ASIASOURCE.ORG INTERVIEW (for Bombay Time)

by Michelle Caswell

Thrity Umrigar is the author of Bombay Time (Picador/ St. Martin's Press, 2002), a new novel that artfully traces ambition and disappointment in the lives of several inhabitants of a Parsi neighborhood in Bombay.

Washington Post Book World has called the novelist, "heartfelt... [with] an impressive talent for conceiving multidimensional, sympathetic characters with life-like emotional quandaries and psychological stumbling blocks." A journalist by training, Thrity writes for the Beacon Journal in Akron, Ohio and is a recipient of the prestigious Neiman Fellowship at Harvard. Her work has appeared in the Washington Post and she is a frequent contributor to the Boston Globe.

AsiaSource spoke with the author about her literary influences, India's middle class, and the emotional impact of the brain drain.

Q. How has being a journalist colored your fiction? After paying meticulous detail to facts and sources, do you find it liberating to be able to make characters up?

After years of being a journalist -- and being confined by facts and what other people say to me -- it's been very liberating writing fiction, where the only limits are those of the imagination. Still, I think journalism is a great apprenticeship for becoming a novelist because of the discipline to write daily that it imposes on you. Also, it has taught me to pay attention to details, to listen closely to people's patterns of speech, etc.

Q. Have you always written fiction?

I started writing poetry when I was a young child and then made my way to short stories and plays as a teenager. In a sense, I was writing fiction long before I became a professional journalist. To me, all these different genres feed into each other, just like different rivers feed into the same ocean.

Q. Who are your literary influences?

Those have changed over the years. When I was a teenager, I was influenced by the usual suspects: Hemingway, Steinbeck, Faulkner, etc. I loved Fitzgerald's delicacy of language and Virginia Woolf's exploration of human psychology. Today, I'm very fond of the writings of Toni Morrison and Jamaica Kincaid. I will always owe a debt to Salman Rushdie for making the Bombay that I knew and loved come alive on the pages of a book and for introducing me to the possibility of writing in that wonderful, oddball 'dialect' known as Indian-English.

Q. Why do you think Indian fiction has been so successful in the US in the past few years? Have you been inspired by the success of other Indian writers?

I think Indian fiction has been successful for the simple reason that we have a damn good story to tell. India is a fascinating country, full of dramas and melodramas and pathos and passion and tragedies and comedies. To me, a city like Bombay is larger-than-life and almost operatic in its sweep. There are stories everywhere in a place like that and we are lucky to live in a time when there is finally an interest in hearing these stories.

Q. One of the common threads tying together recent Indian fiction in English is the virtual obsession with the Indian middle class. We either don't see the poverty-stricken masses (as in Salman Rushdie), or when we do see them (as in the works of authors like Arundhati Roy and Manil Suri), we see them undoubtedly through the eyes of the middle class. Do you think this is an accurate assessment and if so, why do you think the voices of the less advantaged are being ignored? Were you aware of your perspective as a
middle-class Indian while writing this novel?

I think your observation is right on the money. It's something I've thought about a lot, also. I keep waiting for a new voice to emerge from India's working class. I wish there were more translations of Indian novels being written in regional languages, languages other than English. I think that would perhaps be one way to get a non-middle-class perspective. But the sorry fact is that Indians who write in English are more likely to hail from the middle-class and are the ones who have migrated to the West, so it's a catch-22. But I do think that in order to listen to all the stories coming out of the subcontinent, in order to gain a true picture of this large, complex, bursting-at-the-seams nation, other voices and other perspectives will need to be heard.

While writing Bombay Time, I was acutely aware that mine was a middle-class voice, but I decided to make that work for me by making most of my characters solidly middle-class and exploring their unease and distrust of a city that they fear is unraveling into squalor and poverty. And then, in the final chapters, I tried to indicate how their middle-class values inevitably put them in conflict with the other inhabitants of the city.

Q. In Bombay Time, the characters have a love/hate relationship with Bombay and India in general. Do you think this ambivalence is typical of the Indian middle class?

I think that ambivalence is very typical of the Indian middle class, although it may be a little bit more pronounced in the Parsi community. There is a segment within this community that has never quite reconciled to thinking of itself as 100 percent Indian and that adds to their ambivalence about the city. I suppose that any ethnic minority has a complicated -- even contradictory -- relationship with the city/country in which it dwells.

Q. Your characters also seem ambivalent about India's brain drain and the success of Indians abroad. Given that you have migrated to the US, did this issue strike a powerful chord with you?

I think one thing that always strikes me about India is that even middle-class folks, that is, people with no immediate economic distress, seem so melancholy and burdened. You compare that to a place like the US, where people seem content and happy with their lives, where there is a sense, whether justified or illusionary, of being in charge of their own destinies.

I think that the 'price' that successful Indians pay is that very often their children leave for the West. I tried to imagine the hollow sense of loss that that would produce in those left behind. I'm sure that my own nascent guilt about migrating to the US has helped me imagine how my family must have felt in the wake of my leaving.

Q. Did you grow up in Bombay's Parsi community? How has the experience of being a minority within a minority (that is, an Indian American Parsi) influenced your work?

That's a great question. The funny part is, I never really felt like a minority in Bombay, except for one or two occasions where I was made to feel that way. That was the joy of growing up in Bombay in the '60s and '70s. We prided ourselves on being progressive, secular people who didn't give in to any of the religious and communal bigotries that were consuming the rest of the nation.

But today, I'm much more aware of what a cocoon I lived in. I do think that growing up as a Parsi has made me acutely aware of this insider-outsider status that is the mark of all minorities. Today, I embrace that because as a writer, it is important to have a critical distance from your subject matter, to be able to stand on the margins of society and examine the dominant culture.

Q. One of the major motifs in the book seems to be dreams deferred. Dosa's character in particular is bitter about lost opportunities, but almost all of the older characters are tied up in a web of sacrifice, failure and disappointment that impacts their expectations for and relationships with their children. Why was this an important theme for you to explore?

As I mentioned earlier, I'm so struck by this sense of unhappiness and loss and defeatism that seems to dog the lives of so many of the people I knew growing up. I guess my novel was an attempt to make sense of their lives, to tell the people that I love that their lives were not wasted, to transform the mundaneness and the private defeats of their lives into art and then hand it back to them.

Back to interviews
Parsi (People)

Parsi, also spelled Parsee; member of a group of followers in India of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. The Parsis, whose name means "Persians," are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who emigrated to India to avoid religious persecution by the Muslims. They live chiefly in Bombay and in a few towns and villages mostly to the north of Bombay, but also at Karachi (Pakistan) and Bangalore (Karnataka, India). Although they are not, strictly speaking, a caste, since they are not Hindus, they form a well-defined community.

The exact date of the Parsi migration is unknown. According to tradition, the Parsis initially settled at Hormuz on the Persian Gulf, but finding themselves still persecuted they set sail for India, arriving in the 8th century. The migration may in fact have taken place as late as the 10th century, or in both. They settled first at Diu in Kāthiawār but soon moved to Gujarāt, where they remained for about 800 years as a small agricultural community.

With the establishment of British trading posts at Surat and elsewhere in the early 17th century, the Parsis' circumstances altered radically, for they were in some ways more receptive of European influence than the Hindus or Muslims and they developed a flair for commerce. Bombay came under the control of the East India Company in 1668, and, since complete religious toleration was decreed soon afterward, the Parsis from Gujarāt began to settle there. The expansion of the city in the 18th century owed largely to their industry and ability as merchants. By the 19th century they were manifestly a wealthy community, and from about 1850 onward they had considerable success in heavy industries, particularly those connected with railways and shipbuilding.

Contact of the Parsis with their fellow countrymen appears to have been almost completely severed until the end of the 15th century, when, in 1477, they sent an official mission to the remaining Zoroastrians in Iran, a small sect called Gabars by the Muslim overlords. Until 1768 letters were exchanged on matters of ritual and law; 17 of these letters (Rivayats) have survived. As a result of these deliberations, in which the Parsis' traditions were in conflict with the purer traditions of the Gabars, the Parsis, in the 18th century, split into two sects on questions of ritual and calendar.

source: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/444672/Parsi
India's vanishing Parsis

Not fade away

The travails of a small but amazingly successful community

Sep 1st 2012 | MUMBAI | From the print edition

A BOLLYWOOD comedy released on August 24th, “Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi” (“Shirin and Farhad Have Got It Made”), revolves around the bumbling courtship of two middle-aged Parsis. The scene where Shirin accidentally eats her engagement ring is pure farce. But much else in the film touches on the real predicament of the Parsis: that this disproportionately successful Indian community is shrinking fast.

The Parsis began arriving in Bombay (now Mumbai) from Gujarat in the 1600s, having much earlier fled Persia when the spread of Islam threatened their Zoroastrian religion. Over a century later they forged Bombay’s rise as a remarkable business hub, managing India’s opium sales to China and ploughing the profits into cotton mills and banks. Today Parsi families such as Tata, Godrej and Wadia are among India’s top corporate dynasties, with a hand in everything from padlocks to five-star hotels. The community has its own housing estates, hospitals and venture-capital funds. Parsis like to describe themselves as India’s Jews.

Yet they are on the wane. Perhaps 61,000 Parsis are left in India today, three-quarters of them in Mumbai. Their numbers have fallen by a tenth in each decade since the 1950s. The Parsis closed their maternity hospital in Mumbai a decade ago because of a lack of births. The venture-capital fund is struggling to find young entrepreneurs. Nostalgia pervades Parsi clubs, where elderly ladies play rummy in faded English dresses.

Jehangir Patel, editor of Parsiana, a magazine for the Parsi community, says Parsis often marry
late, like the lovebirds in the film, or not at all. Many migrate to the West. The group’s closed nature poses more problems. The children of women who marry outside do not count as Parsis, despite an otherwise progressive attitude to women. Some Zoroastrian priests do not admit converts.

In desperation, this year the Bombay Parsi Association raised its monthly cash handouts to 3,000 rupees ($54) for couples with a second child and to 5,000 rupees for those with a third. It gives newly-weds first dibs on housing. Indian officials are usually focused on keeping a lid on the country’s growing population of 1.2 billion. Yet the national planning commission is mulling a $360,000 scheme to increase the Parsis’ dwindling numbers through fertility treatments and advertising campaigns.

Rich youngsters remain unswayed by handouts. The Parsi youth association in Mumbai, founded in 2009 to turn around the shrinking population, holds frequent speed-dating sessions and produces a calendar of the community’s hottest pin-ups. It even held a three-day get-together last year, where guests were put up in a plush Tata hotel and partied in the corridors. Yet even those revels, sighs Viraf Mehta, a 34-year-old single banker who heads the association, led only to fleeting “hook-ups”.

From the print edition: Asia
Mumbai (Bombay)

**Historical overview:**

Mumbai /məmˈbaɪ/, formerly Bombay, is the capital city of the Indian state of Maharashtra. It is the most populous city in India, and the fourth most populous city in the world, with a total metropolitan area population of approximately 20.5 million. Along with the neighbouring urban areas, including the cities of Navi Mumbai and Thane, it is one of the most populous urban regions in the world. Mumbai lies on the west coast of India and has a deep natural harbour. In 2009, Mumbai was named an Alpha world city. It is also the wealthiest city in India, and has the highest GDP of any city in South, West or Central Asia.

The seven islands that came to constitute Mumbai were home to communities of fishing colonies. For centuries, the islands were under the control of successive indigenous empires before being ceded to the Portuguese and subsequently to the British East India Company. During the mid-18th century, Mumbai was reshaped by the Hornby Vellard project, which undertook the reclamation of the area between the seven constituent islands from the sea. Completed by 1845, the project along with construction of major roads and railways transformed Bombay into a major seaport on the Arabian Sea. Economic and educational development characterised the city during the 19th century. It became a strong base for the Indian independence movement during the early 20th century. When India became independent in 1947, the city was incorporated into Bombay State. In 1960, following the Samyuktta Maharashtra movement, a new state of Maharashtra was created with Bombay as capital. The city was renamed Mumbai in 1996, the name being derived from the Koli goddess—Mumbadevi.

Mumbai is the commercial and entertainment capital of India, it is also one of the world's top 10 centres of commerce in terms of global financial flow, generating 5% of India's GDP, and accounting for 25% of industrial output, 70% of maritime trade in India (Mumbai Port Trust & JNPT), and 70% of capital transactions to India's economy. The city houses important financial institutions such as the Reserve Bank of India, the Bombay Stock Exchange, the National Stock Exchange of India, the SEBI and the corporate headquarters of numerous Indian companies and multinational corporations. It is also home to some of India's premier scientific and nuclear institutes like BARC, NPCL, IREL, TIFR, AERB, AECL, and the Department of Atomic Energy. The city also houses India's Hindi (Bollywood) and Marathi film and television industry. Mumbai's business opportunities, as well as its potential to offer a higher standard of living, attract migrants from all over India and, in turn, make the city a melting pot of many communities and cultures.
Economy:

Mumbai is India's largest city (by population) and is the financial and commercial capital of the country as it generates 6.16% of the total GDP. It serves as an economic hub of India, contributing 10% of factory employment, 25% of industrial output, 33% of income tax collections, 60% of customs duty collections, 20% of central excise tax collections, 40% of India's foreign trade and 4,000 crore (US$730 million) in corporate taxes.

As of 2008, Mumbai's GDP is 919,600 crore (US$170 billion), and its per-capita income in 2009 was 486,000 (US$8,900), which is almost three times the national average. Many of India's numerous conglomerates (including Larsen and Toubro, State Bank of India, Life Insurance Corporation of India, Tata Group, Godrej and Reliance), and five of the Fortune Global 500 companies are based in Mumbai. Many foreign banks and financial institutions also have branches in this area, with the World Trade Centre being the most prominent one.

Until the 1970s, Mumbai owed its prosperity largely to textile mills and the seaport, but the local economy has since been diversified to include engineering, diamond-polishing, healthcare and information technology. As of 2008, the Globalization and World Cities Study Group (GaWC) has ranked Mumbai as an "Alpha world city", third in its categories of Global cities.[143] Mumbai is the 3rd most expensive office market in the world. Mumbai was ranked among the fastest cities in the country for business startup in 2009.

State and central government employees make up a large percentage of the city's workforce. Mumbai also has a large unskilled and semi-skilled self-employed population, who primarily earn their livelihood as hawkers, taxi drivers, mechanics and other such blue collar professions. The port and shipping industry is well established, with Mumbai Port being one of the oldest and most significant ports in India. In Dharavi, in central Mumbai, there is an increasingly large recycling industry, processing recyclable waste from other parts of the city; the district has an estimated 15,000 single-room factories.

Most of India's major television and satellite networks, as well as its major publishing houses, are headquartered in Mumbai. The centre of the Hindi movie industry, Bollywood, is the largest film producer in India and one of the largest in the world as well as centre of Marathi Film Industry. Along with the rest of India, Mumbai, its commercial capital, has witnessed an economic boom since the liberalisation of 1991, the finance boom in the mid-nineties and the IT, export, services and outsourcing boom in 2000s.

Mumbai has been ranked 48th on the Worldwide Centres of Commerce Index 2008. In April 2008, Mumbai was ranked seventh in the list of "Top Ten Cities for Billionaires" by Forbes magazine, and first in terms of those billionaires' average wealth.
Demographics:

Residents of Mumbai call themselves Mumbaikar, Mumbaiite or Bombayite. Mumbai has a large polyglot population like any other metropolitan city of India. Marathi, the official language of Maharashtra state, of which Mumbai is the capital, is widely spoken and understood in the city. Sixteen major languages of India are also spoken in Mumbai, most common being Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati and English. English is extensively spoken and is the principal language of the city’s white collar workforce. A colloquial form of Hindi, known as Bambaiya – a blend of Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, Konkani, Urdu, Indian English and some invented words – is spoken on the streets.

Mumbai suffers from the same major urbanisation problems seen in many of the fast growing cities in developing countries: widespread poverty and unemployment, poor public health and poor civic and educational standards for a large section of the population. With available land at a premium, Mumbai residents often reside in cramped, relatively expensive housing, usually far from workplaces, and therefore requiring long commutes on crowded mass transit, or clogged roadways. Many of them live in close proximity to bus or train stations although suburban residents spend significant time travelling southward to the main commercial district. Dharavi, Asia’s second largest slum (if Karachi’s Orangi Town is counted as a single slum) is located in central Mumbai and houses between 800,000 to one million people, in 2.39 square kilometres, making it one of the most densely populated areas on Earth with a population density of at least 334,728 persons per square kilometre. With a literacy rate of 69%, the slums in Mumbai are the most literate in India.

The number of migrants to Mumbai from outside Maharashtra during the 1991–2001 decade was 1.12 million, which amounted to 54.8% of the net addition to the population of Mumbai. The number of households in Mumbai is forecast to rise from 4.2 million in 2008 to 6.6 million in 2020. The number of households with annual incomes of 2 million rupees will increase from 4% to 10% by 2020, amounting to 660,000 families. The number of households with incomes from 1-2 million rupees is also estimated to increase from 4% to 15% by 2020.

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<th>Religion in Mumbai</th>
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<td>Hinduism</td>
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<td>Christianity</td>
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<td>Others*</td>
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Culture:

Mumbai's culture is a blend of traditional festivals, food, music and theatres. The city offers a cosmopolitan and diverse lifestyle with a variety of food, entertainment and nightlife, available in a form and abundance comparable to that in other world capitals. Mumbai's history as a major trading centre has led to a diverse range of cultures, religions and cuisines coexisting in the city. This unique blend of cultures is due to the migration of people from all over India since the British period.

Mumbai is the birthplace of Indian cinema. Dadasaheb Phalke laid the foundations with silent movies followed by Marathi talkies. The oldest film broadcast took place in the early 20th century. Mumbai also has a large number of cinema halls that feature Bollywood, Marathi and Hollywood movies. The Mumbai International Film Festival and the award ceremony of the Filmfare Awards, the oldest and prominent film awards given for Hindi film industry in India, are held in Mumbai.[262] Despite most of the professional theatre groups that formed during the British Raj having disbanded by the 1950s, Mumbai has developed a thriving "theatre movement" tradition in Marathi, Hindi, English and other regional languages.

The rich literary traditions of the city have been highlighted internationally by Booker Prize winners Salman Rushdie, Aravind Adiga. Marathi literature has been modernised in the works of Mumbai based authors such as Mohan Apte, Anant Kanekar, and Gangadhar Gadgil, and is promoted through an annual Sahitya Akademi Award, a literary honour bestowed by India's National Academy of Letters.

Mumbai residents celebrate both Western and Indian festivals. Diwali, Holi, Eid, Christmas, Navratri, Good Friday, Dussera, Moharram, Ganesh Chaturthi, Durga Puja and Maha Shivratri are some of the popular festivals in the city. The Kala Ghoda Arts Festival is an exhibition of a world of arts that encapsulates works of artists in the fields of music, dance, theatre, and films. A week long annual fair known as Bandra Fair, starting on the following Sunday after 8 September, is celebrated by people of all faiths, to commemorate the Nativity of Mary, mother of Jesus, on 8 September.

The Elephanta Festival—celebrated every February on the Elephanta islands—is dedicated to classical Indian dance and music and attracts performers from across the country. Public holidays specific to the city and the state include Maharashtra Day on 1 May, to celebrate the formation of Maharashtra state on 1 May 1960, and Gudi Padwa which is the New Year's Day for Marathi people.
Questions for Discussion

1. Are there hints in this memoir that Umrigar would grow up to be a writer? If so, what are the different signposts and events that point to an eventual writing life? What are the ingredients that create writers?

2. Growing up in Bombay, Umrigar is exposed to many different cultural identities. When her teacher asks the class to come up with real Indian names for their story instead of English names, Umrigar finds herself at a loss. This theme, of not being in touch with Indian culture even though she is living within it, is very prominent throughout the narrative. What other Indian disconnects from culture does Umrigar experience?

3. Umrigar was told by her elders to give up her Enid Blyton stories for more mature material. She felt she had lost a loyal friend, since these stories were always there for her while she was growing up. Did you feel this way during those transitional years when adult material was being presented to you, but you still held on tight to those trustworthy books of your childhood? What role or importance do those early books have in our lives?

4. Throughout the memoir Umrigar describes her various relationships and how they changed the way she defined herself. One such relationship was with her friend Jenny, who was from New York City, and made Umrigar feel she had a connection to America. Have you ever known someone who provided you with insight into another culture, whether it be a country, business, educational institution, etc., where you felt more connected and therefore more knowledgeable about then your peers?

5. Umrigar has a very strained relationship with her mother that is seen during most of their encounters. Umrigar is often the victim of her mother’s unstable emotions and her need to control. How did this affect Umrigar? What signs of affection appear amidst the turmoil of emotions between mother and daughter?

6. Umrigar searches for a sense of identity, as India undergoes a similar transition from colonialism. Do you see these parallels throughout the memoir? Do you think India’s fluctuating identity had an impact on Umrigar’s own journey toward self-identification? Do you think it helped turn her interest towards the United States?

7. All of the people in Umrigar’s life play important roles in developing who she will become. Which individual seems to have the biggest impact on her life?

8. Umrigar constantly desires to escape throughout the memoir. Which aspects of her life is she trying to flee? Do you see any parallels to your own life?

9. The feeling of disconnect with India is prominent throughout the memoir. When Umrigar leaves for the United States, do you think she had a difficult time adjusting to a new culture? Do you think she may feel more at home in the United States where she can distance herself from all of the conflicts in her life?

10. The memoir is filled with descriptions of India and of a middle class family trying to survive in a time of great political tension. Did any of the details surprise you? Were any of your preconceived notions of India and Indian culture challenged by the author?

source: http://www.harpercollins.com/
INDIAN EXPRESS INTERVIEW

By Sujeet Rajan

Q. How much time did it take you to research and write "The Space Between Us"?

The actual writing of the first draft of the novel took less than six months. But the research for it took a lifetime. What I mean by this is that growing up in Bombay, I was always aware of this strange, complicated, emotionally complex relationship between mistress and servant. With the dramatic class differences, with the kind of apartheid that exists in middleclass homes—where servants cannot sit on the furniture they clean, where they have their own separate dishes and glasses etc.—it's a relationship that would be easy to simplify and caricature. But what I wanted to show in the novel was both, the connections and the separations, the intimacy and the distance between women of different classes.

Q. Did the novel evolve?

The novel evolved in the sense that when I started it I had the first line and the last line in my head. I knew that these two lines would act as bookends to the novel. Then it was simply a matter of filling in the story between the two lines.

To be totally honest, I am amazed—and dismayed—at how little I remember about the writing of this novel. It feels like a blur to me, probably because I wrote it so fast I mean, I remember specific moments in the writing of it, particularly this one afternoon when it felt like the writing was pouring out of me. But in terms of, when did I come up with the plot etc., I simply can't recollect the whole process.

Q. What were some of the challenges you faced writing the novel?

The biggest challenge is always the same—getting it right. I have not lived in Bombay in over 23 years. And I have not kept up with the pop culture—who the latest movie stars are, what the hit songs are, etc. So it's a little intimidating to write a book about contemporary India. So what I do is write about things that are timeless—the things that divide and bind people, the eternal, life-affirming presence of the Arabian sea, the incredible instinct for survival and joy that every Bombayite possesses. The journalist in me knows the importance of getting facts and details right. But the novelist in me knows that people turn to literature not for facts but for eternal and universal truths.

Q. Bombay was the setting for your Parsi characters in your debut novel "Bombay Time" and your Memoir "First Darling of the Morning." You revisit the city, with some new Parsi characters in "The Space Between Us." What do you find most fascinating about Mumbai?

I think what I love and admire the most about Bombay is the sheer tenacity of its people. The desire to get up and face another day, even if you're living in the worst of squalor and misery. The rag pickers, the ear wax removers, the old women who make a living selling four cabbages a day. Just the sheer gumption, the creative energy it takes to make a living, to keep a foothold in the city. This is my personal definition of courage and bravery.

Q. Which is your favorite book on Mumbai?

Well, for purely sentimental reasons, I have to say, Rushdie's Midnight's Children. It was the first book I read that had names of streets I recognized, streets that I had actually visited, unlike, say, John Steinbeck's Salinas Valley. It was the first book that captured the nuances of the wonderful, linguistic hodge-podge that is Indian English.

Q. Apart from you, there are some other notable writers and artists from the Parsi community, including
Rohington Mistry and Firdaus Kanga. Many films have been made on the community. What do you find most compelling about the community?

When I was a teenager, it was fashionable for us to mock our parents for their obvious pride in their religion. But the older I get and the more I see of the horrors committed in the name of religion, the more respect I have for the faith and its practitioners. It's a peaceful, live-and-let-live religion. I love how Parsis celebrate Diwali and Id and Christmas with the same zest with which they celebrate Navroz. And the fundamental tenet of the religion—Good thoughts, good words, good deeds. How can you go wrong with that?

Q. Despite living in the US since the age of 21, you revisit India for your works. Why?

Well, I often visit India to see my family. But whenever I'm there, I'm also taking mental notes on what the current phrases are, how people are talking these days, what stories they are telling, how much things cost. In other words, I'm trying to observe what has changed since I last lived there. Also, what has not changed.

Q. Do you plan to write a novel based on the expatriate Indian American community in the US?

Funny you should ask. As a matter of fact, I am close to completing another novel, which is set in suburban Ohio and tells the story of this middle-aged Indian woman who has to chose between living in the U.S. with her son or returning to India.

Q. You have been a journalist for around two decades, writing for among others, the Washington Post. Which do you find more challenging writing: journalism, non-fiction or fiction?

All these genres have their own challenges. For me, journalism began to feel too limiting in that I was only reporting someone else's words and ideas. Also, there are certain structural constraints that one faces in journalism, not the least of which is space. Journalism is great at getting the facts and the information across; it's not always good at telling the larger truth.

Put another way, journalism is about the outer world. Fiction is about the inner life—which is so much richer and emotionally engaging.

In that sense, fiction has been really liberating for me. I get to say what I feel and think and believe and there's no editor hovering around telling me to cut it short. And the act of telling stories that illustrate who we are in a moment in time, that talk about human connections, matters of the heart, is something journalism is not terribly equipped to do. Although the great reporters often come close.

Q. Which are some of the authors who have inspired you, and you admire?

I love Virginia Woolf for combining two difficult tasks—creating psychologically complicated characters and then writing about them in beautiful, lyrical language. I love Toni Morrison for the same reason. I love some of Rushdie's earlier novels for their sheer insanity, the pliable use of language.

Q. "The Space Between Us" seems tailor-made for a Bollywood film or a television soap. Did you have an eye on seeing it on screen when you started writing it?

God, no. I wasn't even sure it would find a publisher, much less anything else. In fact, when I'm working on a book, I try very hard not to think in terms of an audience or the realities of publishing. I want to focus on the work itself, to enter it as deeply as I can and make it as emotionally honest as I possibly can. It's really a kind of game of self-deception that I play with myself. And despite your suggestion, I still can't picture it as a Bollywood film. Where would the song sequences come in?

Q. What do you plan to write next, or are writing?

As I mentioned, I'm finishing another book. And once that's done, I want to start on another novel, this time about a seven-year-old child. This one is still percolating.
Excerpts from ‘A Conversation With Thrity Umrigar’

Tell us a little bit about your growing up years.
Well, I was born in Bombay and lived there until I was 21, when I came to the U.S. I was raised in a joint family, which meant I grew up around very loving aunts and uncles. And since I was an only child, it helped to have all those extra adults in my life, for love and guidance. I’ve always had many sets of parents and even today, have a knack for “adopting” parents.

What do you remember most about growing up in Bombay?
I have two overriding childhood memories or impressions: One, was always being excruciating aware of the poverty around me. Now, as a middle-class kid, you’re not supposed to be that aware of--or certainly not supposed to be tortured by--the poverty around you. It’s a defense mechanism of sorts, to be able to ignore it. For whatever reason, I was never able to ignore it and to some extent, it really affected my childhood, made me a hypersensitive child.

Two, I always wrote. Writing was my way to make sense of the world outside and inside my home. Despite the recollections of the adults in my life, I don’t think I was a terribly articulate child. Writing was a way to give wings to the inchoate emotions and feelings inside of me.

When did you know you were a writer?
Well, I was writing poems at a very young age. As a child, I would write ‘anonymous’ poems to my parents whenever I felt wronged by them and then secretly pin them on their closet door. So I learned early on that writing was a good way to get rid of pent-up feelings. All through my teen years I wrote poetry and short stories and essays. I think I knew I was a writer--not that I was necessarily a good writer, just that I was a writer--one evening when I was 14 or so. I remember sitting in my living room and writing this long poem called The Old Man that came out of me as if someone was dictating it. It was a terribly sappy poem but I felt compelled to write it and when I was done, I was exhausted but I knew something about myself that I didnt before.

source: http://www.umrigar.com/
Why did you decide to come to the U.S.?
I've never had an easy answer to that question. In some sense, my whole life prepared me for moving to the U.S. I was a product of an educational system that was very colonial and very Western in its orientation. I still remember my fourth-grade composition teacher telling the class not to create characters who were blond and blue-eyed. Her statement came as a shock because that was all we knew, you know? When I was a child, I read everything ever written by the British children's writer Enid Blyton and later, the _Billy Bunter and William_ series of novels. And as I got older, all I was reading was Western literature. American pop culture was a big influence, also. I mean, until I picked up Salman Rushdie's _Midnight's Children_, I had hardly ever read a novel by an Indian writer. Rushdie was a revelation for me.

So that's the "sociological" answer. But of course, there were also a hundred personal reasons--wanting to travel, wanting an adventure, wanting to be independent, wanting to get away from certain aspects of my life, not knowing what the heck to do with myself after I'd finished college. I remember the day when it occurred to me very clearly that if I lived in India, I would never be totally independent and would never discover who exactly I was as a person. I wanted to live in a place where I would rise or fall based on my own efforts and talents. And I was very lucky to have a father, who, despite his immense sadness at having me so far away from home, always encouraged me to reach for my dreams and never held me back... But I'm not even sure it was this complicated. Remember, I was 21. Weird as it may sound, not much thought went into it.

So you came to Ohio State? Why Ohio State?
Well, that's a funny story. It's indicative of how so many major decisions in my life have been made. I was sitting in my living room in Bombay, checking off a list of American universities that offered a M.A. in journalism, when my eyes fell on "Ohio State University." There was a Joan Baez record playing on the turntable and right then, her song, _Banks of the Ohio_, came on. I looked up and thought, "It's a sign", and decided to apply there.

Hmmm. Well, I hope the experience there was worth it.
Oh, OSU was a blast. Two of the happiest years of my life. Within days of being there, I made friendships that have lasted till today. Those two years taught me that one can make new families at any point in one's life. I had such positive experiences there that it made me want to live in the U.S. forever. That one line in _Bombay Time_, where Jimmy Kanga feels like he loved Oxford so much he felt he could've gone to war for it, that's what it used to feel like to me. I'll always be grateful.

source: http://www.umrigar.com/
After OSU, I worked for two years at the *Lorain Journal*, a small but feisty little paper near Cleveland. It was a grueling experience, long hours, all that, but when I left there, I knew I could tackle anything that daily journalism threw my way.

**So you came to the *Akron Beacon Journal* when?**

In 1987. *The Beacon* had the reputation of being a real writer’s paper and had just won yet another Pulitzer. It was a great paper to work at. Still is.

**Who are your favorite authors?**

I draw inspiration from everywhere. I’m one of those people who even reads cereal boxes. But my favorite authors are Salman Rushdie (I recently re-read *Midnight’s Children* and wept in awe and gratitude), Toni Morrison and Jamaica Kincaid. But influence is a hard thing to account for—I think Bob Dylan and Emily Dickinson have probably influenced my writing—in terms of making me crazy about words—as much as anybody.

**So how hard was it finding a publisher? It happened during your Nieman year, right?**

Although my friends tell me how lucky I was to find a publisher, I tell them that that wasn’t the miraculous part. Because that was the result of effort, a cause-and-effect kind of thing. The truly miraculous part was finding an agent.

What happened was, I was attending a lecture at Emerson College in Boston and asked the speaker a question. Based on my question, my agent-to-be approached me and asked me if I was writing anything. Believe me, my question was not terribly brilliant or clever or anything. My agent has since told me that she has tried analyzing why she approached me instead of the other people who asked questions that evening but has been unable to come up with an answer. She says it was just a hunch. Anyway, I started mailing her chapters as fast as I wrote them and pretty soon, we had a book.

CLEVELAND MAGAZINE INTERVIEW

At age 21, Thrity Umrigar boarded a plane to the United States, leaving her family and Indian homeland behind for a career as a journalist, teacher and author. Her most recent book, The World We Found, bridges her two worlds and navigates the struggle between pain and hope.

In 1983, Thrity Umrigar took flight from her native India. She was 21 years old, had never flown alone, and now, as she fumbled with her seat belt, she was soaring above the Bombay of her youth, bound for a place she chose because of the lyrics of a song.

Umrigar dreamed of being a writer, even if it meant breaking the grasp of a family that loved her, leaving the tight circle of the Parsi community that had nurtured her.

It wasn’t easy. But almost 30 years later, the Cleveland Heights author is about to release her fifth novel, The World We Found, which landed on January’s Indie Next List from the American Booksellers Association.

The World We Found begins with a pain similar to her departure: a broken tooth and the news that a close friend has cancer. Umrigar, the maestro of the metaphor, applies pain to her characters the way a physical therapist bends an injured knee until you’re certain it’s going to snap. She makes us feel the pain of poverty, the slap in the jaw during a bad marriage, the death of a child. The pain of being prevented from being the person you need to be.

Her books also are about flight, defying the gravity of those real-world afflictions. There are the literal flights of an airplane or balloons and the figurative flights of reinvention. All are voyages of hope.

"I'm a hopeful person," she says during a recent interview at a coffee shop on Lee Road. "I can't stand books that don't give you hope."

The confluence of pain and hope is evident even in the final pages of her memoir, First Darling of the Morning, as she’s about to board that plane back in '83: "And when you go," her father tells her at the airport, "I will lose not only my daughter, but my best friend." Yet he lets go because he loves her, because he must set her free to begin her flight to become the writer she needs to be.

So let’s start her journey there, up in the air, where her memoir leaves off.

Thrity Umrigar landed in Columbus, Ohio, quite by accident. Or maybe fate. When she was applying for graduate school in America, she had to list her top three choices. No. 1 was Columbia University, her home country’s most renowned journalism graduate school. No. 2 was a California school. She was struggling to find a third pick until she heard Joan Baez singing "Banks of Ohio" on her stereo.

It's a song about great sorrow. Perhaps it was predestined that she be accepted to The Ohio State University’s graduate school for journalism.

Those first months were a time of split emotions. "I was totally free and independent for the first time in my life," she recalls. But there were also "moments of great sadness and guilt at the thought of being that far away from my family. It was almost as if I was living on two, parallel tracks even as I enjoyed every new experience, I longed to share it with them."

She pursued a career in journalism because in India she could imagine few alternatives for an aspiring author. "Journalism ... gave me opportunities to write that I wouldn't have had," she says. "And as an immigrant, it proved to be a wonderful, quick introduction to the real America."
In India she learned about America from Simon and Garfunkel, John Steinbeck, All the President's Men, Mad magazine, and Archie and Veronica.

But she found a different America when, armed with a master's degree and her student visa, she got her first job in 1985 at The Lorain Journal.

"Nothing could've prepared me for Lorain in the mid-1980s," she says. "Not even the slums of Bombay, where I used to volunteer as a teenager, compared to the sense of dejection, of defeatism that hovered over the city in those years."

Unemployment was high. U.S. Steel had laid off about 10,000 workers a few years earlier, while another 2,000 were lost as George Steinbrenner moved his shipbuilding operations to Tampa.

"There was just this sense of failure and loss that hung in the air," she recalls.

"And yet, in the midst of all this," she continues, "I met people of such grace and generosity and resilience. It seems like something that connects the poor of the world and the less they have, the more they are ready to share it."

The pay was low, the hours were long, but Lorain proved to be a fruitful training ground, as she quickly grasped the disciplined rhythm of journalism. Umrigar covered the prerequisite five Cs of community newspapers cops, courts, councils, classrooms and corporations. Her writing stood out even then.

"She wanted to comb through every word," says Richard Osborne, who was associate editor in Lorain then. "She wanted every single word to be absolutely the best word to describe what she meant."

Umrigar also made a lifelong friend in Lorain: Regina Brett. "We were sort of like kids just having a ball back then," Brett recalls. "We were getting paid to write. It was a high, ... a kind of joy that's unmatched."

Their lives couldn't have been more different until then. Umrigar was an only child who grew up in cosmopolitan Bombay then took off alone for America. Brett, one of 11 children, had never ventured too far beyond her home in Ravenna. She was a 30-year-old single mother who had tried several careers before she latched onto journalism.

Yet they shared a passion for words and stories. "Lorain is by the lake, but it felt like an ocean to us. Some nights we just sat out there and talked and talked," Brett says. "We felt like everything was possible."

Regina Brett and Thrity Umrigar joined the Akron Beacon Journal a few months apart, just before the paper won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for its coverage of the attempted takeover of Goodyear Tire and Rubber.

There was a sense that there were no limits to what you could accomplish through journalism, Umrigar recalls. "You felt you could take chances, try anything."

That atmosphere seemed to create an incubator for authors that included Chuck Klosterman, David Giffels and Terry Pluto.

"We talked about writing all the time," says Umrigar, who sat next to Giffels in the newsroom. "We would engage in wordplay, exchange jokes, lyrics to songs all day long. We talked about books, music... and story ideas. There were so many writers I admired there."

Brett, Umrigar and others often organized brown bag lunches to hear speakers or discuss writing topics. "It was sort of organic," Giffels says. "I know that working around all those people inspired me and challenged me."

Umrigar gravitated toward stories that generated both pain and compassion. "The wheelchairs are lining up outside for Thrity," an editor once joked. Yet she could find hope and warmth in tales as diverse as the premature birth of a baby boy and the murder of a beloved transvestite.

Her command of the language and gift for storytelling were nurtured by her upbringing. She grew up a Parsi, a small religious sect, not many more than 100,000 worldwide, with most living in Bombay. Parsis put a premium on
education. She went to Catholic schools because they were the best available. Everyone spoke and wrote in English.

As a child, Umrigar was a scamp, the "Mad Parsi" to her schoolmates, charming them with pranks and jokes. Behind the laughs, though, was a difficult relationship with her mother.

Umrigar often imagined she was the daughter of the Ovaltine lady, who looked so loving in the advertisements. As a little girl, she often retreated to her books and to writing poems when the dissonance in their home became too shrill. And she longed to see flowers in the family's unadorned apartment.

"All the things that I thought made life worth living—books, art, music, nature—were considered to be indulgences," she recalls. "Every time I brought fresh flowers home, I would get a lecture on saving my money, not wasting it. So I vowed to myself when I was a teenager that as soon as I was independent, I would buy fresh flowers all the time."

While working as a reporter, she returned to India when she could. On one of those visits, she went to the seaside with her father. His words remain seared in her memory.

"I want to tell you something today that I want you to never forget," he told her. "There may come a time when I'll be old and sick, and you will come to visit me. ... I might ask you to stay by my side. If that day should ever come, I want you to remember what I'm telling you now, while I'm in my mind and body. I don't want you to do that. I would want you to leave and build your own life. You have chosen to live in America. ... Forget about us, and build your own life."

Thrity stayed at the Akron paper for 15 years, probably too many.

The last few years, she tried to balance work with getting her doctorate from Kent State University and writing a first novel about Parsi friends reminiscing about growing up together in Bombay. She got more speeding tickets than sleep. She finally put the novel on the shelf until she won a fellowship to the Neiman Foundation at Harvard University for the 1999-2000 school year. She took advantage of the time away to finish Bombay Time.

When she returned to the paper, it was soon time to jump off the fence.

"After 17 years of reporting and writing about other people's ideas, words and beliefs, I really wanted to express my own," she says. "I felt like there were things I wanted to say, worlds I wanted to describe, people I wanted to memorialize. None of that was possible in journalism. That box began to feel smaller and smaller, too restrictive."

In 2002, she made the leap, taking a visiting professor position at Case Western Reserve University with no job security and less pay than Akron. Her first novel was well-received but only a modest hit.

Regina Brett had already moved on to The Plain Dealer, but she knew her friend needed to go, too. "Thrity was like a kite, ... and we were holding on too tight," Brett says. "She always saw the greater world. It was her time to soar."

Thrity Umrigar didn't realize she used flying as a metaphor so often in her writing until we discussed it in October.

"I do believe that life is movement," she says. "Standing still is death. And in our globalized world, movement often means flight moving away from the past, from the familiar, from the known world to the unknown. I have been lucky so far in that each journey has led to something better."

Success followed Bombay Time. Her second book, The Space Between Us, the story of a wealthy Indian woman and her long-time maid, Bhima, was an international hit. She was hired to a tenured position at Case, teaching both journalism and literature, and continued to write, publishing The Weight of Heaven and If Today Be Sweet in addition to her memoir.

"I have been able to achieve the life I imagined for myself," she says. "I live today in a home that is filled with books. I buy fresh flowers whenever I can."
Her writing has introduced her to other writers, who have become friends. "Earlier this year, I friended Salman Rushdie on Facebook," she says. "I wrote to him about how much his Midnight's Children meant to me when I was a young woman about to leave India for the U.S., and he wrote back a wonderful, gracious reply. It was a totally surreal moment, and now I write to Salman as if he is my next-door neighbor."

So while she seems far removed now from the country she left in 1983, India has never been far away in her words. She is already at work on another novel, I Begins, about an immigrant woman from India and her African-American therapist.

But the India of her books is not the mystical, romantic India that fascinates Americans. It is a country that struggles with class, with race, with religion ... just like most nations do. "My novels could be set in any country," she says.

The World We Found bridges Thrity's two worlds. Four Indian women Ñ friends who were going to change the world when they were in college Ñ try to connect 30 years later. Armati, who moved to Ohio, has an inoperable brain tumor. Laleh and Kavati, both still living in India, are making plans to fly to America before she dies. But they are compelled first to find their fourth musketeer, Nishta, the bold one who married a Muslim and has been out of touch for years.

In less skilled hands, this could have been a Bollywood version of The Big Chill: University friends who were going to save the world but settled into middle-class lives gather at the death of one of them.

Instead, the depth and drama of the story turns on the two main male characters, husbands of two of the women, Adish and Iqbal. Iqbal, the Muslim, is a troublingly complex character who evokes both fear and pity. A fundamentalist, he is a man most would perceive as a monster. But Umrigar asks us to try to understand what made him that way.

What is even more remarkable is how she tells the story through all six characters, crawling into their skins instead of observing them from a literary mountaintop. "She goes to a place that's deeper than anyone I know," Brett says. "She never removes herself. ... She can climb into anybody's life."

Including the young woman who took that flight of faith in 1983 to Ohio, where her father joined her several years ago.

"That flight paid off handsomely," Umrigar says, with a slight smile that reveals that finding success here was no easier than leaving her family there.

"It was part of the whole concept of reinvention," she says. "It was about being something different tomorrow. ... That was the essence of the America I came to in the ... 80s."

That was the world she found.

Back to interviews
ANGELS IN AMERICA

When I first came to this country as a young student, I had numbers on my mind. Test scores. GPAs. How many beers I could drink at one time.

But as I look back on those years, I realize that those are no longer the numbers I am proud of.

The number of which I am now the most proud is the number of Christmases I have spent in America. Because I have never spent one alone.

See, when you move to a country you have never even visited before, weird fears cross your mind. Like: What if everybody at Ohio State goes home for the holidays and I'm the only person left on the whole campus?

Like I said, weird. But real.

However, there was one thing I hadn't counted on. And that was America.

Land of friendly strangers and large-hearted people. Where a stranger can become a friend in a heartbeat. Where a baby-boom generation of gypsies make and create new families wherever they go. Where a new generation, living away from hometowns and biological families, has introduced a new concept -- that of choosing your own families.

I am happy to say that over the years, I have belonged to several families. Being in America has changed my concept of what family is -- from the feudal concept of family-is-what-you-were-born-into, to the post-modern definition of family-is-who-you-chose-to-spend-your-time-with.

This is not to say that I am not close to my family of origin. If anything, getting older only makes me appreciate them more than I ever did in my angst-filled teen-age years.

But America has allowed me to keep adding new members to my family.

And over the years, I have spent my Christmases with my different families.

My first few Christmases, while I was a student at Ohio State, I spent in a small farmhouse in rural Georgia. I had been in America for only four months and here I was, a child of the city from India, romping around in the woods and eating grits for breakfast.

How did that happen, you ask?

The answer is -- America. For what is America but the endless opportunity to re-create yourself?

Georgia was the beginning of a long journey that finally ended with my becoming an American citizen. It was in Georgia that I first realized that life's supply of friends was not limited but as abundant as the leaves on a maple tree. It was there that I realized that it is possible to have more than one home in this world. It was there that I learned that it was my decision whether to live in my new home, America, as a guest or as a family member.
I went to Georgia at the invitation of my friend Peggy, whom I had met on my second day at Ohio State when I stopped her to ask for street directions. We had talked, walked, exchanged phone numbers, had a few beers together several days later, and stayed friends. Then four months later, I went to Peggy’s family home with her.

Good thing, too. Peggy’s family is black and after spending 10 days with these good, hard-working, honest country folks, I’ll never believe another racist stereotype in my life. Not that I was likely to anyway, but racism is a virus. Best to keep getting your immunity shots against it.

One stereotype was true. Peggy’s family did live on the wrong side of the tracks. Despite working hard all their lives, her parents were poor. Still, you’d never know that if you saw the gifts they bought me for Christmas. Not just her parents, but her whole extended family. I was so choked up, I could hardly manage a thank-you.

The funny thing is, I can’t remember any of those gifts now. Because I’m still awe-struck by the biggest one they gave me -- the gift of affection, of inclusion.

The gift of family.

One night stands out in my mind from those days in Georgia. We were driving down a long country road on a moonlit winter’s night. There was a lull in the conversation and John Lennon’s Happy Xmas (War is Over) came on the radio. I remember listening to that song in silence, as the beautiful, still, night scenery flew past. A sweet, sad, peace came over me. It was one of those moments you know you will always remember, even while you are in it.

Fast forward a few years. Peggy now lived in California and I was working at a small paper near Cleveland. A colleague from work asked me to spend Christmas Day with her family. Not knowing what I was agreeing to, I said yes.

I felt as if I had stumbled into the movie The Sound of Music, as I walked into that living room. Jokes, quips and laughter flew across that room, which was filled with exuberant, laughing, screaming adults and children. My friend and her many siblings were hugging and yelling, "Merry Christmas," to each other. Little children were squealing with joy as they were tossed in the air. My friend’s mother, trying to control her brood, was as helpless as a conductor trying to tame an orchestra gone mad.

I watched in amazement, with an only-child’s envy and wonder, while these high-spirited people renewed their family ties and caught up with each other’s lives. But I barely had time to think of this. Because the roaring, cheerful beast spread its tentacles and drew me into its fold. Suddenly, I, too, was talking at the top of my voice, laughing loudly, swapping quips. The distance between me and them collapsed, as they spun the easy webs of friendship around me.

Soon, the clamor of the children to open their gifts reached its crescendo. And the colorful boxes, with their smiling bows, begged to be opened.

At first, the gift-opening was slow, polite and dignified. But soon a happy chaos took over. Siblings tossed their gift boxes to each other like footballs. There was loud laughter over the gag gifts. There were "Ooohs" and "Aahs" over the good ones.

The pile of gift wrap under my own feet grew. All of my friend’s siblings had bought me something. And her mother had knitted me a beautiful blue and pink winter scarf. Each time I wear that scarf today, the memories of that Christmas come rushing past.

Finally, it was time to unwrap my friend’s gift. I gasped as I saw Bruce Springsteen’s five-record box set. With tears in my eyes, I looked up. I saw my friend grinning broadly at my obvious surprise and pleasure.

For Christmas dinner we sat at a beautiful table that was big enough to have served King Arthur and his knights. And as I eyed the twinkling glasses, the sparkling wine, the plates groaning with food, I thought for a brief and shining moment about Camelot.

Other Christmases also stand out in my mind. I remember one because of its simplicity, in contrast to the boisterous Christmases I had been used to.
It was after I started working at the Beacon Journal. I accepted the invitation of a friend who was away from home herself and had invited me to a meal with herself and her teen-aged son. When I got to her house, she was in a frazzled mood. Dinner wasn't ready, her son was in a grumpy mood, and she was feeling the pressure of making Christmas perfect.

"Hey, it's only me, remember?" I reminded my friend. "You don't have to stand on ceremony with me."

She visibly relaxed.

Well, dinner turned to be fine, her son stunned us both with his charming table manners and Christmas was perfect after all. We sat at a beautiful table chatting about everything from James Agee to The Three Stooges to what our individual families were doing on that day.

After dinner, my friend suggested we go to a movie. I agreed, certain that the three of us would be the only people at the theater on Christmas Day. But when we got there, the large crowd of moviegoers, surprised me.

And, suddenly, standing in that crowd of strangers, I felt an incredible sense of community. All those people -- a counter-culture band of nomads, misfits and mavericks -- were redefining the traditional rituals of Christmas in their own, silent way.

This wasn't the Christmas found on Hallmark cards -- the Christmas of snowy woods and fat, jolly old men in red suits. This popcorn-buying Christmas crowd resembled not the old-fashioned, quaint citizens of Norman Rockwell's America, but the cosmopolitan, eclectic, madcap citizens of David Letterman's America. This scene said as much about the diversity and easy casualness of contemporary America as did anything else.

Two years ago, I celebrated Christmas with the family of another friend. There was a twinge of melancholy woven into the day. My friend's mother, a brave, feisty, gruff woman, was dying of cancer. All her children had chipped in to buy her a gold ring.

I watched the woman's weathered face as she opened the box and saw her gift. Her face shone as brightly as the ring, with pride and satisfaction.

All around her stood her children, their faces shiny with love, their eyes saying all the things their lips could not. They were saying good-bye and they were saying thank-you -- two of the hardest things to say.

Despite the hair that she lost to chemotherapy, despite the weight she had lost and the pain she was in, I know my friend's mother had a good Christmas -- her last. The ring on her finger, a symbol of her children's love, was all the wealth she needed.

Later on, I gave my friend's mother my Christmas gift. It was a stone angel.

I like to give angels to people. But I have a preference. I like my angels to be cracked. Or chipped. Just damaged slightly, in some way.

I know this sounds strange. Let me explain. See, perfection bewilders me. Being human, I only understand humanity, not divinity. Angels as ethereal creatures with wings and harps mean little to me. I want my angels to be human, to tread on the same mortal Earth that I do. I want my angels to earn their wings, not be born with them. I want them to try to fly as high as they can, to fall flat on their face, and then, to try again. I prefer my angels cracked.

I had not been able to find a cracked angel for her. But after my friend's mom died in 1993, her family gave me back the angel in remembrance of her. Within days of getting it back, the angel fell off my mantelpiece. It is now cracked.

Last Christmas, my friend's family was subdued. The old woman's absence was a strong presence during dinner. Conversations revolved around her favorite recipes, childhood family stories, funny things she had said during her life. The children seemed a little lost, as if a compass had been misplaced.
All that day, I wished I had a cracked angel for all of them. To remind them that their mother had led a good, brave life and had now earned her wings. To console them that they had all done their part in lighting her way to heaven.

And to tell them, that in their silent sorrow and loss, they were actually marking the true spirit of Christmas.

Because, after all, isn't it for a cracked angel who lived, suffered and died 2,000 years ago that we mark this Christmas Day?

Akron Beacon Journal
Sunday, December 25, 1994

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BOOKSLUT INTERVIEW

BY TERRY HONG

Here's a moment of literary serendipity: on the morning my Bookslut interview with Luis Alberto Urrea went up, I happened to be finishing the galley of Thrity Umrigar's latest novel, The World We Found. Amazingly, here's what appears in the penultimate paragraph on the very last page: "Thanks to Luis Alberto Urrea, whose definition of 'the trembling ones,' inspires my work." What are the chances?

When I contacted Urrea to set up our interview for this piece, she mentioned that she had just started Urrea's Into the Beautiful North: "Howz that 4 coincidence?" she immediately replied. After a little nagging, she explained her "trembling" reference: "I heard Luis tell a story about his dad working as a janitor in a nearby bowling alley. And Luis was there with his friend but he didn't acknowledge his dad. The friend didn't know their relation and made fun of the 'janitor' and the father just stood there, mute, trembling with embarrassment. And Luis said something like, 'here's to the trembling ones.' And I thought to myself that that was the best damn description of who I write for and why I write, that I'd ever heard. He's so friggin' brilliant, isn't he?"

I, too, eventually recognized this story because I realized I was actually there: I moderated a panel almost a year ago at the 2011 AVP conference, where I introduced Urrea and recognized Umrigar in the audience. Urrea would, of course, become the best part of the post-presentation discussion that followed. She is, in live time, fiery, inquisitive, challenging... though occasionally she'll give your brain a rest with her own brand of goofy fun.

On the page, Umrigar is equally fiery and challenging, although she is capable of wielding powerful control even while revealing the most wrenching moments in her resonating novels: dissolution of decades-long relationships in her debut Bombay Time (2001), utter betrayal in The Space Between Us (2006), the death of a beloved spouse and sudden uprooting in If Today Be Sweet (2007), and the unthinkable loss of a child in The Weight of Heaven (2009).

Readers of The World We Found are sure in for some "trembling" of their own. What might initially read like chick lit -- four college friends are brought back together after almost thirty years of drifting apart to fulfill the dying wish of one of their own -- evolves into an explosive, revelatory examination of class, gender, family... and the very extremes of religion.

Not yet fifty, Armaiti is dying of a virulent brain tumor, and having seen her own mother suffer a horrible death, she decides she will hold on as long as she can to her quality of life and not be controlled by debilitating medical interventions. More than anything, Armaiti wants to reunite with the vibrant soulmates of her youth, her three closest friends who remained in Bombay. As university students together back in the 1970s, the fearless four were idealistic, devoted, ready to fight any and all injustice. Decades later, Laleh is a privileged wife and mother, Kavita is an accomplished in-demand international architect, and Nishita has all but disappeared. With the help of Laleh's Mr. Fix-It-husband and in spite of the obstacles of Nishta's fundamentalist spouse, Armaiti must get her final wish.

Q. You've got some explosive content in this, your latest. No spoilers here, but that final scene in the airport is a shocker. Are you ready for the reactions you're definitely going to get?

I'm not sure what you mean. Why is the scene a shocker? I mean, I understand that it's meant to be a surprising twist -- that was my intention -- but I'm not trying to offend or insult any group. My main contention is that when individuals have power over others, more likely than not they will use, and abuse, that power. What reactions, and from whom, do you think I'll get?

Q. That was actually one of the details about this book that I admired most, that none of the characters were ever simply "good" or "bad," and that even the "good" guys were not above falling prey to abusing their power. But back to that final scene, I don't at all think you were intending to offend or insult any
group! I'm convinced, though, that you'll have readers who will have strong reactions to Adish's inflammatory one-word solution to the situation at hand. Adish has been a calming, reassuring presence throughout most of the book, so it's a shocker when he reacts as he does at the airport. Post-9/11, don't you feel people have become hyperaware, even hypersensitive to certain trigger words and situations?

That's great; I want them to have a strong reaction to his "one-word solution," as you so delicately put it. My hope is that they will ask themselves what would've done in this situation and whether the ends can ever justify the means.

Q. Let's back up a little: So when did you begin writing World? How did the story come to you?

The bare outlines of the story took shape after a chance meeting in India with a college friend I hadn't seen in over twenty-five years. We were catching up on our lives and she mentioned that she had moved away from the activism of her college days after the Hindu-Muslim riots that tore apart Bombay in 1992-93. It marked the end of her innocence, in a way. And although I was living in the U.S. by then, I remembered how the riots had affected me at a very deep level. It was almost as if the secular, easy-going, tolerant city we had grown up in, didn't exist any more. So I could relate to her feelings, even though I disagreed with her conclusions. And then I asked myself questions about lost idealism and whether something of value still lingered from that era. And slowly, the book took shape.

Q. When you were that young, did you have an intimate group of friends as your characters here? And did you manage to stay in touch after you emigrated to the U.S. from India about the same age -- early twenties -- as Armaiti does in World?

I had some very deep friendships growing up. Some of us stayed in touch. I lost touch with others but have reconnected with many old friends in the last few years. It's a fantastic feeling. Thank you, Google.

Q. Were you as politicized as your characters are in their university days?

I think I was politicized at age five, once I started noticing the beggars on the streets, and children my age who had to rummage through dumpsters looking for food. But since I grew up in a middle-class milieu where we were always told that "that's just how things are," it never occurred to me that the social order could be changed, much less that I could play a role in changing it. It was only in my teenage years that I understood things about class and inequity and how there was nothing inevitable about it.

Q. Decades later, are you as politicized now?

I'm not a political activist but my opinions have not changed, mostly because the issues have not changed.

Q. Which of your four characters are you most like? Which one do you identify with the most?

It's funny that you ask that question, because I was just thinking to myself the other day that I can see a little of myself in all the characters in this novel. That has not always been obvious to me in some of my other novels. But I can see it in this one.

Q. You yourself are Parsi so you could use your own background and experiences for your Parsi characters here. How did you do the research for your Hindu and Muslim characters? Did you ever don a burkha yourself at some point?

The Bombay that I grew up in was a very cosmopolitan, secular place. For instance, I was a Parsi kid who went to a Catholic school, in a pre-dominantly Hindu city. My classmates were Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Catholics. It never once occurred to us to even question each other's religion, and to their credit, none of our parents seemed to make an issue out of it. Same thing in college. Nobody ever claimed their religion was better than someone else's; no one ever said they were the ones who'd go to Heaven and the rest of us would be left behind. It wasn't until I came to the U.S. that I heard people talk like this. In India, we would've laughed them out of town. Or at least, our toes would've curled in embarrassment for them.

So I guess I don't feel at all self-conscious writing about Hindu or Muslim characters. But the real point is, there's very little about the characters in this novel -- with one major exception -- that would define them by their religion.
They are mostly sophisticated, educated, secular people.

I've never worn a burkha myself. But all it takes is an empathic imagination to know how stifling it would feel.

**Q. How important is religion in your life?**

Religion to me is an intensely private matter. It should never be used as a club to beat up people with, nor as a pretext to feel superior to someone else. Being a Parsi, I was raised to follow the Zoroastrian faith. The basic tenets of Zoroastrianism are simple: good thoughts, good words, good deeds. Who can argue with that?

**Q. So bridging the religious divide in your story proves to be challenging at best, perhaps impossible. Will it ever be?**

I beg to differ. I think what proves hard to bridge in this novel is the class divide and the power differential. By showing the four women and their boyfriends during their college days, I think the novel argues powerfully that religious divisions can be overcome. The novel clearly points out the culprits who create this seemingly intractable "religious divide," the politicians who incite groups to turn on each other.

**Q. But the one Hindu and Muslim relationship here -- again, I have to try and not give too much away -- turns out to be irreparably broken. The couple initially takes great pride in proving that they can't be separated because of their different religions, but eventually, fundamentalism embraced by one side cleaves them apart. The final scene is literally a tossing away -- no bridging possible -- of someone else's religious constraints, no?**

Well, although both of them face great pressures from the outside world, they seem to get along fine with each other. The crack in the marriage occurs not because of their different religions but because one of them becomes increasingly conservative. So it's ideology that divides them, rather than religion per se. As for the final scene, I don't see it as a tossing away of someone's religion. I see it as a refutation of an ideological constraint. And, as we all know, all religions have their fundamentalist elements.

I feel like I'm being very coy in my answer -- just as you are very delicate in your question -- since we're both trying so hard not to give away too much of the plot. So I hope this makes sense to our readers.

**Q. More reason for them to go pick up the book right now! So, I can definitely see a sequel to World, especially continuing the story with what happens with the friends' children. Any plans?**

No plans. I'm not terribly fond of sequels.

**Q. How often do you go back to India? When you go, do you find yourself becoming more aware of religious or class differences? How does that affect you?**

More aware of class differences, yes, because in India the poverty is visual; it's on the street, so it's in your face, unlike the U.S., where it's more hidden. But I'm much more aware of religious differences here in the U.S. than in India. But that may simply be a product of my sheltered life in India. I mean, yes, I belong to a religious minority. But it's not a minority that's been in the crosshairs of the dominant culture. And Parsis are typically a pretty tolerant and easygoing group. I know many more religious dogmatists in America than I do in India.

**Q. You've lived in the U.S. now longer than you lived in India. Where's "home"? And Bombay to Cleveland? How did that happen?**

Home is wherever there's Bob Dylan on the stereo, a pile of good books on the bed stand, a gathering of close friends and family members sharing a meal together, a few bottles of wine being passed around... No, seriously, I'm a contrarian. When I'm in India, the U.S. is home. When I'm here, I long for India. But I don't think I would've become a writer if I'd never left India. I'm deeply grateful to the U.S. for this gift.

**Q. Speaking of Bombay, it seems to be a character in almost all of your titles, except for The Weight of Heaven (which takes place in a rural part of India). Obviously, you can't stay away. Might you see yourself living there again someday?**


I think any novelist would have to be fascinated by a city like Bombay. It's a madhouse, bursting with color, and noise, and people, and melodrama, and stories. It's a daily miracle that a city like that functions at all, that it doesn't just go up in flames or burst at the seams. I find it to be an amazingly heroic and resilient city. It's tough to survive there but there's a sweetness to its people that verges on a kind of innocence. I think any writer, Indian or non-Indian, could visit Bombay and pluck a story out of thin air. It's my good fortune that I happen to have grown up in this city and therefore know it well enough to use it in my novels.

Q. So Indian child-poet to American journalist to bestselling author to Professor Umrigar, with an office and office hours and syllabi and, of course, all those students! Tell us a bit about your teaching life.

I like teaching. I think it compliments my writing career well. I'm blessed that I teach at a very good university and hence have some brilliant, curious students. I love how earnest and serious and polite my students are. If they miss a class, they write me an email explaining their absence. I don't think I'll ever get over my amazement at this.

Q. A book tour's coming up (again)... What are you looking forward to? What are you hoping to avoid?

Oh, the best part of a book tour is actually meeting readers and hearing their interpretations of your work. I really love the interactions. What I'm hoping to avoid... long lines at the airport.

Q. Speaking of book tours and airports, one of your fellow Bombay Parsi authors, Rohinton Mistry (A Fine Balance, Family Matters), famously quit his book tour halfway and gave up air travel after 9/11 because of the (allegedly random) humiliating treatment he had to endure to get through security. Have you ever faced such circumstances? Do you think things have improved at all over the last decade since the tragedy?

I think Rohinton was stopped in part because he wore a full beard. I've not had a problem with airport security. But you know, American airports have become strange, surreal places. You feel like a criminal just because you exist. I was in Brazil a few years ago and at Rio airport, the security folks asked each passenger for permission -- permission! -- to ask a few questions. And each security desk had a small vase of freshly cut flowers and a bowl of candy. It was so sweet and quaint. I almost cried because it hit me hard, what we've lost in the past ten years.

Q. So how come no D.C. stop?

I dunno. Probably because you didn't arrange a reading for me. Or maybe it's some giant conspiracy with global implications.

Q. And, of course, I have to ask, what are you working on now?

A novel called I Begins -- yes, with an s. It's the story of two women, an immigrant Indian who is in a loveless marriage and her African American therapist.

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- Cleveland Magazine
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- A conversation with Thrity
- Indian Express Interview
- Asia Source Interview
- India Currents Interview
- Mumbai Mirror Interview
- Mumbai Tehelka Interview
- Listen to Thrity Umrigar talk about The Weight of Heaven here:

More interviews coming... check back soon.

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A Conversation with Thrity Umrigar

Tell us a little bit about your growing up years.

Well, I was born in Bombay and lived there until I was 21, when I came to the U.S. I was raised in a joint family, which meant I grew up around very loving aunts and uncles. And since I was an only child, it helped to have all those extra adults in my life, for love and guidance. I've always had many sets of parents and even today, have a knack for "adopting" parents.

What do you remember most about growing up in Bombay?

I have two overriding childhood memories or impressions: One, was always being excruciating aware of the poverty around me. Now, as a middle-class kid, you're not supposed to be that aware of--or certainly not supposed to be tortured by--the poverty around you. It's a defense mechanism of sorts, to be able to ignore it. For whatever reason, I was never able to ignore it and to some extent, it really affected my childhood, made me a hypersensitive child.

Two, I always wrote. Writing was my way to make sense of the world outside and inside my home. Despite the recollections of the adults in my life, I don't think I was a terribly articulate child. Writing was a way to give wings to the inchoate emotions and feelings inside of me.
When did you know you were a writer?

Well, I was writing poems at a very young age. As a child, I would write 'anonymous' poems to my parents whenever I felt wronged by them and then secretly pin them on their closet door. So I learned early on that writing was a good way to get rid of pent-up feelings.

All through my teen years I wrote poetry and short stories and essays. I think I knew I was a writer—not that I was necessarily a good writer, just that I was a writer—one evening when I was 14 or so. I remember sitting in my living room and writing this long poem called The Old Man that came out of me as if someone was dictating it. It was a terribly sappy poem but I felt compelled to write it and when I was done, I was exhausted but I knew something about myself that I didn't before.

Why did you decide to come to the U.S.?

I've never had an easy answer to that question. In some sense, my whole life prepared me for moving to the U.S. I was a product of an educational system that was very colonial and very Western in its orientation. I still remember my fourth-grade composition teacher telling the class not to create characters who were blond and blue-eyed. Her statement came as a shock because that was all we knew, you know? When I was a child, I read everything ever written by the British children's writer Enid Blyton and later, the Billy Bunter and William series of novels. And as I got older, all I was reading was Western literature. American pop culture was a big influence, also. I mean, until I picked up Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, I had hardly ever read a novel by an Indian writer. Rushdie was a revelation for me.

So that's the "sociological" answer. But of course, there were also a hundred personal reasons—wanting to travel, wanting an adventure, wanting to be independent, wanting to get away from certain aspects of my life, not knowing what the heck to do with myself after I'd finished college. I remember the day when it occurred to me very clearly that if I lived in India, I would never be totally independent and would never discover who exactly I was as a person. I wanted to live in a place where I would rise or fall based on my own efforts and talents. And I was very lucky to have a father, who, despite his immense sadness at having me so far away from home, always encouraged me to reach for my dreams and never held me back. . . But I'm not even sure it was this complicated. Remember, I was 21. Weird as it may sound, not much thought went into it.

So you came to Ohio State? Why Ohio State?

Well, that's a funny story. It's indicative of how so many major decisions in my life have been made. I was sitting in my living room in Bombay, checking off a list of American universities that offered a M.A. in journalism, when my eyes fell on "Ohio State University." There was a Joan Baez record playing on the turntable and right then, her song, Banks of the Ohio, came on. I looked up and thought, "It's a sign", and decided to apply there.

Hmmm. Well, I hope the experience there was worth it.

Oh, OSU was a blast. Two of the happiest years of my life. Within days of being there, I made friendships that have lasted till today. Those two years taught me that one can make new families at any point in one's life. I had such positive experiences there that it made me want to live in the U.S. forever. That one line in Bombay Time, where Jimmy Kanga feels like he loved Oxford so much he felt he could've gone to war for it, that's what it used to feel like to me. I'll always be grateful.

After OSU, I worked for two years at the Lorain Journal, a small but feisty little paper near Cleveland. It was a grueling experience, long hours, all that, but when I left there, I knew I could tackle anything that daily journalism threw my way.

So you came to the Akron Beacon Journal when?

In 1987, The Beacon had the reputation of being a real writer's paper and had just won yet another Pulitzer. It was a great paper to work at. Still is.

How did the novel come about? Were you writing it in Akron?
I had started the novel a few years ago under a very different plot structure. The first incarnation of the novel was much more 'plot-heavy'. Then, I arrived at a crossroads in that I had to decide between finishing the novel or my Ph.D. dissertation (while working full-time as a journalist) and I opted to finish the dissertation. The novel was discarded but not forgotten. Then, in 1999 I won the Nieman fellowship, which allows journalists a year of study at Harvard. When I found out I'd gotten the Nieman, I promised myself that I would pick up the novel again and I did. I salvaged odds and ends from the abandoned manuscript and wrote some new chapters during the first semester.

But it was during the second semester that the novel really took off. I went home to Bombay during the Christmas break and was struck by how many people there led such sad lives. I remember lying on the couch in my father's apartment one afternoon and vowing to finish the novel. I felt a desperate, burning urge to tell the story of the people I'd grown up around.

I kept that promise to myself when I returned to Cambridge. I was actually grateful for jetlag, because it was easy to wake up at 4 a.m. I would write each morning for a few hours before starting my work day. On some days, the writing flowed so easily—almost compulsively, you could say—that I would skip school and write for eight to 10 hours straight. The bulk of the novel was written in less than two months. I liked having the lonely, solitary experience of writing juxtaposed against the socially hectic and busy life I had as a Nieman fellow. I worked hard and partied hard during this period and that balance was somehow very important.

**What's Bombay Time about?**

Good question. I'm still trying to figure that out myself. Basically, it's a story about this group of middle-aged people who are residents of an apartment building in Bombay. All the characters are Parsis or Zoroastrians, which is the religion I was raised in. Parsis are members of a small ethnic minority who came to India as religious refugees from Persia over 900 years ago, and who went on to become one of India's most affluent and Westernized ethnic communities.

So, against the backdrop of a wedding reception, I tell the life stories of the individual residents—who they were in their youth, what has made them who they are today—and ask the question of how does one live a middle-class existence in a city of so much poverty? That's it, in a nutshell. Hopefully, the novel is more interesting than my summary of it.

**What was the inspiration for Bombay Time?**

Growing up in India exposed me to many stories of startling pathos and tragedy. Daily life for so many people seemed like an endless struggle and yet, I watched these people live their lives with a typically Bombay brand of humor, with bravado and courage. I wanted to commemorate their lives with my novel. I am also fascinated by the insider-outsider status of the Parsis of India. I wanted to examine their love-hate relationship with Bombay, torn as they are between disdain and a helpless love for the city of their birth. In a sense, you can say that that's the story of the middle-class in any city around the world that's besieged with corruption and violence and poverty.

**Who are your favorite authors?**

I draw inspiration from everywhere. I'm one of those people who even reads cereal boxes. But my favorite authors are Salman Rushdie (I recently re-read Midnight's Children and wept in awe and gratitude), Toni Morrison and Jamaica Kincaid. But influence is a hard thing to account for—I think Bob Dylan and Emily Dickinson have probably influenced my writing—in terms of making me crazy about words—as much as anybody.

**So how hard was it finding a publisher? It happened during your Nieman year, right?**

Although my friends tell me how lucky I was to find a publisher, I tell them that that wasn't the miraculous part. Because that was the result of effort, a cause-and-effect kind of thing. The truly miraculous part was finding an agent.

What happened was, I was attending a lecture at Emerson College in Boston and asked the speaker a
question. Based on my question, my agent-to-be approached me and asked me if I was writing anything. Believe me, my question was not terribly brilliant or clever or anything. My agent has since told me that she has tried analyzing why she approached me instead of the other people who asked questions that evening but has been unable to come up with an answer. She says it was just a hunch. Anyway, I started mailing her chapters as fast as I wrote them and pretty soon, we had a book.

What are your hopes for the book?

I'm still so thrilled to have found a publisher for it. I'm so glad Picador/St. Martin's Press, bought it. But my hope is that I've written an emotionally honest and culturally truthful book about a group of people that many Americans know nothing about. For my Parsi and Indian readers, I hope they find some piece of their lives reflected in this book. For my American readers, I hope they can see past the superficial cultural differences and see that the hopes, sorrows and fears of my characters are not so different than those of ordinary Americans. I mean, this is a novel that deals with troubled marriages, dashed hopes, the unfairness of getting old, and above all, the importance of friendship and community. None of us are strangers to these themes.

So what comes next? What are you working on now?

What comes next? Well, obviously the world tour, the appearance on Oprah and the house with the swimming pool. (Laughs.) No, seriously, I'm hoping to get cracking on my next novel. It deals with domestic servants in India and explores the relationship between a servant and the woman she works for. Also, I'm looking forward to the Italian version of Bombay Time. We just sold the Italian rights to Saggiatore. And I'm happy about that.
FIRST DARLING OF THE MORNING
Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood.
By Thrity Umrigar.
Harper Perennial, $14.95.

This self-portrait of the writer as a young woman has a familiar outline: the child of upright but uncultivated middle-class parents rebels against convention after falling under the influence of Van Gogh and Dylan. The setting of Bombay in the 1960s and '70s adds a postcolonial overlay to this memoir, originally published in India in 2004, but most of Umrigar's experiences are typical of childhood everywhere: mourning a pet rabbit who died, playing schoolgirl pranks, falling in with a bad crowd that drinks and smokes, sulking at the senselessness of family quarrels. Umrigar, the author of "The Space Between Us" and two other novels, writes in an earnest, quiveringly passionate language that may accurately reflect the sensibility of a teenager but often seems overwrought. ("My own pathetic poems shrivel and die anonymous deaths," she writes, describing her reaction to the lyrics of a Don McLean song.) But Umrigar's depiction of her tight-knit family is moving. Her father is an affectionate and indulgent parent, but he is too weak to contain the damage caused by the violent rages of his wife. Umrigar agonized over her decision to continue her education in America, leaving behind this troubled but deeply loving family, and the book acts as an extended apology to them. "Here's my explanation," she writes. "Perhaps you will forgive."

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First Darling of the Morning: A poignant and brave exploration of childhood's less lovely spaces, First Darling is a sensitive, vividly-relived memoir that captures the innocence and confusion of a small Indian girl struggling against the paradoxes that rock her life. Told with startling honesty, the memoir paints an unforgettable picture of middle-class life in contemporary Bombay.

Recent Reviews:

THE WASHINGTON POST

Longings That Never End
By Juliet Wittman
Sunday, December 21, 2008; Page BW11

FIRST DARLING OF THE MORNING Selected Memories Of an Indian Childhood By Thrity Umrigar | HarperPerennial. 294 pp. Paperback, $14.95

Thrity Umrigar's mother was abusive, her father often absent. She communicates her childhood longing for a cohesive family in deeply felt portraits of those she loves: Mehroo, the selfless aunt who provided nurturing and gentleness in an otherwise bleak household; her beloved Uncle Babu, who came up with the endearment that gives the book its title and whose death provides its most poignant moment.
Umrigar, who grew up among the remnants of colonial culture of Bombay (now Mumbai) has thought about what it means to be "a cultural mongrel, the bastard child of history." She read Enid Blyton and listened to Western pop music, usually years out of date. She attended a Catholic school. Asked to write a composition using Indian instead of English names, she was puzzled: "Until now, my characters have eaten scones and blueberry tarts instead of chutney sandwiches and bhel puri, and to make that culinary and cultural leap seems impossible." As an adult, she discovered Salman Rushdie and was fascinated by the Bombay he saw as an Indian writer.

Even as a child, Umrigar was troubled by the poverty she saw around her and worried about the beggars who clustered around her family when they purchased food from a stand. She felt affection and respect for one of her father's factory workers and anguish when he joined a group of angry strikers; she tried to discern what he was thinking, questioning her former blindness and sentimentality in believing they could be friends, and finally understood the gulf that prohibited real communication between them. It is this combination of personal revelation and empathetic observation that makes Umrigar's memoir so appealing.

BOOKLIST (STARRED REVIEW)

*First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood.

A melancholy mood suffuses Indian author Umrigar's eloquent coming-of-age memoir (after If Today Be Sweet, 2007). Born in Bombay to middle-class Parsi parents, smart, precocious Umrigar spent much of her childhood feeling out of place. She was very close to her gentle father and her beloved aunt, but her mother was menacing and cruel, frequently mocking her and beating her with a switch. Umrigar's life changed when she met Jesse, a forward-thinking-and rebellious-young woman five years her senior, who introduced her to the wonders of literature and art. Umrigar soaked it all in, even shunning her family's privileged existence after reading Irving Stone's Lust for Life (1934), a novel based on the life of Vincent Van Gogh. Umrigar's upbringing in an apolitical family left her unprepared for the passion she felt after participating in a demonstration against the government. A sense of restlessness, combined with relentless family discord, fed her desire to escape to the U.S.

The memoir ends with Umrigar at 21, departing for America, where she now works as a journalist and associate professor of English at Case Western Reserve University. But she has never forgotten her native land, brilliantly rendered in three critically acclaimed novels and now in this latest bracingly honest and bittersweet memoir.

- Allison Block

KIRKUS REVIEW

FIRST DARLING OF THE MORNING: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood

Indian-born journalist and novelist Umrigar (English/Case Western Reserve Univ.; If Today Be Sweet, 2007, etc.) rekindles the emotional contradictions that affected her childhood as a "cultural mongrel" in the '60s and '70s.

Umrigar paints a stunningly detailed portrait of her multifaceted Bombay milieu. A Parsi minority in a Hindu-majority country, she attended Catholic school, where Hindi was taught as a foreign language. She defines her upbringing as middle class and captures the sadness of the excruciating poverty below her in India, specifically in her vivid descriptions of the starving child beggars at Chowpatty Beach. Umrigar's home, a small, spare apartment with a joint-family
living arrangement and nosy Parsi neighbors, was the source of much emotional turmoil and recrimination. In animated, anguished prose, the author depicts her mother as an unstable, angry and violent woman "with a tongue that can sting as hard as the cane she uses on me." Umrigar found refuge in the kindness of her live-in spinster aunt, Mehroo, whose limited status as an unmarried woman is implicitly evoked. Although Umrigar was close to her father, she was too terrified to reveal her mother's hidden beatings and abuse. The author evokes her volatile emotions in language that conveys the intensity of her pain, yet which may be too flowery for some readers: "My love feels so thick and heavy, it tastes like blood. Or grief." Stifled at home, Umrigar, "restless and defiant," sought an unconventional friend who broadened the author's horizons with such gifts as the Irving Stone biographical novel about Vincent Van Gogh. Lust for Life. Eventually she decided to give up her family moniker of "First Darling in the Morning" and immigrate to America, noting that the desire to resettle was driven mainly by frustration and yearning.

Heartfelt memoir about the significance of origins and self-identity.

LIBRARY JOURNAL

Umrigar's fictional works (Bombay Time; The Space Between Us; If Today Be Sweet) evoke nostalgia for a particular moment in India: the postcolonial but still pre-liberalization 1960s and 1970s, the period of Umrigar's childhood in Bombay. Persuasively re-creating voices and scenes, this memoir (first published in India in 2004) could almost be read as another novel. Umrigar builds a literary bridge between personal and historical truths. As she traces her over-the-top Parsi family life, complete with sadistic mother and Anglophile convent school against the backdrop of Bob Dylan ("the biggest influence on my life") and disillusionment, Umrigar is narrating not just her personal heartache but also that of a global middle-class cohort. American readers may not understand the Indian political context, but the underlying chords in this story about growing up and going away will certainly resonate. Recommended for all large public libraries as well as academic libraries that collect women's memoirs. -Lisa Klopfer, Eastern Michigan Univ. Lib., Ypsilanti

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

Freelance journalist Umrigar alternates between sweet and biting accounts of her middle-class Parsi upbringing in 1960s and 1970s Bombay. With a mixture of rawness and warmth, she recalls moments from her tumultuous childhood through her teenage years, and finally into her early 20s when she leaves India for the U.S. She describes her mother's strictness with her and other children (her mother doesn't think twice to strike disobedient kids with a cane), tempering these scenes with memories of the tight bond with her father as well as her Aunt Mehroo's unflappable love. As she encounters worker strikes and student protests, she begins to understand class differences and the gap between her privileged, private school background and India's poverty. In the end, Umrigar's memoir is colorful and moving. (Nov.)

An Indian writer and her homeland struggle together

Cleveland Plain Dealer, Dec. 28, 2003

There's a moment in Thrity Umrigar's memoir, "First Darling of the Morning," when she recalls herself as a child standing in the bathroom, contemplating whether to stab her eardrums out with the pointed edge of a steel compass. Doing so would allow her to escape the noise of her family's constant fights, but she decides that giving
up the joys of her father's voice and music would be too much to lose.

"It's a harrowing passage, but it conveys Umrigar's frustration and desire for escape that remain constant throughout the book."

Driving much of the pain in Umrigar's life is her mother, a woman whose cruelty evokes conflicting emotions of revulsion and pity.

She "has long, thin, crooked fingers, and most of the time they are curled around one of her many switches," and although her wrath has no specific target, Umrigar is a frequent victim of her malice.

These stories, along with others about Umrigar's extended family, are engrossing, but they are standard components of a childhood memoir.

She recounts punishments, dreams, her struggles to develop a sense of self and her eventual arrival in the United States, but what makes her account compelling is the way her search for identity parallels that of India.

While Umrigar's anecdotes and stories may be about her and her family, they help reveal the absurdities of a country in transition from colonialism.

Now a writer in Cleveland, Umrigar recalls India as "a country still recovering from the national inferiority complex that was a leftover from British colonial rule," and her experiences only prove this.

In a country of extended families, the Von Trapp family of "The Sound of Music" becomes the ideal, and she finds herself part of a society that knows "the words to Do-Re-Me better than the national anthem."

Perhaps nothing emphasizes this disconnect between her culture and her society as vividly as her school, where she encounters little that reflects the world she knows, to the point where she has a better grasp of quaint fictional English towns than "the hot, crowded, equatorial city of dark-haired men and women" in which she lives.

Thus, in a way, Umrigar's stories of an Indian childhood become much more, as her experiences form the fascinating backdrop of an account reflecting modern India's childhood, as well.

**Akron Beacon Journal, Dec. 21, 2003**

Thrity Umrigar's First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood is a mesmerizing, vibrant account of a middle-class Bombay upbringing (in a culture where middle class means having household servants).

Umrigar tells of her childhood in a home with a loving father, devoted aunts and uncles and a cruel, often sadistic mother. She joins her fellow students in driving her Catholic-school teachers to distraction, but her rebel posture is only a cover for hypersensitivity.

Interwoven with mundane activities such as a trip to the beach and sneaking cigarettes are insights into the shattering poverty that surrounds the girl. She has epiphanies during a labor strike at her father's lumber factory and when she learns that the family's maid has a first name.

Young Thrity, when given permission to host an after-school party at the bakery her family runs, chooses street children instead of classmates as her guests. Her social awareness grows as she listens to American music, and culminates in a narrow escape at a demonstration that turns violent.

Despite Umrigar's masterful descriptions of her feelings about caste, privilege and guilt, First Darling is not a book about the ills of Indian society. It's a growing-up story about a pet bunny, the death of an uncle and the unrealized longing for a loving mother.

The narrative takes the reader through Umrigar's college years and her decision to further her education.
at Ohio State University, which she chose because of a song playing on the radio while she studied American college brochures.

Umrigar, of Cleveland Heights, is a former Akron Beacon Journal reporter who has earned a Ph.D. in English literature.


WORTH A SECOND LOOK

First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood takes readers to the other side of the world, the Bombay of Thrity Umrigar’s youth. Some of the references to Indian culture may seem tantalizingly exotic, but much will seem familiar to American readers who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. First Darling is available for $14 from some local bookstores and Amazon.com.

Sahara Time, Nov. 2003

EVCATIVE ACCOUNT: A vividly recounted, poignant memoir of childhood

The songs of the sixties and seventies hum through this poignant memoir of a Bombay child growing up in a cloistered, privileged middle class Parsi family. It is Do-Re-Me that echoes through Thrity Umrigar’s rememberances, not the hits of Lata Mangeshkar or Kishore Kumar. This is an urban, Indian childhood replete with Catholic nuns, pink jeans and pop records.

Yet it is also sharply sensitive, as only a child or adolescent can be, to the everyday cruelties of a stratified society where servants eat on separate plates and beggars stretch out scrawny palms to receive small change.

Thrity’s return flight to childhood zooms us into life as a six-year-old watching The Sound of Music at the Regal Cinema with the family... The flight to university in the USA signals the end of a brilliantly etched, vividly recalled Indian childhood.

INDIA TODAY, Oct. 2003

RAGE OF MEMORY: A return journey to the cries and confusion of an urban childhood

I was drawn into the story of this young, confused Parsi child growing up in Mumbai, trying to understand first the stresses and strains of family and then those of the great, jostling city outside. Thrity Umrigar’s moving account of her childhood begins with a family outing to see The Sound of Music at Regal Theater. It ends with her leaving for Ohio for studies.

Between these two events lie the long and not-always-happy stretches of childhood. With painful honesty, Umrigar tells us about her family.

Memoir details life in a little-seen India
By Lylah M. Alphonse, Boston Globe Staff
May 19, 2004

Thrity Umrigar has a knack for capturing people’s quirks. In her second book, “First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood,” she unflinchingly takes on her own, as well as those of her family, giving readers a vivid glimpse into an unfamiliar part of India’s population.

Even now, the popular view of India is one of dusty villages, fiery curries, and religious struggle.
But India is much more than that, and Umrigar focuses on the part into which she was born: the Parsi community, descended from people who fled Persia to avoid religious persecution under Alexander the Great. Though many of them today live in diaspora, Parsis form a curious and obscure middle class in Bombay that prides itself on its education and exclusivity.

In her memoir, "First Darling of the Morning," Umrigar details the clash of cultures and contradictions that surrounded her as she grew up in 1960s Bombay, now known as Mumbai. "I am a Parsi teenager attending a Catholic school in the middle of a city that's predominantly Hindu," she writes. "I'm a middle-class girl living in the country that's among the poorest in the world. I am growing up in the country that kicked out the British fourteen years before I was born but I have still never read a novel by an Indian writer."

Growing up steeped in Western books and music, Umrigar is confounded when a teacher tells her to write a story using only Indian characters. Though she struggles with the assignment, she is never in doubt of her own identity -- this book does not document a search for self as much as it details a teenager's discovery of the world around her. Her memoir is studded with bits of Indian history and colorful descriptions of Bombay. She captures perfectly the singsong mixture of English and Gujarati spoken in many Parsi households, so different from the butchered grammar of stereotypical Indian stories. Umrigar candidly portrays herself as a selfish, petulant only child, and recounts a childhood that is at times lonely and brutal -- her mother invents sadistic punishments for the smallest infractions, nuns discipline their charges by digging their fingernails into the girls' throats. She lives in a modest apartment with her extended family: a devoted maiden aunt who sacrifices herself for her relatives; a loving but harried father who escapes each day to the office; a harpy of a mother who is scarred by her shattered dreams; an aunt and uncle who are surrogate parents; a cousin who is like a sister; a handful of servants. Meddling neighbors and gossipy aunts abound, but no matter how viciously they turn on one another, to the public they present a facade of calm gentility.

The Bombay of Umrigar's memories is a place where privilege is supposed to bring with it the ability to ignore poverty -- only she never quite manages to do so. She invites the beggars of the neighborhood to lunch at her father's pastry shop. She throws the family out of balance by insisting on calling one of the servants "aunt." Visits to her father's factory and trips to a popular city beach force her to acknowledge the inequity: "At home it is easy to ignore them but here, out in the open, there is no turning away from these dark and hungry eyes and from the questions about the accidents of birth and the randomness of privilege that they arouse in me."

The key events in her life are not the typical milestones of a typical girl. Her doomed romance is with activism, not boys. Her idol is a nonconformist older girl named Jesse, who shocks Umrigar by saying she doesn't believe in God, then leads her to worship at the altars of Vincent van Gogh, Don McLean, Hermann Hesse, and, finally, an Indian writer, Salman Rushdie. Her coming of age centers on politics and the death of a beloved uncle. She finds it more and more difficult to conform to her society's idea of a respectable girl "who accepts without question the authority of their priests, parents, and teachers," and she rebels, first by cultivating her image as the "Mad Parsi" at her Catholic school, smoking and drinking with flunky friends, and later by joining the protests against Indira Gandhi's country-cleansing emergency rule.

Her epiphany comes as she is sitting on the steps at Bombay University, two weeks before graduation. After a college career dedicated mostly to fighting the establishment, "I am nowhere close to being ready to be anything but a college student," she realizes. Economics and social convention mandate that she live at home as long as she is unmarried, a prospect that fills her with dread. Salvation comes in the form of a dream and a Joan Baez song -- "Banks of the Ohio." Umrigar decides to apply to graduate schools in America, "the land of self-invention," gaining
admission to Ohio State University and leaving India and its complexities behind. She is now a journalist, still based in Ohio.

Filled with poignant stories and awkward moments, Umrigar's memoir may seem a little melodramatic at times, but "First Darling" offers readers a rare glimpse at life in a country that is constantly changing, and a look at a little-known culture.
FIRST DARLING OF THE MORNING
Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood

AUTHOR: Thryti Umrigar
PUBLISHER: Harper Perennial, November 2008
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www.umrigar.com
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SUBJECT: Family / Coming of Age / Culture and World History (Memoir)

BOOK ESSENTIALS

Book Summary
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About the Author
Conversation Starters

PURCHASE

Indie Bookstores
Amazon.com
SUMMARY

*First Darling of the Morning* is the powerful and poignant memoir of bestselling author Thrity Umrigar, tracing the arc of her Bombay childhood and adolescence from her earliest memories to her eventual departure for the United States at age twenty-one. It is an evocative, emotionally charged story of a young life steeped in paradox; of a middle-class Parsi girl attending Catholic school in a predominantly Hindu city; of a guilt-ridden stranger in her own land, an affluent child in a country mired in abysmal poverty. She reveals intimate secrets and offers an unflinching look at family issues once considered unspeakable as she interweaves two fascinating coming-of-age stories—one of a small child, and one of a nation.
FIRST DARLING OF THE MORNING
Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood

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Harper Perennial, November 2008

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BOOK ESSENTIALS

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PURCHASE

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PRAISE

"[Umrigar] has never forgotten her native land, brilliantly rendered in three critically acclaimed novels and now in this latest bracingly honest and bittersweet memoir."
—Booklist (starred review)

"Sweet and biting. . . . A mixture of rawness and warmth. . . . Umrigar's memoir is colorful and moving." —Publishers Weekly

"Thrifty Umrigar has a knack for capturing people's quirks. In [this] book . . . she unflinchingly takes on her own, as well as those of her family, giving readers a vivid glimpse into an unfamiliar part of India's population. . . . Umrigar details the clash of cultures and contradictions that surrounded her as she grew up in 1960s Bombay, now known as Mumbai. . . . Her memoir is studded with bits of Indian history and colorful descriptions of Bombay. She captures perfectly the singsong mixture of English and Gujarati spoken in many Parsi households . . . Umrigar candidly portrays herself . . . Filled with poignant stories . . . Offers readers a rare glimpse at life in a country that is constantly changing, and a look at a little-known culture." —Boston Globe

"Persuasively re-creating voices and scenes, this memoir could almost be read as another novel. Umrigar builds a literary bridge between personal and historical truths. . . . Umrigar is narrating
CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Are there hints in this memoir that Umrigar would grow up to be a writer? If so, what are the different signposts and events that point to an eventual writing life? What are the ingredients that create writers?

2. Growing up in Bombay, Umrigar is exposed to many different cultural identities. When her teacher asks the class to come up with real Indian names for their story instead of English names, Umrigar finds herself at a loss. This theme, of not being in touch with Indian culture even though she is living within it, is very prominent throughout the narrative. What other Indian disconnects from culture does Umrigar experience?

3. Umrigar was told by her elders to give up her Enid Blyton stories for more mature material. She felt she had lost a loyal friend, since these stories were always there for her while she was growing up. Did you feel this way during those transitional years when adult material was being presented to you, but you still held on tight to those trustworthy books of your childhood? What role or importance do those early books have in our lives?

4. Throughout the memoir, Umrigar describes her various relationships and how they changed the way she defined herself. One such relationship was with her friend Jenny, who was from New York City, and made Umrigar feel she had a connection to America. Have you ever known someone who provided you with insight into another culture, whether it be a country, business, educational institution, etc., where you felt more connected and therefore more knowledgeable than your peers?

5. Umrigar has a very strained relationship with her mother that is seen during most of their encounters. Umrigar is often the victim of her mother's unstable emotions and her need to control. How did this affect Umrigar? What signs of affection appear amidst the turmoil of emotions between mother and daughter?

6. Umrigar searches for a sense of identity, as India undergoes a similar transition from colonialism. Do you see these parallels throughout the memoir? Do you think India's fluctuating identity had an impact on Umrigar's own journey toward self-identification? Do you think it helped turn her interest towards the United States?

7. All of the people in Umrigar's life play important roles in developing who she will become. Which individual seems to have the biggest impact on her life?

8. Umrigar constantly desires to escape throughout the memoir. Which aspects of her life is she trying to flee? Do you see any parallels to your own life?

9. The feeling of disconnect with India is prominent throughout the memoir. When Umrigar leaves for the United States, do you think she had a difficult time adjusting to a new culture? Do you think she may feel more at home in the United States where she can distance herself from all of the conflicts in her life?

10. The memoir is filled with descriptions of India and of a middle class family trying to survive in a time of great political tension. Did any of the details surprise you? Were any of your preconceived notions of India and Indian culture challenged by the author?
First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood

Booklist, September 1, 2008

* First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood.

By Thrity Umrigar.


[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

A melancholy mood suffuses Indian author Umrigar's eloquent coming-of-age memoir (after If Today Be Sweet, 2007). Born in Bombay to middle-class Parsi parents, smart, precocious Umrigar spent much of her childhood feeling out of place. She was very close to her gentle father and her beloved aunt, but her mother was menacing and cruel, frequently mocking her and beating her with a switch. Umrigar's life changed when she met Jesse, a forward-thinking—and rebellious—young woman five years her senior, who introduced her to the wonders of literature and art. Umrigar soaked it all in, even shunning her family's privileged existence after reading Irving Stone's Lust for Life (1934), a novel based on the life of Vincent Van Gogh. Umrigar's upbringing in an apolitical family left her unprepared for the passion she felt after participating in a demonstration against the government. A sense of restlessness, combined with relentless family discord, fed her desire to escape to the U.S. The memoir ends with Umrigar at 21, departing for America, where she now works as a journalist and associate professor of English at Case Western Reserve University. But she has never forgotten her native land, brilliantly rendered in three critically acclaimed novels and now in this latest bracingly honest and bittersweet memoir.--Allison Block

YA: A rich coming-of-age story in which the universality of teen alienation is readily apparent. BO.

Block, Allison


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Thrity Umrigar

Contemporary Authors Online, 2013
Updated: March 1, 2013

Born: 1961 in Bombay, India
Nationality: American
Occupation: Novelist

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

Contributor to periodicals, including Washington Post, Cleveland Plain Dealer, and Boston Globe.


Nieman fellowship, Harvard University, 1999; awards from Society of Professional Journalists and Press Club of Cleveland.

Born 1961, in Bombay (now Mumbai), India; immigrated to the United States, 1982; naturalized U.S. citizen.

**Education:** Ohio State University, M.A., 1983; Kent State University, Ph.D., 1997. **Addresses:** Home: Cleveland Heights, OH. Office: Guilford Hall, Case Western University, Cleveland, OH 44106. Agent: Marly Rusoff and Associates, Inc., P.O. Box 524, Bronxville, NY 10708. **E-mail:** tnu@case.edu.

"Sidelights"

Thrity Umrigar was born in India, and moved to the United States at the age of twenty-one to study journalism at Ohio State University. She then worked as a journalist in Ohio for seventeen years before joining the staff of the English department at Case Western Reserve University. Umrigar was an only child, but she grew up in a large extended family with several aunts and an uncle, in addition to her parents. In an interview on her home page that was originally conducted by Sonia Faleiro for Mumbai Tehelka, she stated: "I never felt I belonged only to my parents but to this larger group of people." The experience, she said, taught her to get along with many different kinds of people, and it also gave her an expanded definition of family. "So," she said, "I keep 'adopting' new family members along the way."
Umrigar noted in the online interview that she came to the United States because she realized that if she remained in India, "I would never be totally independent and would never discover who exactly I was as a person. I wanted to live in a place where I would rise or fall based on my own efforts and talents." Her father encouraged her to follow her dream. She chose Ohio State University because, as she explained it: "I was sitting in my living room in Bombay, checking off a list of American universities that offered an M.A. in journalism when my eyes fell on 'Ohio State University.' There was a Joan Baez record playing... her song, 'Banks of the Ohio.' ... I looked up and thought, 'It's a sign,' and decided to apply there."

Though Umrigar had written fiction during her teens in India, she did not begin to devote herself seriously to the craft until she finished her doctorate in journalism. After completing her dissertation, she won a Nieman fellowship to study for a year at Harvard University. This gave Umrigar the opportunity to resume work on a novel that she had begun a few years earlier. During a visit to Bombay during the Christmas holiday, "the novel really took off," she remarked in her home page interview. "I remember lying on the couch in my father's apartment one afternoon and vowing to finish the novel. I felt a desperate, burning urge to tell the story of the people I'd grown up around." The book, *Bombay Time*, depicts the lives of people in the closely knit Parsi community of Wadia Baug. The Parsis, a minority in India, are the descendants of people who fled Persia a thousand years ago. Set at a wedding, the book allows the reader to observe each of the guests arriving and hear their various stories of love, loss, and betrayal. "Against the backdrop of a wedding reception, I tell the life stories of the individual residents—who they were in their youth, what has made them who they are today—and ask the question of how does one live a middle-class existence in a city of so much poverty?" Umrigar explained in the interview. "Growing up in India exposed me to many stories of startling pathos and tragedy," she continued. "Yet I watched these people live their lives with a typically Bombay brand of humor, with bravado and courage. I wanted to commemorate their lives... I also am fascinated by the insider-outsider status of the Parsis of India. I wanted to examine their love-hate relationship with Bombay."

The book was well received by several reviewers. In the *Washington Post Book World*, Helen C. Wan wrote: "Umrigar is at her best when imagining each character's colorful history and circumstances, and vividly portraying jealousies, passion and unfulfilled ambitions," adding that the author "displays an impressive talent for conceiving multidimensional, sympathetic characters with life-like emotional quandaries and psychological stumbling blocks." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called the book "an impressive debut offering a glimpse into a cultural world... that most Westerners know only in its barest outlines." In *Booklist*, Bonnie Johnston described the book as "sweet, frightening, poignant, and chaotic." *Library Journal* reviewer Michelle Reale wrote that the novel "poignantly explicates" the Parsi community in a "startling contemporary portrait."

Umrigar once told CA: "Indian-American writers have a wonderful canvas to draw on. A larger-than-life city like Bombay is a fiction writer's dream come true because the city throngs with drama and pathos and humanity and passion and tragedy and comedy. There are stories around every corner in a place like that. And we are lucky enough to live in an age where at last there is an interest in hearing the stories of people living on the other side of the globe. My purpose in writing *Bombay Time* was to make sense of the lives of the people I grew up with because, like the main character Rusi, many of them believe that their lives have ended in failure. And I refuse to believe that. So I saw the book as the act of gathering in all their stories like flowers, and turning them into art, into a bouquet, if you will, and handing it back to them."

Umrigar's second novel, *The Space between Us*, was also well received and became a national best seller. The author offers a look at life in two different households in Bombay, showing how, even in modern times, the nation is ruled by class and social structure, firmly rooted in traditions and in the perceived difference between the sexes. One example is the relationship between Sera Dubash, who is an upper-class Parsi homemaker, and her servant, Bhima. The two may share a cup of tea and chat as if they are close friends, and yet Sera is seated in a
chair while Bhima is left to sit on the floor and must use her own cup for her tea. However, Umrigar also illustrates that, while class separates the women, they are united in their treatment at the hands of men, who consider all women inferior.

Joy Humphrey, in a Library Journal review, wrote that "Umrigar beautifully and movingly wends her way through the complexities and subtleties of these ... relationships." A reviewer for the Economist commented that "the author prevents her story from descending into emotional soup by tackling, across the span of her characters’ lives, many of the issues affecting India today."

In If Today Be Sweet, Umrigar depicts the painful choices before grieving widow Tehmina. Following the death of her husband, she goes to visit her son and his family at their home in Ohio, where her son settled following graduate school in the United States. Tehmina must determine if she should move to Ohio and stay with her son or return to Bombay, her true home and the place where she lived with her husband, to continue her life alone.

Booklist reviewer Allison Block called the book "a sublime, cross-cultural tale about lives driven by tradition and transformed by love."

The Weight of Heaven is about a grieving couple who move to India after the sudden death of their young son. Frank and Ellie Benton, an earnest young couple from Ann Arbor, Michigan, are devastated after their seven-year-old son dies shortly after contracting meningitis. Frank works for a company that produces herbal diabetes treatments, and when the company asks him to take over management of its plant in India, he and Ellie see the move as an opportunity to make a new start. Ellie finds it easy to adjust to their new life; she strikes up a close friendship with Nandita, a journalist, and finds purpose in her work to improve the lives of the impoverished villagers around them. Frank, however, finds himself reviled as the face of the greedy corporate West, intent on robbing developing countries of their precious resources (in this case, a plant from which Herbal Solutions extracts its product) and bent on exploiting indigenous workers. Unable to find a way to appreciate Indian people and customs, Frank feels emotionally isolated. Eventually he becomes attached to Ramesh, the young son of the woman who cooks and cleans for him and Ellie. This bond, which quickly grows intense, angers Ramesh's father, Prakash, who feels that Frank is buying the boy's affection with pricey toys and the promise to help him attend school in the United States.

A Publishers Weekly reviewer admired Umrigar's treatment of the theme of culture class in this novel but found the story line about Frank's obsession with Ramesh even more compelling. Allison Block, writing in Booklist, noted the author's "rich prose and vibrant depictions of India," and called The Weight of Heaven "a bold, beautifully rendered tale of cultures that clash and coalesce." Highlighting the book's somber and difficult themes, Ellen Emry Heltzel wrote in the Seattle Times that "Umrigar carries a burden as heavy as the title by using a tale of personal tragedy to depict the balance of power in global economics. Although her writing sometimes lapses into cliché and the commonplace, she's dispassionate and astute enough to deliver at both levels. This is a morality tale that's tuned to the times."

Described by a Publishers Weekly reviewer as "colorful and moving," First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood chronicles Umrigar's childhood and adolescence during the 1960s and 1970s. A member of the Parsi minority in a majority Hindu culture, the author was further set apart by attending Catholic school, and questions about how and where she fits in pervade the memoir. Though Umrigar's family was comfortably middle-class, home life was far from easy. The author describes her mother as an angry woman with a volatile temper who beat her daughter with a cane. Close to her father but unable to confide in him, Umrigar found solace with Mehroo, an unmarried aunt who lived with the family. Surrounded by family dysfunction and by
the immense squalor and poverty of the city, Umrigar sought escape through friends, books, and pop music, ultimately imagining a new life for herself--no longer as her family's "First Darling of the Morning" but as an independent woman in the United States.

Lisa Klopfer observed in a Library Journal review that the memoir explores "not just [Umrigar's personal heartache but also that of a global middle-class cohort," though the author's experiences growing up in the throes of postcolonial India give the book a unique context. A writer for Kirkus Reviews, describing the memoir as "stunningly detailed," recommended it as a "heartfelt memoir about the significance of origins and self-identity."

Umrigar writes every day. She explained in the interview on her home page that "it helps to take the mystique out of fiction writing--which I think is a healthy thing--and to approach it as a job, with a more roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-to-work kind of attitude." She has always been interested in stories "that buck the trend, that the minority position. And for fiction to be startling and fresh, I think that posture--of telling the unpopular truth--is almost essential."

The World We Found, is the story of four middle-aged women, who decades before had attended university together in Bombay. They were all student activists who for a fought for a "New India." Now, much later, they reflect on whether or not conditions have changed.

Reviewing the work in the Washington Post Book World, contributor Frances Itani assessed: "It takes courage to explore the idealism and hopes of youth and to compare these with the realities of lives lived three decades later. ... Umrigar handles these important themes with expertise and without judgment. A storyteller through and through, she ensures that her characters face up to the costs and consequences created by their choices, right or wrong, principled or unprincipled." Boston Globe contributor Kevin O'Kelly provided: "This is a novel that rewards reading, and even re-reading. The World We Found is a powerful meditation on friendship, on loss, and all the regrets of middle age, mingled with the recognition that for most of us it's not too late to remake our lives in some way." Betty Hafner a contributor to the Gaithersburg, Illinois Town Courier, lauded: "Umrigar's characters, no matter how incidental, come to life. She allows us to hear the four women review their youthful lives at a time of great political and social change for India with the added insight of doing so through the lens of their present."

Further Readings

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

PERIODICALS