



Radical Empathy Book Club

Discussion Questions for *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri – May/June 2023

‘Radical empathy...means putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another's experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. Radical empathy is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it’ – Isabel Wilkerson in *Caste*

1. What did you learn about the importance of family in Indian/Bengali culture? How is it similar to your family? How is it different? Were there aspects of the Ganguli family that you wished were part of your family and if so, why? Were there aspects that you were glad are not part of your family and if so, why?
2. For some people and cultures, names carry a significant importance to someone’s identity. What did you learn about names in Indian/Bengali culture? How does your name impact your identity? Did you relate more with Gogul or his parents when it came to his desire to change his name? Why? What is your reaction to the following quotes:
 - a. “There is no such thing as a perfect name. I (Gogul) think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen...until then, pronouns.” (pg 261 paperback edition)
 - b. “Not only does Gogul Ganguli have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name. And so it occurs to him that no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake.” (p 84 paperback edition)
3. How does each member of the Ganguli family define “home?” How does it differ from the way you define home? When Gogul moves away to college, his mother (Ashima) gets angry with him for calling Yale “home.” Why do you think Ashima was angry? Was it justified? Why/why not?
4. On page 305/306 Gogul reflects on his life (“In so many ways, his family’s life feels like a string of accidents...And yet these events have formed Gogul, shaped him, determined who he is.”) Which events do you think most shaped Gogul’s identity and why? What moments have shaped your identity and why?
5. Radical Empathy encourages us to “listen with a humble heart to understand another’s experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. It is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will.” In what ways does this book help you understand:
 - a. What it’s like to be an immigrant in America? What it’s like to be an immigrant from India living in America?
 - b. What it’s like to be an immigrant and have children born in America?
 - c. What it’s like to be a child of an immigrant in America?
 - d. What it’s like to lose a parent unexpectedly?