



STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

Family Matters by Rohinton Mistry

About This Book

Family Matters is Rohinton Mistry's eagerly anticipated third novel, following the success of his highly acclaimed *A Fine Balance* (1995), which won several major literary awards internationally.

This new novel takes us to Bombay in the mid-1990s. Nariman Vakeel is a seventy-nine-year-old Parsi widower and the patriarch of a small discordant family. Beset by Parkinson's disease and haunted by memories of the past, he lives in a once-elegant apartment with his two middle-aged stepchildren – Coomy, bitter and domineering, and her brother, Jal, mild-mannered and acquiescent. When Nariman's illness is compounded by a broken ankle, Coomy plots to turn his round-the-clock care over to Roxana, his sweet-tempered sister. She succeeds, but not without cost, and eventually Nariman takes up residence with Roxana, her husband, Yezad, and their two young sons. The effect of the new responsibility on Yezad, who is already besieged by financial worries, pushes him into a scheme of deception involving Vikram Kapur, his eccentric, often exasperating employer at Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium. This sets in motion a series of events – a great unravelling and a revelation of the family's love-torn past – that leads to the narrative's final outcome.

In this wise and compassionate novel, Mistry has once again created a beautifully realized world. As his unforgettable characters confront situations over which they have no control, their tragedies and their triumphs ultimately become our own.

Family Matters has all the richness, the gentle humor, and the narrative sweep that have earned Rohinton Mistry the highest of accolades around the world. It is a stunning achievement from one of the finest writers of our time.

Shortlisted for the 2002 Booker Prize

Discussion Questions

1. The family's story springs from Nariman's marriage to the widowed mother of Coomy and Jal. We're told, "And he, when he looked back on it all, across the wasteland of their lives, despaired at how he could have been so feeble-minded, so spineless, to have allowed it to happen" (p. 10). He also blames his parents and their friends, "the wilful manufacturers of misery" (p.76). Why did Nariman give in, after his eleven-year love affair with Lucy, to his parents' demand that he marry a Parsi woman? He was forty-two years old at the time. Was his decision an act of weakness?
2. When the medical assistant setting plaster on his broken ankle says to Nariman, "we need a Mahatma these days," Nariman retorts, "All we get instead are micro-mini atmas" (p. 47). What is the novel's perspective on the state of India's politics, compared with the idealism of Mahatma Gandhi? Is Nariman a cynic, a wit, or simply a realist at this stage of his experience?
3. Nariman's memories of the past, including his love affair with Lucy, are presented in italics at intervals throughout the novel. What is the effect of Mistry's revealing the family's tragic history in this intermittent way? How central is the theme of memory to *Family Matters*?
4. Yezad's friend Vilas writes letters for illiterate workers in Bombay. How does his presence in the novel illuminate the lives of those less privileged, and even more unfortunate, than the Chenoy and Vakeel families?
5. Most of the novel's events take place in two apartments. What perspective do the names of these buildings--Chateau Felicity and Pleasant Villas--cast on the lives lived within them? How are these dwellings described? Coomy asserts that Roxana's flat, though only two rooms is "huge" by Bombay standards: "You know that in chawls and colonies, families of eight, nine, ten live in one room" (see p. 75). Why is it important to our comprehension of Bombay life that we understand just how little space people are living in?
6. Does Coomy force the care of Nariman onto Roxana as an act of revenge? Is it understandable that, given her loyalty to her mother's memory, Coomy would resent having to tend her ailing stepfather? Why are the circumstances of Coomy's death particularly ironic?
7. In *Family Matters*, several characters take steps to alleviate their difficulties. Yezad tries to bring in more money through gambling, and he also makes efforts to change Mr. Kapur's mind about running for office so that he himself will be promoted. Jehangir, as homework monitor, accepts bribes. Coomy and Jal try to delay their stepfather's return by destroying the ceiling of their apartment. Why do these characters' strenuous efforts to arrange the events of their lives come to grief? Does Mistry suggest that fate--rather than desire or will--rules human lives?
8. Why is Roxana so moved by the sight of Jehangir feeding his grandfather, a moment she perceives as "something almost sacred" (p. 98)? Of all the characters in the story, Roxana is the one who understands most fully the weighty responsibilities that come with loving one's family. How does this understanding impinge upon her happiness? Is she too self-sacrificing?
9. How seriously are we to take the ideas of Mr. Kapur, Yezad's employer? Are we to assume that he would not have made a successful politician? Is Mistry using him to represent the best of India's secular and pluralist ideals? What is the meaning of his murder? What sort of person is his widow?
10. Mr. Kapur tells Yezad, "Everyone underestimates their own life. Funny thing is, in the end, all our stories--your life, my life, old Husain's life,

