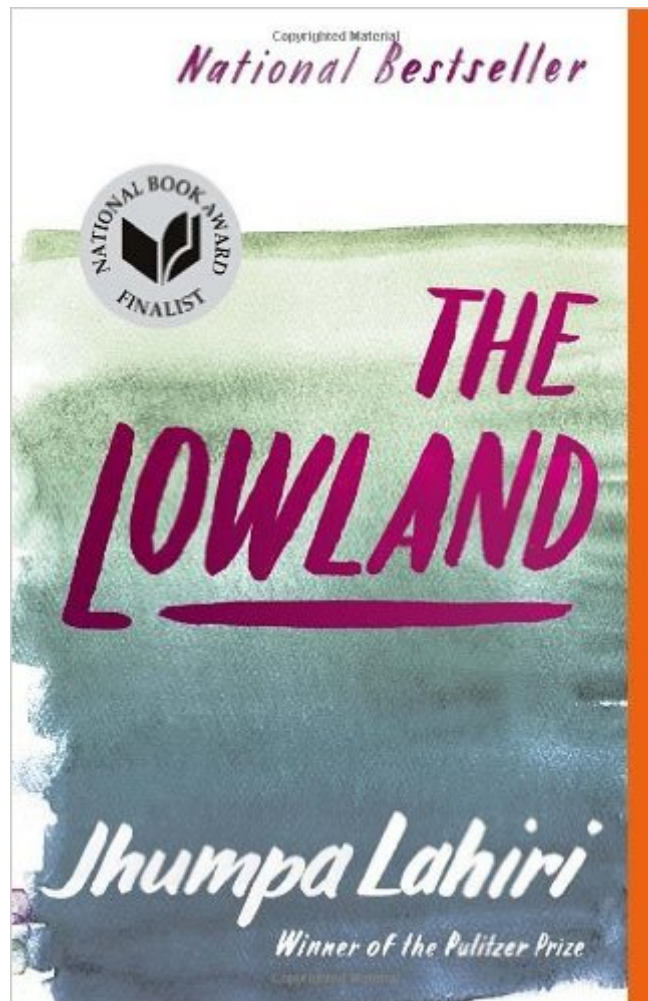


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The Lowland (Vintage Contemporaries)



Synopsis

A New York Times Book Review "Notable Book" • A Time Top Fiction Book • An NPR "Great Read" • A Chicago Tribune Best Book • A USA Today Best Book • A People magazine Top 10 Book • A Barnes and Noble Best New Book • A Good Reads Best Book • A Kirkus Best Fiction Book • A Slate Favorite Book • A Christian Science Monitor Best Fiction Book • An Apple Top 10 Book National Book Award Finalist and shortlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize

The Lowland is an engrossing family saga steeped in history: the story of two very different brothers bound by tragedy, a fiercely brilliant woman haunted by her past, a country torn apart by revolution, and a love that endures long past death. Moving from the 1960s to the present, and from India to America and across generations, this dazzling novel is Jhumpa Lahiri at the height of her considerable powers.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

First let me say that Jhumpa Lahiri is my goddess of literature. I read a lot - maybe 75 books a year - and I have rarely fallen under the spell of a book the way I did with Interpreter of Maladies. Her follow-up collection of short stories, Unaccustomed Earth, was also an unqualified 5-star success. So I was dying to get my hands on her new novel, The Lowland. I read through it eagerly but I closed the last page with mixed feelings. Let's start with the good: Ms. Lahiri is a natural-born storyteller. In this book, she introduces two brothers, close in age who are poles apart - Udayan, the revolutionary brother who gets caught up in the Mao-inspired Naxalite movement to wipe out

poverty in India and his more reserved and dutiful brother, Subhash, who leaves home to pursue an academic and scientific life in Rhode Island. When Udayan inevitably gets swept into a revolutionary movement that turns out badly, Subhash returns home -briefly - and picks up the pieces, including an attempt to heal the emotional scars of his brother's young wife. As the plot goes on - and it is not my desire to encapsulate the plot or to create spoilers - about 70 years of family history is condensed into a mere 340 pages. Themes play out and then they play out again: the connections that make and break us, the intertwining to people we cannot truly see or know, the way we are defined by the place we call "home", the quiet differences we make in the world. It's all wound up in the history of India and indeed, Ms. Lahiri is at her very finest when she's describing Indian customs or lifestyles as only an insider can. There's some lovely craftsmanship here, not bells and whistles, but quiet and contemplative -- even shimmering - moments. The problem is, I never found it to be very compelling. Because of all the years and generations (four of them) that Ms. Lahiri has to cover, she can only provide sketches of her characters. And they never truly come alive. Yes, Udayan is the fiery revolutionary...but what made him so and why was he willing to sacrifice so much (the headiness of youth and a sense of fairness should only be the beginning). His wife, Guari, who eventually bonds with Subhash, was an enigma to be throughout. She is a distanced character, and her actions begin to feel somewhat predictable; the reader is never treated to her resonance and depth. And Bela, her daughter, is only revealed in limited emotional scope. A novel, unlike a short story, demands a considerable emotional tension, a multi-textured richness that makes characters leap off the page. I never really sensed the two-dimensionality, possibly because the story line was multi-generational and ambitious. The litmus test of whether or not you will love this book is this: if you loved *Namesake*, this is definitely a book for you, since stylistically, there are similarities. If you are, instead, a fan of her short stories, you may or may not be engaged. Judge for yourself.

One of the subjects of Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel is the relationship between historical and personal time, the way single lives can encompass remarkably different places and eras, the persistence of the past. It spans two continents and more than fifty years in the lives of several characters. As such, it's a difficult book to review without at least hinting at certain plot details that readers might like to discover for themselves. So those who want to experience the book with little or no sense of what happens should stop at the end of this paragraph for fear of SPOILERS. For them, and for those who prefer brief reviews, the next couple sentences will have to suffice. *THE LOWLAND* is an impressive, frequently moving novel, treating with quiet realism events that could

easily have degenerated into melodrama. It expresses with new force the journey from mid-twentieth century India to contemporary America that has been a consistent feature of Lahiri's fiction, reminding us that for all the distance between here and there, then and now, these worlds are linked by those who have lived, loved, and suffered in both. The title refers to a piece of land between two ponds in the neighborhood where Subhash and Udayan grow up, a space that floods every year during monsoon season and slowly drains. Subhash is the elder by fifteen months, but Udayan is more adventurous and more ambitious, the driving force, for example, behind their childhood scheme to sneak into an exclusive country club whose British amenities offer a sharp contrast to the rest of their Calcutta life. As the brothers reach adulthood, Subhash decides to travel to the United States for an education, while Udayan is drawn toward the Naxalites, a militant Communist movement. But despite diverging paths, they remain loyal to each other, even when Udayan goes against tradition by selecting his own wife, a girl named Gauri. And when the lowland becomes the site of sudden tragedy, Subhash makes a decision that will alter the family's lives forever. That decision is intended to put the past behind them. But of course the past is not so easily escaped. There are losses from which some of us, like Subhash's and Udayan's mother, cannot recover. Even decades later, when Subhash and Gauri are elderly professionals living what seem like ordinary American lives, when the world they knew has become fodder for historical analyses by their fellow academics, they are still haunted at times by what has been taken from them, and by the choices that resulted. Subhash remains reserved, hesitant, forever moving in the shadow of his more outgoing younger brother. Gauri is still fleeing what she saw and did in Calcutta in the 1970s. Another of the novel's characters, Bela, first appears as a child, and in her toddler's mind "yesterday" means any part of the past, even if it was years ago. In emotional terms, she's not wrong-- forty years ago might as well be yesterday, if what's being remembered matters enough. Our minds are like the lowland, quick to flood but slow to drain. We suffer, we cause suffering, we regret... and yet we go on. It's that simple truth of human endurance that makes *THE LOWLAND* so effective in its reserved way. There are no verbal pyrotechnics here, no straining for effect, only an account of what is done and why, with occasional description of the ways in which the physical world reflects or mocks the emotions of the moment. It's more than enough. Lahiri doesn't need to go to great, unnatural lengths to exoticize India; the juxtaposition of Gauri's life as a young wife and daughter-in-law in Calcutta with her distinguished middle age as a philosophy professor speaks for itself. So too does the passage where a visiting Bela is drawn to that country club, but not because it is unlike her (American) home; instead, it is familiar. Lahiri tracks political, social, and technological evolution and difference across decades and nations, yet her characters remain recognizable

despite great variation in circumstance. The simple acknowledgment of external change and internal continuity is true to life, subtly tragic, but not without a sense of hope. We cannot escape what we've done, what's been done to us, but perhaps we can survive it. Even when we don't necessarily deserve to. One of the novel's key features is its portrait of emotional ruthlessness, which is the darker side of endurance. You might think that someone who does what Gauri does, sees what Gauri sees, would be-- would deserve to be-- swallowed by her regrets, and yet she isn't. Too often even nominally complex literary fiction is inclined to minimize its characters' failings, or to offer trite narratives of repentance and forgiveness. Lahiri isn't interested in that. In a key scene one character toys with the kind of dramatic gesture less worthwhile fiction would turn to, before proving too human to be capable of it. In their morality as in the overall arc of their lives, her characters are credible, complicated, forever pulling themselves forward and being drawn backward. This conflict between old and new is one of fiction's timeless themes, and THE LOWLAND gracefully reinvigorates it by tying it to a specific historical moment in which the contrast between the two was especially striking, and poignant.

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