

LIVING in LIMBO

Author speaks on painful truths of immigration

By Lisa Reisman
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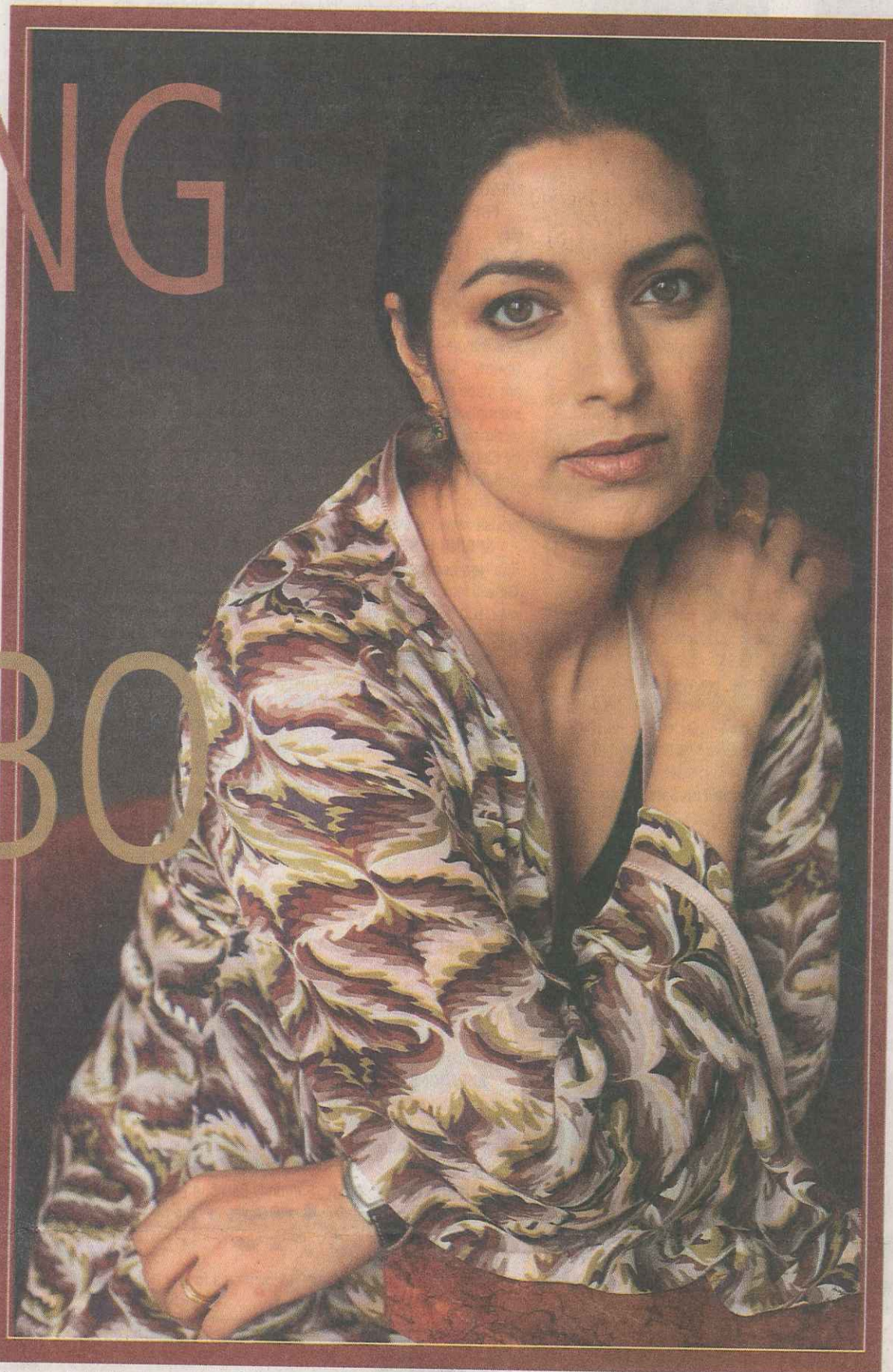
Growing up, I never felt comfortable in my own skin," says Pulitzer-Prize-winning author and literary prodigy Jhumpa Lahiri to a sold-out crowd of 420 at a reading sponsored by R.J. Booksellers in Madison recently. "I never felt fully American. I never felt fully Indian. I never really felt I was anything." In this election year, that kind of acknowledgement might well spell political suicide.

Soft-spoken, with striking features and a gracious simplicity that brings to mind her spare and elegant prose, the woman whom presenter Roxanne Coady called "a rock star of the finest sort" read an excerpt from "Once in a Lifetime," a story from her latest collection "Unaccustomed Earth." Lahiri, the daughter of Bengali parents who immigrated from London to Rhode Island when she was 7, made extended annual trips to visit her relatives in Calcutta as a child, she told the packed auditorium at Polson Middle School.

The experience of dislocation is the thematic thread that ties together the whole body of Lahiri's work: her Pulitzer Prize-winning debut story collection, "Interpreter of Maladies," the best-selling novel "The Namesake," and now this most recent collection, "Unaccustomed Earth," eight exquisitely crafted stories that debuted atop the New York Times Bestseller List, a rare feat for a literary work of fiction, and reaffirms Lahiri's status as one of this country's most accomplished young writers.

The book takes its title from a quote by Nathaniel Hawthorne about the salubrious effects of sending "roots into unaccustomed earth" rather than replanting succeeding generations "in the same worn-out soil."

While "Interpreter of Maladies" deals with the struggle of her parents' generation to bridge the cultural divide between the U.S. and India, and "The Namesake," viewed through its male protagonist Gogol, explores the assimilating pull experienced by the U.S.-born children of those same immigrants, "Unaccustomed Earth" homes in on the Gogols of the world



Jhumpa Lahiri is the author of Pulitzer-Prize winning "Unaccustomed Earth."

now settled into adulthood as working professionals and parents in their own right.

"They are approaching middle age," Lahiri, the married mother of two young children, says of these characters on Monday night. "And they can see both the eventual dying off of their parents' generation and the bringing into the world of the next generation."

And with that a whole new set of complications, which Lahiri expertly teases out in these stories. The parents have existed in a kind of cultural bewilderment and isolation, and their arranged marriages of began without the gauzy promise of romance, and their bonds with other expatriate Bengalis were strong and immediate, an instant community. Their children now contend with the luxury of choice: how to be, what to be, whom to be with. At the same time, they're suspended in a sort of limbo, belonging neither to their parents' home nor to the place in which they have been transplanted—trapped, as one of Lahiri's characters puts it, in a "neither happy, nor unhappy" state, like "a passing taxi with its off duty light on."

The challenge to reconcile tradition with personal fulfillment as they make lives for themselves in the U.S. is typified in the title story, about the changes wrought in the relationship between a father and a daughter after the mother's death: "She knew her father did not need taking care of, and yet this very fact caused her to feel guilty: in India, there would have been no question of his not moving in with her."

Add to that a growing awareness of their parents' disconnection from the cultural terrain in which they've planted their offspring. In the story "Only Goodness," a young woman named Sudha attempts to talk with her parents about her brother's alcoholism and the unhap-

piness that has led to this addiction: "What could there possibly be to be unhappy about? her parents would have thought. 'Depression' was a foreign word to them, an American thing. In their opinion their children were immune from the hardships and injustices they had left behind in India, as if the inoculations the pediatrician had given Sudha and Rahul when they were babies guaranteed them an existence free of suffering."

Of course, the kaleidoscopic effects of alcoholism on a family aren't limited to the Bengali-American population. Indeed, though "Unaccustomed Earth" addresses the immigrant experience, it goes far beneath the incidental, rooting out universal moments of profound joy and sadness - the staggering awe of a mother for her perfectly formed newborn child, the aching loneliness of a housewife isolated in the suburbs, the continuing reverberations of the death of a parent, the crashing end to a love affair.

Perhaps this explains why over 250 copies of "Unaccustomed Earth" have sold at R.J. Julia's since April 1st, when the book came out, Events Coordinator Caroline Davey reported. And also why Lahiri's appearance drew such heavy interest that the bookstore had no option but to move the event to a larger venue. One of those in the audience, Kanishka Azimi, a graduate student in computer science of Afghani descent, made the trip from the University of Massachusetts.

To Azimi, it wasn't so much the similarity of his background to Lahiri's that moved him to make the two-hour drive from Amherst. "The discomfort she described, I know that," he says after the event. "But we're a nation of immigrants. What she read, what she talked about, it speaks to all of us."