



Haunting Bombay

Shilpa Agarwal

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After her mother's death crossing the border from Pakistan to India during Partition, baby Pinky was taken in by her grandmother, Maji, the matriarch of the powerful Mittal family. Now thirteen years old, Pinky lives with her grandmother and her uncle's family in a bungalow on the Malabar Heights in Bombay. While she has never really been accepted by her uncle's family, she has always had Maji's love.

One day, as monsoons engulf the city, Pinky opens a mysteriously bolted door, unleashing the ghosts of an infant who drowned shortly before Pinky's arrival and of the nursemaid who cared for the child. Three generations of the Mittal family must struggle to come to terms with their secrets amidst hidden shame, forbidden love, and a call for absolute sacrifice.

Haunting Bombay Details

Date : Published April 1st 2009 by Soho Press

ISBN : 9781569475584

Author : Shilpa Agarwal

Format : Hardcover 362 pages

Genre : Cultural, India, Fiction, Horror, Historical, Historical Fiction, Asia, Fantasy, Mystery, Asian Literature, Indian Literature

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From Reader Review Haunting Bombay for online ebook

Dree says

Excellent book with fabulous descriptions of life in 1960s Bombay (India). This book follows the lives of the Mittal family and their servants--largely their present, but with very important insights into their pasts. And woven in is a ghost (spirit) story. I found the descriptions of the lives of women in various stages of their lives/from various walks of life to be fascinating (girl, young unmarried woman, young married woman, married woman, widow, married servant, unmarried servant) to be fascinating. The lives of men (boys, servants, young unmarried men, married men) are also well described.

The story itself pulls all these lives together and shows how intertwined they have become over the years; as well as how any one person's fortunes or hopes can change so quickly.

Great characters, great story.

Trudi says

Not a favorite of mine. Although I always enjoy reading about India, the emphasis in this book on ghosts put me off. Although it has interesting characters and setting, I didn't like the ghost aspect.

Vonn New says

Once in a while, I will walk through the library and just pick up a book because I like the cover. That's how I brought home Haunting Bombay. I don't generally like ghost stories, but I often am intrigued by English language literature written by Indian authors. The writing was quite good and the descriptions of life in Bombay were brought to life by the colors, flavors, and monsoon that are almost like characters in this book. I did not find the ending as surprising or shocking as many other reviewers.

Jodi says

I enjoyed this more than I thought I would. It's very well written. I don't normally go in for anything paranormal but this book is different. It shows the some of the superstitions in Indian culture about spirits and ghosts.

About a quarter of the way in the book had me hooked and I couldn't put it down.

What I enjoy about Indian English literature is that most novels don't wrap things up in a cute little, happy every after, bow in the end. The good ones always stay with me a while and have me pondering how life is going to carry on for the characters.

Aspasia says

This story had a confusing prologue and was slow to get started, but after the first few chapters the story sucked me in. Pinky Mittal has been raised by her grandmother since she was an infant. She lives with her grandmother, aunt, uncle, and cousins in an old English bungalow in Bombay during the 1960s. Superstition haunts (pardon the pun) this affluent family: the bathroom door is bolted every night and the children are forbidden to ask why. As Pinky nears the beginning of puberty she starts to question her place in the world and in her family. This important stage in her life and the expiration of an old curses causes her to be more sensitive to the paranormal activities going on in her house.

Wendy says

Ghosts are like secrets. You may not always be able to see them, but they linger, always present, always influencing those around them. Shilpa Agarwal's novel, *Haunting Bombay*, tells the story of the Mittal family, three generations living under the same roof. Secrets cannot be hidden forever. And the dark family secret in the Mittal household would soon be let loose by the unbolting of a door by an innocent girl.

Pinky is thirteen years old. The year is 1960. She never knew her mother, a refugee who died during the Partition. Pinky was taken in by her loving grandmother, Maji. The two live with Maji's only son, his wife and their three sons. Pinky has never understood why the door to the children's bathing area is bolted every night. One night, in the heat of despair, Pinky dares to unlock the door and it unleashes the ghost of a baby once drowned, who is now set on vengeance.

A family, that by all appearances on the outside is healthy and happy, suddenly begins to disintegrate, proving just how fragile their bonds truly were. Pinky's uncle for years has turned to alcohol to soothe his suffering. His wife longs for the upper hand, always wanting to be the best among her friends and family, and will do just about anything to get her way. Seventeen-year-old Nimish moons for the neighbor girl while Pinky pines for him. Then there are the twins, one with a sweet tooth and the other a bit of a trouble maker. The four servants in the house have their own stories: two sisters having fled famine and worse in their childhood; the driver from the slums; and the cook, a man of honor who is devoted to his wife. Maji seems to be the one person who is holding the family together, but as her control slips, and as the family's secrets begin to surface, they risk losing everything. Pinky is at the core of it all, and she is determined to uncover the truth in order to save her family.

Shilpa Agarwal reaches into her own family history to help shape her fictional tale, offering the reader a glimpse into a family's darkest and also strongest moments. It was easy to get lost in the story and feel like a part of the family. I was especially drawn to Pinky, so innocent and yet courageous. She may not have known her place in the household, but she certainly knows her own mind. I was also partial to Nimish, always lost in his books. He may not have been the strongest character, but he loved deeply.

The heat before the monsoons and then the coming of the harsh rain mirrored the events taking place in the novel: a seemingly peaceful existence suddenly uprooted by the storms. The author brings Bombay to life, offering a taste of Indian culture as she takes the reader into an upper class Indian family as well as deep into the city's underbelly, where crime runs rampant. The reader gets a sense of the injustices that existed during that time period, including the corruption and prejudices.

The magical aspects of the story are interwoven into the family's tragedy seamlessly. In the author's guest post here at *Musings of a Bookish Kitty*, Shilpa Agarwal mentions that the spirits are "a metaphor for those who have been silenced." In *Haunting Bombay*, the ghosts have no voice and are often invisible; however, they can only be ignored for so long. The ghosts, like the Mittal family's secrets, will come out and be heard or they will destroy all those who suppress them.

Haunting Bombay lives up to its title. It is a haunting tale full of mystery, forbidden love, dark secrets, and mysticism. Shilpa Agarwal's writing is beautiful, her story intense. I fell in love with this novel on the very first page and that feeling never wavered. If anything, it grew with each turn of the page. There was so much I liked about this novel; so much I haven't said. Do you have a day or two? Haunting Bombay would make a great book club selection.

Monica says

Well it's haunting alright.

Powerful imagery and interesting characters.

I liked the historical fiction aspect of the story: set in post Colonial india in the 1950's.

This novel has several plot twists and turns. Reminds me of a Hindi movie .

I enjoyed it .

Sree says

For reasons i cant quiet point out, this book messed with me. A ghost story that have me chills but at the same time I couldn't put the book down. A ghost seeking revenge and a girl seeking answers culminating in a epic climax!

Kathleen Bianchi says

I enjoy reading books about India. This one was a little different due to the ghost story. It is about a dysfunctional family due to a mysterious death of a baby 13 years previously. And 13 years ago a cousin was brought to live with them due to her mother dying at childbirth. The cousin, Pinky, was never accepted by the family except by her loving grandmother. The children's bathroom was locked up at night after the baby died and Pinky opened it 13 years later letting the baby's vengeful ghost loose. All hell broke loose on the family and they brought their Hindi priest and a Black magic priest in to help. There are many stories going on in this book that are interesting, too many to mention.

AK says

I was intrigued by this book mostly because of all my travels in Mumbai. It was nice understanding all the Indian references and being familiar with the locations. That being said, I think that if it took place anywhere else it would have been kind of boring. The story was interesting but never truly compelling. The characters were interesting, but for the most part, 2 dimensional.

Chris says

Haunting it is!

Zen says

Haunting Bombay really wasn't for me. At its best, it was an engaging ghost story filled with Indian tradition and folklore, and lots of intriguing history. It begins with a woman seeking revenge, continues with a girl seeking answers, and culminates in a series of supernatural phenomena that affect the entire Mittal family and those around them.

What dragged this book down for me was that I constantly felt like I was watching one of the supernatural Hindi dramas my grandparents are *addicted* to, but nonchalantly pretend not to care about. Every character fit one typical role or another: the innocent, unfairly-treated heroine; the unreasonably melodramatic lady of the house who basically exists to make the heroine's life miserable; the grouchy corrupt businessman who abandons his family in times of need; the dominating yet sympathetic old lady clutching her prayer beads; the chubby kid whose affinity for fried snacks is played for laughs. The characters certainly came to life, but mainly because — even with my limited exposure to dramas — I've literally seen them all before.

Even when you rationalize the commonplace characters, I think the way the story played out contributed to the soap opera feeling more than anything: lots of flashbacks, tense confrontations, and dramatic moments where the entire household gathers to witness a shocking event. I half-expected to hear whooshing sound effects as the camera panned across the room to each character's face, followed by a series of tight reaction shots of the same faces. (If you've ever had to sit through a Hindi drama, you know exactly what I'm talking about!)

But that's not necessarily a bad thing: lots of people enjoy said dramas, right? Wouldn't the story appeal to a similar audience? Which brings me to the second thing that put me off about this book:

I love South Asian literature, and so I tend to read a lot of it. I feel like there are two kinds of books within the genre. There are the books that seamlessly weave cultural details into the narrative, and then there are the ones that try to be *so accessible* that the author ends up writing not just a story, but a guidebook. Both sorts can be enjoyable when executed nicely, although I quite obviously have a preference for the former, or a nice balance of both. Haunting Bombay was the latter to an excessive degree.

For example: I think it's probably enough to say that a character ordered paan from a street stall, and maybe a brief description of what it is or what it tastes like. *Bas*. Did we really have to be taken through the entire paan-making process? The paan scene also included a description of what supari is, but later on when a character was chewing supari, it was explained yet again. A detailed description was provided *every single time* any sort of Indian food was mentioned, which got extremely tedious because food was mentioned constantly.

Geographical details were often similarly tedious, and sometimes even totally unnecessary. There was a moment when I actually laughed out loud as a character drove "to Churchgate Station on Churchgate Street." Really? Churchgate Station on Churchgate Street? Tell me more. I can understand that a book titled "Haunting Bombay" ought to be as much about Bombay as it is about haunting, but the constant name-dropping of neighborhoods and locations felt superfluous. Funnily enough, even with all the guidebook moments I hardly got a feel for the city at all — although I can now confidently tell you which street Churchgate Station is on.

Moving on to the things I did enjoy: I really liked the theme of an old injustice being righted, as well as the observations on sexism/classism/nationalism that pervaded many of the characters' histories and motivations.

Some of the scary bits were excellently scary; some of the comedic bits were quite funny. ("*Vechi nakh!*" "*Sala, tu tari ma ne vechi nakh!*") The importance of stories — telling stories, sharing stories, communicating through stories — was another theme that I enjoyed, probably the most out of anything in the book. The eldest son expressed his feelings by selecting choice passages from books to read aloud; the grandmother often communicated her feelings through devotional stories and prayers; the ghost who started it all was, in the end, just someone who wanted her story brought to light.

So maybe if parts of your childhood *weren't* set against a backdrop of predictable soap operas at your relatives' houses, this book might be an entirely different experience. The character archetypes that seem tired and stale to me might seem less familiar to you, or maybe that familiarity is something you'll enjoy. The guidebook moments may well be as informative to you as they were tedious for me. This wasn't an awful book by any means, but as I said, it just wasn't for me. If I've done it an injustice with this review, well, I hope a six-toed ghost maid doesn't show up at my place. I'll practice my dramatic reaction faces just in case.

Sue says

If I were to speak of this book in one word it would be "stunning" which is a word so overused in reviews that it almost means nothing but I mean it literally. At the end, I was absolutely stunned and it took awhile to recover from the final twist.

I am also overwhelmed by its complexity, which makes it a challenge for me to review. In the tradition of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, she writes a novel that questions, critiques and gives loving homage to the survivors, the marginalized, the lost in her culture of origin. It is a ghost story--the ghost is a real ghost but also represents the secret that is destroying the Mittal family. This family exists and is also haunted by the remains of British colonialism in the late 1940's, post-partition.

There is a strong feminist vein and the white feminist American reader (that would be me) may be tempted to be very critical of the ways tradition has marginalized some women, the very poor and those who cannot meet traditional heterosexual norms in India; however, I believe we should be doing that with our own culture first--then looking at what is similar and what is different--for there is something very universal and deeply human about her themes and characters. I will read this book again, knowing the secret that is drives the core of the book, with new insights the characters' motives and decisions.

(This review originally appeared on my Amazon reviews.)

Judy says

I guess I was expecting something else - a scary ghost story with lots of suspense. This was more about a dysfunctional family in India and their dysfunctional neighbors, with a ghost thrown in that wasn't particularly scary. Again, this shows how a publisher tries to market a book for a mass audience by giving you a different impression just so you'll crack open the book.

Kalyn says

I wasn't as astounded by this book as some of the cover blurbs were, but I did enjoy it. The ghost story was

not as central as I expected, but the stories of the other characters were more interesting anyway. The book's best moments are those where it explores themes common to all times and places - children rebelling against parents, young love, revenge, shame, acceptance, and seeking love. The descriptions are well done. I could nearly feel the oppressive heat and then the pouring rain of the monsoons. I would have liked the fantastical elements to tie in better with the more realistic elements so it didn't feel so much like a plot device, but it was a good story and one I would recommend.
