

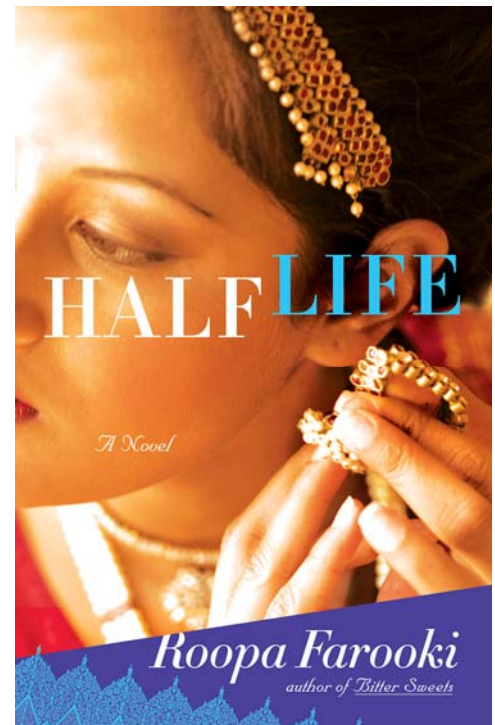


Half Life

by Roopa Farooki

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Half Life* 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 *Half Life*.

About the Book

On the morning that changes everything, Aruna Ahmed Jones walks out of her ground-floor Victorian apartment in London wearing only jeans and a t-shirt, carrying nothing more substantial than a handbag, and keeps on walking. Leaving behind the handsome Dr. Patrick Jones, her husband of less than a year, Aruna heads to Heathrow, where she boards a plane bound for Singapore and her old life. Educated and beautiful, Aruna has a desperate need to risk it all. But why? Waiting for her is a messy past and a perfect past lover she had once abandoned without even saying goodbye – a story left unfinished – until now.

Aruna is not running away from home, she is running back to the home she always had, before it became impossible for her to stay. Before her father, the only family she'd ever known, passed away. Before she tried, and failed, to create a life and a family with her best friend and lover, Jazz. Before her doctor delivered a complicated psychological diagnosis she'd rather forget.

After years of fleeing the ghosts that continue to haunt her, Aruna is about to discover that running away is really the easy part; it is coming home—making peace with her past, with Jazz and those they have loved—that is hard. Spanning the world from London to Singapore to India and back again, *Half Life* is a richly layered tale of love and conflict, friendship and sacrifice, the luminous story of a young woman who risks everything in order to find where she truly belongs.

Praise for *Half Life*:

"Compelling... Farooki's hypnotic narrative is driven by a delicate, probing intensity, full of grace and poignancy." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Lovers of literary fiction will not want to miss this vibrant, moving novel from the gifted Farooki." —*Booklist*

"A heartfelt tale that skips seamlessly from continent to continent and reveals how the ghosts of our pasts have to be laid to rest before we can come back home." —**Farahad Zama, author of *The Marriage Bureau for Rich People* series**

About the Author

Roopa Farooki was born in Lahore, Pakistan, and brought up in London. She graduated from New College, Oxford in Philosophy, Politics and Economics and worked in advertising before writing fiction full time. Roopa now lives in Southeast England and Southwest France with her husband and two young sons, and teaches creative writing at the Canterbury Christ Church University masters' program. Visit her online at www.RoopaFarooki.com.



Discussion Questions

1. *Half Life* opens with the line: “It’s time to stop fighting, and go home.” How do the varied types of conflict in the novel – emotional, psychological, political – affect the characters? In what way does the search for home affect them?
2. The novel is told from the perspective of three characters – Aruna, Jazz and Hassan. Which character do you empathize with most? With whom do you sympathize the least? Which do you feel makes the greatest sacrifice for their loved ones?
3. Aruna realizes on her return to Singapore that “running away is easy; it is coming home that is hard.” Aruna has run away from home twice – do you think she was right to do so? How far do you think she is responsible for her own actions?
4. *Half Life* tells a story across decades, moving from pre-Independence India to modern day London, Singapore and Malaysia, but the action of the novel takes place in just three days. How does this timing drive the pace of the novel?
5. Aruna and Jazz are childhood sweethearts, and grow up believing that they are “made for each other.” Do you think that this was true? Do you think that they would have stayed together if their circumstances had been different? Do you think they could ever have stayed together despite their circumstances?
6. In many ways, *Half Life* is a love story, exploring romantic love, the love between friends, and the love between parent and child. Which of these represents the strongest relationship in the novel? Which has the greatest chance of enduring?
7. How does the diverse cultural/ethnic blend (Singaporean, Bangladeshi, British, Malay) contribute to the narrative? Do you think that the author intended to tell a universal story, or one that could only have taken place in South East Asia?
8. Did you expect the book to end the way it did? Why or why not?
9. How does *Half Life* differ from Roopa Farooki’s previous novels, *Bitter Sweets* and *Corner Shop*? Are there any themes that these novels share?

A Conversation with Roopa Farooki

How did you write *Half Life*? Where did you draw inspiration for the story and the characters? How is it different from or similar to your other novels?

The experience of writing *HALF LIFE* was like being hijacked in a storm; when I wrote the first chapter, I had no idea of where it would lead, but once I had started, I just couldn't stop. For the months that I was writing it, I was so obsessed with the idea, so afraid of losing momentum, that I did almost nothing else; I barely ate or slept, and lost a lot of weight. My only break from writing was to look after my two little boys in the afternoons, but once they were in bed at 7pm, I would go back to writing until the early hours of the morning, and then get back up at 7am and carry on.

The suddenness with which the story poured out took me by surprise; the opening scene where Aruna walks out of her London flat and out on her marriage, came to me when I was travelling home late one night after promoting *CORNER SHOP* at a literary festival. The train home had taken several hours, and it was long past midnight and pouring with rain as I finally arrived at the station, and walked back to my house through an autumnal sludge of puddles, concrete, leaves and mud. I felt curiously disconnected and alone, as though I didn't have a family sleeping soundly in a warm house after all, and I wondered what it would be like to be a grown-up woman who was running away from home, rather than trudging back; I wondered where this woman would go, and exactly where she was running to.

The story may have come quickly, but I had actually been thinking about the Aruna and Hassan characters for some time, initially envisaging separate novels for them, as they seemed to belong to quite different worlds and eras in time. I imagined that Aruna would have a lover whom she had abandoned, and that Hassan had a son who abandoned him, and as soon as I started writing, I realised that this lover and son could be the same character, that in fact he possibly always had been the same character, which is how *Jazz* came about.

HALF LIFE, like my previous novels, looks at relationships in crisis in a multicultural setting, but otherwise it feels very different; both *BITTER SWEETS* and *CORNER SHOP* had a wide cast of characters, and the action took place across several generations. By contrast, in *HALF LIFE*, I focus very tightly on three voices in the novel, Aruna, Hassan and Jazz, and the action takes place across just three days and nights. This restriction was deliberate to heighten the emotional intensity, drama and pace of the novel; I wanted the experience of reading this book to be the same switchback ride that writing it was.

What made you decide to become a writer? What do you like best/least about it? What do your friends and family think of your work?

I always considered myself a writer, and when I was fourteen I wrote a novel that I sent hopefully to every publisher in town; amazingly I got some positive responses back. Then exams and college and work got in the way; even while I was working long hours in advertising, I kept writing, and still got promising feedback but no firm offers. I knew that I had to take some time out if I wanted to focus properly on my writing. My husband and I both left our busy jobs in London, and bought an old ruined farmhouse in France; while he renovated the house, I wrote *BITTER SWEETS*. A

few weeks after finishing the first draft, just after my first son was born, I received a two-book offer from Pan Macmillan in the UK .

I never went back to "proper work" - being a full time novelist is my dream job. I like everything about it - being able to lock myself away in imaginary worlds, being able to write any time of day and night (I'm writing this at 4am - I'm pregnant at the moment, and couldn't sleep), not having to care if I spend a whole week in my dressing gown, having the freedom to be at home with my husband and children, and the freedom to live or travel anywhere I like. The only disadvantage is the erratic income; we keep a tight rein on costs, and I've not gone to a hairdresser or bought new clothes for years, because I'm not really bothered about that sort of thing, and I'd rather spend the money on my children. Like every writer, I'm aware of how lucky I am being able to make a living by doing something that I love.

My family and friends are all proud of my success; I don't tend to ask them what they think of my work, as it might seem a little vain if they liked what I'd written, and awkward for us both if they didn't! But I do know that many of them enjoy my books, because they're fantastic advocates and supporters. Around a book launch, my mother hands out my publicity cards and bookmarks to every person she meets, even strangers on the subway; once when I was on a radio show in London, someone called in to say they'd just met my mother on a train, and that she'd persuaded them to go and buy my book!

Your characters have been praised as “convincingly complex” (Library Journal on Corner Shop) and “vibrant... leap[ing] off the page” (Booklist on Bitter Sweets) – how do you create such realistically flawed yet lovably well-meaning individuals?

It's important to me that my reader senses the humanity of my characters, and feels compassion for them; I want my readers to care about the journeys that my characters take.

This is why I try and draw out the flaws and fragility of each individual, the sense they have of sometimes being overtaken by events, the feelings of loss for the people that they once were, or might have been, for the lives that they might have otherwise had, as this is part of what makes them both human and lovable. I try and call on feelings that we might all have had, that are in some way universal, whether I'm depicting ordinary people in extraordinary situations, or extraordinary people trapped in ordinary situations. And I think that it's important for the reader to walk in the character's shoes, just as I do, as otherwise it would be very easy to lose patience with characters such as Aruna in *HALF LIFE*, or Delphine in *CORNER SHOP*, who might outwardly seem to behave selfishly and unsympathetically.

At its core, *Half Life* is a beautiful and heartbreaking love story. Without giving too much away, can you discuss the meaning of love in the novel and how it shapes the characters' lives?

I wanted to explore the many faces of love in this novel, the passionate, the tragic, the unconditional, and most of all, the love that redeems. Aruna and Jazz are both redeemed by the love that they have for each other, that grew from their childhood friendship so gradually that they honestly don't know when they stopped being friends and started being a couple; even when circumstances stop them making a life together, Aruna is still compelled to return to him, and he is

still compelled to wait for her return, even though he has no certain knowledge that she ever would. Despite their attempts to move on from each other, in other relationships and in pursuing their careers, when they are together again, they create their own world, just as they did when they were children. In one scene, Aruna watches him sleep, "in the increasingly crowded, raucous train carriage, it feels as though they are alone together in a room, and that nothing else exists beyond the ribbons of breath between them." But in their star-crossed situation, the intense exclusivity of their love doesn't bring them happiness, but rather necessitates self-sacrifice on both their parts.

Hassan's love story is tragic, and he is weighed down by guilt over the death of his first love, and by his neglect of his dutiful wife, but he too is redeemed by quite a different love, the unconditional love he has for his son. His love doesn't waver even when Jazz abandons him to die in the hospital; it is this love that motivates Hassan throughout the novel, driving him to persist in his attempts to reconcile with Jazz, to be forgiven and forgive in his turn.

To have Roopa Farooki visit your reading group or call-in via Skype for discussion visit:

trademarketing@stmartins.com



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