

A HISTORY

OF BURNING

"Phenomenal."
Megha Majumdar

A NOVEL

JANIKA OZA

BOOK CLUB KIT

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 death bed, 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, 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.

A CONVERSATION WITH JANIKA OZA

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

A few novels 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 farther back into 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 work was 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 questions 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.



Photo: © Yi Shi

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.

FAMILY STORY: MY GRANDMOTHER'S STEEL POT

An object that appears repeatedly in the novel is Sonal's steel pot, which bears her name engraved on the side and which several of the characters use to transport home-cooked food such as dhokla or fresh curd to one another in Uganda, and later in Toronto. This motif was inspired by a steel cooking pot that belonged to my own grandparents when they lived in Uganda, carved along the rim with my family name.

This pot is one of the few items that my family was able to bring over from Uganda in 1972 when they were forced to leave under Idi Amin's expulsion order. Growing up, I remember the pot being used in our family kitchen in Toronto to soak lentils or wash rice or vegetables, but it was only a few years ago, when I was far into the process of writing [A History of Burning](#), that I learned the significance of the pot, its long history and journey.

Today the pot lives in my own kitchen, and when I use it I invariably think about how far it has traveled, how many hands—known and unknown to me—it has passed through, how many meals it has transported, stomachs it has filled, how much luck, hardship, and care it took for this pot to end up in my home, a journey whose details I can research, imagine, and fictionalize, but whose intricacies I may never know.



RECIPE

MASALA PEANUTS

These make a great shareable snack—perfect for a book club meeting—with the ideal blend of crunch, spice, salt, and of course, a hint of sweet.

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS

2 cups small red peanuts
1 tbsp Canola oil
½ tsp red chili powder
½ tsp salt
pinch of sugar
1-2 lemon wedges
onion (optional)

DIRECTIONS

1. Heat oil in a deep frying pan
2. Add a peanut to test if hot enough – it should start sizzling straight away
3. Add the peanuts a few at a time to fry. Peanuts are ready when they change color slightly but before they turn brown
4. Remove from pan using a slotted spoon and place on a sheet of paper towel to absorb excess oil
5. Transfer to a bowl and add salt, sugar, and red chili powder while the nuts are still hot, shaking to mix. Adjust to taste.
6. Before eating, serve with a squeeze of fresh lemon juice. You can also add chopped raw onions at this stage.

Note: Peanuts can be substituted for other nuts such as cashews or almonds



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PHOTOGRAPH: THE KENYA – UGANDA RAILWAY



On page 108, Pirbhai recalls finding a photograph in the newspaper in 1931, depicting the moment when the East Africa Railway reached its final destination from its origin point in Mombasa.

"In the photo, five men stood around the tracks, their white faces obscured by the shade cast off their hats. A woman in a long white dress was using a metal pole to drive the key into the ground... in the left corner of the photograph, two dogs watched from behind the crowd of men, one black and one tawny, both with hungry eyes."

While the description of this photograph is fictionalized, its inspiration came from a real photograph capturing the moment when the railway reached Lake Victoria at Kisumu. In the real photograph, a white woman in a flowing white dress and carrying a parasol drives the last sleeper key into the ground using a long pole, surrounded by several uniformed British men and an unreadable flag. When I first came across this photograph, I was shocked—incensed—at how it was entirely cleansed of any trace of the estimated 32,000 native African and South Asian laborers who constructed the railroad, the unrecorded thousands of men who were wounded or died as a direct result of this labour, the suffering by way of diseases, drought, treacherous working conditions, abuse, and the infamous man-eating lions at Tsavo. This photograph, like much of the story of colonization, represents a complete erasure of the lives and experiences of marginalized peoples and a rewriting of history in the public record. In the novel, I wanted Pirbhai to reflect in this moment on the injustice of this erasure and to recall his own experience of working on the railroad, in his own words.

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KEY SWAHILI WORDS

icho (eye): Daniel's newspaper, which is eventually taken over by Latika, is named Jicho, or The Eye. As Latika says, "the people's eye cannot shut."

kipande (ID card): during Idi Amin's dictatorship and his expulsion order, all South Asians were required to carry kipande, or an ID card, at all times.

matunda (passion fruit)

mimi ni wa Uganda (I am Ugandan): a phrase that Vinod finds himself repeating to his boss when he is terminated from his job due to the Africanisation policy begun by Milton Obote and amplified by Idi Amin

muhindi (Indian): literally translating to 'Indian', this is a neutral descriptor, but its association became more toxic as resentment and vitriol towards the South Asian communities in Uganda grew

Uhuru (freedom): literally translates to freedom, and was also the term for Ugandan Independence from the British in 1962.

