Rohinton Mistry
1952-

E-Book

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"Sidelights"

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian writer whose work has been compared with that of writers ranging from master Victorian novelist Charles Dickens to controversial contemporary storyteller Salman Rushdie. Robert A. Morace, writing in Contemporary Novelists, observed that Mistry's "literary precursors" include James Joyce, Bernard Malamud, and Saul Bellow, and noted Mistry's work has also been "favorably . . . compared to the work of the best known and most respected contemporary Indian writers." Atlantic Monthly contributor Brooke Allen went beyond that comparison, noting, "Rohinton Mistry is not a household name, but it should be. The fifty-year old Toronto resident, originally from Bombay, has long been recognized as one of the best Indian writers; he ought to be considered simply one of the best writers, Indian or otherwise, now alive." An Economist contributor stated Mistry's novels "put the old fictional virtues of attention and compassion back at the centre of their enterprise. What they lack in formal invention, magical realism or fashionable exoticism is made up for by an unblinking gaze and microscopic powers of observation and recall."

Born in 1952 in Bombay, India, Mistry was raised in what Val Ross, writing in the Toronto Globe and Mail, described as "the classical British Empire traditions." In 1974 Mistry completed studies for a degree in mathematics from the University of Bombay. The following year he and his wife immigrated to Canada and settled in Toronto. He eventually entered the university there as well, and in 1984 he obtained his second degree, a baccalaureate in literature and philosophy. He then determined to pursue a career as a writer.

In 1987 Mistry published Tales from Firozsha Baag in Canada. As Nancy Wigston reported in Toronto Globe and Mail, this collection of stories "is a series of episodes all taking place in a semi-
decrepit apartment complex in Bombay." The inhabitants of the Firozsha Baag housing complex are predominantly Parsi, an Indian subculture, and their lives are significantly intertwined. As a result, the story of one tenant may overlap another's tale, with key incidents reiterated by various characters as time passes. Among the stories in the collection are "Auspicious Occasion," about a middle-aged couple, in which old world Parsi values come up against the tide of change on a high holy day, forcing the husband to reassess his self-image; "Condolence Visit," in which a widow violates decorum and bestows one of her late husband's artifacts upon a young man in need; and "Paying Guests," where perplexing, mentally unbalanced tenants defy their meek landlord's efforts to displace them. In the volume's final episode, "Swimming Lessons," one of the children mentioned early in the book has grown to adulthood and emigrated to Canada. Now an author, the young man intermittently reminisces about his childhood while also imagining his parents, still in Bombay, reading a book he has written. In these recollections, the characters and stories from Firozsha Baag are tied together and revealed not only as individual episodes but as parts of a larger story of a Parsi community.

Upon publication, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* earned Mistry significant attention from reviewers. In the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, Wigston called Mistry an "extraordinarily talented young writer," and *Maclean's* reviewer Alberto Manguel commented, "every story in the collection is finely crafted." Keith Garebian wrote in *Canadian Forum* that Mistry "has given Indo-Anglian literature its first significant collection of short stories that expresses the Parsi sensibility." And *Canadian Literature* reviewer Amin Malak called *Tales from Firozsha Baag* "an impressive collection" and wrote that Mistry's literary debut "shows brilliance and promise." Malak stated, "Canadian literature has gained a fresh and distinctive voice" and added, "Rohinton Mistry is a writer to watch and welcome."

Further praise came for Mistry in 1989 when *Tales from Firozsha Baag* was published in the United States as *Swimming Lessons*, and *Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. In *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, Janette Turner Hospital noted Mistry writes "with intelligence, compassion, wit, and memorable flair." Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* thought *Swimming Lessons* a "fine new collection," acknowledged the author's skill in creating "a world and a time," and compared the volume to both R. K. Narayan's Malgudi books and James Joyce's *Dubliners*. Another critic, Hope Cooke, noted in the *New York Times Book Review* that Mistry's "ability through antic humor and compassion to make the repellent--or, at the very least, sad--story material . . . life-affirming, even ebullient, is astonishing given the horrifyingly stunted lives he depicts."

In 1991 Mistry published his first novel, *Such a Long Journey*, in which a humble bank clerk realizes tragic consequences after he becomes involved in political intrigue. The novel's hero is Gustad Noble, a Bombay patriarch whose mundane existence is irrevocably changed when he grants a friend's favor and consequently finds himself drawn into a covert Indian intelligence operation involving the diversion of government funds. Gustad believes that he is aiding insurgents in East Pakistan, who eventually secede to form the independent state of Bangladesh. But as he becomes more involved he learns he has been an unwitting pawn in a scheme he cannot fathom. By the end of *Such a Long Journey*, Gustad comes to believe the Indian government, under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, possesses immeasurable capacity for manipulation and duplicity. Furthermore, he is devastated by the realization that he has no control over his fate; his greatest source of devastation is his belief that his life is an element controlled by other forces.

With *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry won such prizes as Canada's Governor General's Award for fiction, and he received further praise from critics. David Ray stated in the *New York Times Book Review* that "Mistry's is a strong voice, and a welcome one," while Richard Eder, writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, thought *Such a Long Journey* "authentically Dickensian" and affirmed that the novel's "major characters and some of its minor ones are unforgettable and deeply and broadly moving." *Globe and Mail* reviewer Clark Blaise questioned some of the novel's politics, but he concluded that *Such a Long Journey* proves "a complex and rather alien narrative, eventually
rewarding and occasionally moving." And New Statesman and Society reviewer Lucasta Miller observed that Such a Long Journey is "fluent, pithy and unclogged by artifice," characterizing the novel as "both utterly unpretentious and brilliantly perceptive." Maclean's reviewer Victor Dwyer thought Mistry's novel "a rewarding literary excursion," while Phoebe-Lou Adams, writing in Atlantic Monthly, described Such a Long Journey as "lavishly entertaining." Further praise came from Time critic Pico Iyer, who noted Mistry's ability to render "the warm commotion of Bombay as sad as the death of the man next door," and Publishers Weekly critic Sybil Steinberg, who felt that with Such a Long Journey Mistry provides "an exotic feast."

Mistry followed Such a Long Journey with A Fine Balance: A Novel, which traces the lives of four Indians in the mid-1970s. The principal characters are Dina Dalal, a middle-aged widow, and her three boarders: Manick Kohlah, a student; Ishvar Darji, a tailor; and Omprakash, Darji's nephew. Set in Bombay in 1975 and 1976 during the period immediately preceding the state of emergency called by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to save her government, the novel intertwines the stories of the four main characters, along with many others, painting a broad tapestry of Indian life of the time. An Economist reviewer explained how "The history of these four, their struggles to survive grabbing landlords, corrupt bureaucrats, savage policeman and cynical governments form the substance of the book." The Economist reviewer further called A Fine Balance Mistry's "masterpiece" and "magnificent." Time reviewer Pico Iyer felt A Fine Balance was "monumental" and concluded that "no reader who finishes [the novel] will look at the poor--in any street--in quite the same way again." A Publishers Weekly critic praised the novel as "quietly magnificent." Morace, writing in Contemporary Novelists, commented that A Fine Balance was "by far the author's most ambitious novel to date," and that it was both "Russhild-like in scope [and] Dickensian in approach." For Morace, the novel is an "epic of physical violence and economic exploitation." Writing in the Spectator, Lee Langley commented on the "huge, Tolstoyan background" of the novel, against which "lives were destroyed in divers ways: accident, amputation, castration, violent death." Langley found the characters in A Fine Balance "[h]eartrending, tragic, [with]. . .a wild, Beckett-like humour; astride the grave, they get in the odd laugh."

With his 2002 novel, Family Matters, Mistry again returns to the familiar ground of Bombay for setting, but this time, according to Langley, in a story with a "narrower focus." In the novel, Nariman, a Parsi widower of seventy-nine, lives with his stepson and stepdaughter. Diagnosed with Parkinson's, he tries valiantly to retain a semblance of independence in his life. When he goes for a walk alone, however, he falls, fractures an ankle and becomes an invalid, his leg in a cast. His stepdaughter, Coomy, who blames Nariman for her mother's death, complains that she cannot take care of him, and ultimately banishes him from his own spacious apartment--which she and her brother share with him--to live with his daughter, Roxana, in a flat that is already cramped without his addition. "Mistry gives us the minutiae of everyday suffering," according to Langley, from making food stretch on a poverty budget to the difficulties of cleaning and caring for a bedridden older person. Soon the gentle Nariman is drifting in and out of time, recalling his great love from his youth, the Goan girl Lucy whom his parents forbade him to marry because she was not a Parsi. He also remembers Yasmin, a widow with two children, and his subsequent arranged marriage, which "blights the family for decades," according to Allen. When Nariman is cogent he shares his love of English literature with his son-in-law, but these last months of the old man's life reveal the costs of unbending traditionalism and religious bigotry.

"Mr. Mistry's prose style is as clear as a pane of newly-polished glass," wrote the Economist critic, in praise of a novel that won acclaim from many quarters. Writing in Chatelaine, Bonnie Schiedel noted that Mistry's "poor characters never get a break, everything is unfair--yet his stories are surprisingly uplifting," and such is also the case with Family Matters. As the patriarch declines, the best and the worst is brought out in the people near and dear to him, and laughter is never far from the tears. "This is extraordinary writing," stated Charles Foran in Time International, "tender and wise, stripped of the unessential. Its power rivals those apocalyptic scenes in A Fine Balance and is all the more impressive given the intimate scale." A Publishers Weekly contributor
found the novel "[w]arm, human, tender and bittersweet," despite the themes of poverty and religious intolerance. "This beautifully paced, elegantly expressed novel is notable for the breadth of its vision as well as its immensely appealing characters and enticing plotting," added the same reviewer.

Allen concluded in the Atlantic Monthly that "[m]ajor writers differ from minor ones, even great minor ones, in their ability to handle the big questions: death, family, the passing of time, the inevitability of loss, God or the corresponding God-shaped hole. Mistry handles all of them in an accomplished style entirely his own."

PERSONAL INFORMATION


AWARDS


CAREER

Worked in a bank in Toronto, Ontario, Canada; writer, 1985--.

WRITINGS:

- Tales from Firozsha Baag (stories), Penguin (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1987, published as Swimming Lessons, and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1989.

Author's writings have been translated into German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Japanese.

including Antigonish Review, Canadian Fiction, Canadian Forum, Fiddlehead, Malahat Review, Quarry, and Toronto South Asian Review.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

A Fine Balance was the basis of a 1998 film by the same title. Author's works have been adapted for audiocassette.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 71, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1992, pp. 265-276.


PERIODICALS


- Canadian Literature, winter, 1989, Amin Malak, review of Tales from Firozsha Baag, pp. 101-03; spring, 1992, pp. 4-5.


• *English Journal*, February, 1997, p. 94.


