites of interest. His fare on this particular day is Mr. and Mrs. Das--first-generation Americans of Indian descent--and their children. During the course of the afternoon, Mr. Kapasi becomes enamored of Mrs. Das and then becomes her unwilling confidant when she reads too much into his profession. "I told you because of your talents," she informs him after divulging a startling secret.

I'm tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better; say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy.

Of course, Mr. Kapasi has no cure for what ails Mrs. Das--or himself. Lahiri's subtle, bittersweet ending is characteristic of the collection as a whole. Some of these nine tales are set in India, others in the United States, and most concern characters of Indian heritage. Yet the situations Lahiri's people face, from unhappy marriages to civil war, transcend ethnicity. As the narrator of the last story, "The Third and Final Continent," comments: "There are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept." In that single line Jhumpa Lahiri sums up a universal experience, one that applies to all who have grown up, left home, fallen in or out of love, and, above all, experienced what it means to be a foreigner, even within one's own family. --Alix Wilber

#### From Publishers Weekly

The rituals of traditional Indian domesticity—curry-making, hair-vermilioning, both buttress the characters of Lahiri's elegant first collection and mark the measure of these fragile people's dissolution. Frequently finding themselves in Cambridge, Mass., or similar but unnamed Eastern seaboard university towns, Lahiri's characters suffer on an intimate level the dislocation and disruption brought on by India's tumultuous political history. Displaced to the States by her husband's appointment as a professor of mathematics, Mrs. Sen (in the same-named story) leaves her expensive and extensive collection of saris folded neatly in the drawer. The two things that sustain her, as the little boy she looks after every afternoon notices, are aerograms from home, written by family members who so deeply misunderstand the nature of her life that they envy her and the fresh fish she buys to remind her of Calcutta. The arranged marriage of "This Blessed House" mismatches the conservative, self-conscious Sanjeev with ebullient, dramatic Twinkle, a smoker and drinker who wears leopard-print high heels and takes joy in the plastic Christian paraphernalia she discovers in their new house. In "A Real Durwan," the middle-class occupants of a tenement in post-partition Calcutta tolerate the rantings of the stair-sweeper Boori Ma. Delusions of grandeur and lament for what she's lost—"such comforts you cannot even dream them"—give her an odd, Chekhovian charm but ultimately do not convince her bourgeois audience that she is a desirable fixture in their up-and-coming property. Lahiri's touch in these nine tales is delicate, but her observations remain damningly accurate, and her bittersweet stories are unhampered by nostalgia. Foreign rights sold in England, France and Germany; author tour.

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### From [Booklist](#)

The past few years have seen a number of fine writers springing from India--some living on the subcontinent and others, like the author of this collection of stories, who live elsewhere but whose work is still imbued with Indian culture and sensibilities. In varying degrees, Lahiri explores "Indianness" in all her stories, wherever they are set. Some, such as "A Real Durwan," take place in urban settings in or near Calcutta. Others deal with immigrants at different stages on the road to assimilation. In "A Temporary Matter," Lahiri's sensitive and subtle portrayal of a troubled marriage, the fact that the couple is Indian seems almost incidental. In the title story, Mr. and Mrs. Das, both born in America, are taking their children to visit India for the first time. One of Lahiri's gifts is the ability to use different eyes and voices. Readers who enjoy these stories should also appreciate the work of Bharati Mukherjee and G. S. Sharat Chandra's collection *Sari of the Gods*, which was published last year. *Mary Ellen Quinn*

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##### **Karen Taylor:**

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