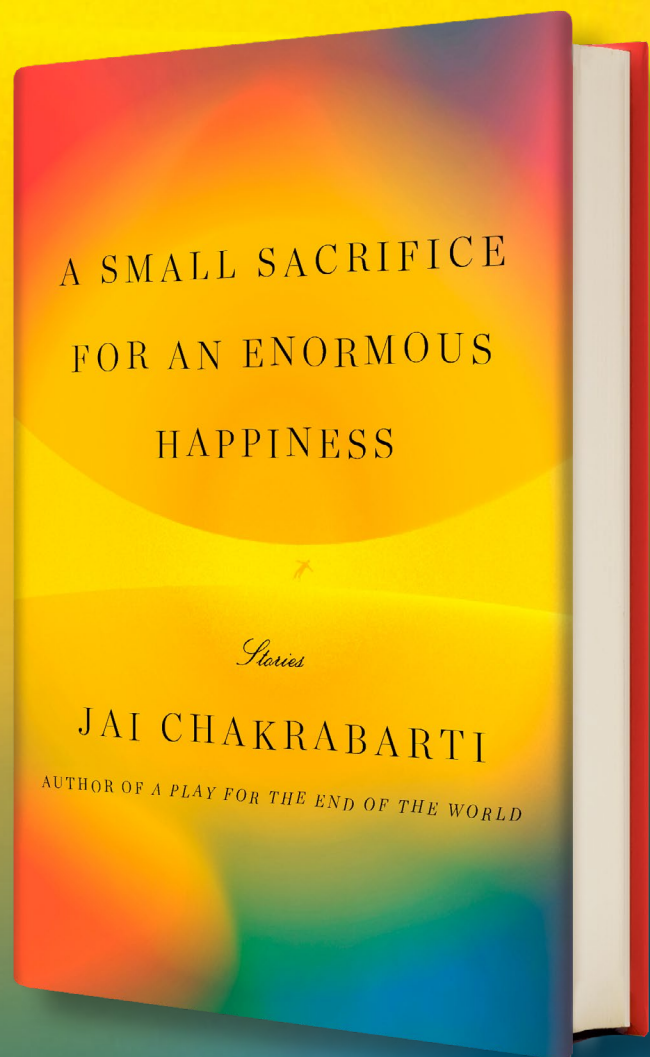


Book Club Kit

for *A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness*



A Letter from Jai Chakrabarti



Dear Reader,

I'm so grateful that you picked up my book and are spending your precious time with these pages. I started writing *A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness* during the years that my partner and I were struggling to conceive. There were lots of visits to a fertility clinic in New York City, aptly named New Hope. We went through a process that so many couples go through, and after miscarriages and many days and nights of yearning we finally became new parents. Back then, we lived in a small apartment in Brooklyn, far away from our birth families, and to raise our child we needed to turn to chosen families—neighbors, poets, misfits. The stories in this collection return in different ways to questions about wanting a child, the emotional costs that come with that, and what it means to cultivate family in this moment. They are also very much about the immigrant experience and how we might seek belonging in places we are not born to but end up still calling home. Finally, these stories are about class differences and how privilege and wealth influence how we treat one another.

I feel I know the characters in these stories as if they were dear friends. Sometimes I wake up wondering, *How is Nikhil doing—did he and Sharma stay together? How about Aparna and her airplane—will she ever fly it?* But I'll admit straightaway that the characters awaiting you are imperfect. Their foibles and flaws and tender parts offer no easy wisdom, no simple solutions, though I hope their struggles inspire empathy and connection.

I was born in Kolkata, India, and have deep connections to that life, as I do through marriage to Jewish communities in New York. So you'll find that my stories span the globe and move between cultures and religions, which is how I have been blessed to live my life. I share them with you now through the magic of literary travel.

I hope you enjoy your journey through *A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness*. Thank you for making a place for these stories in your imagination.

With gratitude,

— Jai

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

for *A Small Sacrifice*

for an Enormous Happiness

1. What does the title of the book suggest about how characters approach questions of love and belonging? Are there characters whose sacrifices truly move them toward a greater happiness? How do you relate to this idea in your own life, a sacrifice for the sake of love?
2. The titular story explores the role of class in relationships as well as the boundaries cultural traditions impose. How do you think Nikhil navigates his own privilege as he strives for a deeper intimacy with Sharma? While this story was set in 1980 and in Kolkata, India, are there elements that you connect with in your present moment?
3. In “*Lilavati’s Fire*,” Harish and Aparna are longtime partners who lack a deeper intimacy. How do Aparna’s attempts at creating a novel invention heighten or further risk their relationship? How have you observed romantic partners “crying out” for attention, and where have these efforts taken them?
4. The collection wrestles with a yearning for desiring children, though when children appear and even grow up, as in “*Lilavati’s Fire*,” the yearning is often replaced by an illumination, sometimes even disappointment. What role does wanting children play in these stories, and how does the reality of children alter the relationships in these stories?
5. A few stories in this collection explore the complexities of adoption. How do Harold and Shira’s views (from “*Daisy Lane*”) on this topic intersect or differ from the Afghani merchant known as the Kabuliwallah (from “*The Fortunes of Others*”)?) In what ways do you see characters evolving their perspectives as the stories and situations progress?
6. “*The Narrow Bridge*” finds its title from a Rabbi Nachman verse, which could be translated as “The entire world is a narrow bridge; the most important thing is to not become paralyzed by fear.” How does the theme of the narrow bridge materialize throughout the collection? Are there moments in your life when you’ve found yourself connecting to this metaphor, and how have you made friends with your fear?

7. “*Mendel’s Wall*” is about a literal but also an emotional wall that is erected to separate a husband from his wife. Are there other “walls” that permeate in these stories, and how do these walls influence relationships?
8. “*A Mother’s Work*” and “*Searching for Elijah*” can be read together as a commentary on the ways in which orthodoxy interrupts and transforms cross-cultural relationships. What were the commonalities you found among the parents in these pieces? What were the differences?
9. In “*The Import*” a husband and wife in Brooklyn solicit the childcare services of a villager from India. How does Rupa view Bethany and Raj; does the way in which she views their relationship shift over time, or does she come in with a set of preconceptions about who they are that largely remain?
10. Many of the stories in this collection are about immigrants cultivating home with a chosen family. Which characters’ journeys resonated with you the most? How do you define “home” in your own life and how has that changed for you over the years?
11. The character of the Kabuliwallah in the final two stories is seen in different lights, but it’s clear that he’s a journeyman, a wanderer, who in “*The Fortunes of Others*” has finally found a sense of home and of family. How do you think the Kabuliwallah will respond to Hannah’s request, and is his response in some ways the greater sacrifice for someone else’s happiness?



Electric Lit Reading List

SEVEN BOOKS WITH CHARACTERS WHO GO AGAINST THEIR ASTROLOGICAL SIGNS

When my father was born there were three astrologers in attendance at the hospital in Kolkata. You could never be too sure, my grandfather said, about who had the most accurate wristwatch, and the good astrologers care about time, deeply. That is their life's work, of course, to understand when and where the planets move and to extract from these orbits our futures.

But sometimes the paths that we've been predestined for aren't the ones we end up taking. We fall outside of the pages of the divine ephemeris, groove away from destinies that have been handed to us. I'm especially drawn to stories where characters are nudged away from well-trodden fates. Expectations are vanquished: the unfamiliar is where we see who they really are.

In my story collection *A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness*, I explore these rifts in our astrology through characters who through choice or chance transition from their birth families to cultivate chosen families, finding new ways to make it in the margins. I think the short story is a powerful technology for anyone trying to figure out what it means to live a good life, and for any of us for whom that good life is beyond usual boundaries, these story collections illumine possible paths. They reshape personal histories. They welcome dreamers and misfits. They allow us to leave our birth charts behind.

For the Relief of Unbearable Urges by NATHAN ENGLANDER

I first came across Nathan Englander's first short-story collection in a dusty bookshop in Jerusalem. So many who come to the holy city are looking for an altogether different sort of life, a reclamation of a spiritual or religious self, which the hallowed old city walls might provide, but in this seminal collection Englander's characters are often fighting against the social walls that limit their search for love and expression. They are striking out, miserably, honorably, always evoking a great empathy, to make their own life within or outside orthodoxy.

In the Country by MIA ALVAR

Mia Alvar understands home isn't a singular place but rather a constellation that we carry with us. The conflicts in these stories—for instance, in the first story, "Kontrabida," where a young pharmacist returns to the Philippines to visit his sick, dying father and his mother, who may have dark motives—explore moral ambiguities. They defy easy categorizations and allow readers to empathize with characters whose actions might be described as more ethically gray than good. This is something I love about the story form: the speed at which we're thrown into the woods, as it were, kept away from any surefootedness about what's wrong or right.

Electric Lit Reading List

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Safe as Houses

by MARIE-HELENE BERTINO

The primary instrument writers have is the sentence. Books are built on these, of course, and writers decide the rhythm of each line and forecast how the words might land in the reader's brain. Reading Marie-Helene Bertino's sentences is like watching the world through an alien mirror, with the distortion that's provided taking us closer to the heart of the heart of the matter. Take a fictionalized Bob Dylan, for example, who visits a family for Thanksgiving, and who the narrator eventually describes as "He was supposed to create some sort of lather, and he barely summoned enough energy to behead a pile of string beans." What is beheaded in these stories are ordinary expectations and what is revealed is worthy of many rooms of family albums. In Greek mythology, the Pisces sign comes from two fish who were connected by a ribbon. They turn themselves into sea creatures to escape the monster Typhon, a transformation Bertino allows through language and observation.

The Empty Family by COLM TÓIBÍN

I've always admired how Colm Tóibín refuses to shy away from the most difficult parts of family life. With candor and compassion, he'll examine choices from years past that may have left characters doomed to their loneliness. Somehow, mem-

ory becomes evidence that the heart exists, that it does what it does despite a lifetime of missed consolations. Perhaps my favorite story, and one I return to every few years, is "*The Pearl Fishers*." In it our narrator has a meeting with a lover from his past and his lover's new wife. We explore the complexity of this situation as we do the modern Irish moment, and what it means to be a gay man with the "true Catholic church" casting its judgments.

A Good Place for the Night

by SAVYON LIEBRECHT

In Savyon Liebrecht's sixth story collection, translated from the Hebrew by Sondra Silverstein, characters find themselves away from home: in America, Munich, Hiroshima, Jerusalem, even a futuristic world blighted by nuclear catastrophe. Throughout, Liebrecht explores the sanctity and relevance of place, because as those who've crossed borders know, nothing holds us more in our orbits than our relationship to what we consider home. These are unsettling stories that ask us to question where and how we find comfort and love. Still, there is always warmth, even in the title story with its apocalyptic landscape where new family bonds are stubbornly formed. Cities and countries, too, have zodiac signs and, like families, exert a pull we must accept or push away from.

Electric Lit Reading List

SEVEN BOOKS WITH CHARACTERS WHO GO AGAINST THEIR ASTROLOGICAL SIGNS

The Boat by NAM LE

What does it mean to write an “ethnic story”? the narrator of Nam Le’s opening piece wonders. In fiction, we’re often working to make the familiar unfamiliar, which poses an interesting challenge for writers whose heritage takes them outside a conventional literary milieu. Perhaps our astrology is in part a function of our cultural capital, of what is venerated by the world we live in. Except all the other worlds deserve their due, and Le explores them with a sense of adventure. Columbian assassins, Hiroshima orphans, all get their time on the page, as does the desperately real and the gritty, a thirteen-day boat journey across an unforgiving ocean.

The Unknown Errors of Our Lives

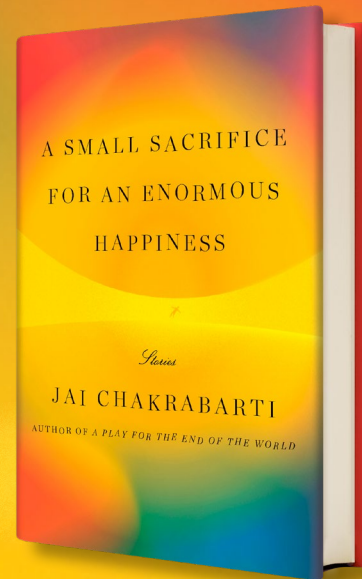
by CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKURNI

Few places remain the same as they were in our youth, and when I visit Kolkata, the city of my birth, I’m especially attuned to the ways in which the old guard rubs up against the new, and in her second collection of short stories I love how Chitra Banerjee Divakurni describes these transitions between the traditional and the modern, and the city beneath the city. In “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter” a widow now living in Sunnyvale struggles to provide a glowing review of her new life in America. What she can offer in the confusion of new devices and disappointing grandchildren is a feeling of living outside the margins that I think many of us have felt in those particularly challenging and liminal moments of our lives. When I read these stories, I imagine characters in their old age returning to their childhood astrologers and saying, “How did you get everything so wrong?”

Playlist

for *A Small Sacrifice for
an Enormous Happiness*

[LISTEN TO THE PLAYLIST ON SPOTIFY](#)



Flying by GARTH STEVENSON 

Chaiyya Chaiyya by SUKHWINDER SINGH, SAPNA AWASTHI

Tu Hi Re—Bombay / Soundtrack Version by HARIHARAN, KAVITA KRISHNAMURTHY

Gonna Get Through This World by THE KLEZMATICS

Kabuliwala by HEMANT KUMAR, USHA MANGESHKAR, SABITA BANERJEE, RANU MUKHERJEE

Exile by GEOFFREY ORYEMA

Traces of You by ANOUSHKA SHANKAR, NORAH JONES

Baby by JUSTIN BIEBER, LUDACRIS

You Were Born by CLOUD CULT

Kothbiro by AYUB OGADA

Mustt Mustt by NUSRAT FATEH ALI KHAN

The Narrow Bridge by SANDRA ZEMOR, YURI SHRAIBMAN, DAVID NAULIN MILSTEIN, RONNY GOLD

Sacrifice (Remix) (featuring Swedish House Mafia) by THE WEEKND, SWEDISH HOUSE MAFIA

Fortunate Son by CREEDENCE CLEARWATER REVIVAL

Fortune Teller by ROBERT PLANT, ALISON KRAUSS