



Fireflies

Shiva Naipaul

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Fireflies tells the story of Trinidad's most venerated Hindu family, the Khojas. Rigidly orthodox, presiding over acres of ill-kept sugarcane and hoards of jewellery enthusiastically guarded by old Mrs. Khoja, they seem to have triumphed more by default than by anything else. Only 'Baby' Khoja, who is parcelled off into an arranged marriage with a bus driver, proves an exception to this rule. She is the heroine, and her story the single gleaming thread in Shiva Naipaul's ferociously comic and profoundly sad first novel.

Fireflies Details

Date : Published February 1st 1996 by Penguin Classics (first published 1970)

ISBN : 9780140188240

Author : Shiva Naipaul

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Genre : Fiction, Humor, Comedy

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From Reader Review Fireflies for online ebook

James says

I waited a long time to write the review of this book as I struggled to find anything meaningful in my own response to it.

The Khojas are The preeminent Indian family in Trinidad, not least in their own estimation, and the story starts with a minor family member being parceled out in an arranged marriage to a bus driver and then follows her life over the years.

Published by VS Naipul's younger brother Shiva in 1970, the book garnered a certain amount of acclaim and then was "rediscovered" more recently. The book reminded me a lot of "a house for Mr. Biswas" which I enjoyed much more perhaps for no other reason than I read it first. This made me feel rather sad for Shiva, who was described by Paul Theroux who to continue his streak as worst family friend ever described him as a drunken sot overshadowed by the towering presence of his brother.

Judging the book on its own merits I struggled to find anything funny about it at all, the humour felt awfully dated and more than a little sneering. The highlight for me was the slow development of affection and in the arranged marriage combined with the sadness that the lack of recognition of this contentment. This was the only part which felt rooted in a empathetic reality.

Carolanne says

This was between 3 and 4 stars. Three because at some points it was really boring and slow. but 4 because the characters were really endearing and I appreciated their growth and commentaries on their lives.

Casey says

I'd never heard of this book or author prior to picking it out at the library but I'm so glad I chose to read it. At times touching and at others infuriating, it was a brilliant novel. The characters weren't necessarily likable but their realness made them endearing and kept me hooked on the story. The dialogue between them cracked me up, though of course the way they were prone to treating one another was really sad.

A couple of chapters dragged and I was a little confused by the Khoja family tree and who was who, though the latter is likely due to the sisters having names my white girl ass is unfamiliar with hearing. Overall this was a thoroughly enjoyable book that I can't imagine myself forgetting about in a hurry. Definitely an incentive to pick up less spoken about classics more regularly.

Melanie says

Fireflies is an immediately gripping story with irresistible characters and an insight into all of their complex identities. Naipaul addresses important and intensely complex aspects of post-colonial literature- such as fate, individualism, tradition and modernisation- but still manages to maintain a fluent and unconstrained style of writing.

Aparna says

This is like one of the strangest ways of writing I have ever come across. The characters are supposed to be based in Trinidad and suddenly you find references of Kolkata like places living you wondering whether you are losing it!

Christiane says

In this book we observe the inner workings of the Khoja Clan, one of Trinidad's wealthiest and most traditional Hindu families, ruled with an iron and extremely stingy fist by old Mrs. Khoja who mercilessly marries off her 6 daughters to get rid of as many mouths to feed as possible. While prominent and rich, the Khojas are also backward, orthodox, semi-educated and proud of it.

When the matriarch dies, power is handed down to her son Govind who doesn't share the inheritance equitably. The Clan quickly splits into scheming and back-stabbing factions hastening the family's disintegration.

These characters are quite a despicable lot and brilliantly portrayed: the vain, mediocre and pompous Govind with his Rousseau and his delusions of grandeur, his arrogant wife who is fairly dripping with adulation and flattery for her husband, the six selfish, malicious sisters, five of whom have happily buried their husbands, and the young daughter of one of them who breaks out and runs wild.

However, the protagonist of the story and the only appealing character is Baby, a lesser member of the Khojas. Devoted to the family and not expecting much of life she is resigned to her fate and prepared to do her duty in the service of others always. We watch her over the years from her arranged marriage to a lowly bus driver with a violent temper and a drinking problem, the birth of her two sons, her husband's death and her struggle for independence to the loss of all her hopes and dreams.

She is the only person in the book who leads her life with dignity, a dreamer with grand visions who after each disaster – and there is no end to them - picks up the pieces and finds a new reason for living. She is smart, loving, optimistic, tenacious, proud, loyal, generous, infinitely adaptable and she really carries the story.

Mr. Naipaul has created a gem of a book, lively, funny and finally heartbreakingly sad.

Karen says

* 1000 novels everyone must read: the definitive list

Selected by the Guardian's Review team and a panel of expert judges, this list includes only novels – no memoirs, no short stories, no long poems – from any decade and in any language. Originally published in thematic supplements – love, crime, comedy, family and self, state of the nation, science fiction and fantasy, war and travel – they appear here for the first time in a single list.

!Tæmbu?u says

KOBOBOOKS

Reviewed by The Guardian (23 Mar 2012)

Shreya Vaid says

After reading 4-5 books, I always dive back into a classic. The slow pace of the story, the deeper meaning of words, the grey areas where characters seek their energy, a classic has the power to take away all the heaviness. Last month, I picked up *Fireflies* by Shiva Naipaul as my classic, and I must say it was a complete roller coaster ride of emotions. From the characters to the situations they were pushed into, I was completely engrossed into it.

The story of *Fireflies* revolves around Trinidad's most respected Hindu Family, the Khojas, who are superbly orthodox and reside over acres of useless land that reaps the lowest quality of sugar cane and have hoards of jewelry fiercely guarded by Mrs. Khoja. The only silver lining they have is Baby, the protagonist of the story who is married off to a bus driver and who doesn't want to settle down like a regular Khoja.

The characters of *Fireflies* are pretty much a hateful lot but brilliantly portrayed by Naipaul. The mediocre Govind with delusional grandeur, his arrogant wife who has spent her life flattering her husband, the six malicious sisters, five of whom are widows and one of them who runs wild.

However, the only protagonist and the appealing character is Baby, a lesser member of the crazy Khoja clan and the one who doesn't expect much, as she has resigned to her fate and prepared for her duty to service of other always, including a drunk husband who beats her all the time. The one who leads her life with dignity, with two kids, husband's death and her struggle for independence to loss of her hopes and dreams. She is smart, loving, generous and she is the one who single-handedly carries the story till the end.

Speaking of technicalities, the language of *Fireflies* is easy to understand and decipher. The characters are a bit tricky to understand first, but then Naipaul has given each character time to fold in front of you. The book is long, which may not be good for some, but then within the duration is the real beauty. *Fireflies* is not just a book to read and keep aside, it's an experience that will be with you always. So make sure to grab your copy soon.

Pamela says

The Khojas are the 'big fish' in the small pond of Trinidad's Hindu community, jealously maintaining their position as their fortunes slowly decline. *Fireflies* is the story of 'Baby' Khoja, married off to a bus driver,

making her own path through life with a determination that her family regards as mere stubbornness.

This is an amazing read, the straightforward style is deceptive, as this story is both savagely comic and deeply poignant. The characters are endearing and infuriating, and family relationships are skilfully assembled and pulled apart. The setting of Trinidad is brought to life, the lively capital Port of Spain contrasted with the acres of sugar cane and the poor villages.

There are so many episodes from this book that stick in the mind. It's a book I will go back and reread with sorrow and delight.

David Archer says

I wonder if it will be for everyone (out of print, I believe), but I love this novel just as much as I love his candid and cantankerous travel writing.

Manoj Karki says

This is an all and all family saga. One would have just find it boring had it not been brilliantly written by Shiva Naipaul. He has made a very ordinary story otherwise into a master piece. Story of Khoja family in Trinidad.

In its wholeness, it is a very sad story where nothing seems to be going right for any character in it. Still it is remarkably funny and witty. This narrative style takes it to different level of delightful reading. What a life Baby (the central character here) had to deal with !! How poised, how optimistic she had to be all the time amid nothing good but all turmoil. Enduring lady. The conversations, whether nice or violent or full of agony, have been treat to read throughout. There is an air of self pride in every character, demanding attention.

S Naipaul, wherever you are, you must be in peace. A gem of writer.

Ambar says

Before seeing it on a friend's bookshelf, I wasn't aware of the existence of Shiva Naipaul. Which is a damn shame. V.S.' young brother is very much a skilled writer in his own right, particularly considering the fact that "Fireflies" is a debut.

The author clearly harbours no pretenses regarding the story and plot, which are, quite deliberately, rather mundane. Fireflies follows the life of Vimla, aka Baby, a minor member in the accidentally wealthy and powerful Khoja family, the preeminent Hindu family of Trinidad and in doing so, explores the hypocrisies, obnoxiousness, and falsifications of the Khojas (and the various other members of the motley ensemble of Fireflies) with a dry wit that, though understated, is often surprisingly sharp. Ultimately, the novel leaves the reader with the kind of caustic nihilism that Bhaskar Lutchmann comes to personify upon his return to the

family home, which perhaps is the point of the novel, if it has any. Fireflies is a great book, but perhaps not one that every reader will enjoy.

Ida-maria Skavhaug says

Another gem on my bookshelf. I loved the pace of this book, it's well-defined characters (in particular the strong will-powered Mrs Lutchman) and their hopes and despairs and attempts at finding (and holding on to) identities in a changing world. There are funny moments, moments when you want to rip your hair out (and give Mr Koja or Romesh a good slap in the face!) and moments when you'll struggle to hold a tear back. There were definitely some surprises on the way, but not wanting to add any spoilers to my review I'll refrain from commenting :-)

Valerie says

In this first novel by the younger brother of V.S. Naipaul we follow an established Hindu family in Trinidad through the eyes of a marginal member (Baby Lutchman) who is married off to an outsider. While at first Baby's husband seems to be the novel's unsympathetic protagonist, it's actually Baby's story: the arc of her marriage, the rise and fall of her financial security, her sons' failure to succeed in straightforward way...There are no great tragedies and no incredible victories in this novel. Instead it's a subtle, finely constructed narrative, with excellent dialogue, about the smaller moments in the life of a family.
