



Book Club Set

A History of Burning

By Janika Oza

About the Author



Janika Oza is a writer based in Toronto. She is the winner of a 2022 O. Henry Prize for Short Fiction and the 2020 Kenyon Review Short Fiction Contest. She has received Fellowships and support from VONA/ Voices of Our Nation, Tin House, One Story Summer Writers' Conference, the Millay Colony, the Toronto Arts Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts. Her stories and essays have appeared in publications such as The Best Small Fictions 2019 Anthology, Catapult, The Adroit Journal, and The Cincinnati Review, among others. A chapter of A History of Burning was longlisted for the 2019 CBC Short story prize and published in Prairie Schooner.

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About the Book



An exhilarating and profoundly moving epic novel spanning India, Uganda, England, and Canada, about how one act of survival reverberates across four generations of a family and their search for a place of their own. Named a most anticipated book of 2023 by the Toronto Star, the Globe and Mail, OprahDaily, and GoodReads.

India, 1898. Pirbhai is the thirteen-year-old breadwinner for his family when he steps into a dhow on the promise of work, only to be taken across the ocean to labour on the East African Railway for the British. With no money or voice but a strong will to survive, he makes an impossible choice that will haunt him for the rest of his days and reverberate across generations.

Pirbhai's children go on to thrive in Uganda during the waning days of British colonial rule. As the country moves towards independence and military dictatorship, Pirbhai's granddaughters—sisters Latika, Mayuri, and Kiya—come of age in a divided nation, each forging their own path for the future. Latika is an aspiring journalist with a fierce determination to fight for what she believes in. Mayuri's ambitions will take her farther away from her family than she ever imagined. And fearless Kiya will have to bear the weight of their secrets.

Forced to flee Uganda during Idi Amin's brutal expulsion of South Asians in 1972, the family must start their lives over again in Toronto. Then one day news arrives that makes each generation question how far they are willing to go, and who they are willing to defy, to secure a place of their own in the world.

A masterful and breathtakingly intimate saga of colonialism and exile, complicity and resistance, *A History of Burning* is a radiant debut about the stories our families choose to share—and those that remain unspoken.

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Discussion Questions



1. With family members being separated by countries and oceans, consistent correspondence is an essential part of the character's lives. In what ways does their correspondence work to create distance as well as intimacy?
2. There are many relationships, both platonic and romantic, that develop throughout the course of the novel. Describe the ways these relationships balance obligation and devotion?
3. When Vinod expresses a desire to attend university abroad to his parents, he realizes it's ultimately not possible. Both father and son experience feelings of shame over this conversation. Describe the reasons for their individual reactions and the way this feeling is carried throughout their lives.
4. Rajni and Sonal form a strong bond as mother-and-daughter-in-law, with an innate shared understanding. How do their experiences shape their sense of home, and what it means to belong to a place, in contrast to their husbands?
5. On his deathbed, Pirbhai tells Latika of his long-held secret. Why do you think he chooses to unburden himself to his granddaughter?
6. How does the knowledge of Pirbhai's actions impact Latika throughout her life?
7. Latika's decision to remain in Uganda during the expulsion of South Asian people ultimately separates her from her family and community. How does the prose emphasize her isolation?
8. How does Hari's discovery of his parentage shine a light on what has remained unspoken in the other character's lives? How does it bring the younger members of the family together?
9. Each family member has major moments where they must decide between complicity and resistance. How does their family legacy influence them in key moments?
10. There is an emphasis on the importance of knowing one's history and family lineage to achieve a greater understanding of personal identity. In what ways is that exemplified in the text?

11. “They had arrived here: almost whole. They would leave again, and find another place. They would let it burn and insist on something better.” (pg. 385). Explain the significance of this line in the final chapter, and the way it speaks to the family’s history through the generations.

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Author Interview

Who are some of your favorite writers and did they influence the way you wrote *A History of Burning*?



A few novel that feel foundational to me and the writing of this book are *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. These books span decades and places, are deeply invested in the intricacies and complexities of families and community, and offer narratives that are inseparable from the specific political and historical landscapes they explore. I also drew much inspiration and instruction from contemporary writers like Maaza Mengiste, Min Jin Lee, Edwidge Danticat, David Chariandy, and Hala Alyan - authors who have written so beautifully on displacement, intergenerational legacies, and shifting notions of home, but who above all are writing about love.

This novel takes place over a century and follows nine different family members. How did you choose who to focus on at specific moments in the text and give equal weight to each character?

I knew early in the drafting stages that the protagonist of my novel would be the family itself. I have encountered very few novels that place an entire family at the center rather than privileging one or two main characters, but I knew I had to try - it was at the core of my vision for the novel, and of my own lens on the world, that we are shaped by our relationships with others, that we can better understand a person by placing them in the context of their people.

The novel is rich with sensory detail and mentions of food. What role does food play for you in the novel?

Food plays such a pivotal role in community, in placemaking and in finding one's way into new understandings of home and belonging. It's also integral to my experience of family. There is a trope in South Asian Literature about food descriptions, a way that food can be used to denote authenticity while simultaneously serving to exoticize the characters. I was conscious of this as I was writing; I wanted not to play into these conventions but rather to expand the meanings that food can carry in a narrative. I considered what it means to be cooked for, to care for someone in this specific and intimate way, what it feels like when you cannot access that taste you want, or when someone rejects the food you have prepared for them. I wanted to lean into the sense

memories that food can evoke. At its best, for the characters in this novel, food is about togetherness, joy.

Did you find any specific challenges in writing such a grand-scale, epic narrative?

I didn't set out to write such a beast of a novel; my earliest drafts began in 1971 and spanned only two decades rather than nearly ten. But as I learned more about the history and the characters, it became clear to me that I had to go further back in this family's lineage to really understand the different migrations, empires, separations, and ambitions that had shaped them.

This novel is rich with historical detail. What was your research process?

The seed of this novel and my entry point into the world were the various family stories I had heard over my lifetime - and the silences between them. I had so many questions, so many gaps in my understanding of where I came from and what my family and community had experienced and these equations spurred my initial research.

The most vital part of my research process, however, was speaking to members of the Ugandan Asian community and gathering oral histories from those who experienced the expulsion and its aftermath firsthand. Through the magic of WhatsApp and Zoom, I was able to speak with people across the world, families separated by the expulsion and scattered across continents.

Many of the people I spoke to were eager to recount stories and share their astonishing breadth of knowledge, and it was through these interviews and conversations that the world of the novel truly came alive.

Were there characters that came to you fully-realized and others that took longer to take shape?

Rajni was the first character to come to me, and when she did, I saw her fully formed; a woman who had already experienced the loss of her homeland and family once, and was facing the prospect of doing so again in the new land she had adopted. From there, I was able to drop into her skin, and her first chapter came out of me in a breath - I could feel so clearly who she was, this young, carefree and spirited woman whose life was on the brink of change. Other characters were more guarded, taking draft after draft to reveal their true desires and motivations to me. There is a powerful, magical feeling when a character steps into the novel fully realized, but most times it's a work of

patience and curiosity and attentiveness to learn who they really are, much like in real life.

What do you hope readers will take with them after they've finished reading *A History of Burning*?

At the heart of this novel is the idea of community and collectivism, what it means to belong to a whole -whether a family, a land, a movement - and all the messiness and beauty of navigating that space. But crucial to the idea of community is a consideration of who is included and who is excluded, who is made central and peripheral. I hope readers will reflect on that notion, in the novel and in their own spheres, and the possibilities of solidarity because our fates are entangled, because we need each other.

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DATE: _____

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BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: