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Article by MARILYN LIGHTSTONE

# Rohinton Mistry

*You must read it, I say, when I've read a great book  
But to say it, four words was all that it took  
Which means that I must have terribly blundered,  
You must write, they have told me,  
One thousand, two hundred.  
Don't be lazy, they say,  
You've a role here to play.  
With only so many hours in the day...  
And with so many books...  
And so little time...  
It's your duty to point out the one that's sublime.*

**M**aybe so; but I do wish I could think of a word other than 'masterpiece' to describe Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*. Canadian to my bones, I know how Scrooge-like we are in our country as regards the use of the 'M' word, and all words of high praise, when it comes to holding forth on our own; as if it were a matter of principle; too many sweets that will spoil the children.

Well, too bad. If one is required, in this harsh, unfeeling time, to call a spade a spade (assuming, for some reason long lost in antiquity, that being a spade is somehow a pejorative) one is also required to do as Mistry does; to redress the balance (his favorite theme) by acknowledging all that is beautiful and true.

But don't get your hopes up, dear reader. I tell you, right now, that all I intend to sell you in these paragraphs is the sizzle of Rohan Mistry's *Family Matters*, but no more

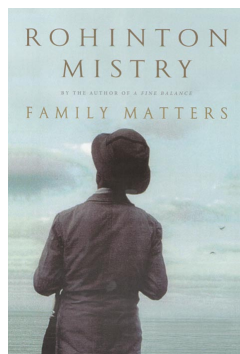
than a sliver of the steak. Perhaps it's because I've watched too many movie trailers that gave away too much of the plot. Or read too much glowing coverage on books that I will never buy; largely because, after reading the descriptions of the characters, and the outline of the plot, as well as a quote or three from the book itself, I think I've got the gist. Besides, in Mistry's case, how much of a gamble could a cold purchase be? I, myself, will fork over my credit card without a moment's hesitation for a book about whose content I know nothing, other than that it's been penned by someone whose previous work has given me enormous joy and pleasure.

Or, perhaps my reluctance stems back to my feeling about art, one of whose main prerequisites is that it be greater than the sum of its parts. In the case of lesser work, it's all too easy to dismember and poke holes; it's simply a matter of cutting along the all too evident joins in the

tapestry. But never, never, is that the case with Mistry. The setting is, once again, India; a country that I've come to love over the course of the several visits I've made there during this last decade. This might lead someone to think that I have some special access to Mistry's work unavailable to one who hasn't had my good fortune, but I promise you, it's not so. He is an inclusive writer, accessible, through his great gifts, to all. Yes, his work is shot through with the sights, smells and sounds of the subcontinent, but his subject matter goes far beyond the roiling world of Indian concerns (and there's no shortage of subjects there!) to the human condition; its fears and its fables; its foibles and fantasies; all brought to life over the course of one short year by a family who, though they live in the great, seething melange that is Mumbai (once Bombay, and therein hangs another part of the tale), will be as recognizable to you as your own flesh and blood.

No, you needn't be Indian to relate to what happens in *Family Matters*. All that you need be is a child or a parent. An employer/employee. A friend. All you need know is that humankind is as capable of good as of evil, and that the decision to be complicit in one or the other can turn on a dime.

Mistry – raised in that tradition – gives The Great Drama that is mankind a Parsi palette of reference, and – always through his characters, never didactically – imparts to us an understanding of that community. Among the things my *Concise Oxford Dictionary* has to say about Zoroastrianism is that it is “based on the concept of a conflict between a spirit of light and good, and a spirit of darkness and evil”, and our world must struggle to maintain the fine balance



(there it is, again!) between them. Once you know the tale of Zuhaak and Faridoo that old Professor Nariman tells to Jehangir, the younger of his two grandsons, once you know how few and frail are the things that keep us back from the pit you'll never look at a cock or a spider the same way again.

Like Jehangir, I, too, shared a room with a grandparent, a maternal grandmother who died when I was twelve; and there will be many others like me who will recognize the special sweetness of that connection.

I asked the author if Jehangir was modeled on himself as a youngster. After all, as he says several times of Jehangir:

“Not secret from him though, he saw everything.”

It's the perfect attribute for a little boy who goes on to become a great writer but Mr. Mistry denied it, though I'm still not certain whether or not to believe him.

The family is an unfailing source of the world's most enduring tales: from the *Bible* and the *Ramayana* to the *Fall of the House of Atreus*, and William Shakespeare. The combination is a classic one: an innocent child and an old man- failing and wracked by guilt and regret, but still struggling to do the right thing. In hands less than masterful, it is a source rife with potential for the most sentimental and obvious shlock. Mistry, however, with his musical ear and delicacy of touch, ensures us a prose that is never an adverb too long or a hair's breadth too short, and in which the choice of each word, the rhythm of each phrase, is the right choice.

*Family Matters* will give you an insight into Indian politics, too. A great many otherwise informed people in

our part of the world are unaware that – in addition to the intransigent and painful Indian Hindu-Muslim conflict that occupies so much media attention – there is a political entity in the country that goes by the name Shiv Sena; an ultra-nationalist, right wing, Hindu party that holds the reins of political power in much of the south-central part of the nation. A fascinating plot point turns on the fact that Hindu India, part of whose great strength has heretofore been its ability to ingest almost every kind of outside influence and still remain unmistakably Hindu, is now a country where something as innocuous as a storefront Santa can be seen as a threat to society and a provocation to violence; though in this case the bully boy tactics of Shiv Sena pale beside the havoc the principals bring down on themselves.

Am I too vociferous in my praise? Or have I (heaven forbid!) made the book sound like a downer, reeking of piety, and everything that's supposed to be 'good' for us? If you've answered yes to that question, then I do beg pardon, for I've led you wildly astray. The fact is, the book's a hoot! Not the standup comic's ha ha kind of hoot, but a gentle humor embodied in characters that cry out for dramatization. I shall never forget Edul, who does a great job of talking the talk of a Grand Master of Do-It-Yourself, but is utterly inept when it comes to walking the walk. Or dear Jal, Old Nariman's stepson, a man who yearns to give and receive love, but who is restrained by his sister, a woman whose superficial devotion to religion masks a bitter heart.

But enough! I've already told you far more than was my original intention, and given you ample information as to the pleasures you have in store. The rest, as they say, is up to you. ■

Marilyn Lightstone is an award winning actress and writer. Her first novel, *Rogues and Vagabonds*, is published by Stoddart.