



## STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

### *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai

#### About the Book

Published to extraordinary acclaim, *The Inheritance of Loss* heralds Kiran Desai as one of our most insightful novelists. She illuminates the pain of exile and the ambiguities of postcolonialism with a tapestry of colorful characters: an embittered old judge; Sai, his sixteen-year-old orphaned granddaughter; a chatty cook; and the cook's son, Biju, who is hopscotching from one miserable New York restaurant to another, trying to stay a step ahead of the INS.

When a Nepalese insurgency in the mountains threatens Sai's new-sprung romance with her handsome tutor, their lives descend into chaos. The cook witnesses India's hierarchy being overturned and discarded. The judge revisits his past and his role in Sai and Biju's intertwining lives. A story of depth and emotion, hilarity and imagination, *The Inheritance of Loss* tells "of love, longing, futility, and loss that is Desai's true territory"

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#### Discussion Questions

1. The *Inheritance of Loss* is preceded by a poem by Jorge Luis Borges. Given what you know of Borges, why do you think Kiran Desai chose his work as an epigraph? Who are "the ambitious . . . the loftily covetous multitude"? Why are they "worthy of tomorrow"? Who is "I"?
2. The first evening that Sai was at Cho Oyu, "she had a fearful feeling of having entered a space so big it reached both backward and forward" (p. 34). Discuss this observation. Could this be a description of the novel itself?
3. Discuss the terms globalization and colonialism. What does it mean to introduce an element of the West into a country that is not of the West, a person from a poor nation into a wealthy one? What are examples of this in the novel? Discuss them in political and economic terms. How are Noni and Lola stand-ins for the middle class the world over? See page 242.
4. Why did the judge lead such a solitary life in England? The judge returned to India a changed man. "He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both" (p. 119). Discuss the effect that the prejudice and rejection he experienced in England had on the judge for the rest of his life.
5. Bose was the judge's only friend in England. "A look of recognition had passed between them at first sight, but also the assurance that they wouldn't reveal one another's secrets, not even to each other" (p. 118). Compare and contrast the two men. Who was the optimist? How did Bose help the judge when they were in England? When they met again, thirty-three years later, Bose had changed. How? Why did he want to see the judge again?
6. Nimi attended a political rally unknowingly. Who took her to the rally? Explain why the judge was enraged at this. After independence, he found himself on the wrong side of history. What was happening politically in India at this time? What was the Congress Party?
7. The judge's marriage to Nimi was destined to fail. Did the judge ever have any tender feelings for his wife? Why and how did her family pay for him to go to school in England? What finally happened to Nimi? What did the judge choose to believe about it? And finally, did the judge have regrets that he abandoned his family "for the sake of false ideals" (p. 308)?
8. Discuss the judge's feelings for Sai, who was "perhaps the only miracle fate had thrown his way" (p. 210). The cook treated Sai like a daughter. Discuss their relationship.
9. Discuss the role that Mutt played in the judge's life.
10. Sai's parents left her at St. Augustine's Convent, and she never saw them again. Why were they in the Soviet Union? How does their journey to and years in another country parallel the stories of Biju and the judge? How do India's allegiances to other countries prompt this kind of immigration?
11. Describe Noni, who was Sai's first tutor. What advice did Noni give Sai? Why? See page 69.
12. Compare Gyan's and Sai's homes. Gyan's home is "modernity proffered in its meanest form, brand-new one day, in ruin the next" (p. 256) and Sai's home had been a grand adventure for a Scotsman, but is now infested with spiders and termites, and the walls sail out from the humidity (p. 7). How do their homes illustrate the differences between them?
13. Compare Gyan and the judge. Both were the chosen sons of the family; much was sacrificed for their success and much expected of them. They are both lonely and feel that they don't fit in anywhere. If they are so similar, why don't they get along? Do you think they would raise their sons the way they had been raised?
14. How is it that the judge's father realized that the class system in India would prevent his son from realizing his potential, but that colonialism offered a chink in that wall? Why does the judge not work in his own province once he returns to India? What are the different types of immigration that take place in the novel? There is Biju, Saeed Saeed, the judge, Sai's mother and father, Father Booty and Uncle Potty, the Tibetan monks, the workers in the New York restaurants, and all the people in the Calcutta airport when Biju arrives back home (chapter 48). What does all this immigration mean?
15. Was Gyan a strong person? How did he become involved with a "procession coming panting up Mintri Road led by young men holding their kukris aloft and shouting, 'Jai Gorkha'" (p. 156)? Gyan was not totally convinced at the rally. Later at Ex-Army Thapa's Canteen "fired by alcohol" (p. 160), what decision did Gyan reach? Explain his reasons. What did Gyan think about his father?



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16. The next day Gyan went to Cho Oyu. What had changed? He returned to the canteen after leaving Cho Oyu. Discuss his reasons for betraying Sai. " 'You hate me,' said Sai, as if she read his thoughts, 'for big reasons, that have nothing to do with me' " (p. 260). Discuss why Gyan rejected Sai.
17. Discuss the unrest, betrayals, and eventual violence that separate Gyan and Sai. How are their troubles, and those of the cook, the judge, Father Booty, and Lola and Noni, related to problems of statehood and old hatreds that will not die? Does Noni's statement, " 'Very unskilled at drawing borders, those bloody Brits,' " (p. 129) fully explain the troubles?
18. Biju's time in New York City is not what he had expected. How do the earlier immigrants treat him? How do the class differences in India translate into class differences in the United States, where there were supposed to be none? Saeed Saeed is a success in America: "He relished the whole game, the way the country flexed his wits and rewarded him; he charmed it, cajoled it, cheated it, felt great tenderness and loyalty toward it. . . . It was an old-fashioned romance" (p. 79). Why is he so successful, and Biju is not?
19. Most of the examples of Americans and other tourists in India are extremely unflattering (pp. 197, 201, 237, 264). Most of the Indians in America are also not impressive, such as the students to whom Biju delivers food (pp. 48–51) and the businesspeople who order steak in the restaurant in the financial district (p. 135). How do they judge themselves? How does Biju judge them?
20. How did the cook get his job with the judge? Did the cook accept his position in society? Did he fulfill his responsibilities despite the judge's treatment? Why did the cook embellish the stories he told about the judge?
21. Why did the cook want his son, Biju, to go to America? Discuss Biju's experiences there. How did he feel about the possibility that he might never see his father again? Why did Biju return to India? Describe how he felt when he stepped out of the airport.
22. Did Sai mature or change over the months of both personal and political turmoil? "The simplicity of what she had been taught wouldn't hold. Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that narrative belonged only to herself" (p. 323). Explain what she means by this statement. Will Sai leave Cho Oyu?
23. The cook is not referred to by name until the next to last page of the novel. Why?
24. Which of the characters achieved, in Gyan's words, "a life of meaning and pride" (p. 260)?

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### About the Author



Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971, she lived in Delhi until she was 14, then spent a year in England, before her family moved to the USA. She completed her schooling in Massachusetts before attending Bennington College; Hollins University and Columbia University, where she studied creative writing, taking two years off to write *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*.

Her mother is Anita Desai, author of many books, three of which have been short listed for the Booker Prize (*Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999)). Anita Desai currently teaches writing at MIT. Her maternal grandmother was German, but left before the World War II and never returned. Her grandfather was a refugee from Bangladesh. Her paternal grandparents came from Gujarat, and her grandfather was educated in England. Although Kiran has not lived in India since she was 14, she returns to the family home in Delhi every year.

She first came to literary attention in 1997 when she was published in the *New Yorker* and in *Mirrorwork*, an anthology of 50 years of Indian writing edited by Salman Rushdie - *Strange Happenings in the Guava Orchard* was the closing piece. In 1998, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, which had taken four years to write, was published to good reviews. She says, "I think my first book was filled with all that I loved most about India and knew I was in the inevitable process of losing. It was also very much a book that came from the happiness of realizing how much I loved to write."

Eight years later, *The Inheritance of Loss* was published in early 2006, and won the 2006 Booker Prize. When talking of the characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, and of her own life, she says, "The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance."

*The Inheritance of Loss* is set partly in India and partly in the USA. Desai describes it as a book that "tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant," and goes on to say that it also explores at a deeper level, "what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West" - which happened during the British colonial days in India, and is happening again "with India's new relationship with the States." Her third aim was to write about, "What happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere, a political sphere, over time?"

As she says, "These are old themes that continue to be relevant in today's world, the past informing the present, the present revealing the past."

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