

Rohinton Mistry

Biography



Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, on July 3, 1952. A member of the Parsi religious community in India, he completed an undergraduate degree in mathematics and economics at the University of Bombay. In 1975 he moved to Canada, where he lived in Toronto and worked for a bank. Mistry eventually returned to university, finishing a degree in English and philosophy in 1984 at the University of Toronto. It was while he was a university student in Canada that he began to write and publish fiction. His first two published short stories won the Hart House Literary Prize (1983 and 1984), and another story won the *Canadian Fiction Magazine* contributor's prize in 1985. Those three stories, with eight others, became his first book, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987). This collection of linked short stories concerns the inhabitants of an apartment compound in Bombay. One of the stories, "Squatter," consists of tall tales told by the compound's local storyteller; one tale concerns Savukshaw, a heroic cricket player and tiger hunter, and the other concerns Sarosh, a Parsi who immigrates to Canada but returns to India when he cannot learn how to use a Western toilet. In another story, "Swimming Lessons," a young man connects the residents of his Canadian apartment to the family and residents in the Bombay apartment he has left behind.

Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), brought him national and international recognition. The book concerns an ordinary man who becomes involved in the politics surrounding the Bangladesh separatist movement in India and Pakistan. In Canada the book won the Governor General's Award for Fiction and the W.H. Smith *Books in Canada* First Novel Award. It also won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book and was a finalist for Britain's Booker

Prize. In 1998 *Such a Long Journey* was made into a feature film by Sooni Taraporevala (screenplay) and Sturla Gunnarsson (director).

Mistry's subsequent novels have achieved the same level of recognition as his first. His second novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995), concerns four people from Bombay who struggle with family and work against the backdrop of the political unrest in India during the mid-1970s. The book won Canada's Giller Prize, the Commonwealth Writers Award, and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. It was nominated for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and was a finalist for the Booker Prize.

Family Matters (2002) won the Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize for Fiction, the Canadian Authors Association's MOSAID Technologies Inc. Award for Fiction, and the regional Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book; it was nominated for the Booker Prize and shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. *Family Matters* describes the members of a blended family who are trying to cope with the failing health of their father. In the meantime, the father relives his past, a past beset by thwarted love and crushing social strictures.

Mistry's fiction deploys a precise writing style and a sensitivity to the humour and horror of life to communicate deep compassion for human beings. His writing concerns people who try to find self-worth while dealing with painful family dynamics and difficult social and political constraints. His work also addresses immigration, especially immigration to Canada, and the difficulty immigrants face in a society that recognizes their cultural differences and yet cannot embrace those differences as being part of itself.

Family Matters was published in 2002 and won the Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize, amongst many other honours. The story is set, again, in Bombay and focuses on the past and present life of a retired professor, Nariman Vakeel, and his difficult, complicated familial relationships. Like Mistry's other works, the novel has been praised by reviewers for both its intimate portrayals of individuals and its universal, sweeping themes and concerns. Mistry consistently demonstrates in his fiction that he is a writer who is able to produce both the sharply focused close-ups and broad landscapes of humanity.

Rohinton Mistry was a finalist for the 2011 Man Booker International Prize, which recognizes an author's entire body of work. In October 2011 Mistry was awarded the 2012 Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

Summary

Family Matters is a contemporary 2002 novel by Indian-born Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry. Mistry tells the story of the personal struggles of a Parsi family living in Mumbai, India. Through the lives of this family, Mistry also explores the larger issues that Parsi people face. Parsis are part of a Zoroastrian community that settled in India from modern-day Iran sometime around the 10th century. Mistry is from the Parsi community himself, and was forced to cancel his book tour in the United States after he and his wife became a target for the TSA at American airports.

The plot centers around Nariman Vakeel and his family. Nariman lives with his stepchildren, Jal and Coomy, in an apartment inside Chateau Felicity. His wife, Yasmin, has died some years before. Nariman's daughter, Roxana, is married and lives with her husband Yezad and their children, Murad and Jehangir.

Nariman is about to celebrate his 79th birthday, and his stepdaughter Coomy is planning a party for him. Nariman heads out for his evening walk, despite Coomy's concerns that he might fall. He has been displaying some early signs of Parkinson's disease, and she fears his balance and coordination are at risk. He comes home after falling in a ditch, a little bruised but otherwise fine. Coomy tries to get him to agree to stop going on his nightly walks, but he refuses.

After the party, Nariman goes on another walk and suffers another fall, this time breaking his ankle. Jal and Coomy rush him to the Parsi General Hospital. The doctor, Tarapore, sets his ankle and puts it in a cast. A few days later, Nariman is able to return to the apartment. Coomy gets him a portable commode for his bedroom, but he has trouble using it because he's having difficulty moving around. Coomy replaces the commode with a bedpan and urinal, but Nariman is still struggling.

Coomy is frustrated with having to clean up after her stepfather and begins to complain loudly and often. Both stepchildren have long seen Nariman as little more than a burden. Coomy, in particular, resents him for the way he treated their mother, and now there is an excuse to be rid of him. They are actually the apartment's owners: they have talked Nariman into signing it over to them, a move

he later likens to King Lear dividing his kingdom among his two ungrateful daughters. Finally, Coomy tells Jal they need to bring him to Roxana so she can take care of him instead.

Nariman doesn't want to leave his home, but he agrees to go to Roxana's if his stepchildren get her permission. But Coomy and Jal haven't even told Roxana about Nariman's broken ankle yet, and they aren't interested in her permission. They take Nariman to his daughter's house anyway, where Roxana has no choice but to take him in.

Roxana's own apartment is cramped already with her husband and two sons, but they assume that Nariman will only need to stay for three weeks, so they make concessions. Yezad and Murad are not pleased, but Jehangir is happy to help take care of Nariman. Nariman has troubled dreams of his first love, a non-Parsi woman named Lucy. His family forbade him to marry outside his religion, and so rather than go against their wishes he married a suitable Parsi widow, Yasmin, whom he did not love.

Money becomes tight for Roxana's family after Nariman moves in. Yezad turns to participation in an illegal lottery in the hopes of getting extra cash, but loses money instead. Hope comes when Yezad's boss at the Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium contemplates running for office, which would mean more responsibility and higher pay for Yezad down the road. However, Yezad's boss decides not to run when his wife objects to his ambitions.

Desperate, Yezad hatches a scheme to con his boss out of a large amount of money by falsely reporting a threat from Shiv Sainik, a far-right Indian political party, but the plan is botched and Yezad's boss is killed. Then, his widow shuts down the emporium, leaving Yezad unemployed.

Coomy does not want Nariman returned to the apartment in Chateau Felicity and decides to sabotage the place so he can't live in it. She knocks out the plaster ceilings and makes up a story about damage from a flood. However, when Coomy and a helpful neighbor work to repair the ceiling, her scheme turns on her when a ceiling beam slides off its supports, killing both Coomy and her neighbor.

After Coomy dies, a guilt-stricken Jal offers to let Roxana and her family move in at the Chateau Felicity apartment. At last, Nariman is able to return to his home.

The story concludes in an epilogue that takes place five years later. Nariman is still confined to his bed; his ankle has healed long ago, but his Parkinson's disease is now advanced. He is unable to care for himself, and Roxana has hired a full-time nurse for him, though she feels guilty for not being his full-time caretaker herself. Yezad has found religion; he once was not a religious man but is now a Zoroastrian. He forbids Murad from dating a non-Parsi woman, just as Nariman was once forbidden to do the same.

The book received mixed reviews, with the *Guardian* noting its "odd" ending that the reviewer speculates might have benefited from additional revision, while *Publisher's Weekly* described the narrative as "warm, tender, and bittersweet." *Family Matters* was nonetheless shortlisted for that year's Man Booker Prize, James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Mistry later returned to writing about Parsi culture and religion in 2008 with the short story "The Scream."

Analysis

A quarter of the way through *Family Matters*, Yezad divides the Indian authors who write about Partition into two camps. On the one hand are the "realist novels of corpse-filled trains"; on the other, the "magic-realist midnight muddles". Mistry belongs to the first camp and, unlike the magical realist, he focuses on the grimy modern city rather than the exotic countryside. But this is modern India, so instead of corpse-filled trains he gives us overcrowded carriages.

Yezad, hanging on to an overhead railing, reveals how his "dream for an end to this apeman commute had led him to apply for immigration to Canada. He wanted clean cities, clean air, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone." His application is rejected so he is confined to Bombay with its "14 million people, half of them living in slums, eating and shitting in places not fit for animals."

Besides poverty, Mistry focuses on political corruption and religious divides. Hussain, a Muslim peon at the Bombay Sporting Emporium, tells how, during communal riots, "the police were behaving like gangsters... Firing bullets like target practice."

The emotional centre is Nariman, a Parsi widower. He is beset by Parkinson's disease and becomes bedridden. His stepchildren, Jal and Coomy, send him to live with Roxana, his natural daughter, and her family, in their tiny two-room flat – the flat Nariman spent his savings on so they might have "a place of their own".

Things start to fall apart for Roxana's family as soon as Nariman moves in. The money from his pension doesn't cover the cost of his medicines and, with an extra mouth to feed, they soon run into financial problems. The youngest son, Jehangir, starts accepting bribes as homework monitor at school and slipping the money into his mother's food envelopes. Yezad – Roxana's husband – gambles away the food money in an attempt to solve their difficulties. He then hatches an elaborate scam to secure a promotion and pay rise.

Family Matters is about the struggle to maintain integrity and honesty in the face of economic hardship. In the end, Mistry's characters pull through, but not unscathed. Yezad's scheme goes disastrously wrong: his boss is murdered and he ends up unemployed. Coomy dies in an accident, so Roxana and family move into the larger apartment with Jal. Their money worries are over but life is never the same again. Yezad turns to religion and becomes fanatical and tyrannical.

As the novel progresses, Nariman becomes increasingly silent. Towards the end, he's shut away from the family in his old room, with the ayah. He finally dies of his disease and his family mourn him at the Tower of Silence. Nariman becomes a Lear figure, cast out of his home by his elder daughter, who turns for support to his youngest daughter. But Nariman's collapsing body, the stench he makes as he relieves himself, his overgrown nails and beard, the old-man smell, also represents modern Bombay. Yezad and Mr Kapur share "a lament for the city they felt was

slowly dying", being destroyed, "as the newspapers put it, 'in an unholy nexus of politicians, criminals and police'."

The form of *Family Matters*, with its big, linear narrative, recalls 19th-century novels; there's an element of post-imperial nostalgia. While Yezad hates the fact his children read Enid Blyton, he is obsessed with the photographs Mr Kapur brings of 1930s "European" Bombay. Kapur makes Yezad a gift of the prints of Hughes road but after his death his wife reclaims them. The romantic city images are finally lost.

Although large and ambitious in scope, *Family Matters* is not a baggy monster. The constant return to the tiny flat and its focus on interior lives makes for a tight, well-contained narrative. Ultimately, the novel's main achievement rests with character; Mistry never allows the writing to draw attention to itself. His creations are all equipped with longings, desires and, above all, resilience. The epilogue, narrated by the adolescent Jehangir, provides a stunning end. Roxana asks, "What is it Jehangoo? Aren't you happy?" And in the middle of the corrupt city, following scenes of family squabbling, he answers, "Yes, I'm happy."