

READING GROUP GUIDE

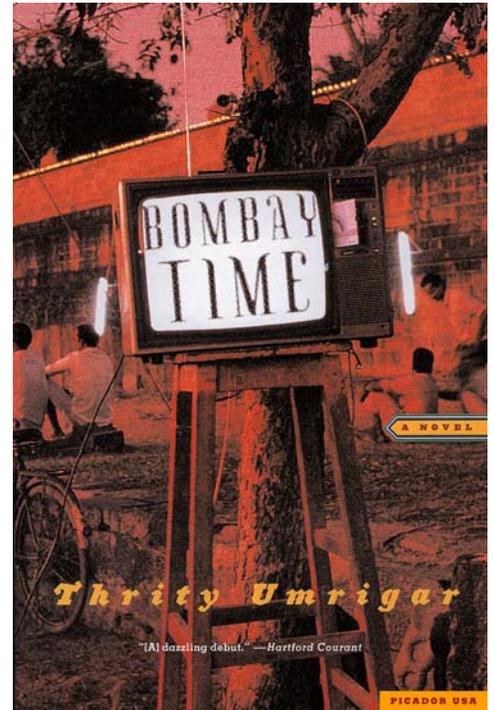
Bombay Time

A Novel

by Thrity Umrigar

ISBN-10: 0-312-28623-6

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-28623-1



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Bombay Time* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Bombay Time*.

About the Book

Intricately layered, engrossingly written, and beautifully imagined, this tapestry-like first novel depicts modern life as experienced by the residents of a middle-class apartment complex in Bombay, India. Indeed, with its many vivid characters, journalistic detail, historical sensitivity, and various tragicomic subplots, *Bombay Time* is a profile of the city itself. The Bombay presented here is, on the one hand, an urban nightmare of mass poverty and rampant street crime. But on the other, as revealed in the novel's many long and winding flashbacks, Bombay is also an innocent city of youth, promise, stability. Caught between these extremes, remembering the colonial Bombay of the past and trying to survive the "ticking bomb" of the present, the novel's main characters confront their fortunes and failures, their private dreams and personal disasters,

while also confronting the impossible yet commonplace experience of growing older. Like the photo albums that, in the late narrative, do so much to awaken, enchant, and invigorate these characters, *Bombay Time* is a collection of individual yet collective memories, a scrapbook of life's lessons and losses. Thrity Umrigar's debut novel is at once as nuanced as a love letter and as sweeping as a multigenerational saga.

Praise

“Bombay throbs with life and death, crowded, hot, dirty, and volatile...[This novel] is a warmhearted look at human nature, with all its strengths and flaws exposed...Umrigar proves a good storyteller who is especially adept at capturing relationships.”—*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“With the unflinching gaze of a Diane Arbus protégé, Umrigar pulls each of [her characters] into and out of focus to reveal the definitive—at times profoundly intimate—events of their respective lives...[A] dazzling debut.”—*The Hartford Courant*

“[Umrigar] displays an impressive talent for conceiving multidimensional, sympathetic characters with life-like emotional quandaries and psychological stumbling blocks.”—*The Washington Post Book World*

“Engaging...Umrigar is an accomplished, natural storyteller...She also manages to work in a portrait of the decline of Bombay, delivering an impressive debut offering a glimpse into a cultural world—especially that of the Parsis, an ethnic minority—that most Westerners know only in its barest outlines.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Umrigar has an acute ear for dialogue, and a gift for unmasking the complexities of personal relationships. As she sifts through her characters' personalities she dredges up layers of envy, hope, bitterness, grudges, regret, joy and the glue of shared memory that binds these people in unexpected ways. Wise and nuanced, *Bombay Time* grips the reader's attention.”—Bapsi Sidhwa, author of *Cracking India*

About the Author

Thrity Umrigar writes for the *Beacon Journal* in Akron, Ohio, and is a contributor to the *Boston Globe*. Her work has also appeared in *The Washington Post*. A recipient of the Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University, she grew up in Bombay, India. Umrigar now lives in Kent, Ohio. *Bombay Time* is her first novel.

Visit her website at www.umrigar.com

Discussion Questions

1. “Bombay is awake.” So reads the first sentence of the Prologue. Consider the city of Bombay as if it were a character in this novel. Discuss the physical terminology and emotional terrain assigned to it. How is the city described in these pages—and to what end, or for what purpose, is it rendered in this manner? And how is modern-day Bombay perceived by the book’s main characters?
2. Almost all of those who live in Wadia Baug, the apartment building that is the ongoing backdrop and Main Street of *Bombay Time*, are Parsis. Reading the novel, what did you learn about the cultural values, family beliefs, religious rites, cooking practices, economic status, and/or speaking habits of the Indian ethnic minority known as the Parsi? Talk about the role played by these customs, traditions, and characteristics within the larger framework of the novel. DO they serve any purpose apart from adding detail or realism to the narrative?
3. Though set in the Bombay of today, this book could be considered a kind of historical novel. Discuss the ways in which it is informed by historical events, trends, and figures. For starters, how do the main characters regard India’s colonial past? And how do they regard Great Britain more generally? What about America? Nehru? Gandhi? The partition conflicts between the Muslims and Hindus? Hitler’s war against the Jews? And any other such historical phenomena?
4. Why is gossip so important to so many of the characters in this story? What does this habit say about these characters, and about the social realm they inhabit?
5. A vast, far-reaching drama with a broad array of players and scenes, *Bombay Time* has all the tragedy and comedy of life itself. Here are thus a number of stories within this story, and many if not most of them are love stories. And not just romantic love, but all kinds of care and affection. Discuss the variety of such moments—as they are shared between friends and lovers, husbands and wives, parents and children—and try to pinpoint certain relationships and situations as representative or otherwise relevant to the novel’s air of human tenderness and closeness.
6. Why do you think the novel begins and ends with the thoughts of Rusi Bilimoria? Talk about what he is thinking, feeling, remembering, and living with at these two distinct moments. How, if at all, can his perspective be seen as the primary voice or intelligence of the novel?
7. Near the beginning of Chapter Nine—just before Rusi’s long speech to the newlyweds—Coomi Bilimoria and Soli Contractor offer differing views on the topic of growing older. Examine the particulars of this brief but significant disagreement, illuminating the view held by each as well as the reasons and motivations behind their views. What is the gist of their opposition, and how does this opposition reflect the main themes of *Bombay Time*?
8. Author Thrity Umrigar—who, like most of the characters in her novel—grew up in middle-class Bombay during the latter half of the twentieth century, recently stated the following in an interview: “I think the best writing is when you write about a specific thing, but somehow you give it enough universality that everybody can relate to it.” Do you think this remark can be successfully applied to *Bombay Time*? Explain.
9. Late in the narrative, just before the beginning of Chapter Ten, we meet two lesser yet pivotal characters, Baba and Bhima. Who are they? How do they affect the novel’s plot, tone, and meaning? Were you surprised by the appearance of these characters? Or by

- their actions? Explain why or why not. Also, why do you think Umrigar included them in the first place? And why did she introduce them at this particular point in the story?
10. This book is rife with flashbacks—defining past experiences, richly telling diversions, personally revealing memories, and so on—but it is squarely set in the present: the wedding celebration of Mehernosh and Sharon Kanga. Discuss in detail the chronological mosaic of the novel. Why is it structured in this way? How does this structure relate to the novel’s key concepts, especially as articulated in the final paragraphs? Explore the meaning(s) of the novel’s title.

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