



# Riot

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## **Riot** Shashi Tharoor

Who killed twenty-four-year-old Priscilla Hart? And why would anyone want to murder this idealistic American student who had come to India to volunteer in a women's health programme? Had her work made a killer out of an enraged husband? Or was her death the result of a xenophobic attack? Was she involved in an indiscriminate love affair that had spun out of control? Or was she simply the innocent victim of a riot that had exploded in that fateful year of 1987 between Hindus and Muslims? Shashi Tharoor experiments brilliantly with narrative form, chronicling the mystery of Priscilla Hart's death through the often contradictory accounts of a dozen or more characters. Intellectually provocative and emotionally charged, *Riot* is a novel about the ownership of history, about love, hate, cultural collision, religious fanaticism and the impossibility of knowing the truth.

## **Riot Details**

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Author : Shashi Tharoor

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## **From Reader Review Riot for online ebook**

### **Abhay Nair says**

Unusual & as exciting!

There's religious rift, cultural rift & ideological rift here, it's the emotional churn that stands out as well as hold (or brings) everything together

This one's for an active and involved reader. Spoon-fed narration and clue droppings are skipped for snippets of details to EVENTUALLY form the linear story in the reader's mind.

The highlight of this work is the way it ties up in the end - effortless and in place. All the more so due to the splintered way the story unravels.

Kudos Mr. Tharoor, you held my engagement - in-spite of the deliberately disruptive way of narration.

On my shelf you'll be!

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### **Azita Rassi says**

I liked the form and much of the book, but found some parts rather artificial and constructed. I didn't like Priscilla Hart at all. In my opinion, she was immature and self-centered and she had a huge hero complex. The other characters were more or less ok. The thing I liked most was learning all those historical and social tidbits rather than the main story.

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### **Shylashree Chikkamuniyappa says**

Read the first 100 and last 50 pages of the book. Presentation was unlike anything I had read before with the story written as news articles or journal/scrapbook entries or interviews or letters of communication etc.

Priscilla Hart, a 24-year-old American volunteer for an NGO is stabbed 16 times in the midst of Hindu-Muslim (Rama janmabhoomi issue)riots in Kotli/Zalilgarh. Characters including her dad, who was the main guy involved during the Coke introduction and ousting in India to his extramarital affair witnessed by Priscilla, and followed by his divorce. Priscilla's contact with married Laxman, the district magistrate which goes on to even revealing her pregnancy but hushed up by his friend, Gurinder, the superintendent. Thoughts of Geeta, Laxman's wife; NY journalist and local leaders all make up for an interesting read since the story happens in India.

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### **Nehal says**

narrative is missing. the style was too pedantic - ok for non-Indians who may need a lot of contextualisation (given the layered and complex reality of India's communal and gender intermesh).

However, that takes away from a fluid narrative and sounds pedantic and more like a research paper told in story mode!

disappointed.

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### **Venkateswaran says**

Liberal doses of sexuality mixed with long drawn monologues by various characters on the idea of India make this book a passable train read. The narration method is probably novel, the book being written as excerpts from diaries, recorded conversations and newspaper clippings. The books revels in its cliches, including the pious south Indian civil servant, the arrogant american marketing executive, the go-get-it journalist , the profanity spewing Punjabi police officer and the fundamentalist saffron party men. The book deals with an Indian-American love affair set during a riot in a nondescript Indian village and its aftermath and in passing touches upon facets of India, mainly the rise of Hindu fanatisism during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. The most interesting character is the lady protagonist, an American student cum social worker and the author uses her murder to touch on various viewpoints of different participants in the drama.

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### **Lee says**

This underappreciated book is good on several levels -- it tells a good story (mystery, cross-cultural relationships, love story), examines cultural-historical issues, engages the reader as both a mystery and because of the structure of the novel. It is set in India -- a young woman doing her thesis on her work in a family planning clinic there is dead and her parents are seeking to understand how she died. The official story is that she was killed in a Hindu-Muslim riot. It turns out that she might have been killed in the riot but there were a number of people who would have like to see her dead. Each chapter is a "primary source" document -- official reports, letters, diary entries and so forth. In about the middle of the book you read about a conversation she had with her lover who says his goal is to write a book with chapters that can be read in any order, and depending on what order they are read will lead the reader to a different conclusion. That is, of course, this book and so I spent a lot of time wondering if I read the chapters in a different order if I really would come to a different conclusion about who dunnit. Great choice for a book club because there is much to talk about including the structure of the novel.

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### **Louise says**

Marginal. I did like the idea of the narrators using different formats to tell their story but there just seemed to be too much "filler" information. I was glad when I got to the last page. There really weren't any characters that I could like. I give it a 4.0 on my 10 scale (again, keep in mind that any book I would recommend needs to get at least a 7 on my scale to qualify for three stars on the Goodreads rating.)

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## Ming says

The characters in this book are one-dimensional. They stand on shaking soap boxes and make soliloquys. I am truly disappointed. Some of the polemic portrayals are interesting...for just a moment. These include the Hindu and the Muslim scholars. But then these stances are repeated needlessly. Furthermore, the format of journal entries, letters and a reporter's notes feels false and contrived. And the pieces include poems, "verbatim" quotes from conversation and documents. Just not believable.

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## Em\*bedded-in-books\* says

Amazing

\* love transcending race

\* hatred transcending religions

\* a country divided by religion, caste and class

\*a few do gooders attempting to set right the mess created by intolerance, insecurity and hatred

This was an interesting read comprising of different types of narratives focusing upon the events preceding the Babri Masjid demolition of 1992. I came across extreme religious faggots strangling and choking the voices of the majority of normal, peace loving people of either religions whose only aim is to lead comfortable, non violent existences.

Priscilla, an American Humanity research student bent upon improving the lots of the oppressed Indian lower class women is murdered, presumably during the Religious riots. Her parents set out to investigate and events unfurl. I liked the main characters of Lakshman, the DC, Gurcharan , his diametrically opposite police chief friend and Priscilla, a woman with a good heart, all who are intricately caught in the drama of love and life.

Got to know a lot about the post independence politics of India.

Thoroughly relished the read.

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## John says

liked nothing about this book or so called book

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## Sweetnessandlight says

It immediately struck me that this book was a story of attempted ideological colonization. One white woman, the independent westerner, sweeps into small-town India to save them from \*GASP\* having too many children, seduces the District Magistrate (who she thinks should behave like a westerner because he was educated in the western manner), gets murdered and it all becomes something NO ONE WILL TALK ABOUT. When will we begin to understand that going to someone else's country and telling them that they do things all wrong and try to change hundreds if not thousands of years of tradition is maybe not the correct approach? It has been shown time and again that when a country develops an educated class then industry follows. Educating women and keeping them in school longer naturally postpones marriage and the later a women gets married the fewer children she is likely to have. This can all be done without radically disrupting the traditions of a country. It is a benefit that is much easier to sell than the pain, heartache, jealousy and disrespect of pushing contraception and abortion on people who are not interested. When will we start asking

these countries, "How would you like us to help?"

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### **Bini says**

Good passing tea time read. Piece of history described with emotion.

The characters had their heart to the events of past which the author narrated in their tongue.

The mix of perspectives from characters of Tamil Nadu, Punjab & UP on RIOTS is like velvet, rub your hand over it and a new shade comes alive.

Irony of bureaucratic life is well described with room for readers interpretation.

DM Sahab can be "hailed for selfless service", "object of pity in love" or "loathed for cowardice".

Tharoor a seasoned writer have made me keep him high in my higher expectations ? so two stars.

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### **Diya says**

Okay first off, I know one mustn't judge a book by its cover, but I have something to say about it here: no it didn't have to be that explicit. It really didn't.

This book had two triggers for me: violence and infidelity, so it was a little difficult to read it without wanting to shout at the characters a little and getting very very sad.. If Riot didn't have the romantic plot and was simply a book of essays on history, religion and social dynamics of India - I wouldn't have found anything missing really. That would have been whole and brilliant in itself.

I find the author pandering to the audience overseas a little, trying desperately to make this more readable and "light" even and in the process, loses his voice on more occasions than one. I don't seem to empathise with any of the characters. Laxman is too full of himself and Priscilla is portrayed as this naive blue eyed blonde American who is working on spreading awareness on population control among women - two dimensional much? There are no details about the work she does, except one case that goes horribly wrong and sends out more of a "you're not welcome here" message rather than the outcome that she was hoping to achieve? It's seems as if the author didn't really spare much time to shape her character better. To Laxman and Gurinder he has been more kind. They have proper back stories and backgrounds that make you empathise with them even. Well I didn't. I had started to like Gurinder the cop and then he suddenly became a misogynist.

The way the novel has been presented through letters, scrapbook, interview transcripts and newspaper clippings does give it a more tangible feel and as Laxman describes it himself, can be read as a "story encyclopedia"... so that was good.

But I wouldn't recommend. Not really.

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### **Kira says**

I didn't like all the diary entries.

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## Anuradha says

Full disclosure: I admire Shashi Tharoor. A lot. He has served as my inspiration in life ever since I was 13; when he came about ye close to becoming the Secretary General of the UNSC. I decided then that I wanted to be like him, and that hasn't changed. My point is, I'm probably going to be biased here.

Cue the soundtrack. Somehow, it seemed appropriate.

The events that inspired this book predate my birth. However, the after-effects of the Ram Janambhoomi controversy were felt till I was about seventeen, which was when the Court gave its final ruling on the matter. I was on the brink of writing my law entrance exam, and everyone I knew couldn't stop emphasising how important it was that I knew the facts of this particular issue. And so facts, I did learn. I remember the day the judgement was passed. The television was blaring; I had holidays, and my parents had been sent home from work half-day, because no one knew what the consequence of the judgement would be. Sure, I lived in an almost completely non-volatile area, but the seed of apprehension had been planted.

*Riot*, on the face of it, is a murder mystery. This is despite its rather obvious title. The novel is, rather than a conventional collection of chapters put together, a collection of letters, journal entries, and other such anecdotes tied together. Much like Lakshman, in the book, wants to write a novel whose conclusion remains the same immaterial of the order the book is read in; this book comes close to achieving that.

Riot answers many questions. It makes astute observations. What it does not do, however, is address the infamous riots directly. Cleverly interspersed with scenes and reactions from what seems like a violent murder, of an American woman that too, *Riot* deals with the Hindu-Muslim tension in India with as much subtlety as could be afforded to such a subject in India. I'm politically a liberal, and religiously an agnostic-theist, so the views put forth in this book, and by extension my own personal views, may be controversial in some points. Don't say I didn't warn you.

When a "foreigner" is killed in India, the whole community reacts. In *Riot*, the well-meaning *precocious* (or is it *precious* ?) Priscilla Hart, who wanted to make Indian women, those women who carry "*babies, baskets, and burdens too heavy* more aware of the reproductive rights available to them, is found brutally murdered in *communally hypersensitive* Zailgarh, a small, poor village both literally and metaphorically, about ye far Delhi. There is an obvious flaw to Priscilla's character, a flaw that does not resonate with me in the least. You see, Priscilla Hart sees the best in everyone. *She (Priscilla's mom) said my problem was that I saw things in people that they didn't see in themselves.*" She's an eternal optimist who believes that with the right amount of love and knowledge, the world will change. It is perhaps this nature of hers that got her killed. It is also because of this that she doesn't understand what the inherent problem with the Indian women was. *"...this is the real issue for women in India. Not population control, but violence against women. In our own homes. What good are all our efforts as long as men have the power to do this to us? Your daughter (Priscilla) never understood that." ... "A lot of people, did not understand what your daughter believed in."* And this much, is true. After having read about 300 pages of her escapades, I still don't know what Priscilla believed in, or what she expected out of the world. This is not to say that I didn't like her; I did. But she was too conflicted, too confused, and much too involved in 'saving the world' to do much good. The events that transpired right before her death remain as a glaring instance of the sheer irony of life. *I want every woman to have that right. Even me.*

*"Either something is true, or it's not."*

Lakshman, aka Lucky, the devoted father, reluctant husband, and closet writer. His torrid, yet surprisingly tender affair with the victim remains the focus of the book, as does his internal turmoil. We see two sides to his character - the closet writer and passionate lover, which I would call his true side, a side that he solely reveals to Priscilla; and the dutiful family-man and responsible citizen, his real side, an utter lie, but the facade that he needs to show society. **"How can I forget? How can I possibly forget?"** Because who accepts writers in India? A divorced one at that, and way back in 1989, that too. And so, Lakshman continues to live a life of constant dilemma throughout the course of the book. A choice between his happiness and the 'greater good'. He was flawed, perhaps the most flawed of them all, but yet, I was drawn to him. His character seemed real and raw. Then again, I have this weird thing for smart guys, and by god, this man was one of those. From his detailed, coherent explanation of divisions in India **"Ensure that democracy protects the multiple identities of Indians, so that people feel that you can be a good Muslim and a good Bihari and a good Indian, all at once."** ... **"We have given passports to dream, a dream of extraordinary, polyglot, polychrome, polyconfessional country."**, to his constant Wildeisms and Lakshmanisms, this was a character I could relate to. He was witty, smart, mature, and at times, unabashedly cheeky. Most importantly, he was cynical. And a realist. **"If there is such a thing as the wrong place, or the wrong time. We are where we are at the only time we have. Perhaps, it's where we're meant to be."**

**"It's a bit all over the place, but then so was I at the time."**

**"Everyone should keep a diary - preferably, someone else's."**

**"Truth is elusive, subtle, many-sided."**

**I think of prayer as something intensely personal..."**

And just like that, they fell in love. It happens. And as much as I hate cheaters, I can understand *why* it happened. ***She loves me, she says, and she means it. This is not love as my parents spoke of it, an emotion anchored in family, in a sense of one's place in the world, in bonds of blood so thick, one cannot conceive snapping them. ...a feeling that is independent of social context or familial connections."*** ... ***"I do not know what she sees in me, what kindred spirit is that ignites a spark of recognition in her. I believe, I know though, what I see in her. ... And I know that I love her."*** Was Priscilla merely *an escape from reality*, though? I think not. ***I could not have invented Priscilla if she did not exist: her luminous beauty, her intelligence and sincerity of purpose, her complete openness to me, the way she gives so fully of herself. She is that rare combination of innocence and sexual freedom that I now think of as peculiarly American.*** Priscilla's love for Lakshman, however, is unqualified. She doesn't have any other obligations, so she's free to love him to her heart's content, ***with all her heart and soul***, like she says, while Lakshman spends every waking hour with conflicted feelings. Because, indeed, falling in love was the ***most irresponsible thing he'd ever done***.

***With Priscilla, silence is all I have.*** Because, indeed, how could he leave his responsibilities to his family and run away with her. Not that I'm okay with loveless marriages, but in India, and India three decades ago at that, his acts would've been blasphemous. ***"I am torn between two kinds of love and the prospects of two kinds of happiness. I chose the love for my daughter over my love for you, and the unhappiness of losing you over the unhappiness of shattering her."***

In the betwixt of this, of course, there are the titular riots. Conservative Hindu leader Ram Charan Gupta says at one point that the people in power in India are all atheists and communists, and in context of the time that statement was made, he was not completely wrong. Much as I would personally be exulted if India were run by communists and atheists, the consequences of such a rule in India would be dire indeed, because politics in India thrives on the vote bank, and of course, our distinguished politicians would go to any lengths to secure as many vote banks as they can. Ever wondered why India doesn't have a Uniform Civil Code?

Another thing that I had to agree with Mr. Gupta on was the controversy regarding alimony (or the lack of it), provided to Muslim women on the basis of their personal law. The legislature passing this was a political move, and not a just one, and the world knows that. Ram Charan Gupta says that no communal riots have occurred where "Hindus" have been in power. That the secularists cause riots. What he fails to mention is why communal riots aren't caused in the "Hindutva" states. Mostly, violence and oppression.

Professor Mohd. Sarwar, I agreed with. Well, mostly, at least. More historian than Muslim, he believes in his duty of *digging out the myths that divide and unite our people*. He quotes the great Maulana Azad, and attempts to reintegrate the society by studying such secularists (?) as Ghazi Miyan. *But who owns India's history? Are there my history and his, and his history about my history?* What is the difference between Hindus and Muslims, indeed, I ask myself. I mean, on a train, *we are all indistinguishable from any other Indian middle-class family*, aren't we? There is some hypocrisy in his statements, I agree, but we are all hypocrites in the end, aren't we? *I am a Muslim, but I will never allow your kind to define what kind of a Muslim I am.*

It is important for us to remember, that in the end, we are all Indians. Or lives, tastes, and passions, were all shaped by this country. A country divided on the lines of religion, language, and caste.

Gurinder Singh, the Superintendent of Police, every bit the Superintendent we read of. Smart, strong, brave. But of course he had to be a Sardar. And stereotypically at that. With his constant interjection of "motherloving" and love for alcohol. And yet, formally educated and incredibly smart. *"The story of my life begins with the words, 'Once a pun a time.'"* Forced to give up his dreams of a simple life for one of 'glory', as we think it is, in India. *He gave in. We all do.* The dysfunctional Harts - a cheating father, a protective mother, and of course, siblings. A memory that Priscilla kept, as *an icon of what she had cherished and lost*. A father who let his daughter down, and a mother who couldn't forgive her husband. A father who perhaps, for the first time ever, broke down on seeing everything that remained of his daughter, who was reduced to the things she owned after her death.

*"Your sister's going to have a future, young lady." ... Unlike my daughter.*

*It's never too late to say you're sorry, is it, Kathy?*

In some ways, Priscilla's death brought people closer together.

Who killed Priscilla Hart? The answer is never what it seems to be.

The book however, is something more than its characters and their stories. It is a commentary on the Indian thought process.

*"If I partitioned the country, I wouldn't be here. I'd be in Pakistan."*

*"...we're just as Indian as the pregnant women in your population control programs."*

*"Women don't sleep around. If they did, no one would marry them."*

Food for thought?