



# The Middleman and Other Stories

*Bharati Mukherjee*

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## **The Middleman and Other Stories** Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee's work illuminates a new world of people in migration that has transformed the meaning of "America." Now in a Grove paperback edition, *The Middleman and Other Stories* is a dazzling display of the vision of this important modern writer. An aristocratic Filipina negotiates a new life for herself with an Atlanta investment banker. A Vietnam vet returns to Florida, a place now more foreign than the Asia of his war experience. And in the title story, an Iraqi Jew whose travels have ended in Queens suddenly finds himself an unwitting guerrilla in a South American jungle. Passionate, comic, violent, and tender, these stories draw us into the center of a cultural fusion in the midst of its birth pangs, yet glowing with the energy and exuberance of a society remaking itself.

## **The Middleman and Other Stories Details**

Date : Published 1999 by Grove (first published 1989)

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Author : Bharati Mukherjee

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# From Reader Review *The Middleman and Other Stories* for online ebook

## David Smith says

America is a nation of immigrants. It's easy to forget that the immigrants of a century ago were just as marginalized and, by definition, foreign as the immigrants of today. These stories are primarily about Indians, Arabs, East Indians, and the Americans they relate to. This book gave me a real appreciation for the humanity of an educated man from Afghanistan trying to make it in New York, or an Indian family trying to run a motel in Florida. Bharati's language is beautiful and spare. Her scenarios are imaginative, mind opening, and often hard to take.

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## Susan Strickland says

This collection stands for everything good about the short story form - the microscopic view of an individual's transformation (or stasis) in a crystallized moment in a gritty, Cheeverian\* world. I definitely will read more by Bharati Mukherjee.

The common thread is immigration, from different parts of the world, to different parts of the world (but largely to the USA and Canada). Mukherjee takes us through initial journey, homesickness and culture shock, youth, aging, fitting in, earning a living, repatriation, and relationships. The last story, *The Management of Grief*, revolves around the aftermath of Air India Flight 182.

A quotation:

"Dr. Chatterji's horror is real. A good Brahmin boy in Iowa is in love with an African Muslim. It shouldn't be a big deal. But the more she watches the physicist, the more she realizes that "Brahmin" isn't a caste; it's a metaphor. You break one small rule, and the constellation collapses. She thinks suddenly that John Cheever - she is teaching him as a "world writer" in her classes, cheek-by-jowl with Africans and West Indians - would have understood Dr. Chatterji's dread. Cheever had been on her mind, ever since the late afternoon light slanted over Mrs. Chatterji's drying saris. She remembers now how full of a soft, Cheeverian light Durham had been the summer she had slept with John Hawden; and how after that, her tidy graduate-student world had become monstrous, lawless. All men became John Hawden; John became all men."

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## RD Chiriboga Moncayo says

Fine stories of immigrants and how they adapt or fail to do so in their new homes.

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## Angie says

The only two stories that stood out to me were "A Wife's Story" and "The Management of Grief," the latter of which might be one of my favorite stories of all time. The rest is rather middle-of-the-road, with beautiful

turns of phrases here and everywhere, but characters with too many loose ends to really feel anything other than indifference for.

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## **Moses Kilolo says**

Something about this book isn't quite clicking with me. Maybe the premise, not that I don't enjoy stories about the immigrant experience, but this book at this time just isn't working for me.

I know I never abandon books. If I do I delete them from my lists and try not to think of them. But for this one, I feel I should just go back to it some other time. Maybe then I will be able to see what I can't see now.

The first few stories I read didn't quite stand out except for *A Wife's Story* which I find both deep and quietly truthful of a woman receiving a husband she has lived away from.

But the writing contains some pretty nice passages, quotes if you like:

*They work hard, eat cheap, live ten to a room, stash their savings under futons in Queens, and before you know it they own half of Hoboken. You say, where's the sweet gullibility that made this nation great?*

So I walk away from it with guilt. Maybe it will be assuaged later, when I can read and feel the stories resonate.

Damn, I need to get out of my world for a while, see what other worlds look like. I'm not talking about Mars. Just outside of my country. Whose borders I've never crossed. Is that how you find yourself able to identify with Bharati Mukherjee's characters' experiences? I doubt. But then, some other time.

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## **Gabriel C. says**

I knew there had to be a reason she liked the creepy stuff I workshopped in her undergrad writing class, and I guess I now know the answer. Sex and sexuality oozes out of every single one of these stories, not peripherally, but totally centrally. Fucking is the major point of most of these stories and it's almost the major point of all but one. I know I read a novel or collection of hers years ago, at the time, but it wasn't this one because my world would have been turned upside down. She's sharpest when she's writing closest to her own experience, that of an immigrant woman with the ability to put a foot in both worlds. Her exoticizing white men can be caricature.

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## **Kathy Piselli says**

Mukherjee died recently and I hadn't read her yet, so I started with this story collection. Great writing, the kind you can't tell the author struggled over, it just blows along airily, easy as pie. I live in Atlanta, so I liked this description of our rain: "the raindrops are of the big, splashy variety, complete with whiffs of wild winds and churned seas". I've often noticed that though we are 250 miles from the ocean, it's not unusual to smell ocean in the rain here. Together with the unaffected writing are perfect short story characters, the kind you learn something new about with each rereading. Can't wait to try a novel.

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## Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

Most of the characters in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories* are displaced, foreign born people living in America. They feel odd, out of touch with the world in which they live, yet out of touch with the world from which they came. I can easily see why Mukherjee won the National Book Critics Circle Award for these stories. Highly recommended.

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## Judy says

A jarring and beautifully poignant collection of short stories about immigrants, their tragedies and triumphs in leaving and arriving, *The Middleman* present a touching variety of voices and perspectives.

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## Ryan says

After reading *The Middleman and Other Stories* twice, I have decided that I wouldn't want to be a character in a Bharati Mukherjee story.

Alfie, an Iraqi Jew who ends up in El Salvador by way of Queens, lusts after Maria in the title story. Maria was once with President Gutierrez but is now married to a wealthy rancher and businessman. Her current sexual allegiances lie with a revolutionary. Will Al get the girl?

Well, Al gets the girl, for one night. Then he watches as she murders her husband and runs off with the revolutionary. Al is left in the jungle, surrounded by dead bodies. Fortunately, Al is not distraught. He wonders how he will sell the information to Gutierrez.

It's difficult to find innocents in this exploration of immigration, which I found refreshing. Immigration is often treated as an identity crisis or as a maker/ taker relationship. While these themes are present in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, I was pleased to notice that Mukherjee had found more than two angles from which to approach her subject. At other times, she starts along familiar paths and ends up in bizarre destinations.

If there is a pattern here it might be this: when these characters try to pick themselves up by their bootstraps, they usually end up using those straps to choke the life out of their problems.

Sometimes, those problems are other people. In "Loose Ends," Jeb the Vietnam veteran works as a hitman for a Latino crime lord. In the war, he was told to be a locust, always consuming. However, murder for hire has allowed Jeb to overcome neither his impotence nor his insolvency. Instead, he finds a sense of resolution when he murders a girl in her parents' motel.

Mukherjee's strength as a short fiction writer is her ability to turn a story on its head in just a few sentences. She is not a beautiful stylist and few would call her a kind author to her characters, but she does write excellent short stories.

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## Will says

A good example of boilerplate MFA writing. Starts in medias res, continues in the first person with a mix of fragments, rhetorical questions, blunt descriptors ("the fat man"), voice-driven small talk, and supposedly telling but rather trivial details ("Charity bought a used blue Datsun ('Nissan,' Phil insists)"). The characters are mostly unlikeable, and for all the fuss about how "brave" writers must be to use that perspective, the Unlikeable Character has probably been the most typical character type in the short story for the last several decades.

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## Alison says

Mukherjee isn't one of those self-congratulatory assholes who thinks she's bucking political correctness (whatever the fuck that means) by hating on Indians (and everybody else), but a real thinker who wants immigrant, encounter, and postcolonial lit to exist beyond the binaries of white/nonwhite, good/evil, and, especially, nice/not-nice. Her characters are NOT NICE. For any writer to do that, with immigrant characters or not, while still keeping alive some sense of human dignity and struggle and sadness, is a powerful thing. How many books can you think of with really unlikeable characters whom you have to sympathize with, **without** the intervention of a totally good, uncomplicated savior character to show them the light, or a dead baby or run-in with the KKK to make them pitiable? Not many (I'm thinking, *Lolita*? I was going to say, *The Sea*, *The Sea*, but it's got one of those mitigating elements going on). I think that it's a model many readers are uncomfortable with, despite all our self-help hoocha about accepting people as they are. Which may also be why so many other readers (including myself) were most moved by the story "The Management of Grief": it moved us not only because it was good, but also because it didn't challenge us to think morally.

So I like and admire the challenge. But, Mukherjee can also be irritatingly sloppy. Small examples: for her to write, "Mr. Venkatesan was beginning to feel like a character in Anne Frank's diary," is bizarre in so many ways. It's "Upper Mountain Avenue" in Montclair, not "Upper Mountainside Road," though she was right that you can't buy the ticket onboard the NJ-bound Decamp bus--that snippet delighted me. And 1988 was too late for her to be using "Orientals" to describe East Asians, besides which, I hate to have to say this, but as a so-called Oriental herself she should have known better. And, far too many of the stories had female Asian characters whose primary motivation was that they wanted to have depressing sex with the wrong guys. It's all too common, but a writer who can invent an Iraqi Jew who unwittingly aids a Central American revolution should have tried a little harder.

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**Itisme says**

Bhurati writes with such richness. Her characters are all deeply flawed and or troubled. She is skilled. She is outlandish in her imagination. I love her complexity in describing life.

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**Thing Two says**

This collection, from the mid-80s pulls together a dozen stories of people in the middle. All are caught in some type of struggle -- from a grieving widow struggling to move on to a man being sucked into a drug deal -- the voices vary, but the stories are well done.

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**Vaishali says**

Fantastic story-telling about complex, believable people. Guaranteed: you've run into each of her protagonists and other characters.

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