

**Title:** Thrity Umrigar  
**Known As:** Umrigar, Thrity N.; Umrigar, Thrity  
American Novelist ( 1961 - )  
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#### PERSONAL INFORMATION:

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.

#### CAREER:

Journalist, author, critic, and educator. *Lorain Journal*, Lorain, OH, journalist, 1985-87; *Akron Beacon*, Akron, OH, journalist, 1987- 2002; Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH, 2002--, became assistant professor of English, 2003.

#### AWARDS:

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

#### WORKS:

#### WRITINGS:

- *First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood*, HarperCollins Publishers (New Delhi, India), 2004.

#### NOVELS

- *Bombay Time*, Picador (New York, NY), 2001.
- *The Space between Us*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2005.
- *If Today Be Sweet*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2007.
- *The Weight of Heaven: A Novel*, Harper (New York, NY), 2009.

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

#### 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 throbs 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 also move to Ohio and stay with her son, or if she should 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: A Novel* 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."

#### FURTHER READINGS:

#### FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

#### BOOKS

- Umrigar, Thrity, *First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood*, HarperCollins Publishers (New Delhi, India), 2004.

#### PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, May 15, 2001, Bonnie Johnston, review of *Bombay Time*, p. 1734; January 1, 2006, Allison Block, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 62; May 15, 2007, Allison Block, review of *If Today Be Sweet*, p. 20; September 1, 2008, Allison Block, review of *First Darling of the Morning*, p. 25; February 1, 2009, Allison Block, review of *The Weight of Heaven: A Novel*, p. 28.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, April 10, 2009, Yvonne Zipp, review of *The Weight of Heaven*.
- *Economist*, January 28, 2006, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 82.
- *Elle*, March 22, 2009, Corrie Pikul, review of *The Weight of Heaven*.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, January 13, 2006, Missy Schwartz, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 85.
- *Globe & Mail* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), February 4, 2006, Keith Garebian, review of *The Space between Us*, p. D5.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, May 1, 2001, review of *Bombay Time*, p. 621; November 15, 2005, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 1210; May 1, 2007, review of *If Today Be Sweet*; October 15, 2008, review of *First Darling of the Morning*; March 1, 2009, review of *The Weight of Heaven*.
- *Library Journal*, June 1, 2001, Michelle Reale, review of *Bombay Time*, p. 219; December 1, 2005, Joy Humphrey, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 117; April 15, 2007, Marika Zemke, review of *If Today Be Sweet*, p. 76; August 1,

- 2008, Lisa Klopfer, review of *First Darling of the Morning*, p. 93; February 1, 2009, Susanne Wells, review of *The Weight of Heaven*, p. 68.
- *Marie Claire*, April 1, 2009, Katie Charles, review of *The Weight of Heaven*, p. 71.
  - *National Post*, March 4, 2006, Patricia Robertson, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 11.
  - *New York Times Book Review*, January 22, 2006, Ligaya Mishan, "The Clash of Caste," review of *The Space between Us*, p. 14.
  - *Nieman Reports*, spring, 2003, review of *First Darling of the Morning*, p. 108.
  - *Publishers Weekly*, July 2, 2001, review of *Bombay Time*, p. 51; December 5, 2005, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 30; April 9, 2007, review of *If Today Be Sweet*, p. 33; August 11, 2008, review of *First Darling of the Morning*, p. 35; December 1, 2008, review of *The Weight of Heaven*, p. 25.
  - *Seattle Times*, May 2, 2009, Ellen Emry Heltzel, review of *The Weight of Heaven*.
  - *Times Literary Supplement*, April 7, 2006, Chitralkha Basu, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 22.
  - *Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), August 5, 2001, review of *Bombay Time*, p. 3; July 7, 2002, review of *Bombay Time*, p. 6.
  - *Virginia Quarterly Review*, summer, 2006, Mark Meier, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 271.
  - *Washington Post Book World*, July 22, 2001, Helen C. Wan, review of *Bombay Time*, p. T5; January 8, 2006, Frances Itani, review of *The Space between Us*, p. 4.

## ONLINE

- *Cleveland Plain Dealer Online*, <http://www.cleveland.com/> (June 17, 2009), Ellen Emry Heltzel, review of *The Weight of Heaven*.
- *Curled Up with a Good Book*, <http://www.curledup.com/> (June 17, 2009), Swapna Krishna, review of *First Darling of the Morning*; Michael Leonard, review of *The Weight of Heaven*.
- *Marly Rusoff and Associates Web site*, <http://www.rusoffagency.com/> (June 17, 2009), author profile.
- *Thrity Umrigar Home Page*, <http://www.umrigar.com> (June 17, 2009).
- *Writer's Voice with Francesca Rheannon Online*, <http://www.writersvoice.net/> (June 17, 2009), transcript of radio interview with Umrigar.\*

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Thrity Umrigar has a new novel out, "The Space Between Us," published by HarperCollins:

"There are two major female characters in 'The Space Between Us'--Sera Dubash, the upper middle-class Bombayite, and Bhima, the servant who has worked in the Dubash household for many years. The character of Bhima is based on a real person. She worked in the house I grew up in Bombay, a shadow flitting around our middle-class house, her thin brown hands cleaning furniture she was not allowed to sit on, cooking food she was not allowed to share at the family dining table.

"But despite these obvious divisions, there was another reality, one that I also noticed when I was a child: I saw servants trusting their meager savings to their mistresses as a way of protecting their money from the grasping hands of drunken husbands; I saw Bhima and the females in my household working peaceably together in the kitchen in a kind of domestic shorthand.

"I have always been fascinated by this intersection of gender and class--how the lives of women from the working class and the middle-class seemed at once so connected and so removed from each other.

"It is a theme that has interested me--haunted me, even--for as long as I can remember. One of the reasons I have always loved Bombay is because it is a city, riddled with contradictions and paradox. In an apartment in a small corner of the city, I grew up experiencing a microcosm of this larger paradox--this strange tug-of-war between intimacy and unfamiliarity, between awareness and blindness.

"'The Space Between Us' is an attempt to understand, through the illuminating searchlight of fiction, paradoxes that I could never make sense of in real life. I began the novel in the spring of 2003. But, in fact, I have been writing this book forever."

Umrigar has been a journalist for 17 years, and has written for The Washington Post, The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer, and other national newspapers. She also regularly writes for The Boston Globe's book pages. Umrigar teaches creative writing and journalism at Case Western Reserve University. She is also the author of the novel "Bombay Time" and the memoir "First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood."

**Named Works:** The Space Between Us (Book) Product introduction



Title: The Clash of Caste. ("The Space Between Us") (Book Review)

Pub: *The New York Times Book Review*

Detail: Ligaya Mishan. (Jan 22, 2006): p.14(L). (625 words) From *General OneFile*.

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## THE SPACE BETWEEN US

By Thrity Umrigar.

321 pp. William Morrow/

HarperCollins Publishers. \$24.95.

IN the classic upstairs-downstairs story, you always have a sneaking suspicion that downstairs, freed of corsets and etiquette, the servants are having a lot more fun than their prim, monocled masters. But no such palliative exists in the world of Thrity Umrigar's second novel, which examines the class divide in Bombay (as Umrigar continues to call Mumbai) through the relationship of a mistress and her servant.

In a city where the densest slums have a population of one million per square mile, "downstairs" is fairly grim. It's hardly surprising, then, that Bhima, the longtime housekeeper of a middle-class Parsi widow named Sera, has had a life of woe: her once loving husband was crippled in an industrial accident, took solace in alcohol and eventually

absconded with their only son; her daughter and son-in-law both died of AIDS. At the novel's start, her orphaned granddaughter, the first in the family to get a proper education, has dropped out of college because she's pregnant.

Fortunately, Bhima's employer is generous. Sera has sponsored Bhima's granddaughter through school, and she now proposes to help the girl obtain an abortion. (Which, Bhima muses, is preferable to the way "some other" Indian grandmothers might deal with an out-of-wedlock pregnancy: "a quick shove down an open well, a kerosene can and a match, a sale to a brothel.") Meanwhile, Sera's friends tease her for treating Bhima "like she is the Kohinoor diamond" and warn that her charitable efforts will end badly. ("Did you see that story in last week's Times of India? . . . Poor woman, stabbed in her bed by her own servant.")

But Sera is well aware of the limits on her relationship with her housekeeper. In Sera's home, Bhima drinks from a special glass "that is kept aside for her," and she squats on the floor rather than use a chair. "The thought of Bhima sitting on her furniture repulses her," Sera admits to herself. When she spies her daughter hugging Bhima, she must "suppress the urge to order her . . . to go wash her hands."

The irony is that Sera herself has been shunned in the past for being "unclean." As a young woman, she married a seemingly urbane Parsi who became a viciously abusive husband. While living with his parents, she was forced to abide by her mother-in-law's rule that a menstruating woman must be quarantined, using separate utensils and eating meals alone in her bedroom. Now, years later, she fails to recognize the parallel between her mother-in-law's superstition and her own physical aversion to Bhima, whom she imagines to be covered in a "sheen of dirtiness."

Umrigar is a perceptive and often piercing writer, although her prose occasionally tips into flamboyant overstatement. (Walking to visit Bhima in the slums, Sera can't avoid "the flies, thick as guilt.") Umrigar's last book was a memoir about growing up in a well-off Parsi family in Bombay, and her portrait of Sera as a woman unable to "transcend her middle-class skin" feels bracingly honest. But Umrigar never makes a similar imaginative leap with Bhima. The housekeeper seems exaggeratedly ignorant and too good-hearted to be true.

Yet this novel does allow for one moment when Sera and Bhima close up the space between them. In a flashback, Bhima sees the results of a savage beating the young Sera has received from her husband and, without making any explicit reference to the assault, gently rubs medicinal oil over her mistress's bruises. At first, Sera recoils from Bhima's touch, then tearfully submits. It's a powerful scene, with an uncomfortable echo of the age-old way the social classes have come together: furtively, in silence, in the dark.

**Named Works:** The Space Between Us (Book)

### Source Citation

Mishan, Ligaya. "The Clash of Caste." *The New York Times Book Review* 22 Jan. 2006: 14(L). *General OneFile*. Web. 25 Oct. 2010.

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**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 excruciatingly 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 political 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.

## PARSEES).

A small community in India, adherents of the Zoroastrian religion and originally emigrants from Persia. According to the census of 1881 their total number in India was 85,397, to which must be added for sake of completeness about 3,000 scattered about various other countries and also about 8,000 in various part of Persia — thus bringing up the total of Zoroastrians in the world to something under 100,000. Of the 85,397 in India, 82,091 were by the same census found in the Bombay presidency, and 3,306 scattered over the rest of the country. Of those in the Bombay presidency more than half (48,507) resided in Bombay City, 6,227 in Surat, and 3,088 in Broach; about 10,000 being in Native States, and the rest in other parts, chiefly of Guzerat. The census of 1901 reveals a rise to a total of 94,190 in India, of whom 78,800 are found in the Bombay presidency, not inclusive of 8,409 found in Baroda State. In Persia the Zoroastrians (called Iranis to distinguish them from those in India) are chiefly found in Yezd and the twenty-four surrounding villages, where according to figures collected in 1854, there were a thousand families, comprising 6,658 souls — a few merchants, the remainder artisans or agriculturalists. At Kerman there were also about 450; and at Teheran, the capital of Persia, about fifty of the merchant class. They were formerly much more numerous; they now show a constant tendency to decline.

## History

This small community owes its origin to those few Persians who, when Khalif Omar subjugated Persia in A.D. 641, resisted the efforts of the conquerors to impose on them the Moslem faith. Escaping to the coast they found a first refuge in the Island of Ormuz, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf; but having here little permanent chance of safety or sustenance for any large number, they began a series of emigrations across the seas, landing first at Diu on the Kathiawar coast some time about A.D. 700. After remaining here for nineteen years they were led, by an omen in the stars, to cross the Gulf of Cambay. After suffering shipwreck they landed at Sanjan, some twenty-five miles south of Daman on the Guzerat coast, where the local ruler, Jadi Râna, on hearing their pathetic story and an account of their religious beliefs, allowed them to settle on condition that they would learn the language of the country, abstain from the use of arms, dress and conduct their marriages in the Hindu manner etc. A spirit of accommodation to surroundings has characterized the Parsis throughout their history, and account at once for many of their usages in dress and manners, and for their subsequent success in industrial arts and trades. They thus became a regular part of the population of Sanjan, adopted the Guzerati language as their vernacular, and erected their first fire temple in A.D. 721. Here they remained for over five centuries of uneventful history, till in 1305 the incursion of the Moslems forced them to take refuge elsewhere. Partly by further emigrations from Persia, and partly by spreading from their centre at Sanjan, they gradually settled in various other localities such as Cambay, Ankleshwar, Variav, Vankaner, Broach, Surat, Thana, Chaul etc., and traces of them are found even as far as Delhi. When in the sixteenth century the Portuguese at Thana brought moral pressure to bear in order to make them Christians, they managed by a subterfuge to escape to Kalvan, only returning in 1774 when Thana had fallen under British rule. The advent of the English to Surat in 1612 opened up new connections for industry and trade, so that Surat, as well as Broach, soon became two of their chief settlements. Finally, when the government of the East India Company was (in 1668) transferred to Bombay, the Parsis followed and soon began to occupy posts of trust in

connection with Government and public works in Bombay. Gradually certain families acquired wealth and prominence (Sorabji, Modi, Kama, Wadia, Jejeebhoy, Readymoney, Dadysset, Petit, Patel, Mehta, Allbless, Tata etc.), many of whom are noted for their participation in the public life of the city, and for their various educational, industrial, and charitable enterprises. The Parsis had formerly a domestic tribunal called the Panchayat, which possessed judicial control and the power of excommunication; but for nearly a century back its influence has been curtailed, so that at present it is little more than a trust for the administration of public charitable funds.

The education movement began among the Parsis in 1849. Parsi schools since then have been multiplied, but other schools and colleges are also freely frequented. In 1854 they started the "Persian Zoroastrian Amelioration Fund," which, after long efforts lasting till 1882, succeeded in obtaining for their poor Irani brethren in Persia a remission of the Jazia tax, besides inaugurating schools and charitable institutions among them. Many of these Persians come over to India and set up cheap restaurants, which on that account are familiarly known as "Irani shops."

The Parsis are divided into two sects, the Shehanchais or old, and the Kadmis or new party — not on any point of religion, but merely on a question of chronology (like that of the "old" and "new style" in Europe). The old party follows the Indian, and the new party the Persian way of framing the calendar, which makes a difference of about one month in the observance of their "New Year's day." Among salient peculiarities should be mentioned: worship in fire temples (which contain nothing remarkable except a vase of sandalwood kept perpetually alight); praying on the sea shore to the rising and setting sun; celebration of marriages in public assembly; exposure of their dead to birds of prey, in what are called "towers of silence"; exclusiveness as regards marriage; refusal to incorporate aliens into religious membership; the rule of never uncovering the head; and of never smoking. But they are free from the Hindu trammels of caste, have no religious restrictions about food, are free to travel and take their meals with other races etc. It should be remarked that their worship of fire, as explained by themselves, is not open to the charge of idolatry, but is reducible to a *relative* veneration of that element as the highest and purest symbol of the Divinity. The Parsis have remained faithful to their Zoroastrian faith and are proud of their racial purity. And although the colour among many families, chiefly of the lower classes, reveals the effect of mixed marriages, the community as a whole is unmixed, and marriage with outsiders is rare. In very recent times the influence of Western ideas has led to a relaxing of the old religious and social bonds, so that many are now merely nominal believers, while others dabble in theosophy and religious eclecticism, and adopt such habits as smoking, the uncovering of the head, and even marrying European women etc. For an account of their religion see AVESTA.

## **The Space Between Us**

A Novel

by Thrity Umrigar

### About This Book

Each morning, Bhima, a domestic servant in contemporary Bombay, leaves her own small shanty in the slums to tend to another woman's house. In Sera Dubash's home, Bhima scrubs the floors of a house in which she remains an outsider. She cleans furniture she is not permitted to sit on. She washes glasses from which she is not allowed to drink. Yet despite being separated from each other by blood and class, she and Sera find themselves bound by gender and shared life experiences.

Sera is an upper-middle-class Parsi housewife whose opulent surroundings hide the shame and disappointment of her abusive marriage. A widow, she devotes herself to her family, spending much of her time caring for her pregnant daughter, Dinaz, a kindhearted, educated professional, and her charming and successful son-in-law, Viraf.

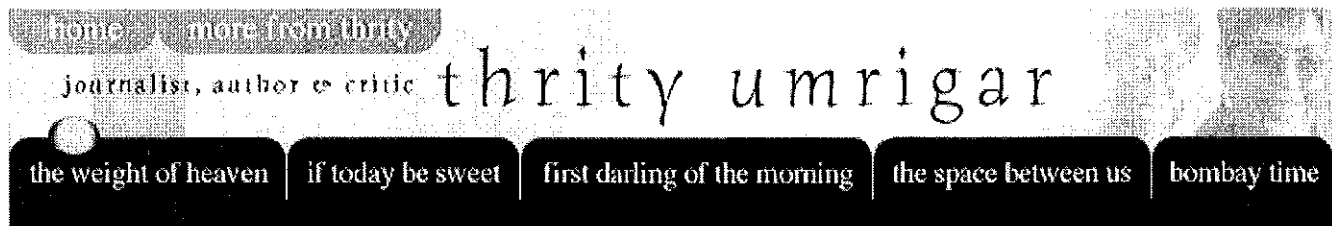
Bhima, a stoic illiterate hardened by a life of despair and loss, has worked in the Dubash household for more than twenty years. Cursed by fate, she sacrifices all for her beautiful, headstrong granddaughter, Maya, a university student whose education -- paid for by Sera -- will enable them to escape the slums. But when an unwed Maya becomes pregnant by a man whose identity she refuses to reveal, Bhima's dreams of a better life for her granddaughter, as well as for herself, may be shattered forever.

Poignant and compelling, evocative and unforgettable, **The Space Between Us** is an intimate portrait of a distant yet familiar world. Set in modern-day India and witnessed through two compelling and achingly real women, the novel shows how the lives of the rich and the poor are intrinsically connected yet vastly removed from each other, and vividly captures how the bonds of womanhood are pitted against the divisions of class and culture.

### Discussion Questions

1. At the end of **The Space Between Us**, Sera has a tough choice to make. Can you envision a scenario where she could've made a different choice? What would it have taken for her to have made a different choice? And what would be the consequences of that choice?
2. The novel deals with a relationship that, despite all the good will in the world, is ultimately based on the exploitation of one human being by another. Has this novel caused you to look at any situations in your own life where you may be benefiting from the labor or poverty of another?
3. Remarking on the fact that Bhima is not allowed to sit on the furniture in Sera Dubash's home, or drink from the same glass, it could be said that the novel is about a kind of "Indian Apartheid." Do you think that's putting it too strongly? If not, can you identify any parallels in contemporary America?
4. The novel tracks the lives of two women. Trace some of the ways in which their lives resemble each other's. What are the points of departure?
5. Neither Sera nor Bhima end up with happy, successful marriages. Why? Trace the factors that cause each marriage to fail. And for all its failings, which woman has the better marriage?

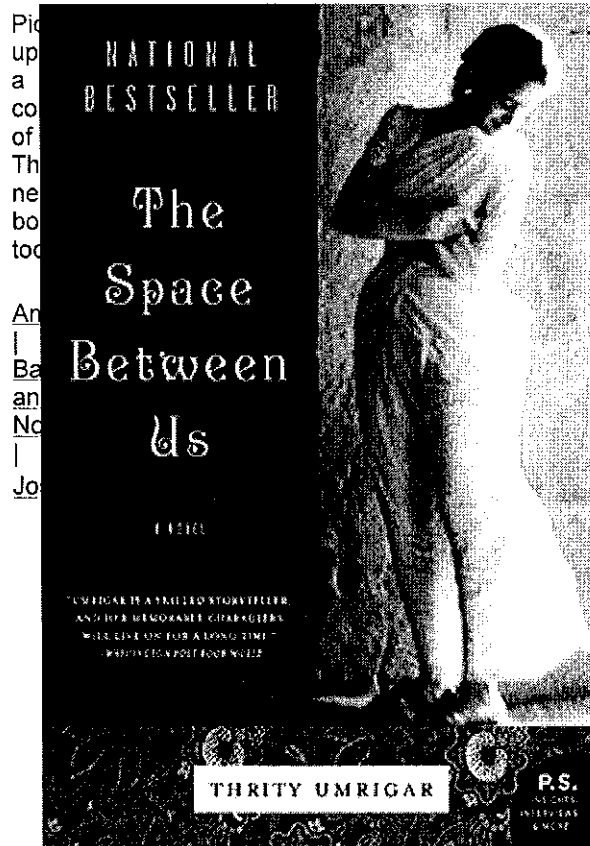
6. Sera's mother-in-law, Banu, makes life miserable for the young Sera. Is Banu the kind of mother-in-law that many American women can identify with? Examine the ways in which she is or isn't the typical in-law.
7. The Afghani balloonwalla is a minor but pivotal character in the novel. What is his role? What does he symbolize or represent?
8. The novel is told from the points of view of the two women, Bhima and Sera. Should it have included more points of view? For instance, should Viraf have had his own "voice"?
9. How do you read the ending of the book? Is it a hopeful ending? Do you think the ending is justified, given what awaits Bhima the next day?
10. What is your opinion about Sera, especially given the choice she makes in the end. Is she a sympathetic character? Or is she part of the problem?
11. This is a novel about the intersection of class and gender. Can you think of ways in which gender bonds the two women and ways in which class divides them?
12. Is Gopal justified in being furious at Bhima for having signed the contract that the accountant puts before her during the cab ride to the hospital? Would the family's fate have been different if she hadn't signed that paper?
13. Two characters who help Bhima -- Hyder, the boy in the hospital and the Afghani balloon seller, both happen to be Muslims. Why? What does the novel say about the issues of religious and communal divisions in India?
14. What does this novel say about the importance of education? Think of some examples where the lack of education hurts a character and conversely, instances of where having an education benefits someone.
15. In some ways, the city of Bombay is a character in the novel. What are your impressions of Bombay after having read this novel? Does the author portray the city with affection or disdain?
16. What societal changes and/or personal choices would need to be different in order for us to envision the possibility of someone like Bhima having a better life?
17. The author has said that although the plot of **The Space Between Us** is a work of fiction, the character of Bhima is based on a woman who used to work in her home when the writer was a teenager. Is there any person in your own life who has inspired you enough to want to write a book about them? What is it about that person that had a deep impact on you?



## Reviews

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### The New York Times

January 22, 2006

'The Space Between Us,' by Thrity Umrigar

The Clash of Caste  
 Review by LIGAYA MISHAN

In the classic upstairs-downstairs story, you always have a sneaking suspicion that downstairs, freed of corsets and etiquette, the servants are having a lot more fun than their prim, monocled masters. But no such palliative exists in the world of Thrity Umrigar's second novel, which examines the class divide in Bombay (as Umrigar continues to call Mumbai) through the relationship of a mistress and her servant.

In a city where the densest slums have a population of one million per square mile, "downstairs" is fairly grim. It's hardly surprising, then, that Bhima, the longtime

housekeeper of a middle-class Parsi widow named Sera, has had a life of woe: her once loving husband was crippled in an industrial accident, took solace in alcohol and eventually absconded with their only son; her daughter and son-in-law both died of AIDS. At the novel's start, her orphaned granddaughter, the first in the family to get a proper education, has dropped out of college because she's pregnant.

Fortunately, Bhima's employer is generous. Sera has sponsored Bhima's granddaughter through school, and she now proposes to help the girl obtain an abortion. (Which, Bhima muses, is preferable to the way "some other" Indian grandmothers might deal with an out-of-wedlock pregnancy: "a quick shove down an open well, a kerosene can and a match, a sale to a brothel.") Meanwhile, Sera's friends tease her for treating Bhima "like she is the Kohinoor diamond" and warn that her charitable efforts will end badly. ("Did you see that story in last week's Times of India? . . . Poor woman, stabbed in her bed by her own servant.")

But Sera is well aware of the limits on her relationship with her housekeeper. In Sera's home, Bhima drinks from a special glass "that is kept aside for her," and she squats on the floor rather than use a chair. "The thought of Bhima sitting on her furniture repulses her," Sera admits to herself. When she spies her daughter hugging Bhima, she must "suppress the urge to order her . . . to go wash her hands."

The irony is that Sera herself has been shunned in the past for being "unclean." As a young woman, she married a seemingly urbane Parsi who became a viciously abusive husband. While living with his parents, she was forced to abide by her mother-in-law's rule that a menstruating woman must be quarantined, using separate utensils and eating meals alone in her bedroom. Now, years later, she fails to recognize the parallel between her mother-in-law's superstition and her own physical aversion to Bhima, whom she imagines to be covered in a "sheen of dirtiness."

Umrigar is a perceptive and often piercing writer, although her prose occasionally tips into flamboyant overstatement. (Walking to visit Bhima in the slums, Sera can't avoid "the flies, thick as guilt.") Umrigar's last book was a memoir about growing up in a well-off Parsi family in Bombay, and her portrait of Sera as a woman unable to "transcend her middle-class skin" feels bracingly honest. But Umrigar never makes a similar imaginative leap with Bhima. The housekeeper seems exaggeratedly ignorant and too good-hearted to be true.

Yet this novel does allow for one moment when Sera and Bhima close up the space between them. In a flashback, Bhima sees the results of a savage beating the young Sera has received from her husband and, without making any explicit reference to the assault, gently rubs medicinal oil over her mistress's bruises. At first, Sera recoils from Bhima's touch, then tearfully submits. It's a powerful scene, with an uncomfortable echo of the age-old way the social classes have come together: furtively, in silence, in the dark.

Ligaya Mishan is on the staff of The New Yorker.

### **The Economist**

January 28, 2006 - U.S. Edition

Distance and intimacy;

OUT of India's seething hotch-potch of humanity Thrity Umrigar has created two vivid female characters, each representative of thousands of real-life Indian women.

Sera Dubash is an upper-middle-class Parsi housewife. She lives a privileged life in an affluent Mumbai household with her happily married daughter and son-in-law. Bhima Gopal is Sera's servant. She is old, poor, tired: "dried out, scooped out, as hollow and wrinkled as a walnut shell". Each morning she leaves her mud-floored hut in the squalid slum where she lives to cook and clean at Sera's house.

At the heart of this novel is the symbiotic relationship-the essence of distance and intimacy-between Sera and Bhima which, after 20 years, remains defined by their differing class, education and wealth. Although she is thought of as one of the family, Bhima polishes furniture she is forbidden to sit on and washes cups she may not use. She has her own utensils and a private bar of soap. When the two women drink tea together Sera sits at the table while Bhima squats on the floor.

In spite of these differences their lives have many parallels. Both have watched "the bloom fade from their marriages", both have supported one another in times of hardship, and both have pinned their future happiness on the younger generation, a dream that splinters like a shattered mirror when their loyalty to their families and to each other is cruelly tested.

This ultimately tragic story is told against the vibrant backdrop of modern Mumbai, an exuberant metropolis of 12m, which Bhima now barely recognises: "something snarling and mean and cruel had been unleashed in it." The book's pages glow with descriptions of the city. Iridescent colours, noise, the smell of frying bhelpuri and everywhere people, people, people-office workers, street urchins, legless beggars, nut vendors, slum dwellers, balloon sellers, call-girls in high heels, brash T-shirted teenagers-the common currency of the developing world.

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: poverty engendering poverty; the power of privilege and wealth; domestic violence; class; education; women's rights; AIDS. This adds richness, making "The Space Between Us" far more than an analysis of fate and a portrait of the bonds of womanhood. It is also a powerful social commentary on the glorious and frustrating jigsaw puzzle that is modern India.

### **The Montreal Gazette**

By PAT DONNELLY

After reading Thrity Umrigar's *The Space Between Us*, I felt as if I had just returned from a trip to Bombay. Although I was happy to be home again, I regretted leaving the people to whom Umrigar had introduced me during my imaginary sojourn. Especially Bhima, faithful servant, devoted grandmother and determined survivor, a character based on the housekeeper who facilitated household maintenance during Umrigar's childhood in Bombay. Guilt may have introduced Bhima to the page. But affection and admiration have made her whole, a character so vibrant she carries the Bollywood drama of this



book beyond itself, into potential bestseller heaven.

There's nothing new about literary exploration of the servant-employer relationship. Memorable underlings have been around for centuries - mainly in supporting roles. But allowing them to narrate (as the butler did in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*) or to become central to the action has been a more recent innovation attributable to the rise of democracy and the prevalence of television (*Hazel*, *Beulah*, *The Nanny*).

As the title suggests, *The Space Between Us* is a story of two solitudes, that of Bhima, an illiterate, lower-caste Hindu, and her employer, an educated, aristocratic Parsi widow.

Umrigar offers equality of consideration to both, shifting the point of view from one to the other as she interweaves the stories of their parallel lives.

Bhima is dirt poor.

Sera lives comfortably, sharing her home with her cheerful daughter, Dinaz, and charming son-in-law, Viraf.

Yet both of these women have proven themselves able to endure what we suspect we could not. Sera's late husband, Feroz, physically abused her while his insane mother, Banu, drove her to the brink: "Sera felt that she was up against something insidious; that Banu was assaulting both her body and her mind. So this is evil, she thought to herself. Before, she had always imagined that evil played out on a large canvas - wars, concentration camps, gas chambers, the partitioning of nations. Now, she realized that evil had a domestic side, and its very banality protected it from exposure."

At least Bhima never had to live with a mother-in-law from hell. But her husband, Gopal, injured on the job and deprived of compensation, sank into alcoholism and deserted her, taking their son with him. After raising her daughter alone, she now finds herself living in a putrid slum with the granddaughter she was obliged to raise after her daughter and son-in-law died of AIDS.

The friendship of between servant and mistress rings true, grounded in daily domestic routine and shared heartbreak. But when they sip tea together, Bhima must crouch on the floor, like a pet, forbidden to use Sera's furniture. Class and culture conspire to deny the validity of their complicity.

Hope for the future keeps Bhima going. Her granddaughter, Maya, has been able, with the financial help of Sera, to enroll in university. But these dreams are dashed when Maya is impregnated by an elusive suitor whom the girl refuses to name. Sera accompanies Maya to a private abortion clinic that caters to the rich. Bhima struggles to revive her granddaughter's broken spirit, urging her to pick up and move on. But another explosive plot twist lies ahead, one that deprives Bhima of her only safety net.

Umrigar, who left Bombay for the United States at the age of 21, is a seasoned journalist turned college professor, living in Cleveland. *The Space Between Us* is her second novel, a follow-up to *Bombay Time*. She has also penned a memoir, *First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood*. Of Parsi background, she has said she is fascinated by the "insider-outsider" status of her ethnic

minority within India.

Gifted with a fine ear for dialogue and an uncanny ability to transport the reader to another time and place, Umrigar has created an engaging work of women's fiction, as opposed to chicklit.

The Space Between Us is a worthy read as well as a juicy one, offering clear-eyed social commentary as it dishes up delicious flavours, pungent odours and glorious seaside vistas.

All it lacks is a glossary to clarify the meaning of those frequently used Hindi expressions sprinkled throughout. Just a quibble.

### **Bookreporter.com**

#### **THE SPACE BETWEEN US**

Thrity Umrigar

William Morrow Fiction

ISBN: 0060791551

THE SPACE BETWEEN US is a musing on the bond between two modern-day Bombay women: Sera and her long-time servant, Bhima. Their union is tested again and again, frayed by Bhima's servile role, by Sera's educated, middle-class Parsi upbringing, and by the deeply-sown seeds of bigotry and class prejudice that rank Bhima as less than human.

We see Sera struggle to overcome her class bias and we grit our teeth with frustration when she admits that the thought of Bhima sitting on her furniture, sleeping in her house and using her utensils makes her shudder. Umrigar masterfully depicts the paradox of Sera's desire to strengthen her bond with Bhima --- to help her and her family --- with her uneasiness as Sera is dragged further and further down into the muck and bog of Bhima's life, her world of filthy slums and political indifference.

From the moment Bhima awakens on her thin mattress and Sera smiles tearfully over the onions on the chopping block of her sun-lit kitchen, we are absorbed in the polar, harshly contradictory lives of these women. There is clarity and simplicity in Umrigar's style as well as a devotion to detail. Each description, murmur of dialogue and turn of phrase rings sharply. We can see the worlds she describes through each woman's distinctive gaze.

The parallels of Bhima's and Sera's life are dealt with subtly; indeed there is nothing heavy-handed or melodramatic about this novel. Despite the weight of the themes --- race, class, gender, sexuality and culture --- Umrigar never lets the prose slip into tired clichés or familiar sentiments. We see the squalor of Bhima's existence; we feel her rage and helplessness as she stands over her pregnant, doomed granddaughter as acutely as we smell Sera's onions simmering in the hot oil of the frying pan. The lives of these women are rendered vividly, without bias, by a narrator who easily slips behind the curtain of her words. Umrigar the author virtually disappears, achieving a kind of omniscience that only the best writers can hope for, allowing readers to witness the flaws and beauty of both these women and make their own judgments.

Strong and startling images punctuate the text --- from the charred black rope, woven with bitterness and resentment, that uncoils itself within Sera as she looks on her stepmother, to the face of the balloon seller who once delighted and fascinated Bhima and her husband, the memory of whom haunts her still.

We see Bhima betrayed time and time again --- by her family, by the government, by men who claim authority and take advantage of her trust and lack of education, by her aging body and her once-trusting spirit. Yet she possesses a dazzling, almost blinding conviction that there are sparks and pockets of pure goodness in the world, and Sera shines brightly in her eyes.

That is why the final climactic betrayal of the book is wrenching. Bhima has risen above so much and yet this final betrayal may be the wound that will not heal, festering and infecting her body with a vile, justified rage at the unfairness of her life --- a rage that will destroy her in the end. This book will keep readers up nights, absorbing them in the sights and sounds of Bombay, the struggles of its central characters, and the flashes and glints of the peripheral characters: Sera's daughter Dinaz, her son-in-law Feroz, Bhima's granddaughter Maya, and the ghosts of both women's husbands that still haunt their memories.

Readers will turn the last page reluctantly and remember the turns of Umrigar's prose long after they have retired the book to their bookshelves, both for its expertly woven narrative by a writer with a masterful ear for dialogue and description and its meditation on attraction and friendship, no matter how seemingly insurmountable the differences are. *THE SPACE BETWEEN US* reveals the power of coming together and the tragedy of breaking apart.

**The Washington Post**

**Housekeeping**

**A wealthy woman and her servant endure parallel challenges in India.**

**Reviewed by Frances Itani**

**Sunday, January 8, 2006; BW04**

***THE SPACE BETWEEN US***

*A Novel*

*By Thrity Umrigar*

*Morrow. 321 pp. \$24.95*

Artists know very well that a good way to depict overwhelming social problems is to tell the story of an individual who represents many others. One set of political circumstances might blur into another on the large scale, while the human story, well told, will be long remembered. India's complex struggle with poverty, class and overpopulation amid political change poses special challenges in this regard, but Thrity Umrigar has created two wonderfully sympathetic characters who do much to make that

country's complex nature comprehensible.

Sera Dubash, an upper-middle-class Parsi, lives a privileged, urban life, but her comforts largely depend upon her domestic servant, Bhima, who arrives every day to cook and clean for her. Bhima (based on a real-life Bombay housekeeper known to Umrigar when the latter was a child) lives in extreme poverty, under appalling circumstances in a city slum. She needs the job to survive. The lives of the two women are parallel in striking ways, but it is Bhima who quickly takes over the emotional thread of the story. Although she lives in a crowded, stinking place where fresh water is scarce and there are abysmal, communal toilets and open drains, what Bhima allows herself to want is, on the surface, simple: a better life for her beloved granddaughter, Maya.

But the opening pages tell us that this dream is already dashed. Maya, who has been attending college under Sera's benefaction, is pregnant and is forced to abandon the education that offered hope of a better life. Bhima is so upset by this that she drifts between conflicting emotions: rage at Maya for ruining her chance to break the chain of poverty, and love for the child she has raised as her own. Umrigar is particularly good at this constant, internal and external railing.

"Bhima wants to take the sobbing girl to her bosom, to hold and caress her the way she used to when Maya was a child, to forgive her and to ask for her forgiveness. But she can't. If it were just anger that she was feeling, she could've scaled that wall and reached out to her grandchild. But the anger is only the beginning of it. Behind the anger is fear, fear as endless and vast and gray as the Arabian Sea, fear for this stupid, innocent, pregnant girl who stands sobbing before her, and for this unborn baby who will come into the world to a mother who is a child herself and to a grandmother who is old and tired to her very bones, a grandmother who is tired of loss, of loving and losing, who cannot bear the thought of one more loss and of one more person to love."

Sera, a widow, and Bhima, abandoned by her husband, have a strong bond, but the differences are recognized by both. Every day, Bhima takes a break from the housework she does for Sera, and the two elderly women have tea and discuss their lives. Sera sits at the table, while Bhima squats on her haunches on the dining-room floor. There is always, as the title implies, a "space between." But Bhima knows more about Sera than the educated Sera will ever know about her. Sera's pregnant daughter and son-in-law live in her home, and her personal happiness now depends upon them. As the background stories unfold -- and these are told with as much immediacy as the ongoing, main story -- it is Bhima who is central to the events that play out in the lives of every member of the two families.

Both Sera and Bhima have lived with fear and disappointment, but Umrigar ensures that they always live with dignity. Both have suffered at the hands of the men they once loved. One of the many disturbing threads throughout the book is the way male power is directed at others in cruel and abusive ways. And Sera has also suffered while living with a vindictive mother-in-law who is now ill and can no longer hurt her.

This is a story intimately and compassionately told against the sensuous background of everyday life in Bombay. Against terrible odds, Bhima must find the strength and the will to keep going. The tragedy is that there is so little to hope for. Which brings us to the implicit, pivotal question raised at the beginning and end of the book: Why survive at all in the face of continuous despair? The life of the privileged is harshly measured against the life of the powerless, but empathy and compassion are evoked by both strong

women, each of whom is forced to make a separate choice. Umrigar is a skilled storyteller, and her memorable characters will live on for a long time.

*Frances Itani's novel "Deafening" was shortlisted for the 2005 IMPAC Dublin International Literary Award.*

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### **San Francisco Chronicle**

With child, within class in Bombay

- Reviewed by Lynn Andriani

Sunday, January 1, 2006

The Space Between Us

By Thrity Umrigar

MORROW; 320 PAGES; \$24.95

In many ways, Bombay-born writer Thrity Umrigar's second novel covers common literary terrain. Its theme is familiar: Two characters from opposite sides of the track become inextricably intertwined. Its literary devices aren't unique: Metaphors and similes appear on nearly every page, and flashbacks reveal characters' backgrounds. Its characterizations are, on the surface, rife with recognizable dramas: The rich live in luxury, while the poor exist in squalor, and there appears to be no in-between.

Yet for all the tale's familiarity, to read it is to become absorbed in the goings-on of two families whose habits may be startlingly like our own, despite their being halfway across the world. And even if "The Space Between Us" does invite comparisons to stories we've heard before (for instance "The Kite Runner," which takes place largely in Afghanistan, near the India of "The Space Between Us," and also puts together people of different classes), that doesn't take away from the blunt realism and beauty of Umrigar's book.

Part of what makes "The Space Between Us" so engrossing is its ability to make readers feel empathy for its subjects. Initially, it's easy to feel for Bhima; she's a 65-year-old servant living in a Bombay slum with her granddaughter, Maya. Her children and alcoholic husband are either dead or absent, and every cent she earns goes toward Maya's college education, which she hopes will be their ticket out of poverty. But when Maya gets pregnant, those dreams evaporate and it appears the girl is doomed to repeat her grandmother's fate. It would be easy to pity poor Bhima, but Umrigar makes us feel something more: understanding. For Bhima is not just hopeless; she's also human. She feels "hard, merciless ... rage" as she watches the shamefully pregnant 17-year-old sleeping peacefully. In another scene, a flashback, Bhima lashes out against her son when she knows he doesn't deserve it. Umrigar's ability to give Bhima such a realistic personality is remarkable and one of the book's high points.

Bhima's wealthy counterpart is her employer, Sera Dubash, a younger, upper-middle-

class Parsi housewife. Like her servant, Sera has carried on without a husband (she is a widow) and has a young woman to watch over (her daughter, Dinaz, and Dinaz's handsome husband, Viraf, are expecting their first child). But unlike Maya's pregnancy, Dinaz's is a happy one -- just one of the book's examples of how members of different classes experience similar circumstances. Every day when Bhima goes to work at Sera's house she must listen to the family cooing over Dinaz's growing belly. Yet it's difficult for her to begrudge them, as Sera, a generous employer who objects to India's strict class distinctions, uses her clout to bring Maya to a private abortion clinic rather than allow the girl to go to a dirty, public one. Bhima feels nothing but appreciation for Sera and her family, although the book's denouement later finds her in a horrid struggle with her beloved boss.

As Umrigar relates the present and past events in the lives of Bhima and Sera, she reaches for similes and metaphors to describe feelings and actions. Her frequent use of them could become grating if they didn't color her scenes with such intense, convincing descriptions of Indian life. Sera's memory of her husband's death still stings years later, "as if someone sprinkled chili powder in my eyes." Revealing a terrible secret about one character allows Bhima to "destroy [that person's] current happiness as swiftly as a wind can knock down a house." And when the uneducated Bhima learns that the AIDS virus can be in one's body for years before manifesting itself, she likens the sickness to a curse: "Someone does some jadoo on you -- like they put cut fingernails under your mattress or they hide chilis and lime in an old rag and put it in your path -- and years go by and you think you are safe. And then one day, something bad happens and you realize that the curse was with you all these years."

Such devices render lifelike the characters' predicaments, while drawing Western readers into a far-away culture. To read these comparisons is to understand that Umrigar's Bombay is a place where robust foods figure prominently, elements like wind and sea are driving forces, and religious beliefs underscore everything. She takes the cultural infusion one step further with her use of slang in dialogue. "What is this, baba? So-so much money," Bhima's son remarks upon seeing the payoff Bhima's husband received when he injured himself at his factory job. "Ae, Bhima mausi," one of Bhima's slum neighbors calls out from the water tap line, "Come over here, na. For you only I've been holding a reservation here." These singsong phrases steep the narrative in local flavor.

To read Umrigar's novel is to catch a glimpse of a foreign culture, for better and for worse. Yet while the class divide between Bhima and Sera provides much of the conflict in "The Space Between Us," it isn't the only source of disagreement. Class colors everything, but in the end, Umrigar shows, every one of life's ups and downs are available to us all.

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### **Booklist Starred Review**

#### **Umrigar, Thrity. THE SPACE BETWEEN US.**

Sera Dubash is an upper-middle-class Parsi housewife in modern-day Bombay. Bhima is her domestic servant. Though they inhabit dramatically different worlds, the two women have much in common. Both married men they alternately love and loathe: Sera's moody husband frequently beats her, and Bhima's betrothed falls into an alcohol-

drenched depression after losing his job. Sera's civil treatment of her servant—she overlooks Bhima's frequent tardiness and treats her like an equal—dismays her neighbors and friends. She also offers to fund the college education of Bhima's granddaughter, Maya, whom Bhima adopted when the girl's mother died of AIDS. The bond between the two women deepens when Sera (whose own daughter is happily wed and expecting her first child) arranges an abortion for unmarried Maya. Veteran journalist and Case Western Reserve professor Umrigar (*Bombay Time*, 2001) renders a collection of compelling and complex characters, from kind, conflicted Sera to fiercely devoted Bhima (the latter is based on the novelist's own childhood housekeeper). Sadness suffuses this eloquent tale, whose heart-stopping plot twists reveal the ferocity of fate. As Bhima sits at her dying daughter's side, a fellow hospital visitor speaks the simple, brutal truth: "Here, we have all hit the jackpot for grief."

• **Allison Block**

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## **The Plain Dealer**

**The Space Between Us by Thrity Umrigar. William Morrow, 321 pp., \$24.95.**

**Drawing reader close in tale of two disparate women**

**Karen R. Long**

Soon, Bombay - now called Mumbai - is expected to out strip the continent of Australia in population. Already among the largest cities on the planet, with some 18 million urban dwellers, Bombay and its stories represent who we are becoming.

New York journalist Suketu Mehta took a big, masculine bite of Bombay in "Maximum City," his celebrated 2004 work of nonfiction.

Now another American journalist, Thrity Umrigar, circles back to the city of her first 21 years, which she left to attend Ohio State University. Her second novel, "The Space Between Us," is a quieter, more intimate slice of Bombay than Mehta's, layered with keen, feminine insight into class and family, betrayal, guilt and love.

Umrigar's central character is Bhima, an aging, illiterate domestic servant who lives without electricity, a toilet or running water. She works for a kind but aloof upper-class Parsi woman named Sera, who has plenty of sorrow of her own. The focal point of "The Space Between Us" is the space between Bhima and Sera. They share the intimacy of years and alternate the narrative perspectives of this book.

In Sera's household, Bhima is not allowed on the furniture. She has a separate glass and utensils, a private bar of soap. When Sera's son-in-law offers to buy a dishwasher, Bhima's hope leaps, but Sera quickly refuses. The matriarch brags about the 65-year-old Bhima's ability to make the pots and pans shine, overlooking the bent back and arthritic hands.

"The Space Between Us" is a ruminative novel, told from inside the heads of these close-but-distant women, with their dual histories back-filled in flashbacks. The book's

structure deepens the reader's attachment to the characters but slows the reading pace.

The novel's narrative pulse is set beating in the first chapter's fourth paragraph, when the reader discovers that Bhima's smart, beautiful teenage granddaughter is pregnant. The father's identity remains a mystery until the story is almost over, and that revelation - with more than a touch of Bollywood melodrama - carries tragedy for both Sera and Bhima.

Umrigar understands the way love mixes with cruelty and loneliness. She is a connoisseur of guilt - and knows how to describe it. As Sera drinks a sweet liquid in front of a parched slum child, she feels like she is swallowing "a bloody clot." At another moment, Bhima is fighting shame, exposed to the gaze of her neighbors: "Like vultures these people are, she thought. Peck, peck, pecking away at one another's lives, feasting on one another's misery, circling over other people's dead marriages."

In counterpoint to this grimness is the pleasure of the book's musicality, enhanced with a smattering of Hindi words and cadences. The suave son-in-law is described parking his expensive car: "But Viraf is a thanda pani ka matla - an earthenware pot of cold water."

This pleasure is offset by Umrigar's reliance on cliché. Details are sordid; arguments fold like a deck of cards; silence is utter, and the show needs to get on the road. In another awkward bit of writing, Sera decides "that promise lay in the drawer marked Unkept Promises, along with many others."

Umrigar is at her best, however, conveying the small moments that sustain or degrade the minuet of intimacy. She steers her characters into the harshness of domestic violence, abortion, alcoholism and AIDS. Still, we stay with them, partly because they navigate it bravely.

On the final pages, neither Umrigar nor Bhima lets us down.

In the press kit for "The Space Between Us," Umrigar reveals that Bhima is based on the housekeeper of her own Bombay childhood. She dedicates her novel to "the real Bhima and the millions like her."

One of the joys of fiction is it can make visible what we readers recognize but have not seen. With "The Space Between Us," Umrigar narrows the gap between those of us with the education and leisure to enjoy her book and the many, like Bhima, who have neither.

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**Publishers Weekly THE SPACE BETWEEN US, Thrity Umrigar. Morrow, \$24.95 (320p) ISBN 0-06-079155-1**

Umrigar's schematic novel (after Bombay Time) illustrates the intimacy, and the irreconcilable class divide, between two women in contemporary Bombay. Bhima, a 65-year-old slum dweller, has worked for Sera Dubash, a younger upper-middle-class Parsi



woman, for years: cooking, cleaning and tending Sera after the beatings she endures from her abusive husband, Feroz. Sera, in turn, nurses Bhima back to health from typhoid fever and sends her granddaughter Maya to college. Sera recognizes their affinity: "They were alike in many ways, Bhima and she. Despite the different trajectories of their lives—circumstances... dictated by the accidents of their births—they had both known the pain of watching the bloom fade from their marriages." But Sera's affection for her servant wars with ingrained prejudice against lower castes. The younger generation—Maya, Sera's daughter, Dinaz, and son-in-law, Viraf—are also caged by the same strictures despite efforts to throw them off. In a final plot twist, class allegiance combined with gender inequality challenges personal connection, and Bhima may pay a bitter price for her loyalty to her employers. At times, Umrigar's writing achieves clarity, but a narrative that unfolds in retrospect saps the book's momentum.

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### Kirkus Review

#### THE SPACE BETWEEN US, Umrigar, Thrity

Morrow/HarperCollins , Pages: 320 , \$24.95, Publication Date: 1/10/2006 , ISBN: 0-06-079155-1

Set in contemporary Bombay, Umrigar's second novel (*Bombay Time*, 2001) is an affecting portrait of a woman and her maid, whose lives, despite class disparity, are equally heartbreaking.

Though Bhima has worked for the Dubash family for decades and is coyly referred to as "one of the family," she nonetheless is forbidden from sitting on the furniture and must use her own utensils while eating. For years, Sera blamed these humiliating boundaries on her husband Feroz, but now that he's dead and she's lady of the house, the two women still share afternoon tea and sympathy with Sera perched on a chair and Bhima squatting before her. Bhima is grateful for Sera, for the steady employment, for what she deems friendship and, mostly, for the patronage Sera shows Bhima's granddaughter Maya. Orphaned as a child when her parents died of AIDS, Bhima raised Maya and Sera saw to her education. Now in college, Maya's future is like a miracle to the illiterate Bhima—her degree will take them out of the oppressive Bombay slums, guaranteeing Maya a life away from servitude. But in a cruel mirror of Sera's happiness—her only child Dinaz is expecting her first baby—Bhima finds that Maya is pregnant, has quit school and won't name the child's father. As the situation builds to a crisis point, both women reflect on the sorrows of their lives. While Bhima was born into a life of poverty and insurmountable obstacles, Sera's privileged upbringing didn't save her from a husband who beat her and a mother-in-law who tormented her. And while Bhima's marriage begins blissfully, an industrial accident leaves her husband maimed and an alcoholic. He finally deserts her, but not before he bankrupts the family and kidnaps their son. Though Bhima and Sera believe they are mutually devoted, soon decades of confidences are thrown up against the far older rules of the class game.

A subtle, elegant analysis of class and power. Umrigar transcends the specifics of two Bombay women and creates a novel that quietly roars against tyranny.

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**BEACON JOURNAL****Class difference can't quiet heart**

**"The Space Between Us" shows relationship between women, India's caste system**

**By Mary Ethridge**

**Beacon Journal staff writer**

**THE SPACE BETWEEN US**

By Thrity Umrigar

(HarperCollins, \$24.95, 321 pages)

The relationship between a wealthy woman and her domestic servant isn't a new subject in the world of fiction. Think of Shakespeare's Juliet with her maid and Scarlett O'Hara's ties to Mammy. But by setting such a relationship in India, a culture ferociously bound to class identities, author Thrity Umrigar has infused the story with a particular richness and depth.

The Space Between Us, Umrigar's second novel, traces the relationship between the upper-class Parsi Sera Dubash and her illiterate, slum-dwelling servant Bhima.

Their story unfolds in Bombay (now known as Mumbai), a city of intense contrasts. Hideous poverty festers alongside great wealth.

Entrenched traditions bump up against contemporary ambitions. The astounding beauty of the seaside is marred by garbage and human feces.

Umrigar, a former Beacon Journal staff writer, lived in Bombay until she came to Ohio State University at age 21. As a middle-class girl in India, Umrigar saw many relationships such as Sera's and Bhima's firsthand and was fascinated by their mix of natural intimacy and imposed distance.

"There is a special relationship among women together in a household," Umrigar said. Sera and Bhima have supported each other over the years. Bhima has witnessed some of the most private moments of Sera's life, including Sera's beatings at the hands of husband Feroz. Bhima helped to raise Sera's child, Dinaz. And the women become even closer after the death of Feroz.

For her part, Sera comes to Bhima's aid many times over the years. She uses her social standing to get top medical care for Bhima's husband when he's injured in an industrial accident. She also pays for the education and care of Bhima's orphaned granddaughter Maya.

When Maya, a promising college student, gets pregnant by a man she refuses to name (we later learn why), it is Sera who takes her to get an abortion.

Both women have suffered at the hands of men (Bhima's husband eventually deserts her), and both struggle to raise strong young women under trying circumstances. But despite their similarities and intimate knowledge of each other, it never occurs to either woman to bridge the class chasm between them. Bhima does not think it odd that she's not allowed to use the furniture or utensils in Sera's house. When the two women share tea, Bhima uses her own cup and sits on her haunches while Sera is perched on a dining room chair. Things are as they are, and both know their place.

*The Space Between Us* is not meant to be read as a social commentary about race or class, although it certainly has some powerful messages along those lines. Rather, it is an elegant novel of the heart and spirit whose characters are testament to the essential human drive -- to find joy, peace and love where we can.

"I think human beings are hard-wired for hope," Umrigar said in a phone interview from her office at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, where she teaches English. "The instinct is to pick up and move on."

After Maya has an abortion, she can't seem to move on. She mopes around the filthy hut she shares with Bhima and gives up on the idea of going back to college. But Bhima knows Maya must move on or she'll be stuck in the squalor of Bombay for life. To arouse her senses, she takes the young woman to the beach. There, Bhima begins to offer the gift of Maya's past to her.

Maya's parents -- Bhima's daughter and son-in-law -- died of AIDS when Maya was a child. As Bhima unfolds the story to Maya, she paints the horrific scenes at a public hospital in vivid detail. When Bhima recalls watching the skeletal body of her only daughter eaten by the flames of the funeral pyre, it is hard not to weep for the sweet, illiterate and emotionally ravaged woman.

But somehow telling the story of the past gives both Maya and Bhima strength. It's a strength Bhima will dig to find when she is betrayed over and over by people and circumstances.

In lesser hands, the story of Bhima and Sera could have turned into a soap opera. It has the hallmarks, including domestic violence, untimely deaths, guilt and sexual betrayals. The book's plot twists rival any best-selling page turner.

But the inner workings of Umrigar's characters are so sophisticated and complex, the story never descends into the tawdry. Her rich language and eye for the powerful detail, especially evident in her descriptions of everyday life in Bombay, are transporting.

#### **EDMONTON JOURNAL (CANADA)**

Living in a class of their own Thrity Umrigar's richly made characters tell the story of regret-filled solitudes in Bombay life

Graham Andrews

*The Space Between Us* by Thrity Umrigar

William Morrow

321 pp, \$32.95

Pathos abounds in Cleveland-based Thrity Umrigar's second novel -- a unique and ungilded tale of the ingrained class chasm separating two women living parallel existences in the author's hometown of Bombay, India.

While their differences may be profound, it's the similarities that reluctantly bring together upper-middle-class Sera Dubash and her servant, Bhima. The women share regret-filled pasts concerning their choices of departed husbands. They also share a bottom-line cruelty that stems from blind devotion to their respective families.

At Sera's insistence, however, the two never share furniture or familiarity.

Through exquisite storytelling interspersed with cultural and class-based insights, Umrigar elicits a range of emotions in the reader regarding all characters in the novel, and particularly the matriarchs of each truncated home. Where Sera is a proud and privileged Parsi widow and soon-to-be grandmother, her illiterate counterpart resides in the squalor of a nearby slum with her orphaned granddaughter.

For many years, Bhima has dutifully (and, in fact, happily) served Sera and her family by hauling groceries, preparing meals, cleaning house and applying a peasant's ointments to the bruises left by Feroz, her boss's unpredictable and abusive late husband. In exchange for Bhima's life of willing servitude, Sera endures the questionably natured taunting of her peers by treating her servant "like family." Bhima frequently receives small gifts of groceries and an educational sponsorship for her granddaughter, Maya -- gifts that are neither unappreciated by the poor woman nor unnoticed by her fellow residents of the fetid slum she calls home.

Within the framework of the story, however, the gift of education is tarnished by Maya, who, during her first year in college, has gotten pregnant.

As evidence of her misdeed grows in her young belly, Maya is subjected to the plotting of Bhima and Sera.

Plans for an abortion also include Sera's daughter, Dinaz, and son-in-law, Viraf, who are anticipating the birth of their own firstborn.

In a stellar fashion typical of Umrigar's craft, the reader is comprehensively taken through the psychology and emotions surrounding each character's tales of hope and betrayal. In the end, only Dinaz escapes the dark light of the author's development, leaving each person to be admired as well as disdained.

While there is no clear protagonist in *The Space Between Us*, the sufficient antagonist is Umrigar's excellent measure of the human condition. Pettiness and self-importance are present in a bulk of the characters every bit as much as kindness and self-sacrifice (although, in some cases, sacrifice is more relative than in others).

From a purely Western perspective, a reader can't help but question the emphasis placed on class by all parties involved.

And that, most certainly, is one of the book's outspoken strengths.

Umrigar, a self-described middle-class woman who made keen observations during her youth in India, clearly writes about what she knows. Despite the fact that her knowledge of class disparity is apparently more observational than participatory, she has created a convincing and enlightening work rife with emotion and wisdom.

What fills *The Space Between Us* is the work of an unconventional and accomplished writer. While her story is at points ugly and troubling, her approach is kind and impartial. Despite plentiful opportunity, there is no overt moralizing in this book, which is another strong point, to be certain.

Umrigar's two main characters, although they may never directly speak of their shared hardships, are logical extensions of the author -- all are filled with silent, if not unrealized, promise.

Graham Andrews is a Journal copy editor and writer. © The Edmonton Journal 2006

## **BOSTON GLOBE**

Trying only to connect, in a place full of barriers

By Judy Budz | February 26, 2006

*The Space Between Us* By Thrity Umrigar Morrow, 321 pp., \$24.95

"*The Space Between Us*," Thrity Umrigar's new novel, is set in Bombay, where mistress and servant, Sera and Bhima, are best friends separated by class, money, religion, geography, and politics. The divide between them is certainly vast; but seen in a larger context, their connections are much more powerful. The novel is provocative and disturbing, asking how female friendship might bridge individual isolation and loneliness. Will women support each other in the face of family obligations, powerful husbands, and the desire for upward mobility in a downwardly mobile environment?

Umrigar weaves together the stories of Sera, a wealthy Parsi widow, and her longtime servant, Bhima, a slum dweller whose husband deserted her years earlier. Sera depends on Bhima to prepare lunch for her beloved children and tend to the household's needs, and Bhima expects to work for the family forever. She loves Dinaz, Sera's married daughter, and Dinaz's husband, Viraf.

The friendship between Sera and Bhima is founded on the platform of India's stultifying class separation and looming poverty. Outside, the slums breed despair. Children torture animals, and crowds target Parsis because their bones are famously "brittle." The doctors in the government-run AIDS hospital are brutal and unsympathetic, swamped by hundreds of dying patients who have failed to heed the instructions of the sex educators. The open drains of the slums reek while, nearby, men sit in doorways, drunk and dozing.

Inside, things are not much better, and both women recognize that they have suffering in common. Each had romantic hopes for her marriage, and each has been bitterly disappointed. Sera's late husband, Feroz, was a bully with a hairtrigger temper. After he courts her and wins her, she discovers that his mother is a nightmarish manipulator who is intent on separating her from her husband. Bhima's husband, Gopal, charmingly

courted her by riding his bicycle in pursuit of her bus every morning. The other bus riders were smitten, too. However, after a catastrophic work accident, he becomes drunken and selfish.

Both women are devoted to their children. Sera, having experienced the impossibility of living with her own mother-in-law, carefully gives her live-in daughter and son-in-law space for marital squabbles and affection. Dinaz is joyfully pregnant, and Sera anticipates a happy future in the same house as her grandchild. Bhima's future looks worse. She loves her own granddaughter, Maya, and has gratefully accepted Sera's offer to fund the 17-year-old girl's college education. But Maya is also pregnant, and there is no man in sight. Bhima believes that Maya can look forward only to a life of menial servitude, stuck with a child she did not plan. Fearing that she will be responsible for raising the child, Bhima rages at Maya for destroying their future.

The novel initially focuses on Maya's pregnancy. Bhima contemplates "one swift kick to the belly, followed by another and another"; this would be a "humane" solution compared to the customary "quick shove down an open well, a kerosene can and a match, a sale to a brothel." Sera is "concerned, anxious, and ready to help" by arranging for an abortion. Meanwhile, Maya refuses to reveal the identity of the baby's father.

Custom and prejudice are the twin jailers of this society. Sera and Bhima are too tightly locked into their traditional roles to break out. Bhima endures the stench of the public slum latrine, while Sera hates to chop onions because they leave an odor on her hands. Bhima haggles over the price of every vegetable she buys for Sera's table, but Sera refuses the gift of a dishwasher, which would ease Bhima's aching back. Although Bhima, nursed Sera through the pain of her marriage to Feroz and remains Sera's only confidant, the woman cannot be her equal. In one of the novel's most striking images, Bhima sits on the floor during shared mealtime while her employer sits on a chair.

The novel's male characters prefer this separation of the classes; they even encourage it. In a scene shown in flashback, Feroz swoops into the hospital like an all-powerful god after Bhima's husband is hurt and browbeats the doctor into treating the injured man with antibiotics. Bhima wonders if his apparent anger is merely a pose, even a private joke. Her intuition is probably correct, since Feroz frequently reminded Sera to keep the maid in her place. Later, son-in-law Viraf, seemingly so thoughtful and certainly more modern, grumbles about the family's preoccupation with Bhima and Maya. Even the administrator from Gopal's factory takes advantage of Bhima's panic and confusion to cheat the family out of their fair compensation for Gopal's injury.

American readers, liking both Sera and Bhima, will wish to see them sitting at the same table and discussing their common problems. They will wish for an ending in which the mistress rescues the servant from her slum hut, puts the servant's granddaughter through college, and then, together with the beloved servant, lives in the company of a large, unprejudiced family. Alas, Umrigar has not written a Lifetime movie. Better to read the book as a treatment of modern India, where women recognize their sameness but cannot bridge the space that separates them.

**Financial Times, London, UK**

Book Reviews: In brief - *The Space Between Us* By Claudia Webb Published: February 17 2006 20:07 | Last updated: February 17 2006 20:07

## The Space Between Us

by Thrity Umrigar

Fourth Estate £14.99, 336 pages

The Space Between Us is a novel of relationships. Bhima lives in a Bombay slum, a place of extreme poverty where dwellers spend hours queuing for water and live amid the constant stench of open drains. Each day Bhima goes to work in the Dubash household as a servant to Sera Dubash, a rich widow. Bhima has cooked, cleaned and looked after the family, as though it were her own, her whole life.

The space between the two women is not as wide as it appears initially. Both have loved and been betrayed by their husbands; each feels that their children are their sole reason for carrying on. They are both isolated women confused by their fate. The one element that separates them is money.

Sera Dubash lives a lonely life. Since her abusive husband died she has dedicated her life to caring for her daughter and son-in-law, both Bombay professionals who are expecting their first child. In recent years Bhima has become Sera's main confidante. Sera battles with conflicting opinions about whether she should treat Bhima as an equal - allow her to sit on her furniture and drink from the same glasses - and risk being frowned upon by her neighbours.

Bhima's neighbours in the slum are envious of her boss's generosity. But Bhima also worries about her relationship with Sera. She loves the Dubash family and has watched their daughter grow up as if she were her own child. But a secret now threatens to destroy this closeness.

Thrity Umrigar has a striking talent for portraying pain and suffering and the sheer unfairness of life. She creates sympathetic portrayals of both women, particularly Bhima, who becomes the main protagonist of the story. The result is a vital social comment on contemporary India.

### THE WINNIPEG FREE PRESS, CANADA

Absorbing novel looks at relationship Sunday, February 12th, 2006

The Space Between Us By Thrity Umrigar HarperCollins, 320 pages, \$33 Reviewed by Madeline Coopsammy

THIS absorbing literary novel, set in modern-day India, explores the relationship between an upper-class woman and her faithful servant in Bombay. Concerned with the Parsi community, a prosperous Indian religious sect familiar to readers of Toronto's Rohinton Mistry, The Space Between Us lays bare the psyches of two women who, in spite of their yawning gap of class and education, have forged a bond based on their common unhappy experiences with the men in their lives.

Author Thrity Umrigar is a Cleveland-based journalist and creative writing teacher. She has published one previous novel, Bombay Time, and a memoir, Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood. Here, the stories of two marriages -- that of the rich Parsi

employer, Sera Dubash, who realizes too late that her husband's character has a deep and hideous flaw, and the impoverished housekeeper Bhima, whose dashing romantic husband changes personality when he encounters a grave setback in life -- parallel each other. The women's increasing dependence on each other for solace and comfort is touching and well delineated.

The Parsis, who had left Iran and settled in India some generations ago, are now struggling to survive, for the community is a small one and suffering from interbreeding, according to one of the characters in the novel. Some ancient and superstitious beliefs create a culture clash between the older and younger generations. The novel thus touches on universal problems beyond its specific setting.

Umrigar weaves several threads through the fabric of her novel: conjugal relationships, family life, the role of the Indian mother-in-law, who, by tradition makes the life of the daughter-in-law as miserable as possible, and the powerlessness of the Indian working class, whose lack of education allows for blatant abuse by their betters. But it's the problems of Umrigar's two main characters who capture our interest and sustain it to the end.

With consummate skill, Umrigar has carved a gripping tale in which she has juxtaposed the lives of these two vastly different women, while the cleverly designed plot, realistic characters and the crispness of the dialogue guarantee that the reader's interest seldom flags. Sera at first appears almost too good to be real, until we realize that she does not allow Bhima to sit on the furniture nor to drink from the family's crockery. Sera's broadmindedness cannot extend that far.

Umrigar, like Jane Austen and Carol Shields, has worked on the canvas of domestic life. The conflict, crisis and resolution of the novel are deftly depicted in spare, sharp prose, while the city of Bombay with its teeming masses comes alive. The characters move from the highrise apartments of the rich to the slums of their servants, from Chowpatty Beach, where the eternal sea soothes frayed nerves worn down by cruel and unforgiving gods, to the hospitals, where overworked doctors will only give appropriate care to a poor patient if intimidated by someone from the executive class.

Umrigar exposes the raw flesh under the skin of Indian life, where the downtrodden, illiterate and poor are pushed under a swirling maelstrom of water, where their heads are held under until their lives are snuffed out. Perhaps this novel might inspire some social reforms in India the way that Dickens' work created some much-needed ones.

### **The Scotsman**

Bombay mix in the home

NATASHA MANN

The Space Between Us Thrity Umrigar Fourth Estate, £14.99

BOMBAY has a reputation for being India's raciest city; fast, loose and modern. If the ancient barriers of class and caste are to be tentatively chipped at in today's India, you would expect it to happen here first, so the city makes a perfect setting for a novel which seeks to do just that. Umrigar uses her colourful location for a story that is subtle,



compelling and convincingly realistic.

The Space Between Us follows the stories of Sera Dubash, a well-to-do Parsi housewife, and her servant, Bhima. Although separated by the conventions of class, the pair have a great deal in common, both having married for love and then suffered as their marriages turned sour. For more than 20 years they have lived through each other's pains and losses, and have been subject to secrets hidden even from their relatives, so that they have become bound by - if not friendship - then kindness, compassion and intimate knowledge. Only when a crisis occurs are they forced to choose their true allegiances.

Umrigar's fairly conventional style of storytelling interweaves the current crisis with flashbacks to both characters' pasts. This may not be innovative, but through understanding Sera Dubash's disappointments, and the tragedies that have dogged Bhima's life, the present is made more poignant.

However, it is a shame that it soon becomes easy to guess how the book will end. If Umrigar had brought that ending towards the centre of the novel, then allowed the consequences to fall domino-like through the rest of its pages, the result could have allowed her to explore themes - only hinted at - such as the human capacity for self-deception.

Sera Dubash and Bhima are vividly portrayed in language that is fresh and fluid, and this is one of the book's notable successes. Bhima is given thoughts that are not always convincing as those of a servant from her background but, that aside, both characters have credible motivations, impulses and regrets.

There is no great dramatisation of the caste issue, nor does it extrapolate to the clashes that have occurred in recent times in India. Instead the novel's contours are soft and its trajectory inward and domestic. This domestic focus, however, is both a strength and a weakness, since it seems to leave so many other dimensions out. While middle-class, insular Bombay is vividly present in this novel, the city's numerous alternative faces are strangely lacking.

### **The Calcutta Telegraph**

TO FALL FOR THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

Acts of faith

SREYASHI DASTIDAR

The Space Between Us By Thrity Umrigar, HarperCollins, Rs 350

One of the most compelling presences in Middle India is the domestic help - 'Ômaidservant' to the vast majority of households yet to wake up to the charms of political correctness. She is anything between eight and eighty, married or unmarried or widowed or abandoned or separated. She may have to travel for three hours on all possible forms of transport to reach her place of work, or she may live in the slum two blocks away from the highrise of her employers. She is at once witness to the most sordid of family dramas and keeper of her mistress's secrets. But if there is anything

that is constant in these variables, it is that the domestic help is never allowed to forget her station in life.

Nor does Bhima, whose life, and its many points of intersection with that of her affluent Parsi mistress, Sera Dubash, is captured in Thrity Umrigar's second novel. *The Space Between Us* is set in the new-millennium Mumbai, which, for all its state-of-the-art additions, continues to wear the largest slum in the continent like a badge on its chest. Bhima lives in one of the many shantytowns that dot the city with her 17-year-old granddaughter, Maya. Maya has been her grandmother's responsibility ever since her parents died of AIDS in Delhi. Bhima's once-caring husband took to the bottle after losing three fingers in a factory accident and absconded with their son, unable to face her and the familiar world.

In a world which has let Bhima down time and again, her employer's home is her sole oasis. Sera Dubash is a good mistress, sticking to Bhima even when her friends fill her with horror stories of servants murdering or swindling their employers. Sera's generosity is not confined to paying for Maya's college education. When Maya gets pregnant, it is Sera who pays for an abortion at a private clinic and even accompanies the young girl there. Bhima registers every little kindness, but life has taught her not to take them for granted.

Sera's life has been far from a smooth ride. For the most part of her married life, she has been tormented, both psychologically and physically, by her mother-in-law and her husband. While the world outside is not privy to her sufferings, every blow to her body and mind is picked up by Bhima without so much as a word being exchanged. The most moving moment in the novel comes when, after a particularly bad dose of violence from her husband, Sera's bruises are tended to by Bhima in an act of utmost generosity and selflessness.

The relationship between Sera and Bhima defies all attempts at naming it. Sera knows that no one understands her better than her maid of 25 years, and yet, she cannot explain her resistance to letting Bhima sit on the sofa or drink tea from cups used by the Dubash family. Bhima's little box - containing a soap dish, Pond's talcum powder (her mistress has marvelled many times at her odourlessness), a comb with a tooth missing, a metal glass to drink from and her tobacco tin - seems to mock at the fact that it does not take Bhima even fifteen minutes to walk to her employer's house. For the universe they inhabit are more than lightyears away.

Bhima is alternately a mirror image of her mistress and a perfect foil to her. When Bhima's marriage to Gopal seems to be working out beautifully, Sera fights the twin demons of her mother-in-law and husband. But when Feroz Dubash dies, and Gopal leaves Bhima, both women awake to a feeling of being released from their individual cages. Perhaps this is Umrigar's answer to the question, what is a bigger reality in the lives of women in India - gender or class?

One other truth that the novel lays bare is that the Bhimas of modern India cannot bank on the benevolence of the state. Bhima is repeatedly betrayed by the state - by the hospital when her daughter and son-in-law die, by Gopal's factory which refuses to take responsibility of his accident, and so on. Private generosity, like Sera's, is all that Bhima can count on. Empathy is this novel's greatest virtue - reason enough for the situational clichés and the forced Indianness of the English dialogue to be excused. Perhaps the book will soon be available at a theatre close to your home.