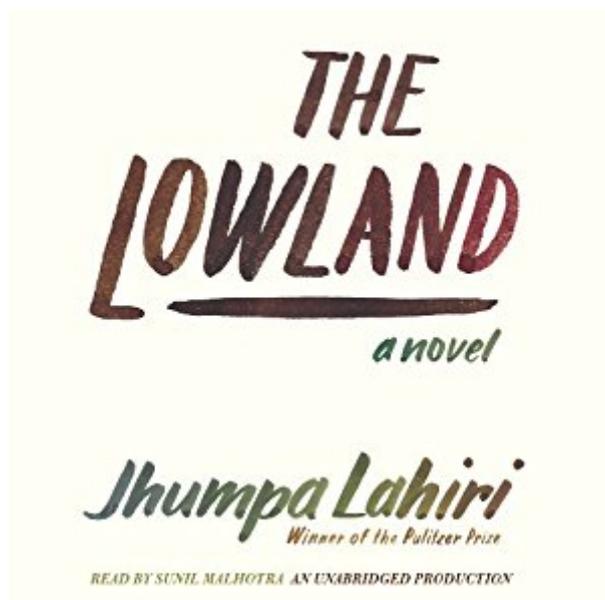


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The Lowland



Synopsis

From the Pulitzer Prize-winning, best-selling author of *The Namesake* comes an extraordinary new novel, set in both India and America, that expands the scope and range of one of our most dazzling storytellers: a tale of two brothers bound by tragedy, a fiercely brilliant woman haunted by her past, a country torn by revolution, and a love that lasts long past death. Born just 15 months apart, Subhash and Udayan Mitra are inseparable brothers, one often mistaken for the other in the Calcutta neighborhood where they grow up. But they are also opposites, with gravely different futures ahead. It is the 1960s, and Udayan - charismatic and impulsive - finds himself drawn to the Naxalite movement, a rebellion waged to eradicate inequity and poverty; he will give everything, risk all, for what he believes. Subhash, the dutiful son, does not share his brother's political passion; he leaves home to pursue a life of scientific research in a quiet, coastal corner of America. But when Subhash learns what happened to his brother in the lowland outside their family's home, he goes back to India, hoping to pick up the pieces of a shattered family, and to heal the wounds Udayan left behind - including those seared in the heart of his brother's wife. Masterly suspenseful, sweeping, piercingly intimate, *The Lowland* is a work of great beauty and complex emotion; an engrossing family saga and a story steeped in history that spans generations and geographies with seamless authenticity. It is Jhumpa Lahiri at the height of her considerable powers. Long-listed for the 2013 Man Booker Prize

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.

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.

As someone who loved *The Namesake*, perhaps my expectations were too high. I was really hoping *The Lowland* would be great. Unfortunately, for me, it fell flat. Brothers Subhash (the responsible serious one) and Udayan (15 months younger, and the rebellious one) grew up together in Calcutta during the politically tumultuous 60's. After college, Subhash heads to the US to further his studies, Udayan stays in Calcutta and becomes involved in a political uprising. When he is killed, leaving behind a pregnant wife, Subhash steps in and fills the role of husband to widowed Gauri and father to his niece-to-be. The Pros: This is a period in history I knew very little about. Lahiri does a great job of summarizing the political landscape of India in the 1960's. I loved learning how the politics of post-colonial India tied to Maoist China, Castro's Cuba, and Che Guevara. For example, I had no idea that Castro destroyed most of Cuba's golf courses when he came into power. Fascinating! It's easy to see how communist ideals could take hold in such a class-divided society. The Cons: I found almost all of the characters in this novel insufferable. Not only did I not connect with them, few of them connected with each other. There wasn't really anyone to root for. I don't necessarily have to like the characters to appreciate a book, but it helps to understand their motivations. I never could decide if these folks were behaving selflessly, making decisions they thought would be best for their loved-ones, or selfishly trying to maximize their own situation at others' cost. Maybe they didn't really know either. Frustrating. The other issue I had was with the pacing of the book. It was very inconsistent.

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