Swimming Lessons Study Guide

Swimming Lessons by Rohinton Mistry

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Swimming Lessons" is the last story in the collection of short fiction that first brought Rohinton Mistry national attention in Canada and subsequently the United States. The set of eleven stories titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag* [retitled *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag* when it was published in 1989 in the United States] was well received by critics in both countries. As "Swimming Lessons" is positioned as the last story in the collection, it has prompted many reviewers to give it particular attention. An important feature of the story is that its setting moves with the narrator from Bombay to Toronto and allows Mistry to draw deft parallels between the lives of the residents of apartment complexes in both of these crowded, multicultural urban settings. It also gives him an opportunity to explore the writer's uses of memory and events of his past life using the commentary of the narrator's parents, who discuss the manuscript he sends them after living several years in Toronto. While the other stories in the collection focus on the lives, foibles, and crises of the Parsi community in the Bombay housing complex called Firozsha Baag, "Swimming Lessons" shifts the focus to issues of the loneliness, racism, and cultural adjustment of Mistry's Indian immigrant protagonist, a not so thinly veiled autobiographical character. While the two settings are literally worlds apart, the characters of "Swimming Lessons" in the end seem almost comfortably similar to their Indian counterparts in their sad, petty, and often humorous attempts to find dignity and human connection in the isolating circumstances of modern urban apartment living.

Author Biography

Rohinton Mistry was born in 1952 in Bombay, India's largest city and the most densely populated place in the world. He grew up as a member of Bombay's middle class Parsi community. His father, Behram Mistry, worked in advertising and his mother, Freny Mistry, was a housewife. He obtained a British-style education at the University of Bombay, studying mathematics and economics and receiving a Bachelor of Science degree in 1975. He then married Freny Elavia, a teacher, and immigrated to Canada, settling in Toronto. He worked as a banker to support himself while taking night courses at the University of Toronto and completed a second baccalaureate degree in 1984, majoring in literature and philosophy.

During this period, Mistry became interested in writing. He studied with Mavis Gallant, a writer-inresidence in Toronto's English Department, and won first prize in a short story contest the university inaugurated in 1983. He won this contest again in 1984 and added two Hart House literary prizes and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*'s annual Contributor's Prize to his list of accolades in 1985. He published in numerous literary magazines and was one of the new fiction writers featured in the 1986 volume *Coming Attractions, 4*, published in Ottawa by Oberon Press. The next year, Penguin/Canada published a collection of eleven of Mistry's stories titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, which the American publisher Houghton Mifflin picked up in 1989 and retitled *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*.

This collection, the final episode of which is "Swimming Lessons," centers around an apartment building in Bombay and showcases Mistry's talent for sketching subtle, sympathetic, and often funny character studies of the tenants of the housing complex. It has received positive attention from reviewers, who have praised Mistry's ability to evoke the atmosphere of the Bombay Parsi community and his skill in narrating his stories with wit and compassion.

In 1991 he published his first full-length work, a novel entitled *Such a Long Journey*, which won the Governor General's Award for Canadian fiction and the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Set in the early 1970s during the creation of Bangladesh from the former East Pakistan, it concerns an upper class Bombay man named Gustad Noble, who is drawn into the politics of this struggle and becomes unhappily involved with Indira Gandhi's government. It was shortlisted (nominated and noted but not chosen) for the prestigious Booker Prize, won the W. H. Smith "Books in Canada First Novel Award," and was quickly translated into several languages.

Mistry's latest work, a novel published in 1995, combines the political themes of *Such a Long Journey* and the character sketches of the Firozsha Baag stories. Titled *A Fine Balance*, it focuses on four people who live in the same apartment in Bombay in the 1970s and describes the effects of the internal political turmoil of the times on their lives. As with his previous work, the critical response was good and Mistry's reputation as one of Canada's premiere young writers has continued to grow.

Plot Summary

Swimming Lessons and Others Stories from Firozsha Baag is a collection of eleven intertwining short stories by Rohinton Mistry, capturing snapshots of how three generations of Parsi residents live in a decrepit apartment complex and how a few émigré children cope in Canada.

"Auspicious Occasion" provides a feel for the Firozsha Baag apartment complex, in which most of the stories are set. It is falling apart for lack of maintenance. Mehroo and Rustomji are Parsis, she pious and traditional, he a modern, cynical, and impious lawyer known as "the curmudgeon." On a Parsi holy day, Rustomji is literally dumped on with filth twice, while Mahroo learns her beloved priest has been murdered. "One Sunday" looks at the interactions of families in B Block, centering on Najamai's refrigerator. Young neighbor Kersi Boyce and his older brother chase down the handyman Francis, whom Najamai accuses of stealing money.

"The Ghost of Firozsha Baag" is narrated by an elderly Goan Christian, Jaakaylee, reflecting on life among the Parsis. Jaakaylee sees a ghost, which makes her the butt of jokes until her employer also sees it. "Condolence Visit" portrays Parsi funeral and wedding traditions, as a caring, sharp-witted widow wishes she had a cassette recorder to repeat the same sad details over and over. The widow Najamai reappears in a most annoying way, as a know-it-all about protocol. "The Collectors" looks back to when the late Dr. Mody and his family move into Firozsha Baag and Mody befriends Jehangir, the outcast bookworm, spending Sunday mornings with him over stamp albums. Mrs. Mody is jealous, steals a favorite stamp, and breaks them up. Jehangir, who builds his modest collection by granting sexual favors to a stamp thief and steals himself, accepts the destruction of Mody's collection, which he receives posthumously, as justice for not being charged for the thefts.

"Of White Hairs and Cricket" is Kersi Boyce's reflections on how, no matter how obnoxious home life might be, he must cherish the fleeting time. "The Paying Guests" shows Bomen and Kashmira trying to break a sublet to an aged couple, Khorshedbai and Ardesar. When Bomen loses in court, and Khorshedbai - at her dead parrot's suggestion - daily strews garbage in front of their flat to antagonize them. She finally goes mad, snatching Kashmira's newborn and putting it in her birdcage. "Squatter" is a story within a story, with skillful Nariman making clear to would-be émigrés the pressures of living abroad - by having Sarosh in Toronto fail for ten years to learn to relieve himself in the Western manner and return to Bombay a total failure. Jehangir's reactions to the storytelling show him maturing intellectually.

"Lend Me Your Light" is another Kersi Boyce narrative, about his own mundane experiences in Toronto compared with his older brother Percy's dangerous social activist in a poor Indian village and their wealthy former friend living in New York holding for his birthplace in utter contempt. On a visit home, Kersi finds himself out of step with put off by much of Indian life, but is not ready to write it off. "Exercises" shows a grown-up Jehangir being torn between his over-protective parents and his first vivacious

girlfriend. It includes a pilgrimage to get a Parsi holy man's views on the relationship, but he delivers only a riddle. In the end, Jehangir clings to his mother's apron strings. "Swimming Lessons" is another Kersi Boyce story about living abroad, cleverly interspersed with scenes in Firozsha Baag as his parents read a book of his short stories and the reader realizes they are enjoying the present book.

Auspicious Occasion

Auspicious Occasion Summary

Rustomji yells for his younger wife Mehroo, busy preparing for prayers at the fire temple. The toilet upstairs has leaked on his head. He declares his day spoiled and fears constipation. Mehroo has packed the children off to school, cooked dinner, and laid out temple clothing. Mehroo sends Gajra away after a quick sweeping, hastily completes decorating, and catches the H bus. Rustomji promises to follow.

Mehroo has always loved the fire temple. As a child, Mehroo watches the flames dance in the marble inner sanctuary and prays before exams, happily hugging Dustoor Dhunjisha, who, now 75, often lets younger priests officiate. She hopes he will be present today.

The gates to the fire temple are locked and police are dispersing the curious crowd. Mehroo hears "murdered" and "stabbed" being murmured. Rustomji finishes his tea, dresses, grooms, and heads to the fire temple. Feeling resplendent in starched whites, he steps off the A-1 bus and is hit between the shoulders by some paan (tobacco juice), ruining his dugli. Shamed and raging at being soiled a second time, he takes a taxi home.

Mehroo wonders what has happened to Rustomji. She finds him at home, with the blood red stained dugli beside him. He explains the bus ride and she tells him how a fire temple employee, whose thievery the old priest stumbled upon, stabbed him to death. Both sit silently. Mahroo sees a rare break in Rustomji's tough exterior and joins him for tea.

Auspicious Occasion Analysis

The first story gives the reader a feel for the Firozsha Baag apartment complex, which is the common locale for most of the stories in the collection. It is falling apart for lack of maintenance. Like Mehroo and Rustomji, most of the residents are Parsis (Zoroastrians) and the tension between traditional and modern ways permeates the stories. Here Mehroo is strictly piety and her husband cynical and impious but accommodating. The story introduces themes other that run throughout: the stark poverty and backwardness of India, owner/tenant conflicts, voyeurism, and constipation. Labeled a curmudgeon and said to storm at children playing in the common areas, Rustomji is literally dumped on twice on a major feast day, perhaps giving him reason. He reappears as a minor character in several later stories.

One Sunday

One Sunday Summary

Najamai locks her cupboards in preparation for a trip. She is a widow whose daughters Dolly and Vera have gone abroad for education. She is glad neighbors Tehmina and Silloo Boyce use her fridge, lest anyone invade her empty flat. Tehmina lets herself in to fetch ice, working the locks with difficulty because of unripe cataracts. She is startled to find grinning, homeless Francis lurking in the hall. He does odd jobs for everyone in C Block.

Silloo finishes packing beef in plastic bags, ready for son Kersi to carry upstairs to Najamai's freezer. He has been repairing the cricket bat he uses to kill rats. Tehmina returns to ice her nightly Scotch and has trouble getting in. Tehmina is startled to find Francis in the dark hallway but then has him check the locks. Najamai gets off the train at 9:30 and stops at Silloo's. Silloo holds a flashlight as she climbs the stairs and listens to her settling down. Suddenly, there are cries for help. Francis has been hiding and flees. Kersi grabs his bat and follows, past a bookie shop. The call, "Thief!" rallies the gamblers, who begin beating Francis. Kersi, horrified, insists on taking him back to the crime scene.

A crowd awaits them outside C Block, ready to resume the beating, and the lone Muslim kicks Francis to the ground. Najamai praises Silloo's sons for saving her 80 rupees. Both ignore Tehmina, who put this temptation in Francis' path, but the Muslim curries her favor, accepting the excuse of poor eyesight. Najamai mops up where Francis loses control of his bladder and considers getting a live-in servant. Kersi, nauseated, destroys his bat.

One Sunday Analysis

This story looks at the interactions of the families in B Block, centering on use of Najamai's lone refrigerator. This begrudging communal spirit continues in later stories mentioning Najamai and her companions. The Boyce boys, introduced in terms of their different interests and Kersi's prowess as a rat slayer, are prominent in later stories, with Kersi's claiming not to believe Francis guilty of stealing, long after leading his captors. The outcast lone Muslim in the story also reappears, emphasizing the religious tensions in India.

The Ghost of Firozsha Baag

The Ghost of Firozsha Baag Summary

Like everyone else in her girlhood in Goa, the ayah Jaakaylee believes in ghosts, but the first time she mentions seeing one in Firozsha Baag, people call her crazy. That is two years ago on Christmas day, after midnight mass. Seeing a white body shape appear and vanish on the first and second landings, she knows it will be on the third but does not fear. Recalling a warning that some ghosts are mischievous, she rings until the bai opens.

The Marathi in low-class Tar Gully make fun of anyone who sees a ghost. Jaakaylee's ghost returns every Friday night, now trying to fondle her breasts. Jaakaylee avoids mentioning the ghost in confession until Christmas approaches. Fr. D'Silva holds her blameless and the ghost does not return. She is sure it is because of the confession. Bai/seth (mistress/master) leave the children at night with Jaakaylee for the first time that New Year's Eve to attend a dance. At 2 AM, she begins mending a sheet. She is outside on the balcony when bai/seth's car drives up. Bai screams and points at a ghost. Jaakaylee wants to laugh, but instead reassures her the ghost is not harmful, just lost.

Many begin to believe in the ghost. Bai treats Jaakaylee as though ghosts are her specialty. One night, while Jaakaylee is reciting her rosary, bai questions her. Jaakaylee assures her "Holy Ghost" is entirely different. Bai talks her into taking part in Parsi magic involving scissors and a soopra, but when she begins speaking in an unknown voice, Jaakaylee feels a chill. When the soopra turns on its own, both scream and the implements fall. The scissors break. They forget the incident over tea.

The Ghost of Firozsha Baag Analysis

This story shifts perspective to allow an elderly Goan Christian to reflect in her own simple words about living among the Parsis in Bombay. She recalls people and events from childhood that parallel activities she observes in Firozsha Baag. Note the prejudice towards dark skin in India and the advances that Jaakaylee sees over four decades. The caste system is never addressed directly, but several stories involve oblique social criticism. Jaakaylee's ghost is not forgotten (to her chagrin) in later stories. The Mody family, including horrid son Pesi, are filled in a bit, but await full treatment in "The Collectors."

Condolence Visit

Condolence Visit Summary

On the tenth day after Minocher Mirza's funeral, his widow Daulat awaits visitors with apprehension. Minocher's final days are spent in relative comfort after months of agony and he dies in peace. Daulat too is at peace, having seen him die with dignity. The visits, however, will make her regurgitate months of bad memories and are inevitable.

At 9 AM, the doorbell startles Daulat. It is neighbor Najamai, a widow for years. Since Minocher's death, Najamai has bombarded Daulat with advice and now is offering folding chairs and glasses for visitations. Najamai sees Minocher's elegant pugree and observes that Daulat must never sell it. She next sees an oil lamp still burning beside Minocher's bed and warns this is wrong. The dustoorji also instructed Daulat to let it burn throughout the four days of prayers at the Towers of Silence and then extinguish it, but she keeps it as a comfort. Najamai says it will confuse Minocher's soul.

When Najamai leaves, Daulat refills the lamp and sets about collecting Minocher's clothing to donate to the Old-Age Home for Parsi Men. After arranging the everyday items, she turns to his "going-out" clothes. She fetches the wedding pugree and recalls their wedding 40 years ago and how he had last worn it to cousin Sarosh/Sid's wedding. The groom had dressed in British fashion, like most young Parsis. She has answered a newspaper ad for a good pugree and the buyer is due today. When the oil lamp crackles, she uses the last oil to refill it, waits for the oilwalla to come by, and replenishes her supply. By 4:30, Daulat has wrapped up all the clothes it has taken Minocher a lifetime to enjoy. She reconsiders parting with the pugree, resolving not to sell it to a mere collector.

When the doorbell rings, it is second cousin Moti and her two grandsons. Moti comes in and falls on Daulat's neck with the expected phrases. Daulat leads them into the living room and begins answering questions about Minocher's suffering. Najamai returns with more chairs. Daulat introduces Moti and gets them talking. As Daulat prepares drinks, the doorbell rings, and Najamai answers. Both mourners oppose the idea of selling the pugree, which the young man wants to wear at his wedding. Knowing Minocher would be happy to find a tradition-minded young person, Daulat gives it to him, gratis, with only the request his son some day wear it to his own wedding. The women, amazed, depart at the first opening. Rather than refilling the oil lamp, she extinguishes the flame.

Condolence Visit Analysis

This story illustrates Parsi funeral and wedding traditions, and shows a caring, sharp-witted widow putting up with overgrown, annoying customs. The cassette recorder is a symbol for how best to deal with the weight of tradition. Najamai reappears in a most annoying way, nearly a caricature.

The Collectors

The Collectors Summary

Dr. Burjor Mody, his wife, and son Pesi move into C Block in Firozsha Baag. Their neighbors are the Bulsaras, including brooding son Jehangir. Big-boned Pesi becomes leader of the rowdy boys. He invents a new game: stone-the-cats. Felines gather regularly after to eat the garbage thrown by upper-floor residents. In the afternoons, the boys take stones to Pesi's apartment to hurl at the cats. Parents are shocked a veterinarian's son could harm animals. This follows the usual pattern of Pesi causing his parents to despair.

Dr. Mody earns respect by ending the cat stonings. Pesi is named for the hero of the Persian epic, Shah-Nameh, in hopes he will enjoy great cultures and, one day, stamp collecting. Fate intervenes, and Mody surrenders his son to destiny. Seeing his abusive, lewd son brings him to despair. Gradually, Jehangir fills the empty spot left by Pesi.

One day Mody comes home to find Pesi threatening Jehangir and rescues him in a rage. Mody asks Mrs. Bulsara to send Jehangir to his flat at 10 AM on Sunday. When he arrives, dour, lean Mrs. Mody blocks his entry, and then lets him sit on an uncomfortable chair, carefully watched. Jehangir is happy to escape when the doctor takes him into his room. Mody shows him his first stamp album, given to him empty at Jehangir's age and now filled. Jehangir agrees eagerly to become a collector. Next Sunday, they unpack the beginner's album and assorted stamps. Before Jehangir leaves, Mody shares with him the mysteries in his cupboard: four shelves filled with tins, all full of stamps. They have taken him years to collect but he lacks time to sort them until he retires.

On the pavement outside St. Xavier's Boys School, Patla Babu and Jhaaria Babu sit among the beggars who do a brisk business selling things to schoolboys. They endure theft stoically. Sometimes the stealing is done on a dare and is known as "flicking." The foremost flicker is Eric D'Souza. Eric, who has a reputation for masturbating in class, has his eye on Jehangir, and one day tickles Jehangir's genitals with an eraser. Having heard about his stamp collecting, Eric offers to flick him some stamps in exchange for a favor. The payoff comes during Thursday "visual period" in a darkened hall. There is nothing unpleasant about the pencil incident, so Jehangir sits with Eric and is silently shown how to bring the boy to orgasm. Declining Eric's offer to reciprocate, Jehangir does not find the experience unpleasant. More stamps arrive and the next week's assignation is set.

Sunday, Mody shows him his most prized stamp, a Spanish stamp featuring an exquisite flamenco dancer, kept in a satin-covered box. Jehangir dreams of owning such a stamp, but hears the Modys fighting loudly about the doctor neglecting Pesi. On Thursday, Jehangir is pleased to control Eric's reactions by varying speed, pressure, and grip. When Eric offers to reciprocate, Jehangir accepts. The stamp collection grows. Students whisper about the "masturbatory partnership," and Jehangir learns to flick

stamps himself. Patla and Jhaaria complain to the school about the theft. The head prefect promises no retribution if the babus get their stamps back. Eric orders Jehangir to obey and the collection shrinks. He leaves the album at home on Sunday and stays only briefly, but Mody shows him the flamenco stamp again. Mrs. Mody summons her husband to yell at him about ignoring Pesi. Mrs. Bulsara, hearing this, fetches Jehangir home. Next Sunday, Mrs. Mody welcomes Jehangir with a malignant smile. The doctor's desk is cleared and the cupboards are locked. He dejectedly presents the empty display box. He dismisses Jehangir, who never returns and cannot understand what happened to the stamp.

The residents of Firozsha Baag are relieved when Pesi is sent to a boarding school in Poona. The boys miss their unpredictable leader and blame Jehangir. Jehangir is also isolated in school—Eric has been expelled for attempted sodomy and Jehangir is remembered as his earlier partner. When the Bombay police sweep street people away, the babus disappear. Two years later, the doctor is transferred to Ahmedabad. Pesi is left in boarding school. While arranging their new life, Mody dies of heart failure. Despite pressure to reassign the flat, the trustees allow Mrs. Mody to stay.

Shortly after this decision, Mrs. Mody visits Mrs. Bulsara and admits resenting Jehangir's visits. Sobbing, she asks that Jehangir come to her flat on Sunday. On Sunday, Mrs. Mody asks him to take everything. He puts it all in a huge, iron trunk under his bed. As he leaves, Mrs. Mody confesses to destroying the flamenco stamp and asks his forgiveness. Jehangir tries to regain interest in philately but finds the task of organizing the stamps futile and boring. One night, Jehangir hears strange noises beneath his bed and in the morning pulls out the trunk. It is filled with cockroaches and white ants. The album and most of the stamps are ravaged. Recalling Mody's dream of working with them in retirement, he feels no loss or pain, just mild relief. Nothing of value remains.

The Collectors Analysis

This long story rounds out the character of Dr. Mody and his troublesome son who has no interest in Mody's great passion: stamp collecting. Mody befriends a bookworm neighbor child and lets him fill Pesi's hole in his heart. Jehangir, who is introduced as a bookwork, loner, and sexual victim and/or partner with the unsavory Eric, figures in later stories on a higher plane. His mother, depicted here as a religious simpleton, in later stories becomes a shrew. Here the shrew is Dr. Mody's wife, who is jealous of his efforts to fill the hole that Pesi leaves in his heart. It is easy to see how in a later story she becomes a bitter religious fanatic after her husband's death, which is painted as particularly pathetic. Mrs. Mody's underhanded means of excising Jehangir from broken the family circle is revealed out at the end, and Jehangir accepts the destruction of the precious collection as justice after he is not charged for his thefts. The older Jehangir in later stories is less naïve.

Of White Hairs and Cricket

Of White Hairs and Cricket Summary

Every Sunday morning, 14-year-old Kersi Boyce has the task of pulling white hairs from his Daddy's scalp while Daddy scans classified ads. Mamaiji is supposed to be resting her eyes since cataract surgery, but insists on spinning thread. Kersi is fascinated by the dexterous way she winds the thread, most of which is used to weave spare kustis.

Daddy declares this ad promising and insists every white hair be plucked. He and Mamaiji disagree constantly. Mamaiji thinks Kersi is underfed and sneaks him food. Daddy says the ad will end their troubles. Mummy normally tries to sound optimistic, but today she is silent. Finally, Mummy speaks: forget planning and leave things to God.

When they leave, the building is just awakening. Kersi looks the length of the compound and sees Dr. Sidhwa paying a house call, which means something is serious. Kersi sees his best friend Viraf and waves, but Viraf accompanies the doctor inside. When Dr. Sidhwa leaves, Viraf stands on the balcony, visibly upset. Kersi learns "Puppa is very sick." Kersi unobtrusively retreats home, and vows hereafter to do a better job. He wishes he could cry for Viraf and his father, for Mamaiji with her bad eyes, for Mummy seeing her dreams fail, for himself, unable to hug Daddy and thank him, and for the white hairs he cannot stop.

Of White Hairs and Cricket Analysis

Kersi Boyce is not named in this first-person narration, but details in common with "One Sunday" make his identity clear. Showing Kersi coming to realize that the things he finds obnoxious about his home life ought to be cherished because time is fleeing, the story fills in details from previous stories about living conditions in Firozsha Baag particularly in extended families. The Boyces in this story are more victimized by the economic system than in later tales and their arguments less philosophic.

The Paying Guests

The Paying Guests Summary

Gray-haired Khorshedbai emerges from her ground-floor room to strew garbage. Satisfied with the arrangement, she adds a glob of dog feces. Behind the locked door, Kashmira and little Adil listen to the now-familiar sounds. Outside, Khorshedbai shreds a newspaper and scatters the pieces. Seeing the latest, truly filthy and insane behavior, Khorshedbai's husband Ardesar despairs. When Khorshedbai comes in, Ardesar invokes God to ask how she could do this. She declares they started the six months of legal nonsense, but no one will peck her to pieces. God left the dog droppings outside the agyaari so she could throw it at that door. Ardesar goes to the Chaupatty beach to feed pigeons.

Locked in her room with Adil, Kashmira waits for Boman to come home so she can clean up the mess and relax outside. When they decide to sublet half their flat, she and Boman keep a bedroom, bathroom, and partition off a bedroom and kitchen. The veranda is shared. In renting half the flat, Boman goes against the advice of Mr. Karani, the accountant on the third floor, who warns it is difficult to evict a paying guest. For a year and a half, the arrangement works well. The elderly paying guests arrive with few possessions, including an empty parrot cage, wind-up gramophone, and one brittle 78-rpm record, Sukhi Sooraj, the Parsi song of praise for the morning sun. They do not lock their doors and Kashmira feels sorry for Khorshedbai as she reminisces about her late parrot. She also believes the old woman has "at least one loose screw."

When Kashmira's pregnancy is confirmed, Boman decides they need the whole apartment again. Karani reminds him how hard this will be, but suggests Boman might appeal to the Firozsha Baag trustees. Unsuccessful, Boman turns to his brother-in-law, the lawyer Rustomji. Rustomji gives Boman the name of a specialist in tenancy law. Kashmira does not like the procedure they are told to follow; she wants to have the tenants over for tea and help them find another apartment. Boman believes tea parties are misinterpreted as weakness, so they must stick with a letter from the lawyer.

Khorshedbai reacts to the notice by declaring no one will beck her to pieces and claims Pestonji has come to her in a dream. She forbids Ardesar to talk informally with Boman. After the final courthouse appearance, the old woman fills the house with agarbatti smoke that spreads next-door, nauseating Kashmira, Boman, and Adil. To keep them from sleeping, she plays shrill Sukhi Sooraj until she can no longer stay awake. Pestonji visits again in a dream and shreds and tosses food out of the cage, all over the veranda. This is a divine sign of what to do. At the same time, Boman vows to get rid of them, but returns home to see the first of Khorshedbai's messes. The littering continues as Kashmira enters her ninth month, and Boman claims to have a foolproof plan, but has none.

In fact, Khorshedbai's harassment has given Boman the legal tools he needs. Witnesses abound. However, Karani will not get involved. Disappointed, Boman turns unsuccessfully to Rustomji, Najamai, all his acquaintances in the Baag, and finally strangers. He wishes Dr. Mody were not dead. He cannot bear to get the lone Muslim to testify against a fellow Parsi. When Kashmira checks into the Awabai Petit Lying-In Hospital to have the baby, Boman must clean up Khorshedbai's messes in his good clothes after work and a visit to his wife. Khorshedbai is delighted, but Ardesar is worried and ashamed.

An emboldened Kashmira returns home with the baby. Khorshedbai is not pleased, continues her antics, but avoids coming near Kashmira. One morning, Kashmira accepts Najamai's invitation to come for a chat. Khorshedbai enters the flat and snatches the newborn. Kashmira calls for help and points to the paying guests' door, where Khorshedbai is cooing beside the cage containing the naked baby.

The Paying Guests Analysis

This story gathers many of the characters from the previous stories as new characters Bomen and Kashmira tangle with "paying guests" to whom they have illegally sublet half their flat. The workings of the Indian legal and real estate systems are sketched, and Khorshedbai, a truly tragic but reprehensible character, is watched as she descends into madness. The misuse of religion, suggested in many stories, is starkly present here, as Khorshedbai defends throwing dog excrement on her neighbor's door as being God's will and direction. Choking incense and blaring phonograph hymns are also used to harass. Even Ardesar is shocked and revolted.

Squatter

Squatter Summary

Whenever Nariman Hansotia returns from the library in a good mood, he parks his 1932 Mercedes-Benz below his window, honks to let his wife know he is working on it a while, and begins whistling. The boys playing in the compound gather to hear a story. Nariman then sits to tell the cricket aficionados about Savukshaw, the greatest cricketer ever.

A week later, Nariman has them fetch Kersi, Viraf, and Jehangir so they hear today's story, useful for those thinking of going abroad. After recalling Najamai's daughters, happily settled abroad, he turns to Sarosh/Sid in Montreal. After ten years in Canada, Sarosh perches on his toilet seat; he tries to sit Western-style, but never enjoys success. He must squat in the Indian fashion. Sarosh has received Canadian citizenship but cannot claim to have completely adapted until he can use a Western toilet, and at a farewell party promises to return home if he fails to assimilate in ten years—and swears on his mother's Avesta. Sarosh remembers the careless promise every morning.

Jehangir wishes the boys would stop giggling, for Nariman is telling the story with extreme care for words and phrases. Nariman continues: In his own apartment, Sarosh squats barefoot, but in public restrooms, he must lay down toilet paper, and the absence of feet under the stall when there is clear evidence in the air of his activity could foster xenophobia and hostility. Every morning he pushes and grunts the Western way, and gives in only when exhausted. This makes him late for work 11 times in a month, as his supervisor points out. Sarosh has no defense and is warned not to continue, lest his career suffer. At a pause in the story, Jehangir's mother calls him home, but he ignores her. Sarosh visits the doctor. Mrs. Bulsara calls more insistently, and Nariman promises to resume the story next evening.

The next evening, the story resumes. Sarosh rejects the doctor's secret remedy, a small device called the "Crappus Non Interuptus" (CNI), but time is running out for Sarosh to learn to sit. He books a fully refundable ticket to Bombay. With just four weeks to spare, Sarosh tries laxatives, suppositories, and gets fired for tardiness and absenteeism in the bathroom. He spends days on the toilet, refusing to squat, ignoring doorbells and phone calls, and racing in from bed at the slightest urge. Sarosh leaves the toilet only to eat, reminding himself that he needs downward pressure on his gut if he is to succeed.

Departure day dawns gray and rainy as Sarosh checks in at the airport and visits the restroom out of habit. He is the first to board the plane. He feels a rumble inside and runs to the washroom. The warning to return to his seat and fasten his seatbelt flashes. He knows he cannot balance to squat as the plane begins to roll. He pushes harder than ever before. When a thunderous clap sounds and rain begins, Sarosh hears a splash below him and sees success. The plane is queued for takeoff, but he insists he must get off. The stewardesses convince him this is impossible, and he takes his seat.

Sarosh is filled with joy as the plane takes off, because his process of adaptation is complete.

The boys figure the story is over. Only Jehangir recognizes it as a masterpiece. Nariman continues. Sarosh's welcoming party cannot be held in Firozhsa Baag because of a sick relative, but liquor flows in his honor. Weeks pass as Sarosh struggles to find his place in Indian society again. One day, as Sarosh sits forlorn, Nariman sees him and strikes up a conversation. He narrates his wretched tale and hopes Nariman will share it with any boys in the Baag who might want to go abroad. Parodying Othello, Sarosh laments being a Parsi boy in Toronto, for whom life in the land of milk and honey is a "pain in the posterior." Jehangir tells Nariman quietly it is the best story he has ever heard.

Squatter Analysis

"Squatter" is a story within a story, with skillful Nariman telling would-be émigrés about the tension under which Parsis live abroad. The scatology with which the book begins reaches its climax here, as poor Sarosh, the proud Sid introduced in "Condolence Visit," too proud to wear Minocher's pugree, is unable to relieve himself in the Western manner and believes himself a total failure. Jehangir the Bookworm becomes a wise literary critique, fully appreciating Nariman's talent, which lets Sarosh emerge a tragic figure worthy of Othello. Jehangir's full story remains to be told, but he is already a serious student of Western culture, recognizing an allusion to Tolstoy's words and appreciating the balance in the story. The story-within-a-story motif is further developed in the concluding story in the volume, "Swimming Lessons," which further develops the theme of the émigré's lot in a foreign land.

Lend Me Your Light

Lend Me Your Light Summary

Kersi Boyce and Jamshed leave Bombay the same year, for New York and Toronto. At St. Xavier's, Jamshed is Percy Boyce's friend; they are both four years older than Kersi. After high school, Percy and Jamshed go to different colleges. Percy, Navjeet, and other friends organize a charitable agency to help destitute farmers. Jamshed's goal is to leave the "bloody corruption" of India. Percy is in the village when Jamshed comes to say farewell, and the Boyces announce Kersi will go to Toronto. Within months, Kersi's departure is arranged. Kersi's last glimpses of his home come through dark glasses.

After a year in Toronto, Kersi receives a letter from Jamshed in New York. He has returned from a two-week visit to Bombay, where he visited Kersi's folks. Jamshed is glad Kersi has left India and wonders how Percy can stay in such a dismal place. The farmers cannot be helped because of corruption and the ghati mentality. He concludes by judging Bombay horrible, dirtier than ever, and invites Kersi to visit him. Kersi is irritated that Jamshed still spouts thus when not living in those conditions. Kersi starts a proper reply with a reciprocal invitation to Toronto, avoiding any hint he agrees about India.

Kersi works days and evenings attends philosophy classes at the University of Toronto. He joins the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario and attends Parsi New Year celebrations. He is often invited to dinner in Parsi homes. They are regular world travelers and most of their conversations evaluate various carriers for rates of lost luggage, food, delays, and washrooms. About Bombay, they say no more than what they have purchased there, how the villainous shopkeepers try to cheat them, but they outsmart them.

Six months after Jamshed's trip to Bombay, Kersi hears from Percy, who describes his work in the small village. They are obtaining interest-free loans, and buying seed and fertilizer wholesale in order to get around the bloodthirsty moneylenders, who now hate and threaten them. Their hut has been burnt to the ground while they are away, so Percy and Navjeet are in Bombay talking with reporters, getting publicity, and collecting donations. Kersi pauses to consider how his brother is battling corruption and evil while he watches sitcoms. He resumes reading about Jamshed's visit to Bombay. Their time together is a waste and he cannot believe they were best friends in school. Percy intends to avoid him in the future. Kersi does not mention his irritation over Jamshed when he replies. In four months, he will have been in Canada two years and plans a visit home.

From the air, Bombay looks parched and unhappy, in contrast with lush London. This trip, Kersi does not wear dark glasses. Riding the train, he sees a 16th-century morality play: Fate, Reality (and its offspring, New Reality), Poverty, Hunger, Virtue, Vice, Apathy, and Corruption. A beggar dusts off someone's dropped chapatti; Kersi suspects this is a lesson to him: trim expectations and reactions back to proper proportions.

Firozsha Baag is much the same. Percy writes from the village that he cannot come home and warns Jamshed is coming with plans for grand reunions; Percy refuses to see him and Kersi agrees. Kersi catches a bus to Flora Fountain, and blends with the crowd there serenely. Suddenly, Jamshed appears, condemns the bloody stalls and wishing he were back in New York. Kersi knows better than to say anything his brother would be proud of—defending these people's efforts to survive without stealing or begging. Kersi understands why Percy wants not to see him: Jamshed saps the soul. Next evening, Percy comes home, telling how the moneylenders beat Navjeet to death. Next evening, Jamshed visits. Mummy tells Percy's story. Jamshed delivers an I-told-you-so and urges Percy to come to the United States. Percy must decide their next move in the village.

Five days later, Kersi is back in Toronto. He thinks about Jamshed's adamant refusal to enjoy India and always seeing the worst there—perhaps because otherwise he would find life in America bewildering. Contempt and disdain lighten his load. When a Christmas card arrives from Jamshed, Kersi tosses it in the garbage incinerator unopened.

Lend Me Your Light Analysis

Kersi Boyce again narrates a first-person story, about his émigré experiences in Toronto. This is the only story with an epithet, a quote from poet Rabindranath Tagore's Nobel prizewinning Gitanjali. Kersi later applies the idea of borrow light for a "dark and lonesome" house, an image that Kersi applies to his idealistic brother's former friend and his fellow émigré, Jamshed. Jamshed has nothing but contempt for his birthright and relishes showing off his wealth and sophistication to former friends. Percy, meanwhile, has plunged headlong into dangerous social action of a kind Rabindranath (and Gandhi) advocates. Kersi is somewhere in between. Coming down with pink eye before the flight out allows the philosophic Kersi to identify with the blind soothsayer of Thebes in Greek mythology. His eyes now clear but feeling confused, Kersi identifies on his return to Toronto with Tiresias and severs contact with Jamshed.

Exercises

Exercises Summary

The Bulsaras go to Bhagwan Baba to let the holy man decide whether Jehangir's girlfriend, Behroze, is suitable for him. At 19, Jehangir has lost his piety but goes out of a sense of duty for his parents' years of scrimping. Still, boarding the train, he feels nauseous, wondering how Behroze will interpret this act of betrayal.

Behroze is the first girl with whom Jehangir goes out. In college, Jehangir finds his lack of sophistication makes competing with the graduates of coeducational schools impossible. He observes their ways in order to imitate them. Behroze starts talking with Jehangir one day waiting for choir practice. As they talk, Jehangir loses his fear of blushing, stumbling, and being overheard. He visits Behroze's house, meets her parents, and borrows books. By college, Jehangir gets over his high school habit of walking in the Hanging Gardens and watching brawny men work out in the playground, and begins going to movies, hoping to brush against girls and watching couples. When he and Behroze go to the cinema, he becomes aroused and leaves feeling like he has been kneed in the groin.

The first time Jehangir brings Behroze home, the visit is too short for Mother to embarrass him, but at dinner she says he is seeing too much of her and reminds him of the 8 PM curfew. Mother's intuition tells her the girl is too well off and someone more fitting might be missed. Dinner table talk grows sharper every evening. Mother concentrates on Behroze's heavy makeup and Jehangir's increased laundry load. Father vouches for Mother's intuition. Jehangir stops bringing Behroze home. She picks up on the antagonism and urges him to stand up to his parents. Any show of autonomy on Jehangir's part is taken as proof of Behroze's evil effect. Every evening, Mother reminds Jehangir that she will not open the door for him after 8 PM. Jehangir kicks himself for putting the idea for this trip in his parents' minds but decides he has nothing to lose. Hostilities are suspended.

Bhagwan Baba's house has a spacious veranda with a wooden bench and is surrounded by a garden. There is no breeze as a large crowd stands in a line marked by no hysterical religious displays. The bald holy man emerges, supported by two men, and wearing dark glasses. His eyes are said to be amazing. When they reach the front of the line, Jehangir's apprehension returns and he digs out Behroze's photo. Mother promises to handle everything: Jehangir has only to listen carefully to Bhagwan Baba.

Father is disappointed that Bhagwan Baba looks at the photo and says little after they wait in line three hours. Mother blames Jehangir for showing no interest in his own problem. Jehangir objects that he has no problem, beyond Mother not liking Behroze. Bhagwan Baba says only that, "life is a trap, full of webs." Father believes this must mean Jehangir should stay away from the girl, but Mother wonders why Bhagwan Baba has always given plain answers before. Chided to talk, Jehangir wants to tell Mother

how he once catches checking for evidence he has been ravished. Mother reminds them of all the things she has done for him and nearly caresses his cheek before resuming the offensive.

Jehangir does not tell Behroze about Bhagwan Baba. He skips choir practice to visit the Hanging Gardens at dusk. He mulls over Bhagwan Baba's words. Behroze cannot be the trap; it must be something cosmic, involving him and his parents. If he continues seeing her, the squabbles will continue. As he cannot solve both problems simultaneously, life is indeed a trap. Happiness mixes with unhappiness and a horrible end must be ahead. At the playground, he sees the sweating, panting exercisers, and thinks of the camaraderie among the boys at St. Xavier's from which he had been excluded. He is tempted to strip down and exercise, but laughs it off, thankful to have been distracted from his problem.

Mother skillfully questions Jehangir and examines him for signs "kissie-koatie." Next evening, Jehangir is drawn to the dry Hanging Gardens. Jehangir walks to the playground, imagining joining this community of men and resolving to begin exercising at home. He also resolves to make a clean break with Behroze and makes a mental list of how their relationship is causing unhappiness. Behroze should return to life before he trespasses. Behroze's parents and the servant are out when Jehangir arrives. She guesses this means they no longer worry about her virginity with him. When she asks about his absence, he admits the trip to Bhagwan Baba, provoking scornful laughter.

Jehangir forgets his well-rehearsed speech and his resolve begins to dissolve. Behroze takes his hand and looks at him softly. She turns off the light, distant thunder rumbles, and the fresh smell of rain rises. Behroze comments that they are like lovers in a Hindi movie when Jehangir sees it is 8:15, jumps up, and makes himself presentable. Behroze tries to calm his childish panic, but he races out, noticing two tiny tears, realizing Bhagwan Baba has tricked him into ending the relationship. He runs like a madman. Mother opens to say he is late and slams the door in his face. He rings repeatedly to no avail. He recalls Mother accompanying him to school on rainy days to dry his feet and put on new socks and shoes. Now she lets him sleep outside. The chain coming off the door awakens him.

Exercises Analysis

This story shows a grown-up Jehangir being torn between his over-protective parents and his first vivacious girlfriend. The difference between boys' and coeducational schooling is portrayed, and Jehangir's voyeurism is examined. He interprets his interest in the exercising men as the camaraderie he is denied in his youth, with no reference to his activities with Eric D'Souza in "The Collectors." Being with Behroze in the park in the presence of real sexual activity embarrasses him. The story also depicts pilgrimage to see a Parsi holy man, with Jehangir skeptical and happy being able to blaspheme and the man in line gushing with pious enthusiasm. When Behroze mentions a string, Jehangir thinks she is talking about his kusti (a long string tied and untied during prayers), but she means Mother's apron strings. Jehangir's race home through the

monsoon is pitiable and his mother's hardheartedness barely forgivable. She opens the door when he quits knocking, not yet knowing she has won.

Swimming Lessons

Swimming Lessons Summary

In a Don Mills apartment building, an old man sits in a wheelchair in the lobby, talking to people as they come and go. He first speaks to Kersi Boyce as Kersi waits for the elevator after buying swim trunks. The old man reminds Kersi of his Grandpa after his stroke, except with Parkinson's disease Grandpa bounces, causing passers by to think he is waving. The Portuguese Woman (PW) across the hall who always comes out when she hears the elevator tells Kersi that the old man's divorced daughter looks after him. Mummy cares for Grandpa until his osteoporosis and lung cancer require hospitalization. With things like osteoporosis and divorce, it is difficult to decide between cause and effect. Mummy says that an old person's blessing to a helper is most valuable and potent. Kersi visits the stinking, noisy ward and is glad Grandpa spends most of his time unconscious. When he recalls Grandpa's death, he regrets not visiting more often.

In Firozsha Baag, Mother tips the postman for an envelope with Canadian postage. Father looks up, knowing there will be no news. Even when he visits, Kersi keeps his life a mystery. Registering for his first swimming lesson, Kersi tells the woman at the registration desk most Indians swim like fish and she confides she cannot ride a bicycle. In fact, Kersi as a boy cannot afford private swim clubs and Chaupatty Beach is filthy.

Kersi examines the Surf King trunks he has bought. They are sleek and streamlined and he wonders if they will contain his genitals. The trunks cost $15, as do ten lessons. In Bombay, Mother replies to Kersi's letter because Father is pouting over non-answered questions, but he watches over her shoulder, prompting her to tell him to work hard and not forget his Parsi heritage of "good thoughts, good words, good deeds." Mother doubts he prays. He has said he belongs to the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario, and Mother knows that being 10,000 miles from him she can only let God take care of her son. Father letters the envelope because his handwriting is neater. Not trusting the postal system, Mother carries the letter to the post office and watches the clerk cancel the stamp.

Kersi's swimming lesson goes badly. When Instructor Ron calls for a volunteer, Kersi steps forward, only to learn he must demonstrate paddling in the deep end. Ron has to rescue him, as the class cheers. Kersi attends another lesson, but then never comes back.

Mother and Father grin, unwrapping a book of short stories by Kersi, whom they have never suspected is a writer. Mother demands they share it, chapter-by-chapter. Meanwhile, in Canada, leaves fall while Kersi walks every evening. At 11 o'clock, he hears an Olds 98 and sees the old man bundled into the front seat. If this were Bombay, Kersi would suspect an emergency, but here an ambulance would be called.

After five stories, Mother is sad that Kersi misses his home so badly, but Father explains that writers use memories and experiences, adding, imagining, and changing details. It does not mean they are unhappy. Mother wonders whether Kersi remembers because he writes or writes because he remembers and misses. In Canada, snow falls and Kersi recalls hearing that immigrants from hot countries enjoy Canadian winters for a few years before coming to dread it. Kersi wonders whether he thinks of childhood winters and knows his memories of Christmas are from Enid Blyton books. When the heat goes, Kersi recalls how long repairs take in Firozsha Baag, worries about the old man, and notices the medicinal smell gone. PW tells him the old man is in the hospital, a stroke.

Father is concerned that the stories show Parsi families poor or middle-class and suffering, omitting anything positive like their contributions in the steel and textile industries and the freedom movement. They ought not to be shown as cranky and bigoted since they are rich, advanced, philanthropic, and family-oriented. Why could Kersi not write about their coming to India, escaping Islamic persecution in Persia and descent from Cyrus the Great? Mother likes how beautifully Kersi expresses even sad memories and still, allowing for imagination, tells the truth. Father wishes he would write about Canada beyond that bit about the man perching on his toilet—disgusting and funny at the same time. Father declares that writers need ten years to absorb and understand events before they are comfortable using it in stories. Before he can expound on beauty, emotion, inspiration, and imagination, Mother resumes reading. For Kersi, the Canadian winter drags on. The return of the medicinal smell makes Kersi is happy, but as he fetches an Indian aerogramme, he notices that the old man is no longer in his usual place, but facing the wall and looking sunken. The old eyes look glazed and he complains of the cold.

Father and Mother now know their son better and wish there were more stories. Father declares that writers, poets, and philosophers never tell the whole story. They like the last story best, because it deals with Kersi's day-to-day life in Canada. If he writes more like this, he will do well, because Canadians enjoy the special viewpoint. In Toronto, Kersi scrubs his tub, recalling how Indians bathe, figuring this explains his preference for showers. Still, he runs a bath and decides to look up the old man's name in the directory. Fighting panic, he dunks his head and opens his eyes. Everything looks so different underwater that he plans to enroll in swimming classes. In the lobby, he checks for Room 201 but finds it blank. Upstairs, PW comes out and says the old man has died.

Mother declares that the best part of the book is about Grandpa and wonders if his spirit is watching and blessing Kersi. Father wonders if the materials are accurate as Mother declares or if she chooses to accept Kersi's made-up versions. Mother believes it happens as written. Father cautions that one must not confuse cause and effect. Mother has stopped listening. She starts a letter to Kersi, expressing their pride in him and hoping for another volume. Father asks her to leave space for him to add a few lines.

Swimming Lessons Analysis

Kersi Boyce again narrates a first-person story about his émigré experiences interposed with scenes in Firozsha Baag (italicized), showing his parents grousing about the generalities in his letters and enthusing about a book of short stories that reveal a great deal. Unlike Sarosh, Kersi is growing comfortable in Canada, despite some xenophobia. He learns to open his eyes underwater and knows that the mystery of life symbolized by water is still eluding him but can be grasped. As the parents discuss what they like and dislike about the tome, it becomes obvious that they are reading the present book. Their hope for more stories is the reader's too as the final page turns.

Characters

Bertha

Bertha is the apartment building superintendent. She is a hard working middle-aged Yugoslavian woman who spends much of her time trying to get her husband and son to be hard working too. She is demonstrative, loud, and unconcerned about how she is perceived by her neighbors when she yells at her spouse or son. Her husband works in a factory but occasionally yields to alcohol, which Bertha calls "booze," one of her few English slang terms.

Bikini sunbathers

Like most of the characters in "Swimming Lessons," the sunbathers are minor figures who serve primarily to reveal the narrator's thoughts and feelings. First seen from a distance, they are objects of desire as Kersi ogles them. Later he comes to think of them as "horny old cows."

Kersi

See Narrator

Mother and Father

The narrator's parents are the only major characters in the story other than himself. They are presented with complexity both as individuals and as a couple who have lived together for many years. The father at first will not answer Kersi's letters because he dislikes their short and impersonal tone. But when he receives his son's manuscript of stories, he becomes interested and writes to give him suggestions about writing and his subject matter. The mother is less interested in writing theory and criticism. She reads his work with an eye to how her son is feeling personally. The conversation Mistry gives these characters gives him the occasion to discuss literary themes, especially how a writer uses the experiences of his own life to create fiction.

Narrator

The narrator's name is never mentioned in the story, but he is clearly the same Parsi Indian character named Kersi who appears in several of the other stories of the *Swimming Lessons* collection. Although shy, Kersi is becoming progressively "westernized" and enjoys displaying his new cultural knowledge, such as the make and model of the old man's son's car. He is a keen observer of the people in his apartment complex and is beginning to write about them, as is evident from the manuscript he

sends to his parents in Bombay. He lives an interior life full of memories of Bombay that he frequently compares to his new life in Canada. He characteristically notices and thinks about the thematic and symbolic meanings of the things he observes.

Old man

Another unnamed character, the old man will soon turn seventy-seven. He sits in his wheelchair by the elevator of the apartment complex and makes small talk with the tenants as they pass in the hall. He seems somewhat senile, but the apartment tenants indulge him and he engages everyone equally. He has a son who visits and takes him for rides.

Portuguese woman

The narrator gives her the designation "PW," making her a blatantly two-dimensional figure. She is nosey and wants the narrator to know the extent of her information about all the goings-on in the apartment building. She is easily insulted when anyone gives her information, since she wants to be the one "in the know."

Rustomji and Mehroo

In "Auspicious Occasion," Rustomji "the Curmudgeon" is a successful but hot-tempered Bombay lawyer now in his fifties, who lives with wife Mehroo, 20 years his junior, in Block A of the Firozsha Baag apartment complex. He alone refuses to contribute to communal maintenance efforts led by Nariman Hansotia, leading to a life-long enmity. Catholic-educated at St. Xavier's School, has lost his youthful idealism and believes India is merciless. He lusts after buxom housekeeper Gajra, hiding behind the newspaper lest Mehroo catch him.

Mehroo is 20 years younger and an observant orthodox Parsi, unhappy at being married off before completing high school to a man who is now toothless. She rushes through preparations for the Behram roje celebration and hurries to prayers at her childhood fire temple where she continues to worship. There she finds her beloved priest, Dustoor Dhunjisha, has been brutally murdered. Meanwhile, constipated Rustomji takes a later bus to the fire temple, is defiled by tobacco juice, and returns in a foul mood.

In "The Paying Guest," Boman turns to Rustomji, his brother-in-law, for legal advice about evicting subletters. Rustomji declares it foolish to admit paying guests: like digging a well after the fire starts and rails about the rich trustees who ignore five weeks of begging to have the plumbing repaired until he sends a legal notice. That gets it done. Rustomji gives Boman the name of a specialist in tenancy law.

The Boyces

In "One Sunday," the Boyces are introduced as the downstairs neighbors of from Najamai in C Block who are allowed to keep packages of beef in her freezer. Silloo, a cultured woman who plays records of "The Blue Danube" rather than Hindi movie themes, resents having to lend their daily newspaper to Najamai and accept her daily milk delivery in return for using the freezer. Son Kersi is an avid cricket player until being left off the school team, while Percy, four years older, prefers building model airplanes and reading Biggles books. Kersi now uses his cricket bat chiefly to kill rats with consummate skill.

Kersi emigrates to Toronto, Canada, where he becomes an author. He narrates "Of White Hairs and Cricket," "Lend Me Your Light," and "Swimming Lessons." In these, he depicts his father's frustration at living with his mother-in-law and not being able to find a job that will allow him to provide adequately for his family. Seeing a friend's father on the brink of death, Kersi appreciates the limited amount of time he has left with his father. In "Lend Me Your Light," he writes about living in Canada while Percy becomes a social activist, taking on the powerful moneylenders in a small village, and breaking with his childhood friend, the rich and now arrogant Jamshed. After an uncomfortable visit home, Kersi returns to work and school in Toronto and Percy continues his crusade for justice. Kersi's works days and evenings attends philosophy classes at the University of Toronto, joins the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario, hoping to meet people from Bombay, and attends Parsi New Year's` celebrations at a rented community center. It is like a wedding at Bombay's Cama Garden but without the cluster of beggars at the gate. He is often invited to dinner in Parsi homes, where he meets world travelers who evaluate various carriers for rates of lost luggage, food, delays, and washrooms. About Bombay, they say no more than what they have purchased there, how the villainous shopkeepers try to cheat them, but they outsmart them. Others talk about the great deals they have gotten on bric-a-brac. In "Swimming Lessons," Kersi writes what turns out to be the present book, a copy of which he sends to his parents, giving them a first insight into his life abroad. It is about life in a Don Mills apartment building and the voyeurism that has accompanied him into adulthood, having had his sexual development retarded by attending an all-boy's school.

Najamai

In "One Sunday," Najamai is introduced as a hefty 55-year-old widow whose husband Soli dies a year after daughters Dolly and Vera go abroad to continue their education. Three years ago, she has fat removed from her abdomen and breasts as a precaution against sagging when she turns 60. She has the only refrigerator in the C Block, which she rather grudgingly allows next-door neighbor Tehmina and downstairs neighbor Siloo Boyce to use. She gives vagrant handyman Francis leftovers and jobs, but when she finds him lurking in her dark kitchen after visiting family in Bandra, she raises a cry that gets Francis hunted down and manhandled.

In "Condolence Visit," Najamai appears as the self-proclaimed authority on "Religious Rituals And The Widowed Woman," forcing her advice on Daulat Mirza in the days following her husband's demise. In "The Paying Guests," Najamai summons Kashmira out of her flat for a chat. They talk long enough for crazy Khorshedbai to enter the flat and snatch the newborn. Kashmira screams for Boman, the police, anyone willing to help. Najamai returns from the other end of the compound and cries for help outside C and B blocks. In "Swimming Lessons," Kersi Boyce, now an author living in a Don Mills (suburban Toronto) apartment building, thinks of the Portuguese Woman (PW) across the hall as a non-subtle Najamai.

Tehmina

"One Sunday," Tehimna is Najamai's next-door neighbor in C Block, to whom Najamai has entrusted keys and given permission to use her new fridge. Tehmina holds cloves in her cheeks to fight nausea and toothache, and is waiting for her cataracts to ripen to the point they can be removed. She lets herself into Najamai's flat to fetch ice for her morning lemonade and evening Scotch and soda. In "Of White Hair and Cricket," Tehmina is shown as a pious spinster who nonetheless curses the kuchrawalli who dares pass in front of her while sweeping, since this pollutes and weakens her prayers at dawn. In later stories, Tehmina's cataracts are gone and she dresses fashionably.

Jaakaylee

The narrator and protagonist of "The Ghost of Firozsha Baag," Jaakaylee (Jacqueline as mispronounced by the Parsis) is a 63-year-old, slightly overweight ayah originally from Goa, who has worked 49 years for the Karani family in B Block of Firozsha Baag. She is an observant Catholic who has always believed in ghosts and becomes a laughing stock when she reports seeing one in Bombay. She works for a chartered accountant since he is a boy. Rich now, owning one of three cars in the apartment complex, he still will not buy an automatic grinder to spare her shoulders the labor of grinding curry masala. She is mentioned in several other stories.

Minocher and Daulat Mirza

In "Condolence Visit," Minocher is a prominent Parsi, Daulat's loving husband who has died ten days ago after a long illness that for a few days loses its agony. Daulat with apprehension looks forward to receiving a string of mourners, having been coached by the veteran widow Najamai. She knows they will poke and pry into her and Minocher's lives and the painful details of his decline and death. Daulat wishes she had a cassette recorder to get down the sordid details of her husband's agony, in order to satisfy the visitors without running through it continually. Knowing her late husband's attitudes, she packages up his clothing for distribution to the poor and gives his pugree to a traditional groom-to-be. The visitors at the time - busybody Najamai and a second cousin Moti -

are aghast at such departures from the norm. Daulat cannot conceive her husband's soul will bet disoriented on its way to the Next World

The Modys

Mentioned in most of the stories, but extensively described in "The Collectors," Dr. Burjor Mody is a veterinarian who moves into Frizsha Baag Block C, third floor when transferred from Mysore to become principal of the Bombay Veterinary College. Dr. Mody instantly becomes the pride of the building, just as his big-boned son, Pesi, becomes leader of the rowdy elements in the 10-16-year age group. His chief talents are brute strength, hawking enormous amounts of phlegm, and breaking wind with both pungency and tonality. This earns him the sobriquet "paadmaroo," which he wears proudly. Eventually, Pesi's behavior gets him sent off to boarding school, where he is left back several times.

Dr. Mody befriends Jehangir Bulsara, an effeminate boy living next door, and Pesi's favorite victim. Mody interests the boy in stamp collecting, but casts him out when he believes Jehangir has stolen his most prized stamp. Dejected thereafter, Mody learns of another transfer and dies of heart failure while arranging new housing. He is greatly mourned in Firozsha Baag. Mrs. Mody confesses to Jehangir that she destroys the prized stamp to stop the Sunday sessions and entrusts the doctor's collection to Jehangir, who is no longer enthusiastic and inadvertently allows it to disintegrate in a trunk beneath his bed. Mrs. Mody becomes a religious recluse and dies a few years later.

Kashmira and Boman

In "The Paying Guests," Kashmira and Boman are a young married couple who rent the ground floor flat in B Block of the Firozsha Baag apartment complex. To cut costs while they have only one child, they illegally and against advice sublet the kitchen and one bedroom to an aged Parsi couple, Khorshedbai and Ardeasar. Things go well for 18 months, until Kashmira and Boman try to break the agreement when they find they are expecting a second child. Kashmira wants to talk out the eviction peacefully, but Boman insists they consult lawyers. They are defeated in court and suffer Khorshedbai's daily torment, strewing garbage outside their door, until the baby is born and Khorshedbai abducts it and is committed to a mental asylum.

Khorshedbai and Ardeasar

In "The Paying Guests," Khorshedbai and Ardeasar are an elderly Parsi couple whose one child lives in Canada. They sublet half of the flat belonging to Kashmira and Boman. Things go well for 18 months until the landlords need the rooms back for their second child. Khorshedbai's late parrot, Pestonji, appears to her in dreams, showing her how to get even by strewing garbage on the neighboring windows, parapets, door, and inner ledge. Khorshedbai silences the tinkling baubles on her bony wrists by pushing

them up her forearms and, satisfied with her arrangement, adds the final touch, a glob of dog feces collected outside the agyaari (fire temple). For Ardesar, a tender advocate for calm, this is truly filthy and insane behavior and a last straw. He increases the time he spends feeding pigeons on the beach and when Khorshedbai is removed to the mental asylum for kidnapping Kashmira's newborn baby, Ardesar disappears in a taxi.

Nariman Hansotia

In "Auspicious Occasion," Nariman Hansotia is the retired, scholarly leader of the ad hoc tenants' association in the Firozsha Baag apartment complex. Frustrated by Rustomji's refusal to contribute to building upkeep projects, Nariman vows to make him a laughing stock and gives him the nickname "curmudgeon." Nariman daily drives his 1932 Mercedes-Benz car to the Cawasji Framji Memorial Library to read international newspapers. Hirabai is Nariman's wife and Mehroo's friend. Nariman and Rustomji appear in several stories as nemeses.

Nariman stars in "Squatter," where he tells the youth of the apartment complex a series of stories after visiting the library and working a while on the "apple of his eye." When in the mood, the bulbous-nosed man with a Clark Gable moustache and twinkling eyes edifies the boys of Firozsha Baag with stories that mix humor and sadness in a way that each listener must decide the meaning for himself. He tells about Savukshaw as a great cricketer, mentions other areas in which he excels, and starts telling about him as a great hunter, but the session is interrupted. Rather than return to that exciting topic, Nariman tells the story of the hapless emigrant Sarosh, forced to return from Canada when he cannot learn to relieve himself seated on the toilet in the Western fashion.

Jehangir Bulsara

In "The Collectors," Jehangir is an effeminate, bookworm who is happy to remain aloof from the other boys in Bock C. The Bulsaras' new neighbor, Dr. Burjor Mody, befriends Jehangir, rescuing him from his brutish son, Pesi, and introduces him to stamp collecting, the doctor's great passion. Jehangir enjoys hobby and discovers he can enlarge his collection rapidly by letting schoolmate Eric D'Souza "flick" (shoplift) stamps from street vendors outside the school. In exchange, Eric wants Jehangir to masturbate him during films in a darkened room. As a result, Jehangir gets a reputation among the other boys and never becomes part of the usual male camaraderie. When they are turned in, Jehangir returns the stolen stamps, and loses interest. Mrs. Mody, who resents her husband spending time with Jehangir rather than their troubled son, destroys the doctor's favorite stamp and lets Jehangir take the blame for stealing it. Sunday visits cease. After the doctor's death, the repentant widow entrusts the stamp collection to Jehangir, but it crumbles in a trunk beneath his bed.

In "Exercises," Jehangir takes center stage at age 19, in his third year in college. He gets his first girlfriend, Behroze, an outspoken soprano whom he meets at choir practice. She takes the lead in the relationship. Jehangir's mother disapproves of her

make-up and superior social position and is sure Jehangir will be happier with someone else. When the Bulsaras make a pilgrimage to Bhagwan Baba to get his opinion about the relationships, Jehangir keeps it from Behroze, knowing he will have to defend the holy man against her skepticism. Behroze swallows her anger and is bringing Jehangir to their first kiss when he realizes he has missed his curfew and fleas in a panic. Behroze has tears in her eyes.

Behroze

In "Exercisers," Behroze is 19-year-old Jehangir Bulsara's first girl friend. They meet at college choir practice, with her taking the lead. She is opinionated and easy to talk to. Jehangir's mother does not approve of her make-up or superior social position. She is sure Jehangir will be happier with someone else. When the Bulsaras make a pilgrimage to Bhagwan Baba to get his opinion about the relationships, Jehangir keeps it from Behroze, knowing he will have to defend the holy man against her skepticism. Behroze swallows her anger and is bringing Jehangir to their first kiss when he realizes he has missed his curfew and fleas in a panic. Behroze has tears in her eyes.

Berthe

In "Swimming Lessons," Berthe is the large-breasted, hard-working, loud Yugoslavian manager of the in a Don Mills (suburban Toronto) apartment building in which Kersi Boyce lives. Her husband is an alcoholic who regularly misses work because of his affliction and the son spends his time working on his van in the parking lot. They both leave her after a particularly violent fight.

Bhagwan Baba

In "Exercisers," Bhagwan Baba is the Bulsara family's longstanding guru whom they seek in health and employment emergencies. When Jehangir at 19 gets his first girlfriend, the parents take him to Bhagwan Baba's suburban home to ask him to resolve the growing conflict between generations. Pilgrims stand for hours queuing up for a few minutes on the bench with the bald, bearded holy man, who does not discriminate between rich and poor. It is said that when he removes his dark glasses, his eyes are remarkable. He tells the Bulsaras enigmatically that life is a trap.

Eric D'Souza

In "The Collectors," Eric is the foremost "flicker" (street shoplifter), a lanky fellow suspended a few times and forced to repeat two years. Eric, who has a reputation for masturbating in class while other pupils pretend not to notice, has his eye on delicate, smooth Jehangir Bulsara, and bargains to steal stamps for his collection in exchange for masturbating him during darkened movies. When the rate of stealing gets out of hand, the victims complain to the school and threaten to go to the police. Eric demands that

Jehangir return the merchandise. Eric is subsequently arrested for attempted sodomy and disappears

Dustoor Dhunjisha

In "Auspicious Occasion," Dhunjisha is a 75-year-old Parsi priest whom Mehroo has known since childhood. A fire temple employee upon whose thievery he comes upon murders him. Rustomji claims Dhunjisha, like all priests, is a dirty old man beneath his robes.

Francis

In "One Sunday," Francis is a short, powerful young man, apparently of limited intelligence, who does odd jobs for everyone in C Block to earn a living after being dismissed from the furniture store across the street, under whose awning he continues to sleep. To the Boyces' chagrin, Francis mentors Kersi in the art of flying a kite, and the two play tops and marbles together. Najamai returns home late from a visit to her sister to find Francis crouching in her kitchen, believes he has stolen money from her, and alerts the neighbors. The Boyce boys chase him into rough Tar Gully, where the street people beat and kick him as a thief, and he is hauled back to face Najamai's charges. Kersi in later years doubts Francis' guilt, but he has disappeared.

Gajra

In "Auspicious Occasion," voluptuous young Gajra replaces ancient Tanoo as Rustomji and Mehroo's gunga (servant). Old Rustomji enjoys watching Gajra work on the off chance that an ample breast - or better yet: a dark nipple - might escape her short blouse.

Jamshed

In "Lend Me Your Light," Jamshed is boy of wealth who lives in the exclusive Malabar Hill of Bombay. He is Percy Boyce's friend while at St. Xavier's and his life's goal is to leave the "bloody corruption" of India for New York. There, however, his ethnic background still seems to haunt him. Fellow émigré, Kersi Boyce in Toronto, ends corresponding with him because of his attitudes.

Patla Babu and Jhaaria Babu

In "The Collectors," Patla Babu and Jhaaria Babu are street people who set up daily on the pavement outside St. Xavier's Boys School and do a brisk business selling items of interest to schoolboys. Their real names unknown, they go by the descriptive nicknames for fat and skinny. The beggars stoically endure theft, but when it involves costly

stamps, they turn in the head "flicker," Eric D'Souza, and stamp collector Jehangir Bulsara to school authorities. They get their merchandise back, but later fall victim to government attempts at clearing the streets of the homeless and are never seen again.

The Portuguese Woman

In "Swimming Lessons," the Portuguese Woman (PW) lives across the hall from Kersi Boyce in a Don Mills (suburban Toronto) apartment building. She pops out her door whenever she hears the noisy elevator open to deliver whatever gossip she has gathered. She is a non-subtle Najamai.

Sarosh / Sid

In "Squatter," Sarosh (he rejects the Western version that he adopts when he first emigrates to Canada) is the tragic protagonist in a story told by Nariman Hansotia to boys who consider emigrating At his going away party, Sarosh declares that if he fails to assimilate completely, he will return home. His mother makes him swear to this on the Avesta. In Toronto, Sarosh finds a job and apartment, but is never able to move his bowels while seated on the toilet in Western fashion. As his ten years end, Sarosh is obsessed with proving himself, but fails. Only when his airplane home is taxiing out to take off does a clap of thunder frighten him into a seated bowel movement, and by then, it is too late not to fly home, defeated. Sitting by the seawall, he tells his story to Nariman and asks him to warn other youth of life's uncertainties.

Tanoo

In "Auspicious Occasion," Tanoo is for two years Rustomji and Mehroo's gunga (house servant), too old and feeble to keep from accidentally breaking things and doing an inferior job cleaning. Abandoned by her husband, she raises two sons who become drunkards. Mehroo feels sorry for her, but Rustomji is hardhearted. Tanoo's decrepitude and clumsiness demand that hard-hearted Rustomji fire her, but they arrange for her to return to her native village.

Objects/Places

Firozsha Baag

A crumbling apartment complex in Bombay, Firozsha Baag is the common setting for most of the stories in this collection. The vast majority of the residents are Parsis (Zoroastrians); there is one Muslim, and he is ostracized. Most of the tenants are low-paid bank clerks and bookkeepers, but each building (or Block) boasts a celebrity: A Block a prominent dustoorji (priest), B Block a chartered accountant, and C Bock, a veterinarian, Dr. Mody. Vendors (wallis) of various sorts wander through in the afternoon, after the 1-3 PM naptime, selling wares. The watchman at the gate keeps them out other times. Their services minimize the need to enter rough Tar Gully nearby to buy necessities. The B.E.S.T. buses thunder by, drowning out all other sounds.

With the exception of a short time when Dr. Mody pushes for improvements, the trustees of the building refuse to do anything beyond the minimum to keep it from being condemned. Conditions are atrocious, including crumbling plaster and leaking toilets. Unlike some tenants who pay for their own repairs, Rustomji and Mehroo let them go for years. Neighbor Nariman Hansotia heads the ad hoc tenants' association that pools money to get the exterior of A Block painted, and when Rustomji refuses to contribute, brands him "curmudgeon," a sobriquet that sticks. The two feud verbally in several stories. Rustomji resents Nariman's telling stories on their stone porch and the loud games that the boys play in the courtyard. Once the courtyard is flagstoned, it becomes unfit for cricket. Before he is packed off to boarding school, Pesi Mody is the leader of the rowdy elements in the 10-16-year age group. His chief talents are brute strength, hawking enormous amounts of phlegm, and breaking wind with both pungency and tonality. This earns him the sobriquet "paadmaroo," which he wears proudly. He invents a new game: stone-the-cats, targeting the felines that gather regularly after mealtimes to eat the garbage thrown by upper-floor residents to await the kuchrawalli, who every morning sweeps away the pungent remnants.

Cawasji Framji Memorial Library

Cawasji Framji Memorial Library is mentioned in several stories as the place to which Nariman Hansotia drives his 1932 Mercedes-Benz in order to read daily papers from around the world. It serves as a symbol of learning and culture.

Chaupatty Beach

The stretch of beach near the Firozsha Baag apartment complex in Bombay, Chaupatty Beach is hopelessly polluted by the masses of people who converge there. It figures most prominently in "Swimming Lessons," where Kersi Boyce is taken as a boy for swimming lessons, since the family cannot afford private swim clubs, but the water is too filthy to abide for long. Avan Yazad, guardian of the sea, is entrusted with mementos

of the departed like Grandpa's brush, comb, kusti, and pills. As a result, the "universal symbol of life and regeneration" frustrates Kursi throughout his life, and in Canada, he decides to take swimming lessons, which also go badly. In another story, "The Paying Guests," beleaguered Ardesar takes refuge on the sidewalks at Chaupatty Beach, feeding the pigeons. Several references are made in various stories to children playing on the sidewalks there and learning to ride bicycles.

Fire Temple

The center of the Zoroastrian (Parsi) religious cult, the fire temple (or agyaari) is a place where the devout offer sandalwood sticks to be burnt as a sacrifice. It is mentioned in many of the stories. The most sacrosanct of the fire temples is in Udwada. During her vendetta with Kashmira and Boman over eviction from their half of a flat, Khorshedbai visits the fire temple every day to make her offering. One morning, she finds a glob of dog feces on the sidewalk outside and considers it a gift and inspiration from God to be used in her campaign.

The Hanging Gardens

In "Squatter" and "Exercisers," the Hanging Gardens of Bombay are the setting for several incidents in Jehangir Bulsara's life. Daytime and until dusk, the park is filled with ayahs and their charges and old folks. At night, brawny young men work out in the playground, amorous couples seeking privacy in the bushes, and gangs flush that enjoy flushing them out and insulting them. While at St. Xavier's School, where he has no friends or male camaraderie, Jehangir goes to the Hanging Gardens regularly to watch the muscular young men work out. By college, he decides this is not fitting and begins frequenting the cinema. He and his first girlfriend, Behroze, go to the Hanging Gardens for a first kiss but are shocked to see a couple fellating on a bench, refusing to be driven away by a guard. After being told a riddle by the guru Bhagwan Baba, Jehangir returns to the Hanging Gardens to think about their future together. At the opposite side of the Hanging Gardens are the sculpted hedges of Kamala Nehru Park.

Panjim

In "The Ghost of Firozsha Baag," Panjim is the small seaside village where the ayah Jaakaylee grows up before moving to Bombay 49 y ears ago. She recalls Cajetan trying to fondle her and the other girls in the movies or on the beach. Every ten years in the Church of Bom Jesus, local Catholics venerate the glass-enclosed body of St. Francis Xavier. This is almost canceled when a crazy woman bites off his toe, but the authorities relent. Jaakaylee notes that the Vatican requisitions St. Francis' forearm as a relic.

Social Service League

In "Auspicious Occasion," the Social Service League (SSL) is a volunteer organization that takes students from St. Xavier's Boys School like Rustomji out into remote areas to build schools, roads, and wells, and teach villagers. It is hard work but great fun. In "The Paying Guest" it is show that Rustomji's sister, Kashmira, is not allowed by their father to join SSL because of stories about antics between the sexes at coeducational camps.

St. Xavier's Boys School

The Roman Catholic institution in which most of the boys the Firozsha Baag apartment complex study, St. Xavier's offers none of the extras that expensive coeducational schools do. Students of all faiths are exposed to Catholic doctrine and ritual but it seems to make little difference. Outside the school, itinerant street vendors set up each day selling trinkets. "The Collectors" shows the students "flicking" Patla Babu and Jhaaria Babu. During Thursday "visual periods" in a darkened hall, when the teachers cannot easily patrol, Jehangir and Eric masturbate one another, and all the boys mentally undress female teachers and spy up their dresses.

Tar Gully

Tar Gully is a tough neighborhood of tenements near the Firozsha Baag apartment complex. The Irani Restaurant there supplies many of the wants of the occupants, who must risk being spit on by residents who resent the better healed. It is said to present a "menacing mouth" with few streetlights. Although it is not a red light district, it attracts its share of prostitutes and pimps after dark. In "One Sunday," the Boyce boys chase the vagrant and supposed thief Francis into Tar Gully, where the street people beat and kick him before he is hauled back to face Najamai's charges.

Toronto

The capital of Ontario, Canada, Toronto has a large and diverse immigrant population, including Sarosh/Sid in "Squatter" and Kersi Boyce. Sarosh marries and takes his bride to Toronto, where she does not feel at home and divorces him. He vows to his mother that if he has not completely assimilated in ten years, he will return home. When his inability to relieve himself on a Western-style sit-down toilet makes him late for work and he takes too many bathroom visits, his boss refers him to the Immigrant Aid Society for Indians (also serving Pakistanis and Sri Lankans), where Mrs. Maha-Lepate refers him to Dr. No-Ilaaz, who develops programs to help immigrants systems adjust to Canadian food products. Sarosh decides against a radical operation, which pleases the doctor, who is happy when his drastic remedies are turned down. As the decade nears its end, Sarosh books a fully refundable ticket to Bombay, explaining to the agent, Mr. Rawaana, who prides himself on solving travelers' problems so they need not return home.

Kersi also emigrates to Toronto, where he becomes an author. In "Lend Me Your Light," he writes about living in Canada while brother Percy becomes a social activist and their former childhood friend, Jamshed, establishes himself in New York City. Kersi works days and in the evening attends philosophy classes at the University of Toronto. He joins the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario, hoping to meet people from Bombay, and attends Parsi New Year celebrations at a rented community center. In "Swimming Lessons," Kersi is living in an apartment building in the Don Mills suburbs.

Towers of Silence

The Towers of Silence are funereal structures in which Parsis over the course of four days mourn the departed and then consign their bodies to the sacred vultures to consume the flesh. It is mentioned when Minocher Mirza dies and is mourned by his widow, Daulat.

Themes

Water

Water as the "universal symbol of life and regeneration" does not flourish in these stories, which open with Rustomji leaping from his toilet when the one directly above overflows on his head. As he prepares for an Indian bath (a method recalled in final story as the reason why narrator Kersi takes showers, not baths) he sees motes of plaster floating, showing more corruption. Rustomji washes away the memory of this foul experience only to be spat upon. Having the gutter flowing with filthy water emphasizes the atmosphere in Tar Gully. The first positive note of water comes when a driving rainstorm and thunder help Sarosh move his bowels seated on a Western-style toilet, but comes too late to spare his return to India. There, Sarosh struggles to find his place in Indian society and at the sea wall on Marine Drive tells his tale to the local storyteller to impart to other would-be émigrés. Sarosh recalls watching its construction; today it smells of human excrement. Thunder and then driving rain play a part in "Exercisers," when Behroze is at the point of making boyfriend Jehangir relax and kiss her. Instead, pulled by his mother's apron strings, he races through the flooded streets, oblivious to the impoverished people bathing and washing their pots and pans in the downpour. The monsoons are India's salvation.

In Toronto, émigré Kersi registers for swimming lessons at the high school. He explains to the woman at the registration desk that most Indians swim like fish, but in fact, he fails to learn because the family cannot afford private swim clubs and Chaupatty Beach is too polluted to more than paddle in a bit. Religious festivals deposit leftovers and the pious entrust to Avan Yazad, guardian of the sea, mementoes of dead loved ones. Kersi purchases revealing Surf King trunks and pictures attracting some fellow student to his brown Asian body. He finds only a paunchy, plain, 35-year old woman in a pink one-piece suit, but her floating pubic hair enthralls him and he returns for another lesson. When she arrives shaven, he never returns, out $30, and considering the pool another stillbirth and a symbolic death. When Kersi scrubs his tub, he runs a bath and forces himself to dunk his head and open his eyes. Everything looks so different underwater that Kersi plans to enroll in swimming classes.

Religion

Religion runs through many of the stories in this collection, but only rarely comes into focus. The first shows a husband, Rustomji, who considers religious customs meaningless but tolerates his young wife's intense piety. Setting the action on a Parsi feast day heightens the tension. Mehroo has always loved the fire temple and wishes her children cared about their religion. Since childhood, she has cherished the dustoor (priest) Dhunjisha, whom Rustomji insists is, beneath his priestly garb, a dirty old man, making lewd remarks between prayers, and is crushed the old priest is murdered and prayers canceled that day. A Goan Christian, Jaykaaly, tells how she sees a ghost, and

the resident dustoorji conducts an exorcism that she as a non-Parsi may not attend. Jaakaylee explains to her employer that "Holy Ghost" is entirely different. Several stories show Parsi children attending St. Xavier Boy School and learning the basics of Catholicism without being affected. Several stories feature a token Muslim, whom the Parsis ostracize.

Parsi traditions for mourning are shown, including superstitions that widow Daulat endures but does not believe. The dustoorji has told her to let her husband's lamp burn for four days while prayer are being said at the Towers of Silence, and then extinguish it; Najamai insists that leaving it lit will confuse Minocher's soul as it seeks the Next World. The fastidious Dr. Mody is shown dying of heart failure two days away from home and decomposes badly in the trunk of his car, because Parsis forbid embalming. The Bulsaras pilgrimage to Bhagwan Baba to let the holy man decide whether Jehangir's girlfriend, Behroze, is suitable. At 19, Jehangir has lost piety. He is glad that in the large crowd there are no hysterical religious displays, although a man in front of them waxes enthusiastic about the man and his powers. Jehangir withholds the trip from Behroze, fearing she will lump Bhagwan Baba with other charlatans in Bombay. When he admits the trip, she laughs about his mother's extra-long apron string and the old man's "mumbo-jumbo." Several stories mention kustis, long strings used during Parsi prayers, and routine distemper that erupts from the pious whenever outsiders disrupt morning prayers. Poor Sarosh returns from Canada when his mother makes him swear on the Avesta that he will come home if he fails to assimilate in ten years.

The worst misuse of religion comes when gray-haired Khorshedbai collects dog feces outside the agyaari (fire temple) to throw at her neighbor's door and declares God would not have left it there, had he not wanted her to do so. She fills her flat with agarbatti (incense) smoke that spreads next-door, nauseating the neighbors and prevents their sleeping by play shrill Sukhi Sooraj (sunrise prayers) full blast.

Voyeurism

Describing a sexually repressed society, it is not odd that Rohinton Mistry depicts voyeurism far more often than he does real sex. Old Rustomji enjoys watching voluptuous, young Gajra work, hoping a nipple may escape her short choli. He is frustrated when his young wife sends Gajra away after a quick sweeping. Young Kersi once pursues a rat into Najamai's flat, but misses it when he sees daughter Vera naked after a bath; later, chasing a thief, he recalls Vera and having once seeing a young man fondling a milkmaid on the street. Evil Pesi Mody scares Vera and Dolly to look up their miniskirts with a flashlight and, pretending to help the victims, the grown-up men are little better. Eric D'Souza has a reputation for masturbating in school. Hearing about Jehangir's stamp collecting, Eric offers to steal stamps in exchange for masturbating him in a darkened room during "visual period." Jehangir declines reciprocity only the first time and they get a reputation. Jehangir visits the Hanging Gardens after dark to watch brawny men work out.

The young characters grow up. When Kersi leaves for Canada, Nariman hopes he will not shame the Parsi community like another sex-crazed young man who, landing in Los Angeles is deported immediately for asking the immigration officer where the supposedly near-naked girls are. Jehangir in third year in college gets his first girl friend, after years of going to movies, hoping to brush against girls and watching couples. When he and Behroze go to the cinema, she offers him her sprained wrist to massage and awkwardly hold hands. He becomes aroused and leaves feeling like he has been kneed in the groin. He envies American teens' sexual freedom. Jehangir still looks up women's skirts in stairwells but fears that Behroze will catch him. Dragged to get the family guru's opinion of his romance, Jehangir looks up the skirt of a girl on a swing, reveling in the blasphemy of the playground and the exercisers, whom he has avoided for two years. Once at the Hanging Gardens, as Jehangir and Behroze are about to enjoy their first kiss in a secluded spot, an oversexed couple begins fellating. Shocked, Jehangir freezes up and the evening spoiled. After discussing Bhagwan Baba and Jehangir's mother's extra-long apron string, Behroze takes Jehangir's hand, looks at him softly, turns off the light, observes that they are like lovers in a Hindi movie, and watches him jumps up in a childish panic when he realizes he has missed his curfew. He runs like a madman, shivering and tormented.

In Toronto, a grown Kersi watches women sunbathe in untied bikinis and hope they forgetfully roll over. He buys revealing Surf King for swimming lessons, hoping they will attract women to his brown Asian body. He finds only a paunchy, plain, 35-year old woman in a pink one-piece suit who, however, floating on her back, displays tantalizing stray hairs from her Spandex. Pubic hair wins out over terror, and Kersi attends another lesson, only to be disappointed: she looks like the airbrushed photos in magazines. Kersi never returns, the pool have produced another stillbirth and a symbolic death. Berthe, the building superintendent, a large Yugoslavian, however, jokingly offers to keep Kersi warm between her enormous breasts. Kersi finds the prospect unnerving.

Style

Point of View

Award-winning author Rohinton Mistry is born in Bombay and currently lives in Toronto, Canada. The final story in this book reveals that Kersi Boyce, first introduced as a young knuckle-cracking, rat-hunting cricket aficionado in "One Sunday," has become a writer of short stories in Toronto and has published his first book, a copy of which he sends to his parents. It is clearly the present volume. Before Mistry reveals the twist, Kersi narrates two other stories in the first person. "Of White Hairs and Cricket" depicts his frustrating home life on the brink of poverty as a teenager, and learning to appreciate that time is fleeting when he sees a friend's father on the brink of death. In "Lend Me Your Light," he writes about living in Canada, and mulls over the differences between older brother Percy becoming a social activist in India, while their wealthy school day friend, Jamshed, disowns his ethnic heritage. The story shows Kersi settling into life abroad.

"Squatter" is a story-within-a-story, with an émigré confides his tragic-comic tale to the apartment complex's resident storyteller, who spins the yarn skillfully, showing would-be émigrés the dangers of the undertaking. The use of story cum commentary points to the final story, "Swimming Lessons," where Kersi divides the story between his ongoing experiences accommodating to life in Canada with his parents' concern about his well-being and silence in letters. The aging ayah

Jaakaylee narrates the story of her long service to two generations of wealthy Parsis in Firozsha Baag, centering on her seeing a ghost early in her service. She is a Goan Christian, giving her a unique perspective, and she speaks in a distinctive patois. The remaining stories are told in the third person past tense as simple, rich narratives and lively, idiomatic dialog. Flashbacks to earlier days help establish characters but are held to a minimum. Generally non-dramatic events rich in subtle humor and pathos dominate.

Setting

Swimming Lessons: and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag, by Rohinton Mistry is set primarily in Bombay, in the mid-1960s (as established in "Of White Hair and Cricket," when it is said to be 17 years after the British pullout from India. The most of the stories are set in flats of the Firozsha Baag apartment complex. There are three "blocks," designated A, B, and C. Most of the residents are middle class Parsis (Zoroastrians), and each block has one prominent resident of which it boasts. The blocks surround a gated courtyard in which the children play. After being flagstoned, the courtyard ceases to be any good for playing cricket, so they look for other games. The buildings have long been in ill repair, with plaster crumbling and plumbing leaking. The owners resist doing anything beyond what is strictly necessary to keep the building open.

Whatever necessities wandering vendors cannot provide, residents obtain from the Irani Restaurant in rough, unlit Tar Gully. Spiritual needs are met at the fire temple (or agyaari), where the devout offer sandalwood sticks; at the associated Towers of Silence, their departed after four days of mourning are consigned to sacred vultures to have their flesh consumed. The Cawasji Framji Memorial Library provides daily papers from around the world, and boys attend nearby St. Xavier's Boys School. Near the Baag are the Hanging Gardens of Bombay, filled until dusk by ayahs and their charges and old folks, but at night, brawny young men exercise in the playground, amorous couples seeking privacy in the bushes, and gangs flush that enjoy flushing them out and insulting them. The Hanging Gardens overlook beautiful but hopelessly polluted Chaupatty Beach. In "Exercisers," the Bulsaras make a pilgrimage to Bhagwan Baba's home 45 minutes out of town to get his opinion about the relationship between Jehangir and Behroze. The trip allows description of the parched countryside.

Several stories are set in Toronto, Canada, which boasts a large and diverse immigrant population, with the Parsi maintaining cultural institutions for their own benefit and the Canadian government providing assistance to those who have trouble, like Sarosh's tragic-comic inability to learn to sit on a Western toilet. Two other stories show Kersi Boyce's success in a Don Mills apartment building.

Language and Meaning

Swimming Lessons: and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag, by Rohinton Mistry is about life in teeming Bombay, India, and among a few Parsi émigrés in Toronto, Canada. Mistry is well equipped to portray intricate details of life in both places, having been born in Bombay and now living near Toronto. Earlier novels, Such a Long Journey and A Fine Balance, set in Bombay, have won Commonwealth Writers prizes and been short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize.

Both dialog and narration are filled with Marathi words, rarely translated into English, but somehow understood in context. Some readers could find this annoying. Otherwise, the dialog tends to the clipped, British-style English that one hears in Bollywood movies. Mistry seems to look for quiet humor and pathos and demonstrates a penchant for young Indians trapped in voyeurism and repressed sexuality. Politics, race, and poverty are touched upon but lightly. Mistry's precise description of the characters' surroundings, rich in metaphors and similes, suggests the dialog must be true-to-life. Most of the characters are Parsi and their speech is uniform. The Goan Christian ayah, however, speaks in a distinct patois.

The last story, "Swimming Lessons," reveals that the entire book comes from the pen of Kersi Boyce, first introduced as a young cricket aficionado in "One Sunday." He has grown up to become a writer of short stories in Toronto and has published his first book, a copy of which he sends to his parents. Before Mistry reveals the twist, Kersi anonymously narrates two stories in the first person ("Of White Hairs and Cricket" and "Lend Me Your Light"). As one would expect, their emotional level is somewhat higher than the third person, recent-past tense tales among which they are interspersed. So

too is the ayah Jaakaylee's tale. In all of the stories, brief flashbacks to earlier days help establish characters and show how much (or how little) Indian has changed since colonial times. Some transitions begin confusingly but become clear once the point of the digression is made. In most cases, they conclude with a witty observation about something in the main narrative.

Structure

Swimming Lessons is a collection of eleven short stories by Rohinton Mistry, all dealing with residents, present and past, of the Firozsha Baag apartment complex in Bombay, India. The stories are generally arranged in chronological order of the events depicted. "Auspicious Occasion" establishes the dilapidated condition of the premises and the range of religious views among the largely Parsi residents from strict piety to worldly disdain. "One Sunday" uses neighbors availing themselves of space in a refrigerator to victimize the widow Najamai and introduce as intrepid boys the heroes of the final stories. "The Ghost of Firozsha Baag" provides a different perspective, being narrated by a Goan Christian who raises two generations of affluent Parsi children and sees ghosts. It abounds in flashbacks. "Condolence Visit" shows the experienced widow Najamai giving well-intentioned advice to a recent widow about to be inundated with well-wishers. "The Collectors" tells the story of Dr. Mody, earlier mentioned as a revered figure and now deceased. His son is as despicable as the veterinarian is good. The long story centers around Mody's stamp collection, with which his wife and son are uninterested. Mody takes in the outcast bookworm, Jehangir, who gets involved in sex and thievery to enlarge the collection.

"Of White Hairs and Cricket" is Kersi Boyce's first first-person narration, in which he comes to realize time is fleeting and he should savor life with his parents. "The Paying Guests" looks at the troubles that arise when a young couple sublet to an older couple and ask for the space back when their second child appears. Most of the characters in earlier stories become secondary figures in this tale. "Squatter" is a story-within-a-story in which a failed émigré to Canada entrusts his sad tale to a skilled storyteller to relate to the boys of the Baag. Its scatology recalls the opening tale.

"Lend Me Your Light" is Kersi's second first-person story. Living in Toronto, Canada, but visiting home, he contrasts his older brother, Percy, with Percy's best friend during their school years. Jamshed who has become too good for India, lives in New York City. Percy fights the oppression of Indian peasants and is in mortal danger. Kersi stands in between, wondering at the meaning of it all. "Exercisers" shows a grown-up Jehangir fighting with his parents over his first girlfriend and seeking a guru's advice. "Swimming Lessons" is Kersi's final story, about his life in Toronto. It turns out to be the present tome, sent home to his appreciative parents.

Historical Context

Canada

Since the 1960s, and particularly since 1980, Canada has been embroiled in a series of disputes arising out of efforts to "patriate" and modernize Canada's constitution. Quebec nationalists, provincial premiers, and, more recently, feminists and aboriginal leaders have sought and sometimes won major victories as Canadians have attempted to transform their constitution and move from a commonwealth based in British law to an independent republic.

India

An ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan after independence from Great Britain came over Kashmir in 1947-49. With independence and partition, the numerous states had to choose to join either Hindu India or Muslim Pakistan. Contiguous to both India and West Pakistan, Kashmir was ruled by a Hindu prince, but the majority of its population was Muslim. In 1947, Pakistan invaded Kashmir in support of an uprising by Muslim peasants. The maharajah fled to Delhi, where he signed papers giving Kashmir to India. Indian troops defended the former princely state, which drew the Pakistani army into the conflict. Fighting continued in Kashmir until a United Nations commission arranged a truce in January 1949. Kashmir was then divided along the cease-fire line, with India holding about twothirds and Pakistan the remainder. Periodic fighting has broken the uneasy peace often since then and India and Pakistan remain bitter enemies.

Bombay

Greater Bombay, of which the southernmost part is the island of Bombay, was formed into a metropolitan municipal organization in 1957, when it was officially renamed Mumbai. About twothirds of the population is concentrated on Bombay Island, which has an area of 26 square miles. Bombay has one of the highest population densities in the world, in some areas reaching 1,500 persons per square mile. The city attracts a large number of migrants, particularly from the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh. The principal languages spoken are Marathi, Gujarati, and Hindi. Of all of India's huge cities, Bombay offers the greatest religious diversity. More than half its population is Hindu; the rest is divided among Parsis, Christians, Jains, Muslims, and others.

Critical Overview

Mistry's "Swimming Lessons" is the concluding story of *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, the collection that first brought him critical attention, but most commentators initially ignored this particular story. Writing in *Canadian Literature*, Amin Malak, for example, chose to discuss "Squatter" and "Lend Me Your Light," presumably to showcase both the Parsi Indian and Canadian immigrant elements of Mistry's work. But he never mentions the last story. He does make flattering literary comparisons to Mistry's work that later reviewers echo. He writes that "following the models of psychological realism set by Chekhov and Joyce, Mistry reveals a knack for generating humour in the midst of tragedy," and concludes that he "adroitly blends tragedy with irony, cynicism with humour, skepticism with belief."

When the collection was reprinted in the United States in 1989, two years after its Canadian debut, it was reviewed twice in the *New York Times*, first by Michiko Kakutani in February and then more extensively by Hope Cooke in the March 5th *New York Times Book Review*. Both reviewers discuss the final story, probably since the American edition retitled the collection, *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. Kakutani notes that it was in the book's last tale that the narrator is revealed as a fictionalized surrogate for the author, and Cooke points out that Mistry "steps out of the frame" in the final story to discuss issues of symbolism and metaphor in fiction and his artistic intentions as a writer.

Both reviewers are very positive. Kakutani stresses Mistry's masterly evocation of his characters' "epiphany" moments, those sudden flashes of understanding about the world and one's place in it that were named and perfected in the stories of James Joyce. She concludes that Mistry's best stories "pivot around incidents that reveal to the characters some unforeseen truth about their lives." Hope Cooke, on the other hand, focuses on Mistry's humor and compassion for his characters, attributes placing him more in the company of Chekhov than Joyce. She suggests that the light, life-affirming quality of his stories is "astonishing, given the horrifying, stunted lives he depicts."

Janette Turner Hospital, writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, is less approving in her assessment of the collection. It is her opinion that:

There are weaknesses in the stories, moments when the reader is conscious that this is a first collection from a young writer. Mistry is imitative of Indian novelist Anita Desai in his depiction of sudden and grotesque incursions of violence into the community, but he has the habit of predictably and rather portentously foreshadowing these events (a splat of betel juice on a white cloth prefigures a murder; a rat bludgeoned with a cricket bat precedes the bludgeoning of a starving servant) and in general there is a tendency toward heavy-handed symbolism.

Her discussion of the story "Swimming Lessons" points out that, while the narrator alludes to racist remarks others make about him, he is unaware of his own sexist remarks about several of the women he encounters (or more accurately, stares at) in

the course of the story. In general, she likes the stories set in Firozsha Baag more than the Toronto ones, but she predicts that "significant" work about Mistry's Canadian experiences might be yet to come.

In an interview with Mistry in *The Canadian Fiction Magazine*, Geoff Hancock brings out interesting comments from him regarding his "double consciousness" as a resident alien Canadian, his sense of the difference between Canada and the United States (which he obviously sees as a very violent society), and his major literary influences. In this interview he confirms those who saw Joyce and Chekhov as important models for his work and adds V. S. Naipaul, R. K. Narayan, Bernard Malamud, and John Cheever to the list. He makes it very clear that the Kersi/narrator figure of "Swimming Lessons" is not himself but a fictional character. He notes that the parents in the story say they would like to learn more about how he lives in Canada; his next book did not fulfill that wish but returned to the Bombay Parsi community of the earlier stories. The interview is noteworthy as well for his insistence that both politics and religion are of minor importance in his work.

Finally, a long article by Keith Garebian in *The Canadian Forum* is worth mentioning because of its early, strong evaluation of Mistry as an important new writer based on his performance in *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. In "In the Aftermath of Empire: Identities in the Commonwealth of Literature," he says, "in short, Mistry's is a tour de force first collection, on a higher order than V. S. Naipaul's first collection, *Miguel Street*." This is a robust endorsement and has certainly helped bring attention to Mistry's work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Barden is a professor of American Studies and the Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Toledo. In the following essay, he examines Mistry's use of humor and symbolism.

Rohinton Mistry's "Swimming Lessons" is not very dramatic. Very little actually happens in the story and the narrator seems to miss a lot of what does happen until other characters point it out to him. There are some minor social interactions, numerous finely-turned descriptions of scenes from the narrator's daily life, and several cutaways to his memories and scenes of his mother and father in Bombay. But altogether, it is certainly not the short story as envisioned by Edgar Allen Poe, who invented the genre and thought it should focus on a single compelling dramatic event. Nor is it like the short fiction of James Joyce, whose addition to the genre was the concept of the "epiphany," or sudden psychological realization on the part of a central character, as an alternative to Poe's single effect.

Mistry's closest historical model is the turn-ofthe- century Russian writer and dramatist Anton Chekhov, whose "psychological realism" chronicled the ordinary lives of pre-revolutionary Russia's middle class. While avoiding dramatic scenes, Chekhov gave readers insights into the hearts and minds of his believable and sympathetic, if shabby, characters. Likewise, Mistry explores the loneliness and anxieties of his modern ensemble of unremarkable people. His characters fill today's sterile apartment complexes rather than estates on the outskirts of Moscow, but the feeling is the same. Nothing happens, sentences never quite get completed, even the title event of the story, the swimming lessons, don't work out and are quietly dropped. Just be beneath the surface, however, the characters lead lives of quiet desperation and make bumbling attempts to reach out to each other. They engage our sympathy because Mistry makes them real and likeable despite their pettiness and quirks.

One of the principal ways he does this is through his subtle use of humor. Like Chekhov, Mistry is essentially a comic writer. His characters' unfulfilled longings and failures to communicate would be merely depressing if he didn't convey their optimism, energy, and ability to endure life's blows with dignity. One need only think of the large-bosomed, muscular Bertha's overture to the reticent narrator figure to see how integral comedy is to "Swimming Lessons." Kersi, who has already revealed to us his tendency to conjure up erotic daydreams, speaks to her about the heat going out in his flat. In a great flurry of thickly accented English she scares him with her broad sexual humor. "Nothing, not to worry about anything.... Radiator no work, you tell me. You feel cold, you come see me, I keep you warm." His response is understated and yet precisely phrased in Mistry's language. "I step back, and she advances, her breasts preceding her like the gallant prows of two ice-breakers."

The image works because it is weird, funny, and symbolic at the same time. She will "break the ice," as the cliche goes, and combine her business as apartment manager with pleasure. Mistry's narrator then adds another detail. "She looks at the old man to

see if he is appreciating the act." We are left with two possibilities&mdas;that she is as repressed and frustrated as the narrator, or she is only joking. Or, and here we begin to rise to Mistry's bait and psychoanalyze her, maybe she only thinks she is joking. The next thing we learn about her is that she was screaming loudly at her husband. Not long after this her husband and son leave her. Her complexity as a character deepens and she becomes both a stereotypical Eastern European comic figure and a realistic, suffering human being facing her coming old age alone.

Another example of Mistry's comic touch in "Swimming Lessons" is the Portuguese Woman, whom he reduces to a two-dimensional cliché soon after introducing her into the narrative. She becomes "PW," a hovering, snooping presence whose only joy in life is waiting by the elevator and keeping absolutely current about events in the apartment complex. In one of the few threads of the story that builds to a climax, the narrator increasingly mocks her until she realizes she is being mocked. She is incensed because he is a member of a more recent and "less acceptable" immigrant group than her own yet seems to understand the chaotic scenes going on around him. When she tells Kersi two women were sunbathing in bikinis by the parking lot, he responds by saying "That's nice." When she tells him Bertha filled six big black garbage bags with autumn leaves in her frenzy of work that day, he responds with, "Six bags! Wow!" The finale of these exchanges comes when she informs him that the old man's son came to take him on a drive in his big beautiful American car. "I see my chance," he says, and shoots back at PW, "Olds Ninety-Eight." His comment on this exchange reveals the power struggle that he knows has been occurring. "She does not like this at all, my giving her information. She is visibly nettled, and retreats with a sour face." As with Bertha, the comic atmosphere takes a turn and we see a psychological reality behind the twodimensional figure of PW. She yearns for some measure of respect, some position in the apartment complex. She wants to have something of importance, even if it is only the latest news.

One critic of the story took Mistry to task because he "frequently makes extremely sexist observations about women." But the over-wrought political correctness of this criticism misses an important point. These observations are essential to the humor that permeates "Swimming Lessons." Furthermore, they are indispensable to its psychological realism. It is true that the narrator is constantly ogling women, but it is always only from a distance and in his imagination. And things never work out for him in this area. The bikini sunbathers turn out to be middle-aged women with varicose veins and sagging bottoms. They become like the comic Bertha when they take on the role of sexual aggressors in the laundromat. Kersi has hesitated to remove their clothes, which have finished drying in the unit's only two dryers, because he thinks it will offend them. When the women come in, they tell him he needn't have waited, that he should have taken them out. When one of them suggestively adds, "You can touch my things any time you like," the narrator is not pleased. This is not his idea of a good erotic offer. His disgusted response is to call her a "horny old cow," not to her face, of course.

As this case illustrates, the humor in Mistry's narrative is characteristic of the sort that Sigmund Freud noted in his 1905 treatise "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious." Freud suggested that the psychological sources of comedy are those things we have deep anxieties about, sex, nudity, violence, death, etc. This idea helps

explain Kersi's bumbling encounters and lonely fantasies, which are funny but also embarrassing and usually of a sexual nature. Akin to the bikini sunbathers' daydream is his fantasy of meeting a sexual partner at his swimming lessons. When he buys new swimming trunks he worries that they will be too skimpy to cover him sufficiently if he becomes aroused at the lessons. With this thought he launches into a confession to the reader that he hopes he will encounter a gorgeous woman, become aroused, and thus attract a fantasy partner, who will be unable to resist his "delectable Asian brown body."

This confession prepares the reader for his account of the swimming lessons. Knowing his high romantic expectations gives us a simultaneous interior and exterior view of the subsequent events. On arrival, Kersi is immediately disappointed that his dream lover is not among the students, but he quickly settles for a less than ideal substitute. His lovingly detailed description of her partially exposed pubis around the edges of her bathing suit (probably what the critic of his sexist observations was referring to) reveals his dreamy disconnectedness to the actual scene he is in. No wonder he doesn't learn to swim! Later, the instructor has him go to the deep end helped along by a pole and net, but he is terrified, almost sinks to the bottom, and accuses the teacher of being "an irresponsible person," again, not to his face.

When the object of his desire shows up at the next lesson having shaved her pubic area, he loses heart for the entire thing and drops out. Reality and fantasy do not seem to come together very well for the narrator. But from our reader's perspective, we grasp the Chekhovian comic-sadness of this lonely but persevering immigrant. He is trying to have a life. These sad-comic scenarios suggest that there is both a surface and a deeper symbolic level to every character and every element of the story. The old man in the lobby playing his guessing game about his age is just a "slice of life" in the apartment complex; but he also becomes emblematic of a general human longing for company and communication. The narrator begins to realize this after he associates him with his own grandfather back in India and remembers his mother's advice that one should be nice to old people because they can bestow blessings on people, even after death. But when he resolves to find out the old man's name, it is too late. He has died.

Mistry discloses his view of symbolism in fiction early on in the story when his narrator muses aloud that "symbols, after all, should be still and gentle as dewdrops, tiny, yet shining with a world of meaning." This is perhaps the best possible literary gloss on "Swimming Lessons," since it comes from the author's surrogate himself. The writer declares that he crafts his work to contain "worlds of meaning." But his narrator immediately goes on to pose a problem by asking—"But what happens when, on the page of life itself, one encounters the ever-moving, all-engirdling sprawl of the filthy sea?" Beneath this beautiful sentence lies a defin ing issue of psychological realism. How does a writer depict "real life" as he or she sees it, but also provide the symbolic meaning essential for successful fiction?

The answer is to find those things in reality that innately function at a symbolic level. And then, of course, he/she must write so precisely that readers will not say, as Kersi puts it, "how obvious, how skilless." Water as a symbol, for example, is important enough for the narrator to single it out for comment. Kersi says "water imagery in my life

is recurring." With a title like "Swimming Lessons" this should not be unexpected, but in choosing water, Mistry consciously plays with our symbolic expectations. Ordinarily, water equals purity. Going under the water, as in a baptism, symbolizes death to an old life and rebirth to a new one. These are standard western symbolic meanings, but Mistry blurs them and disrupts our expectations in subtle ways. In his symbolic lexicon, water is not only Judeo-Christian but also Zoroastrian, and he provides us with fitting analogs in the story. The squeaky clean high school pool in Toronto is juxtaposed to the filthy sea of Bombay. To the western mind water is pure. To the Parsi tradition only fire is wholly pure; water may be good and bad simultaneously, reflecting the ever-present struggle between good and bad that is the bedrock of the Parsi faith. Just as Ahriman and Ahura Mazda struggle at the cosmic level over good and evil, so water can be religiously clean but grossly polluted in actuality.

In fact, this water-borne struggle between purity and filth is woven through the story. Freud would appreciate how blatantly erotic images keep popping up and "dirtying" the situation whenever water is invoked in the narration. A telling example, and surely the most startling water image in "Swimming Lessons," is that of the guttersnipes—the naked Bombay urchins who used to expose their "buoyant little penises" in the garbage-strewn waters of Chaupatty Bay when he was a boy. They would splash around pretending to masturbate as Kersi's "Mummy" tried to teach him to swim. After such an image, the chlorine-clean pool and the female student's out-of-place pubic hairs seem tame. Later in the story, when Kersi overcomes his fear of going under water and totally submerges himself in his bath tub, he finds a strikingly similar image to the one that excited him so much in the pool. As he opens his eyes to look around in his newly conquered underwater realm, he discovers a hair caught in the tub drain. He describes it in very similar wording to the student's pubic hairs.

The numerous scenes that pit purity against dirt, the body, and sex lend an unmistakable Freudian tone to the story. The narrator drops hints about all of this, the most obvious being his concluding comment on the bath tub episode. Kersi says, "The world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside." This thinly veiled reference to the unconscious points the reader to the psycho-symbolism of the story and heightens reader interest in Kersi by presenting him in all his complexity, "inside and out."

Of course, sex is not the only sub-text of "Swimming Lessons." Although his frustrated libido is the most obvious facet of the narrator's interior life, there are other things going on in there. As Freud's student Carl Jung pointed out, there are human motivators besides sex. An important one in "Swimming Lessons" turns out to be the yearly change of the seasons. For writers from temperate climates, this has been a time-honored trope. James Joyce, for example, used winter to stand for deadness of the soul in "The Dead," the final story of his *Dubliners* sequence. But to the immigrant Kersi (and in the hands of his immigrant creator Mistry), the symbol seems fresh and new. That the seasons anchor the story can be readily seen by noting how the first sentences of so many paragraphs remark on them. Kersi recalls that he read about snow and winter in British adventure books when he was a boy in Bombay (a tropical city on a parallel latitude to Jamaica). But in Toronto he experiences the real thing.

After taking us around a full year, through a rough winter, and to the symbolic end point of the old man's death, Kersi blithely states, "The dwindled days of winter are all but forgotten.... I resume my evening walks, it's spring and a vigorous thaw is on." The elevator door has been oiled and no longer squeaks. He remembers that the spring class for adult non-swimmers will begin in a few days at the high school and, as hope springs eternal in the new blossoming year, he decides to sign up and try again. Here is a symbol readily available from, as Kersi put it, "the page of life itself."

Source: Thomas E. Barden, Overview of "Swimming Lessons," for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Piedmont-Marton compares and contrasts the two-halves of the "split screen" of "Swimming Lessons," Toronto and Bombay, and the narrator's perception of events in his life with reality.

In "Swimming Lessons" a young Indian immigrant, Kersi, describes his daily life in an apartment building in Toronto. Woven into his narrative, however, are imagined scenes from his parent's apartment in Bombay. The story is constructed like a split screen, with the narrator's life and story telling on one side, and his parents ten thousand miles away reading his letters and stories and commenting on them. The swimming lessons that the narrator signs up for are also a metaphor for his attempts to negotiate the foreign waters of his adopted country.

The story opens in *media res*, or in the middle of things. The narrator, whose name is not revealed but is recognizable from the preceding stories in the volume, is describing the cast of characters who live in his building, but he does not reveal his writerly ambitions. He mentions his family back in Firozsha Baag, in Bombay, but his attention is focused on his late grandfather. He does not reveal anything about his parents' lives at the present or about his relationship with them. It's the old man who sits in the lobby of the apartment building that brings the narrator's thoughts back to his childhood in India: "He reminds me of Grandpa as he sits on the sofa in the lobby staring vacantly at the parking lot." When he recalls his grandfather's decline from Parkinson's disease, osteoporosis, and finally lung cancer, the narrator expresses regret that he should have done more to ease his last days. Twice he says, "I should have gone to see him more often." Visiting his grandfather would have been all the more important because, as his mother said, "the blessings of an old person were the most valuable and potent of all, they would last my whole life long."

When the scene suddenly shifts to India, it is unclear whether Kersi is present in this memory, if he is imagining it, or if it is happening during the same time period when he introduces readers to his neighbors, like the old man and the Portuguese Woman. Soon though, it becomes apparent that the scene is Kersi's parents' apartment on the day they receive a letter from him in Toronto. The letter fails to live up to its promise however, and both of his parents are disappointed that their son chose only to write about the weather and what his apartment looks like. Since readers have had a glimpse of Kersi's close observations of the rich details of his life in Canada, they, too, may wonder why, as his father says, "everything about his life is locked in silence and secrecy."

The dramatic contrast between Bombay and Toronto is underscored by another striking disparity. Kersi's inner life is rich with detail and humor, while his outer life, to all observers, must appear lonely and isolated. His father isn't the only one who thinks he lives a life "locked in silence and secrecy." For Kersi, for example, an encounter with some women in the elevator is filled with heroic details and romantic possibilities. After watching the two women sunbathing from his window, Kersi races downstairs to arrange

an accidental meeting. But the women are not what they had seemed to be from the window, and standing in the elevator with them, he is disappointed to see that they do not resemble the characters he has created in the ongoing story in his head. "The elevator arrives and I hold it open, inviting them in with what I think is a gallant flourish. Under the fluorescent glare in the elevator I see their wrinkled skin, aging hands, sagging bottoms, varicose veins. The lustrous trick of sun and lotion and distance has ended." The women have no way of knowing what role they have played in, and have failed the audition for, Kersi's inner life.

Another small episode also assumes unusual significance for the narrator. Kersi has signed up for evening swimming lessons at the local high school. When he registers he is struck with the friendliness of the woman at the desk, who, unbeknownst to her, gives him an opportunity to tell part of his story out loud: "The woman at the registration desk is quite friendly. She even gives me the opening to satisfy the compulsion I have about explaining my nonswimming status." For Kersi, swimming and water imagery are important themes in his life, and anticipating his first adult swimming lesson prompts him to revisit his attempts at swimming as a child in India. When he explains that "The art of swimming had been trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea," and that "water imagery in my life is recurring," the narrator reveals his ambitions as a writer. It's not just his failure to learn how to swim that bothers Kersi, what's worse is his inability to interpret and arrange the images and connotations associated with water and swimming: "The universal symbol of life and regeneration did nothing but frustrate me. Perhaps the swimming pool will overturn that failure." The narrator's memories of swimming in the Bay of Chaupatty are inseparable from his fears and feelings of inadequacy, and these insecurities apply to swimming as well as writing and interpreting: "When images and symbols abound in this manner, sprawling or rolling across the page without guile or artifice, one is prone to say, how obvious, how skilless; symbols, after all, should be still and gentle as dewdrops, tiny, yet shining with a world of meaning."

Kersi's swimming lessons will require him to move from the familiar world of the apartment building and his own imagination to the frightening public world where he risks and encounters, failure, embarrassment, and racism. He arrives at the pool for his first swimming lesson weighed down with fears and unreasonable expectations, burdened with old stories from his past as well as the hopeful beginnings of new stories. Kersi's memories of his childhood swimming excursions evoke the crowded, filthy, and vaguely menacing atmosphere of the public beach near his home in Bombay. Obstacles to swimming there included the filth generated by crowds of "street urchins and beggars and beachcombers," and by all the "religious festivals [that] used the sea as a repository for their finales." But for Kersi, the worst thing about trying to swim in the Bay of Chaupatty "was the guttersnipes, like naked fish with their little buoyant penises, taunting me with their skills, swimming underwater and emerging unexpectedly all around me." Years later, in Toronto, he converts the sexual element of his memories into an erotic fantasy of his own about meeting a gorgeous young woman in the class.

The narrator's adult swimming lessons are no more successful than his childhood attempts, but on the metaphorical level he makes more progress. Terrified after the first

class, he returns only because he hopes to get another glimpse of "the straying curls of brown pubic hair" of one of the women in the class. When even this doesn't happen, Kersi feels like "the weight of this disappointment makes the water less manageable, more lung-penetrating," and he never returns to class. Though he has failed to learn to swim once again, the narrator may have made some progress in negotiating the deep waters of fashioning his solitary immigrant's life, "locked in silence and secrecy," into the writer's life to which aspires. Back in the apartment in Bombay, his parents receive a surprise from the postman: not the usual bland and uncommunicative letter from their son, but a parcel, a book of stories. In this scene, the narrator imagines his parents' joy and his father's pride at discovering that their son is a writer. Imagining his parents as readers of his work keeps Kersi connected to his childhood in India while he struggles to find his way alone in a strange country.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, Overview of "Swimming Lessons," for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Bailey notes that Mistry has managed to "epitomize the important difference necessary to render fiction individual" and "distinctive."

...The other stories dealing with the ambiguities of emigration follow Kersi from his childhood disillusionments with the Firozsha Baag residents through his move to Toronto, the dynamic of the collection moving the action progressively away from Bombay to Canada. By the closing story, "Swimming Lessons," Firozsha Baag has been replaced by the grim "Don Mills, Ontario, Canada" apartment building where Kersi lives among strangers, watching alien snowflakes fall and indulging himself in sexual fantasies about the women taking swimming lessons with him at an indoor high school pool. The exotic, densely-consonated Indian words which lent such strangeness to the early stories have given way to the "gutang-khutang" sound the building's elevator makes, and Bombay exists only as a truncated echo in Kersi's parents' letters, which admonish him to "say prayers and do kusti at least twice a day," and which comment on the very stories the reader has come to the end of. Kersi must be "so unhappy there," his mother concludes, because "all his stories are about Bombay, he remembers every little thing about his childhood, he is thinking about it all the time even though he is ten thousand miles away, my poor son, I think he misses his home and us and everything he left behind, because if he likes it over there why would he not write stories about that, there must be so many new ideas that his new life could give him."

"Swimming Lessons" movingly dramatizes both the truth and error of Kersi's mother's opinion; *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag* anatomizes the process which has left Kersi dreaming of one culture, living in another, and feeling himself a citizen of neither. In this stunning first work of fiction, Mistry manages to epitomize the "important difference" necessary to render fiction individual, distinctive, even as it affectingly enacts the protagonist/author surrendering up that "different viewpoint." His book renders simultaneously what is saved and what is lost.

Source: Peter J. Bailey, "Fiction and Difference," in *The North American Review*, Vol. 274, No. 4, December, 1989, pp. 61-64.

Quotes

"Indeed, Behram roje meant a lot to Mehroo. Which is why with a lilt in her voice she sang out: 'Com—ing! Com—ing!'
"Rustomji growled back, 'You are deaf or what? Must I scream till my lungs burst?'
" 'Coming, coming! Two hands, so much to do, the gunga is late and the house is unswept - '
" 'Arré forget your gunga-bunga!' howled Rustomji. 'That stinking lavatory upstairs is leaking again! God only knows what they do to make it leak. There I was, squatting - barely started - when someone pulled the flush. Then on my head I felt - phuk - all wet! On my head!
" 'On your head? Chhee chhee chhee! How horrible! How inauspicious! How...' and words failedher as she cringed and recoiled from the befouling event. Gingerly she peeked into the WC, fearing a deluge of ordure and filth." Auspicious Occasion, pg. 4.

"The flow of familiar sounds was torn out of sequence by Najamai's frantic cries.
" 'Help! Help! Oh quickly! Thief!'
"Kersi and his mother were the first to reach the door. They were outside in time to see Francis disappear in the direction of Tar Gully. Najamai, puffing, stood at the top of the stairs. 'He was hiding behind the kitchen door,' she gasped. 'The front door - Tehmina as usual! - '
"Silloo was overcome by furious indignation. 'I don't know why, with her bad eyes, that woman must fumble and mess with your keys. What did he steal?'
" 'I must check my cupboards,' Najamai panted. 'That rascal of a loafer will have run far already.'
"Tehmina now shuffled out, still clad in duster-coat, anxiously sucking cloves and looking very guilty. She had heard everything from behind her door but asked anyway, 'What happened? Who was screaming?'" One Sunday, pgs. 33-34.

"And believe or don't believe, that was a ghost of mischief. Because just before Easter he came back. Not on the stairs this time but right on my bed. I'm telling you, he was sitting on my chest and bouncing up and down, and I couldn't push him off, so weak I was feeling (I'm a proper Catholic, I was fasting), couldn't even scream or anything (not because I was scared - he was choking me). Then someone woke up to go to the WC and put on a light in the passage where I sleep. Only then did the rascal bhoot jump off and vanish." The Ghost of Firozsha Baag, pg. 46.

"With Sarosh's cassette recorder, she could have made a tape for Najamai too. It would be a simple one to make, with many pauses during which Najamai did all the talking. Neighbour Najamai Take One - 'Hullo, come in' - (long pause) - 'hmmm, right' - (short pause) - 'yes, yes, that's okay' - (long pause) - 'right, right.' It would be easy, compared to the tape for condolence visitors." Condolence Visit, pg. 69.

"Dr Mody was concerned about the boy, so nervous and uneasy; he put it down to his feeling unwell. They looked at some stamps Dr Mody had received last week from his colleagues abroad. Then Jehangir said he'd better leave.
" 'But you must see the Spanish dancing-lady before you go. Maybe she will help you fell better Ha! Ha!' and Dr Mody rose to go to the cupboard for the stamp. Its viewing at the end of each Sunday's session had acquired the significance of an esoteric ritual.
"From the next room Mrs Mody screeched: 'Burjorji! Come here at once!' He made a wry face at Jerhangir and hurried out." The Collectors, pg. 95.

"Instead, I threw myself on the bed. I felt like crying, and buried my face in the pillow. I wanted to cry for the way I had treated Viraf, and for his sick father with the long, cold needle in his arm and his rasping breath; for Mamaiji and her tired, darkened eyes spinning thread for our kustis, and for Mummy growing old in the dingy kitchen smelling of kerosene, where the Primus roared and her dreams were extinguished; I wanted to weep for myself, for not being able to hug Daddy when I wanted to, and for not ever saying thank you for cricket in the morning, and pigeons and bicycles and dreams; and for all the white hairs that I was powerless to stop." Of White Hairs and Cricket, pg. 120.

"Dhorshedbai reversed three paces and regarded her handiwork with satisfaction. Especially the length of gristle, which was pendulating gently with the weight of the bone at its extremity. Only one thing remained now. Collected from the pavement as an afterthought while returning from the agyaari, she hurled it against the locked door.
"Dog faeces spattered the lower panel with a smack. Bits of it clung, the rest fell on the step. Behind the locked door Kashmira puzzled over the soft thud. She was alone with little Adil." The Paying Guests, pg. 124.

" 'With a thunderous clap the rain started to fall. Sarosh felt a splash nder him. Could it really be? he glanced down to make certain. Yes, it was. He had succeeded!
" 'But was it already too late? The plane waited at its assigned position on the runway, jet engines at full thrust. Rain was falling in torrents and takeoff could be delayed. Perhaps even now they would allow him to cancel his flight, to disembark. He lurched out of the constricting cubicle.
" 'A stewardess hurried toward him: "Excuse me, sir, but you must return to your seat immediately and fasten your belt."
" ' "You Don't understand!" Sarosh shouted excitedly. "I must get off the plane! Everytying is all right, I don't have to go any more...""'Squatter, pg. 165.

"I thought of Jamshed and his adamant refusal to enjoy his trips to India, his way of seeing the worst in everything. was he, too, waiting for some epiphany and growing impatient because, without it, life in America was bewildering? Perhaps the contempt and disdain which he shed was only his way of lightening his own load.
"That Christmas, I received a card from Jamshed. The Christmas seal, postage stamp, address label were all neatly and correctly in place upon the envelope, like everything else about his surface existence. I put it down without opening it, wondering if this

innocuous outer shell concealed more of his confusion, disdain, arrogance.
"Later, I walked out of the apartment and down the hallway, and dropped the envelope down the chute of the garbage incinerator." Lend Me Your Light, pgs. 192-193.

" Your string is showing again,' she interrupted. He reached behind, thinking his kusti had slipped out over the waistband of his trousers.
"She laughed scornfully. 'Not your kusti, I mean your mother's extra-long apron string. Anyway, tell me about your Baba. This should be good.'
" 'If you're going to mock me even before I ...'
" 'I'm sorry, go on.'
"Jehangir described the visit to Bhagwan Baba and the pronouncement. He paused before announcing his own decision about them. she adjusted her skirt properly over the knee and said, 'But does that make any difference? Surely you don't believe all that mumbo-jumbo." Exercisers, pg. 221.

"It's a mixed class, but the gorgeous woman of my fantasy is missing. I have to settle for another, in a pink one-piece suit, with brown hair and a bit of a stomach. She must be about thirty-five. Plain-looking.
"The instructor is called Ron. He gives us a pep talk, sensing some nervousness in the group. We're finally all in the water, in the shallow end. He demonstrates floating on the back, then asks for a volunteer. The pink one-piece suit wades forward. He supports her, tells her to lean back and let her head drop in the water.
"She does very well. And as we all regard her floating body, I see what was not visible outside the pool: her bush, curly bits of it, straying out at the pink Spandex V. Tongues of water lapping against her delta, as if caressing it teasingly, make the brown hair come alive in a most tantalizing manner. The crests and troughs of little waves, set off by the movement of our bodies in a circle around her, dutifully irrigate her; the curls alternately wave free inside the crest, then adhere to her wet thighs, beached by the inevitable trough. I could watch this forever, and I wish the floating demonstration would never end." Swimming Lessons, pg. 238.

"Don't you see, said Father, that you are confusing fiction with facts, fiction does not create facts, fiction can come from facts, it can grow out of facts by compounding, transposing, augmenting, diminishing, or altering them in any way; but you must not confuse cause and effect, you must not confuse what really happened with what the story says happened, you must not loose your grasp on reality, that way madness lies.
"Then Mother stopped listening because, as she told Father so often, she was not very fond of theories, and she took out her writing pad and started a letter to her son; Father looked over her shoulder, telling her to say how proud they were of him and were waiting for his next book, he also said, leave a little space for me at the end, I want to write a few lines when I put the address on the envelope." Swimming Lessons, pg. 250

Topics for Further Study

The Parsis of Bombay that Mistry depicts in his fiction are remnants of the Zoroastrians who came to India from Persia [now called Iran] after the Muslim conquest of that country in the seventh century. Look up the three volume *History of Zoroastrianism* edited by Mary A. Boyce and others (1991) and find out some of the basic tenets of this religion.

Bombay is the home of one of the most successful steel business families in India, the Tatas. Find out about this famous Parsi industrial family that the narrator's father in "Swimming Lessons" mentions with such obvious pride.

Sociologist Werner Sollers' 1986 book *Beyond Ethnicity* discusses the tension in the life of immigrants to America (or a big Canadian city like Toronto) regarding "melting," or assimilating the new culture, versus remaining "unmeltable," maintaining native habits and customs. Consider the narrator of "Swimming Lessons" as an immigrant struggling with these tensions.

The sociology of living in large urban apartment complexes has been studied and discusses extensively. One section of Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land* focuses on the problems of African Americans in Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes high-rise apartments in the 1960s. Compare the situation Lemann describes to that of the apartment tenants in "Swimming Lessons."

What Do I Read Next?

Such a Long Journey (1991) is Mistry's first fulllength novel. It is about an ordinary middle class man from Bombay's Parsi community named Gustad Noble who becomes unwillingly entangled in the corruption of Indian national politics.

Dubliners (1914), James Joyce's famous short story collection about the people of Ireland's capital city, is a work Mistry has said was very influential on him. Like Mistry, Joyce was living away from the city he depicted when he wrote and relied heavily on his personal memories of his hometown.

Midnight's Children (1981), which first brought Salman Rushdie a wide audience and won Britain's Booker Prize, is an allegory about the birth of independent India. It is a good introduction to this important Indian writer.

The Things They Carried (1990), by Tim O'Brien, is a collection of interrelated short stories about a platoon of soldiers in the Vietnam war. This powerful set of narratives, like Mistry's work focuses on memory and the relationship between individuals and the groups to which they belong.

Alice Munro's 1990 *Friend of My Youth* is a good introduction to a Canadian writer many critics have compared to Rohinton Mistry. Her short story collections depict the rich human connections of small town life in Ontario, Canada.

Starting in the 1930s, R. K. Narayan wrote tales of everyday life in the fictional South Indian village of Malgudi, often said to be his hometown of Mysore. *Swami and Friends* (1935), his first collection of Malgudi stories, is a good place to start reading Narayan, India's best known English language writer.

The stories of Russian writer and playwright Anton Chekhov are similar to Mistry's stories in their sympathy with the lives and struggles of unspectacular middle-class people. Some outstanding stories are "A Dreary Story," "The Butterfly," "Terror," " Lady with a Pet Dog," and "In the Hollow."

Topics for Discussion

What is the significance of cricket in this collection and how does it serve to tie the stories together?

How does the educational system encourage voyeurism in Indian boys? How is their sexuality depicted?

Are Parsis (Zoroastrians) unfairly depicted in these stories, as Kersi's parents complain? What positive and negative impressions have you formed from reading about them?

How is water used as a symbol in these stories?

What roles does music play in these short stories?

Who is the most sympathetic character in the book and what elevates him or her above others in your view?

Who is the least sympathetic character in the book, and what makes him or her despicable to you?

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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