

Summer Reading Guide
Pre AP English I
The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

Author's Introduction:

Interviews with Lahiri • Interview with Melissa Block on National Public Radio, August 2003. Lahiri reads excerpts from *The Namesake* and discusses naming convention in Indian culture, the narrative structure of the novel, and its universal themes.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1415693>

An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri

On February 14, 2013, Josephine Reed of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Jhumpa Lahiri. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Josephine Reed: How would you describe the plot of *The Namesake*?

Jhumpa Lahiri: It's about the process of becoming American, understanding the ways in which that's possible. The heart of the book is about a family's relationship to America and to the change that inevitably happens when a person leaves one's place of origin and arrives in a new world, which is very much an American story.

JR: We see an uncertainty about identity filtering down to the next generation in *The Namesake*, in Gogol.

JL: Gogol is very typical in wanting to be American. I think most young people just want to conform on some level, and then they stop wanting to conform and maybe become more interesting; but there's a stage of simply wanting to be accepted and not questioned. [Gogol's parents] may be lost, and they may be homesick, but they never doubt for a moment where home is—whereas for Gogol that sense of home is not fixed because India is not his home, and America is not yet his home.

JR: Issues of identity play out in his relationship with his parents—he sees them as foreign, and that's troubling to him. Can you talk about some of that tension?

JL: I can speak maybe just from my own experience. I think my impulse as a child was to protect my parents from what I perceived as sort of ignorance. But the other emotion was a frustration with them, because I wasn't there to protect them; I was their child, and I wanted them to protect me. It creates a strange dynamic when you speak the language better than your parents, when you go into stores and you're a child and they ask you what kind of washing machine your parents are interested in because they don't trust your parents to articulate themselves. These kinds of things

can be very troubling, they're frustrating, they made me angry, they made me sad, they made me overprotective of my parents, concerned for them and also frustrated that they weren't more seemingly capable.

JR: Names, as the title of your book suggests, are important. Can you explain pet names in the Bengali tradition as opposed to the "good" name?

JL: I think the pet name is very much connected to one's formative years and childhood and affection. And one's mother and father would never, ever, ever, ever use anything but a pet name for one's child. You tend to go to school with your good name and what ends up happening is that you've got two names to represent the sort of home version, the more intimate version, versus the out-in-the-world, being-educated, working-at-a-job version—the formal version, as it were, versus the informal.

JR: When Gogol goes to school, his father tells him the "good" name that he's chosen for him, which is Nikhil.

JL: I think in an American context, it would be doubly disconcerting to suddenly enter school and be told by your parents, "Oh, by the way, not only are you going to spend all day away from us in the company of a teacher you've never met and don't know, but she's going to call you this other name." I imagine that would be very distressing to any child.

JR: Can you touch on the sense of displacement the Ganguli family experiences?

JL: Gogol's parents appear most at home when they go back to Calcutta, where there is a certain sort of blissful abandonment of a...level of anxiety and uncertainty that they carry with them as foreigners. I think it's impossible, virtually impossible, to live as a foreigner in any country. No matter how at ease, affluent, educated, articulate you are. When it's not your place, it's not your place.

"I'm the least experimental writer. The idea of trying things just for the sake of pushing the envelope, that's never really interested me."

—Jhumpa Lahiri, from an interview in *New York Magazine* (2008)

Quick Write:

Agree/Disagree: A good name is worth more than gold. Why? Why not?

In your opinion, what constituents a "good name"?

Discussion Guide Questions

1. In the opening scene, Ashima is making a snack for herself, and near the end she prepares samosas for a party. Food plays a large role throughout the novel. How does the author use food to evoke specific emotions?
2. This novel, less than 300 pages long, spans more than 30 years. What techniques does the author use to compress time and move the story forward?
3. Much of the story is told in the present tense. Why would the author make this unusual choice?
4. Maxine and her parents live in an elegant townhouse, while Gogol's family has an ordinary suburban house. How does the author use these two settings to help the reader understand these different families?
5. Gogol's discomfort with his name is one of the novel's main themes. Also, Ashima never addresses her husband by his given name, because such a name is "intimate and therefore unspoken." What other names in the novel are important, and why?
6. Gogol's sister Sonia is present in only a few scenes in the novel, and the story is never told from her point of view. Why do you think that Lahiri left her a less-developed character than Gogol? What purpose does she serve in the story?
7. There are two train accidents in the novel, one involving Gogol and one his father. How are the two accidents linked, and how do they serve to drive the characters closer together, or farther apart?
8. How does Gogol evolve as a character, from his first days of school to his life as an adult, with a profession and a wife? How does he stay the same?
9. The author has stated in multiple interviews that she strives to write in a plain, unadorned way. What impact does her chosen style have on the reader?
10. *The Namesake* is written in third person, but various characters serve as the "point of view" character, telling the story from their perspective. How many different "point of view" characters are there, and how does the author shift the narrative between them?

Whitehaven High School Cultural Connection

What is the meaning of your name? Create a meaning based on your character traits, attributes, personality and/or family history.

Students are to design a placard or poster then create an online graphic book discussing the origin and meaning of their name. Reference their family tree to provide greater insight into the meaning of your name.

***The Namesake* Gets People Talking about the Meaning of Names in Reading, Massachusetts**

"Each attendee had a place setting with their name, its origin and meaning.

A big 'nametag' was provided to each staff member to write down and share the meaning of their name, why that name was chosen and who, if anyone, was their namesake. This proved to be a really wonderful way to connect to *The Namesake*; fostering conversations around culture, family, and identity in the novel as well as our own lives. Due to the success of this activity we continued to use it in all the discussion groups we facilitated to great effect."



: A library display featuring the theme of names and genealogy. Photo courtesy of Reading Public Library