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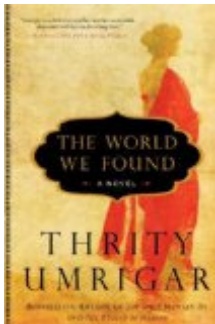
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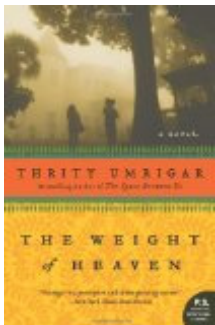
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An Interview with Thrity Umrigar



Here's a moment of literary serendipity: on the morning my Bookslut [interview with Luis Alberto Urrea](#) went up, I happened to be finishing the galley of Thrity Umrigar's latest novel, [The World We Found](#). Amazingly, here's what appears in the penultimate paragraph on the very last page: "Thanks to Luis Alberto Urrea, whose definition of 'the trembling ones,' inspires my work." What are the chances?



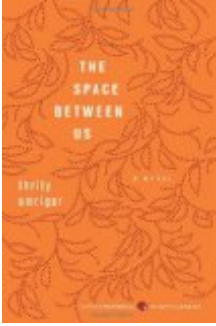
When I contacted Umrigar to set up our interview for this piece, she mentioned that she had just started Urrea's [Into the Beautiful North](#): "Howz that 4 coincidence?" she immediately replied. After a little nagging, she explained her "trembling" reference: "I heard Luis tell a story about his dad working as a janitor in a nearby bowling alley. And Luis was there with his friend but he didn't acknowledge his dad. The friend didn't know their relation and made fun of the 'janitor' and the father just stood there, mute, trembling with embarrassment. And Luis said something like, 'here's to the trembling ones.' And I thought to myself that that was the best damn description of who I write for and why I write, that I'd ever heard. He's so friggin' brilliant, isn't he?"



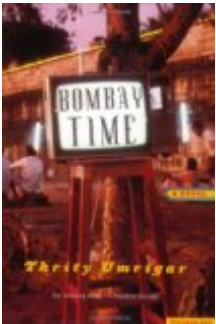
I, too, eventually recognized this story because I realized I was actually there: I moderated a panel almost a year ago at the 2011 AWP conference, where I introduced Urrea and recognized Umrigar in the audience. Umrigar would, of course, become the best part of the post-presentation discussion that followed. She is, in live time, fiery, inquisitive, challenging... though occasionally she'll give your brain a rest with her own brand of goofy fun.



On the page, Umrigar is equally fiery and challenging, although she is capable of wielding powerful control even while revealing the most wrenching moments in her resonating novels: dissolution of decades-long relationships in her debut *Bombay Time* (2001), utter betrayal in *The Space Between Us* (2006), the death of a beloved spouse and sudden uprooting in *If Today Be Sweet* (2007), and the unthinkable loss of a child in *The Weight of Heaven* (2009).



Readers of *The World We Found* are surely in for some "trembling" of their own. What might initially read like chick lit -- four college friends are brought back together after almost thirty years of drifting apart to fulfill the dying wish of one of their own -- evolves into an explosive, revelatory examination of class, gender, family... and the very extremes of religion.



Not yet fifty, Armaiti is dying of a virulent brain tumor, and having seen her own mother suffer a horrible death, she decides she will hold on as long as she can to her quality of life and not be controlled by debilitating medical interventions. More than anything, Armaiti wants to reunite with the vibrant soulmates of her youth, her three closest friends who remained in Bombay. As university students together back in the 1970s, the fearless four were idealistic, devoted, ready to fight any and all injustice. Decades later, Laleh is a privileged wife and mother, Kavita is an accomplished in-demand international architect, and Nishta has all but disappeared. With the help of Laleh's Mr. Fix-It-husband and in spite of the obstacles of Nishta's fundamentalist spouse, Armaiti must get her final wish.

You've got some explosive content in this, your latest. No spoilers here, but that final scene in the airport is a shocker. Are you ready for the reactions you're definitely going to get?

I'm not sure what you mean. Why is the scene a shocker? I mean, I understand that it's meant to be a surprising twist -- that was my intention -- but I'm not trying to offend or insult any group. My main contention is that when individuals have power over others, more likely than not they will use, and abuse, that power. What reactions, and from whom, do you think I'll get?

That was actually one of the details about this book that I admired most, that none of the characters were ever simply "good" or "bad," and that even the "good" guys were not above falling prey to abusing their power. But back to that final scene, I don't at all think you were intending to offend or insult any group! I'm convinced, though, that you'll have readers who will have strong reactions to Adish's inflammatory one-word solution to the situation at hand. Adish has been a calming, reassuring presence throughout most of the book, so it's a shocker when he reacts as he does at the airport. Post-9/11, don't you feel people have become hyperaware, even hypersensitive to certain trigger words and situations?

That's great; I want them to have a strong reaction to his "one-word solution," as you so delicately put it. My hope is that they will ask themselves what they would've done in this situation and whether the ends can ever justify the means.

Let's back up a little: So when did you begin writing *World*? How did the story come to you?

The bare outlines of the story took shape after a chance meeting in India with a college friend I hadn't seen in over twenty-five years. We were catching up on our lives and she mentioned that she had moved away from the activism of her college days after the Hindu-Muslim riots that tore apart Bombay in 1992-93. It marked the end of her innocence, in a way. And although I was living in the U.S. by then, I remembered how the riots had affected me at a very deep level. It was almost as if the secular, easy-going, tolerant city we had grown up in, didn't exist any more. So I could relate to her feelings, even though I disagreed with her conclusions. And then I asked myself questions about lost idealism and whether something of value still lingered from that era. And slowly, the book took shape.

When you were that young, did you have an intimate group of friends as your characters here? And did you manage to stay in touch after you emigrated to the U.S. from India about the same age – early twenties – as Armaiti does in *World*?

I had some very deep friendships growing up. Some of us stayed in touch. I lost touch with others but have reconnected with many old friends in the last few years. It's a fantastic feeling. Thank you, Google.

Were you as politicized as your characters are in their university days?

I think I was politicized at age five, once I started noticing the beggars on the streets, and children my age who had to rummage through dumpsters looking for food. But since I grew up in a middle-class milieu where we were always told that "that's just how things are," it never occurred to me that the social order could be changed, much less that I could play a role in changing it. It was only in my teenage years that I understood things about class and inequity and how there was nothing inevitable about it.

Decades later, are you as politicized now?

I'm not a political activist but my opinions have not changed, mostly because the issues have not changed.

Which of your four characters are you most like? Which one do you identify with the most?

It's funny that you ask that question, because I was just thinking to myself the other day that I can see a little of myself in all the characters in this novel. That has not always been obvious to me in some of my other novels. But I can see it in this one.

You yourself are Parsi so you could use your own background and experiences for your Parsi characters here. How did you do the research for your Hindu and Muslim characters? Did you ever don a burkha yourself at some point?

The Bombay that I grew up in was a very cosmopolitan, secular place. For instance, I was a Parsi kid who went to a Catholic school, in a pre-dominantly Hindu city. My classmates were Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Catholics. It never once occurred to us to even question each other's religion, and to their credit, none of our parents seemed to make an issue out of it. Same thing in college. Nobody ever claimed their religion was better than someone else's; no one ever said they were the ones who'd go to Heaven and the rest of us would be left behind. It wasn't until I came to the U.S. that I heard people talk like this. In India, we would've laughed them out of town. Or at least, our toes would've curled in embarrassment for them.

So I guess I don't feel at all self-conscious writing about Hindu or Muslim characters. But the real point is, there's very little about the characters in this novel -- with one major exception -- that would define them by their religion. They are mostly sophisticated, educated, secular people.

I've never worn a burkha myself. But all it takes is an empathic imagination to know how stifling it would feel.

How important is religion in your life?

Religion to me is an intensely private matter. It should never be used as a club to beat up people with, nor as a pretext to feel superior to someone else. Being a Parsi, I was raised to follow the Zoroastrian faith. The basic tenets of Zoroastrianism are simple: good thoughts, good words, good deeds. Who can argue with that?

So bridging the religious divide in your story proves to be challenging at best, perhaps impossible. Will it ever be?

I beg to differ. I think what proves hard to bridge in this novel is the class divide and the power differential. By showing the four women and their boyfriends during their college days, I think the novel argues powerfully that religious divisions can be overcome. The novel clearly points out the culprits who create this seemingly intractable "religious divide," the politicians who incite groups to turn on each other.

But the one Hindu and Muslim relationship here – again, I have to try and not give too much away – turns out to be irreparably broken. The couple initially takes great pride in proving that they can't be separated because of their different religions, but eventually, fundamentalism embraced by one side cleaves them apart. The final scene is literally a tossing away – no bridging possible – of someone else's religious constraints, no?

Well, although both of them face great pressures from the outside world, they seem to get along fine with each other. The crack in the marriage occurs not because of their different religions but because one of them becomes increasingly conservative. So it's ideology that divides them, rather than religion per se. As for the final scene, I don't see it as a tossing away of someone's religion. I see it as a refutation of an ideological constraint. And, as we all know, all religions have their fundamentalist elements.

I feel like I'm being very coy in my answer -- just as you are very delicate in your question -- since we're both trying so hard not to give away too much of the plot. So I hope this makes sense to our readers.

More reason for them to go pick up the book right now! So, I can definitely see a sequel to *World*, especially continuing the story with what happens with the friends' children. Any plans?

No plans. I'm not terribly fond of sequels.

How often do you go back to India? When you go, do you find yourself becoming more aware of religious or class differences? How does that affect you?

More aware of class differences, yes, because in India the poverty is visual; it's on the street, so it's in your face, unlike the U.S., where it's more hidden. But I'm much more aware of religious differences here in the U.S. than in India. But that may simply be a product of my sheltered life in India. I mean, yes, I belong to a religious minority. But it's not a minority that's been in the crosshairs of the dominant culture. And Parsis are typically a pretty tolerant and easygoing group. I know many more religious dogmatists in America than I do in India.

You've lived in the U.S. now longer than you lived in India. Where's "home"? And Bombay to Cleveland? How did *that* happen?

Home is wherever there's Bob Dylan on the stereo, a pile of good books on the bed stand, a gathering of close friends and family members sharing a meal together, a few bottles of wine being passed around... No, seriously, I'm a contrarian. When I'm in India, the U.S. is home. When I'm here, I long for India. But I don't think I would've become a writer if I'd never left India. I'm deeply grateful to the U.S. for this gift.

Speaking of Bombay, it seems to be a character in almost all of your titles, except for *The Weight of Heaven* (which takes place in a rural part of India). Obviously, you can't stay away. Might you see yourself living there again someday?

I think any novelist would have to be fascinated by a city like Bombay. It's a madhouse, bursting with color, and noise, and people, and melodrama, and stories. It's a daily miracle that a city like that functions at all, that it doesn't just go up in flames or burst at the seams. I find it to be an amazingly heroic and resilient city. It's tough to survive there but there's a sweetness to its people that verges on a kind of innocence. I think any writer, Indian or non-Indian, could visit

Bombay and pluck a story out of thin air. It's my good fortune that I happen to have grown up in this city and therefore know it well enough to use it in my novels.

So Indian child-poet to American journalist to bestselling author to Professor Umrigar, with an office and office hours and syllabi and, of course, all those students! Tell us a bit about your teaching life.

I like teaching. I think it compliments my writing career well. I'm blessed that I teach at a very good university and hence have some brilliant, curious students. I love how earnest and serious and polite my students are. If they miss a class, they write me an email explaining their absence. I don't think I'll ever get over my amazement at this.

A book tour's coming up (again)... What are you looking forward to? What are you hoping to avoid?

Oh, the best part of a book tour is actually meeting readers and hearing their interpretations of your work. I really love the interactions. What I'm hoping to avoid... long lines at the airport.

Speaking of book tours and airports, one of your fellow Bombay Parsi authors, Rohinton Mistry ([A Fine Balance](#), [Family Matters](#)), famously quit his book tour halfway and gave up air travel after 9/11 because of the (allegedly random) humiliating treatment he had to endure to get through security. Have you ever faced such circumstances? Do you think things have improved at all over the last decade since the tragedy?

I think Rohinton was stopped in part because he wore a full beard. I've not had a problem with airport security. But you know, American airports have become strange, surreal places. You feel like a criminal just because you exist. I was in Brazil a few years ago and at Rio airport, the security folks asked each passenger for permission -- *permission!* -- to ask a few questions. And each security desk had a small vase of freshly cut flowers and a bowl of candy. It was so sweet and quaint. I almost cried because it hit me hard, what we've lost in the past ten years.

So how come no D.C. stop?

I dunno. Probably because you didn't arrange a reading for me. Or maybe it's some giant conspiracy with global implications.

And, of course, I have to ask, what are you working on now?

A novel called *I Begins* -- yes, with an *s*. It's the story of two women, an immigrant Indian who is in a loveless marriage and her African American therapist.

Terry Hong writes [BookDragon](#), a book review blog for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program.

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