

Please join the Highland Bookies
as we review

The God of Small Things
by
Arundhati Roy

Wednesday, March 4, 1998
1 p.m.

at the home of Sheryl Davidson
2942 E. Phillips Dr.

773-2012 Regrets only









Books and Buddhas Inc.



The God of Small Things

The God of Small Things



by Arundhati Roy

Name	Grade	Comments
Judy Bush 	A ^{writing} B ^{flu}	Beautiful descriptions, wonderful command of English. I loved the capitalized repetitive words. Plot was slow, overdone, ponderous and extremely depressing.
Leann Jewels 	C-	A very depressing book - the characters had very few redeeming qualities. The writing was wonderful though.
Nora Ruppert 	A	I loved the writing - exquisite grasp of the language. It is such a complex book with the microcosm of this family reflecting Indian society - a society where people pay on each other.
Martha Boon 	C	I enjoyed her writing but struggled with the total bizarre behavior of so many of the characters: the treatment of the children. It was a sad, sad tale but made a good point comments on Indian society. Glad I read it - didn't enjoy it as I have other books.
Sheryl Davidson 	B+	I was very surprised & enjoyed the flu of the language, used by Ms Roy. It was so beautifully written... I felt the story fragile but a cultural view of life in India from the authors view. Sad, sad story, but interesting.
Anne 	B+	I will finish this book! Without a doubt, it is the most lovely, lyrical writing I have ever experienced. Sad, hopeless and yet beautiful.

upon completion I give it a grade "A"

The God of Small Things

by Arundhati Roy

Name	Grade	Comments
Jain. Davis 	A	I could feel the heat, the smell and the feel of India. I thought the "dark" man in the book was the most enlightened. I loved her writing style.
Sushila Samaranayake 	A	I think her style of writing is unique and very effective. She tells her story in a compelling way and it leaves a lasting impression on the mind.

July 29, 1998

Arundhati Roy Wins the Booker Prize



First-time novelist from Flamingo takes home Britain's
biggest literary prize to universal praise

The God of Small Things

By early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazzars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways.

At a glittering ceremony televised by channel 4, Arundhati Roy was announced the winner of this year's Booker Prize. We first carried an interview with this new literary star six months ago when she came over to Britain to discuss the publication of the book with her editor. Even then there was a lot of excitement about the potential of *The God of Small Things* and booksellers and critics alike were tipping it for the Booker. So often the announcement of the Booker winner causes disquiet. This year few felt challenged the fact that Roy deserved the prize for what is a stunning debut novel.

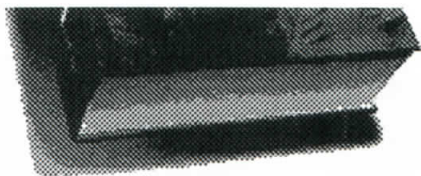
The God of Small Things opens in Kerala, a remote area of south-western India in which Roy grew up as a child. The book captures the spirit of a part of India which has an unusual history: Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Christians all live in the area and the different religions exist uneasily alongside each other. Arundhati Roy is keen to point out that the book is not directly about issues such as religious unease, the plight of women in the caste system or the influence of Western technology upon India. The reason for stressing this is because *The God of Small Things* is a book which deals with so many ideas, places and people. It is a book which is rich in landscape, displays a love and a suspicion for the people it describes and is conveyed with a fluency of writing style that few writers ever achieve.

Arundhati Roy came over to London for the Booker ceremony. After hearing the news of her success she broke down with tears of joy as she thanked the judges and her publisher. She then went off to a phone to call her family back home to tell them her astounding news. Arundhati has come a long way from the days she trained in India to be an architect.

Although Arundhati may have given up her career, her architectural training has enabled



her to write and structure her book in a very challenging fashion. After her training, Arundhati Roy soon became involved with writing for television. She wrote a 26 part television series called *The Banyan Tree* which was set in Uttar Pradesh in the years between 1921 and 1952. The television series follows the lives of four students through the last tumultuous decades of the British Raj.



One thing that is instantly apparent when talking to Roy is her energy, creative mind and sense of fun. Indeed, some of her memories of India should be made into films. She once escorted a convoy of five rhinos from Delhi to Dudhwa where they were being re-introduced in the hope of starting a new gene-pool.

If this was not bizarre enough, while living in Goa she was selling cakes on the beach while deciding what direction her career should follow. Roy toyed with the idea of cutting up old Benares sarees and turning them into silk beach shirts. Eventually she decided against this and returned to Delhi where she met her husband while riding a bicycle down the wrong side of a road!

To find out more about *The God of Small Things* and Arundhati Roy's experiences of growing up and living in India, read on in our interview with India's new talent.



How Small Things Grow into Something Far Greater



"One of the things that I enjoyed about
it was that it kept surprising me, I hadn't
planned it out in advance."

What was it like growing up in India and do you remember your childhood with fond affection?

"I grew up in Kerala and a lot of the atmosphere of *A God of Small Things* is based on my experiences of what it was like there. Most interestingly, it was the only place in the world where religions coincide, there's Christianity, Hinduism, Marxism and Islam and they all live together and rub each other down. When I grew up it was the Marxism that was very strong, it was like the revolution was coming next week. I was aware of the different cultures when I was growing up and I'm still aware of them now. When you see all the competing beliefs against the same background you realise how they all wear each other down. To me, I couldn't think of a better location for a book about human beings.

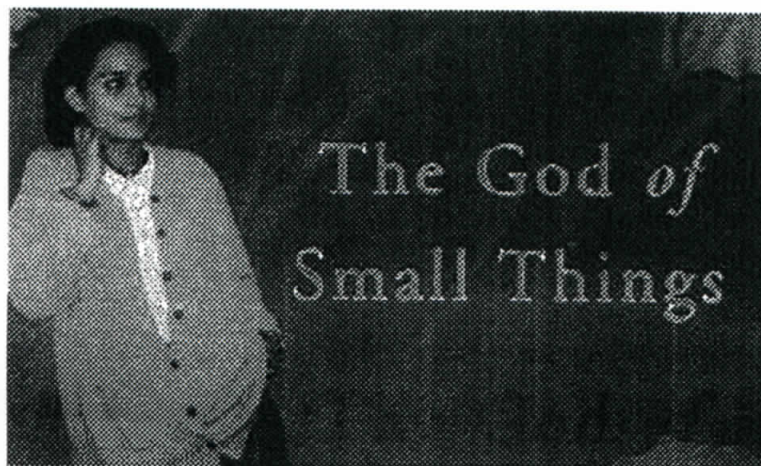
After being involved with making films it must have been a very different experience to write a novel?

"I wanted to do something where I didn't have to deal with people; I wanted to do something alone. I didn't know what I'd started really, I got a computer and started using it, finding out what it could do. I didn't know I was writing a book for a while. It took me five years to write *The God of Small Things*, but for first few months I was just fooling around before I realized what was happening and got down to writing the book properly. To me it was wonderful experience because nobody knew what I'd written until I'd finished it. Even I didn't know if I'd ever finish it. One of the things that I enjoyed about it was that it kept surprising me, I hadn't planned it out in advance."

How did the title come about and how do you think it conveys what you're saying in the novel?

"This novel didn't have a title until the very last minute. I didn't know what to call it, there were lots of ideas and suggestions but I just remember printing out the manuscript and just printing out the title at the last minute. One of the chapters was called The God of Small Things, I don't know how that happened, I just remember Ammu's dream, who was the one armed man, the God of loss, the God of Small Things? When I read the book now I can't believe the amount of references there are to small things, but it was absolutely not the case that I started with the title and built the novel around it. At the last stage they knew they had to put their faith in fragility and stick to the small things, and I just can't believe how appropriate the title is."

Capturing Landscapes which Become a Part of You



"If you spent your very early childhood
catching fish and just learning to be quiet, the
landscape just seeps into you."

Do you actively use the rich landscapes you describe to convey a political message. It does seem that your landscapes almost have a personality in the book?

"I think the kind of landscape that you grew up in, it lives in you. I don't think it's true of people who've grown up in cities so much, you may love a building but I don't think you can love it in the way that you love a tree or a river or the colour of the earth, it's a different kind of love. I'm not a very well read person but I don't imagine that that kind of gut love for the earth can be replaced by the open landscape. It's a much cleverer person who grows up in the city, savvy and much smarter in many ways. If you spent your very early childhood catching fish and just learning to be quiet, the landscape just seeps into you. Even now I go back to Kerala and it makes me want to cry if something happens to that place."

Your address the issue of change and how India is dealing with this, such as the availability of CNN and the world-view it offers people. Is India coping well with change?

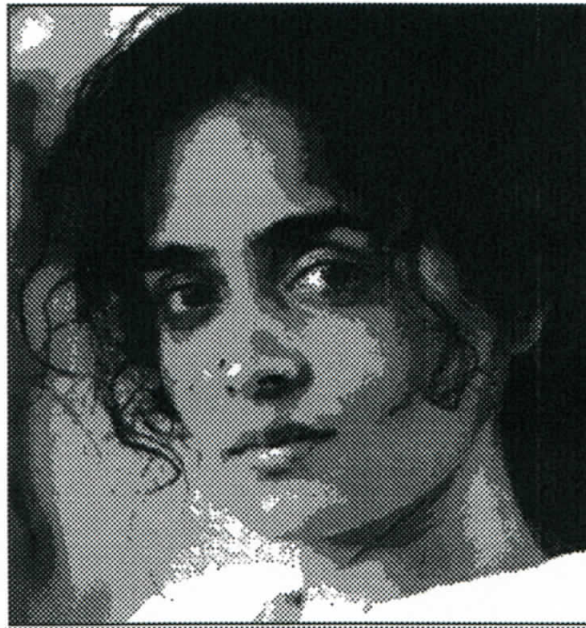
"I think India is having a huge problem dealing with change, in the last three years television has changed India like nothing else has. There are good things about it, such as the way it has loosened the grip of state controlled TV. But it has also introduced a commercial greedy culture that sits very uneasily."

"It's interesting to see how Star Television came in and brought programmes such as *Baywatch*, and the eyes of western media owners lit up with the thought of a new market of 600 million to pitch for. But India resists these things in her own way, and Coke and Pepsi are running at a dead loss because no-one's that interested in what they have to say and sell. It's a period of great flux and change, there are news programmes that the state would never have shown, so it's very confused and strange at the moment."



SALON + CONTACT US + ARCHIVED ARTICLES + TABLE TALK

THE SALON INTERVIEW | ARUNDHATI ROY



winds, rivers & rain

THE AUTHOR OF "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS"
TALKS ABOUT INDIA, THE OBSCENITY CHARGE SHE FACES
AND HOW WRITING IS LIKE ARCHITECTURE.

BY REENA JANA | she claims she never rewrites or revises. Her first novel, "The God of Small Things," has just won the English-speaking world's most premier honor, the Booker Prize, is published in more than 20 nations, has hit No. 1 on the Sunday Times of London's bestseller list and is climbing the New York Times list. It has earned her in excess of \$1 million so far and international media attention as she faces obscenity charges in her native India for a sensual description of inter-caste lovemaking that serves as the novel's coda. And beyond all this, she's good. Real good. Butt-kicking good. So good, in fact, that John Updike, when reviewing "The God of Small Things" for the New Yorker, compares her mind-boggling debut to that of Tiger Woods.

She's Arundhati Roy, and she's remarkably tiny -- hovering around 5-foot-2 -- despite the black platform shoes she's wearing and new literary lioness persona. An explosion of curly black hair frames her face, which showcases nearly childlike, saucer eyes and cheekbones that erupt the moment she talks or smiles. Now in her mid-30s, Roy grew up in Kerala, the Marxist Indian state in which "The God of Small Things" is set. The novel is a vertiginously poetic tale of Indian boy-and-girl twins, Estha and Rahel, and their family's tragedies; the story's fulcrum is the death of their 9-year-old half-British cousin, Sophie Mol, visiting them on holiday.

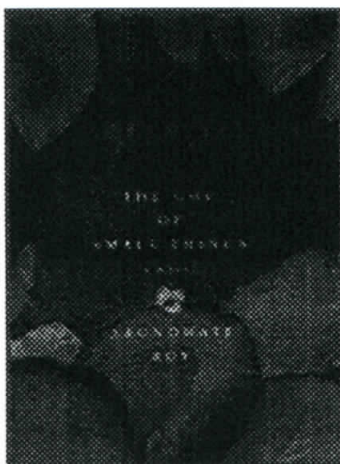
The daughter of a Syrian Christian mother, a divorcee who managed a tea plantation (just like the character of Ammu in Roy's novel), Roy didn't attend school until she was 10. "I was my mother's guinea pig," she explains. "She started her own school, and I was her first student." As a teenager, Roy went on to attend boarding school in southern India and wound up at Delhi's School of Planning and Architecture. And now, after years of supporting herself as an aerobics instructor in New Delhi, she's one of the world's most celebrated novelists. We forgive her for not rewriting or revising "The God of Small Things." Thank God she didn't. Where would the world be without such a display of raw gifts for simile and metaphor, rhythm and lyric? Without Roy's dizzying microcosm of modern India? Without such an honest and wildly creative (her word plays would drive William Safire and any self-respecting dictionary reader mad) expression of human yearning and joy? Let's not think about a world without "The God of Small Things." Let's ask Roy about the world with it.

Next page: **There is no India.**

SALON + CONTACT US + ARCHIVED ARTICLES + TABLE TALK

SALON + CONTACT US + ARCHIVED ARTICLES + TABLE TALK

The Salon Interview | Arundhati Roy | continued



All eyes are on India right now, with the 50th anniversary celebration of its independence. At the same time, all eyes are on you and this novel. People around the world are asking, "What does it mean to be an Indian novelist today? What does it mean to be Indian?" Will readers find the answers to these questions in "The God of Small Things"?

You know, I think that a story is like the surface of water. And you can take what you want from it. Its volubility is its strength. But I feel irritated by this idea, this search. What do we mean when we ask, "What is Indian? What is India? Who is Indian?" Do we ask, "What does it mean to be American? What does it mean to be British?" as often? I don't think that it's a question that needs to be asked, necessarily. I don't think along those lines, anyway. I think perhaps that the question we should ask is, "What does it mean to be human?"

I don't even feel comfortable with this need to define our country. Because it's bigger than that! How can one define India? There is no one language, there is no one culture. There is no one religion, there is no one way of life. There is absolutely no way one could draw a line around it and say, "This is India" or, "This is what it means to be Indian." The whole world is seeking simplification. It's not that easy. I don't believe that one clever movie or one clever book can begin to convey what it means to be Indian. Of course, every writer of fiction tries to make sense of their world. Which is what I do. There are some things that I don't do, though. Like try to make claims of what influenced my book. And I will never "defend" my book either. When I write, I lay down my weapons and give the book to the reader.

Speaking of influences and defenses, your work has been compared to Salman Rushdie's. And now, in India, you face charges of obscenity in India for the erotic ending of "The God of Small Things" -- a controversy reminiscent of (but not as severe as) Rushdie's fatwa (death sentence).

I think that the comparison to Salman has been just a lazy response. When in doubt, if it's an Indian writer, compare them to Salman, because he's the best-known Indian writer! When I say this, I feel bad, because I think it sounds like I don't think very highly of him, because I do. He's a brilliant writer. I think critics have a problem when a new writer comes along, because they want to peg an identity on them. And Salman is the most obvious one for me. But then readers begin to assume the influence, and this isn't fair.

The comparisons emerge from the need to create an analogy, a metaphor for readers to understand the unknown writer's work ...

I understand that need. But then I don't understand when readers assume that Indian writers are "magical realists" and suddenly I'm a "magical realist," just because Salman Rushdie or other Indian writers are "magical realists." Sometimes people can misread because of such pegging. For example, when Baby Kochamma is fantasizing or Rahel is observing something as a child or Ammu is dreaming in my book, it is not me, the writer, creating the "magical realism." No, what I am writing is what the characters are experiencing. What the reader is reading is the character's own perceptions. Those images are driven by the characters. It is never me invoking magic! This is realism, actually, that I am writing.

Actually, it's not just Rushdie I'm compared to. There's García-Márquez, Joyce ... and Faulkner, always Faulkner. Yes, I'm compared to Faulkner the most. But I've never read Faulkner before! So I can't say anything about him. I have, however, read some other writers from the American South -- Mark Twain, Harper S. Lee -- and I think that perhaps there's an infusion or intrusion of landscape in their literature that might be similar to mine. This comparison is not that lazy, because it's natural that writers from outside urban areas share an environment that is not man-made and is changed by winds and rivers and rain. I think that human relationships and the divisions between human beings are more brutal and straightforward than those in cities, where everything is hidden behind walls and a veneer of urban sophistication.

The obscenity charges brought forth by an individual lawyer, Sabu Thomas, that you face are in Kerala, the same Indian region you depict in your book. Is this what you mean by "the divisions between human beings are more brutal and straightforward" in non-urban areas? And how are you coping with such a reception to your book in the very place that inspired its writing?

When the charges were first made, I was very upset. Actually, the individual who accused me of obscenity first did so when I was on my first book tour in the U.S. in June, and no one told me about it because they didn't want me to be upset on tour. Now, I realize that this is what literature is about. This is the fallout of literature. It's more important for me to argue that -- on my territory. To state MY case for literature, and freedom of speech. It's far more important for me to do that than to

go to book parties or on tours. That's the real fight, what it's all about. And that is MY territory, no matter what he is trying to do, what he is trying to say against my book. And I am not afraid, I'm capable of dealing with this and doing myself justice. I am going to stake my claim. In fact, last week, I made an appeal to the high court, and they decided to give the case to a lower court. It's a criminal case, you know; and in India, even though a private citizen charged me, the case becomes "the state" vs. me! It's so unfair, the person who is accusing me of obscenity only photocopied the last three pages of my book and presented them to the court.

The vernacular press in India has dealt with this with viciousness; my mother, who lives in Kerala, hears of the controversy and cannot just be happy for the international success of the book. This has been a strain. But one cannot hide from the glare of one's own writing.

When I started to read "The God of Small Things," it took me some time to figure out who the protagonist was -- and then I started to feel it was the place: India, Kerala.

That quest is interesting -- that quest for one main character. There is no reason for there to be one. In fact, I think the center is everyone, Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Velutha, Estha, Rahel ... they all are the core.

Another "core" of the book is the lyricism of your prose. The Indian-American writer (and Salon columnist) Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has confessed to writing to the rhythms of Indian music; sometimes she reads her work out loud in public with the music playing in the background to enhance the musicality. Do you have a similar approach?

I don't listen to music when I write. It's about design to me. I'm trained as an architect; writing is like architecture. In buildings, there are design motifs that occur again and again, that repeat -- patterns, curves. These motifs help us feel comfortable in a physical space. And the same works in writing, I've found. For me, the way words, punctuation and paragraphs fall on the page is important as well -- the graphic design of the language. That was why the words and thoughts of Estha and Rahel, the twins, were so playful on the page ... I was being creative with their design. Words were broken apart, and then sometimes fused together. "Later" became "Lay. Ter." "An owl" became "A Nowl." "Sour metal smell" became "sourmetal smell."

Repetition I love, and used because it made me feel safe. Repeated words and phrases have a rocking feeling, like a lullaby. They help take away the shock of the plot -- death, lives destroyed or the horror of the settings -- a crazy, chaotic, emotional house, the sinister movie theater.

How do you react to reviews that analyze your wordplays as "writerly" or self-conscious?

Language is something I don't think about. At all. In fact, the truth is that my writing isn't self-conscious at all. I don't rewrite. In this whole book, I changed only about two pages. I rarely rewrite a sentence. That's the

way I think. Writing this novel was a very intuitive process for me. And pleasurable. So much more pleasurable than writing screenplays. I get so much more pleasure from describing a river than writing "CUT TO A RIVER."

You know, I always believe that even among the best writers, there are selfish writers and there are generous ones. Selfish writers leave you with the memory of their book. Generous writers leave you with the memory of the world they evoked. To evoke a world, to communicate it to someone, is like writing a letter to someone that you love. It's a very thin line. For me, books are gifts. When I read a book, I accept it as a gift from an author. When I wrote this book, I presented it as a gift. The reader will do with it what they want.

This is your first novel. How did you start writing it? What was your process? How did you guide yourself through it?

If someone told me this was how I was going to write a novel before I started writing it, I wouldn't believe them. I wrote it out of sequence. I didn't start with the first chapter or end with the last chapter. I actually started writing with a single image in my head: the sky blue Plymouth with two twins inside it, a Marxist procession surrounding it. And it just developed from there. The language just started weaving together, sentence by sentence.

How did you arrive at the final sequence that became the novel in its finished form?

It just worked. For instance, I didn't know, when I started writing, that this book would take place in exactly one day. I kept moving back and forth in time. And then, somehow, I realized that in some of the scenes, the kids were grown up, and sometimes they weren't. I wound up looking at the scenes as different moments, moments that were refracted through time. Reconstituted moments. Moments when Estha is readjusting his Elvis puff of hair. When Estha and Rahel blow spitballs. When Ammu and Velutha make love. These moments, and moments like these in life, I realized, mean something more than what they are, than how they are experienced as mere minutes. They are the substance of human happiness.

Your biography on the book's dust jacket says you are "trained as an architect and the author of two screenplays." By other published accounts you are an aerobics instructor. Why and how did you decide to write a novel?

From the time I was a very young child, I knew in my heart that I wanted to be a writer. I never thought I would be able to become one -- I didn't have the financial opportunities to be a writer. But then I started writing for film, and this started my writing career. Still, when I was studying architecture, or teaching aerobics, these were things I really wanted to do, things I focused on completely. No matter what I did or what I do, I become absorbed in it. And that was what happened when I started writing "The God of Small Things." I worked for a long time, and finally, when I saved enough money to take time off and take the risk

of writing a novel -- which took me four and a half years of my life, once again I was able to focus on it completely and really enjoy writing it. I was as involved in being an architect as I was writing this novel, and vice versa. I never spent time just dreaming of becoming a writer and resenting my present state. No, my secret was to live my life refusing to be a victim. Failure -- no, I shouldn't say "failure," rather, the "lack of success" never frightened me. Even if this book never sold or caught any attention, it would still be the same book. This book is this book. At every point in my life, I decided what I could do and then did it.

There is no way for any publisher or writer to know what will sell and why, even though they are all looking for formula. People are asking me if I am feeling pressure now, and they ask me if I will repeat what I achieved in "The God of Small Things." How I hope I do not! I want to keep changing, growing. I don't accept the pressure. I don't believe I must write another book just because now I'm a "writer." I don't believe anyone should write unless they have a book to write. Otherwise they should just shut up.

So you aren't working on another book?

No. Not now, I am totally free. Right now it's important for me to accept my own peace; I have no idea what I must do next. I don't care. I don't feel I must "follow the path." I don't believe in rules. One of the worst books I've ever read was "The Craft of Novel Writing." I don't write reviews, even though people are asking me to now. I don't want to analyze too much. I had no idea that all of this would happen. For me, what made writing "The God of Small Things" so worthwhile is that people all around the world are connecting with this book, that it's somehow hitting some deeply human chord.

SALON | Sept. 30, 1997

Reena Jana contributes regularly to the New York Times, Wired, Asian Art News and Flash Art International.

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