

Reading Group Gold

No One Can Pronounce My Name Rakesh Satyal

ABOUT THE BOOK

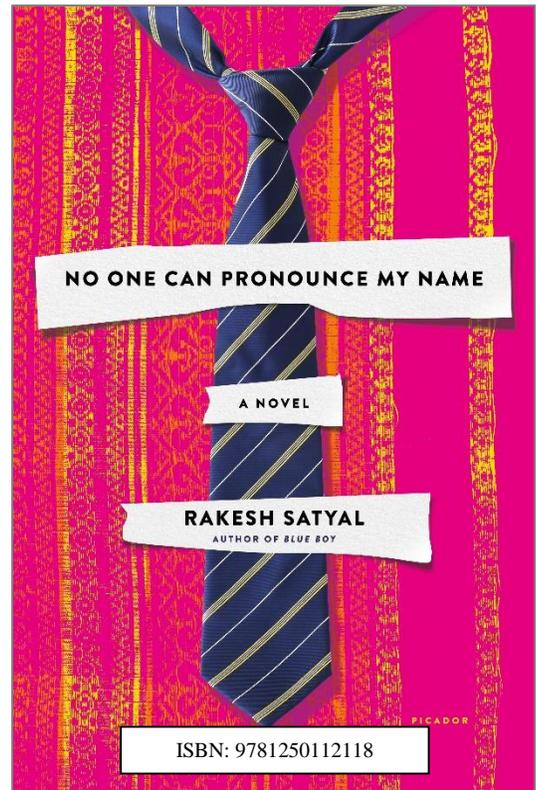
A humorous and tender multigenerational novel about immigrants and outsiders—those trying to find their place in American society and within their own families

In a suburb outside Cleveland, a community of Indian Americans has settled into lives that straddle the divide between Eastern and Western cultures. For some, America is a bewildering and alienating place where coworkers can't pronounce your name but will eagerly repeat the Sanskrit phrases from their yoga class. Harit, a lonely Indian immigrant in his mid-forties, lives with his mother who can no longer function after the death of Harit's sister, Swati. In a misguided attempt to keep both himself and his mother sane, Harit has taken to dressing up in a sari every night to pass himself off as his sister. Meanwhile, Ranjana, also an Indian immigrant in her mid-forties, has just seen her only child, Prashant, off to college. Worried that her husband has begun an affair, she seeks solace by writing paranormal romances in secret. When Harit and Ranjana's paths cross, they begin a strange yet necessary friendship that brings to light their own passions and fears.

Rakesh Satyal's *No One Can Pronounce My Name* is a distinctive, funny, and insightful look into the lives of people who must reconcile the strictures of their culture and traditions with their own dreams and desires.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. After observing Achyut's friends at FB—the bar where he works—Ranjana notes, "In the past few decades, this country had tried to instill a feeling of progress in not just Indian people but also in people of all colors. We were supposed to feel united, all of our children starting from the same place, where cultures melted into each other, yet the divide between Eastern ethnicity and this American setting was greater than ever." Why do you think Ranjana feels this great divide? How might some of the younger characters in the novel respond to this statement?



2. When Prashant’s friend Charlie suggests he take on a nickname, Prashant laments, “But this is my name. I shouldn’t have to leave my name behind just because of other people’s ignorance.” To this Charlie responds, “It’s not ignorance, man. People just can’t do it.” The title, *No One Can Pronounce My Name*, speaks to this struggle between cultural confrontation and accommodation. Can you identify other examples of this tension at play in the novel? What are some of the different ways that the characters handle this tension?
3. In what ways does Ranjana change through her writing?
4. Alcohol plays a complicated role in the novel. In what ways does its consumption shift along cultural lines? How about gender lines? Age?
5. There’s a particular preoccupation with appropriate behavior in this Indian community. In what ways do the central characters’—Harit, Ranjana, and Prashant—senses of propriety change from the beginning to the end of the novel?
6. In their first meeting at the French restaurant, Harit observes that Ranjana had been “proficient in becoming American. The way she pulled the cheese, the way she managed a small sip of wine without its looking overly studied, it was clear that she had honed her social skills to something beyond culture.” What do you think the term “beyond culture” means in this context?
7. Teddy acts as a kind of “matchmaker” for Ranjana and Harit? Why do you think he does so?
8. After Prashant interrupts the older men’s political discussion at Ranjana’s party, he surveys the room and surmises: “All of his father’s friends wore bemused, condescending grins on their faces. He had seen this look before, a look that simultaneously laughed at youth and reiterated the superiority that these men had demonstrated in traveling halfway across the globe. They didn’t appreciate Obama’s struggle . . . because they already saw their own journeys as vastly more impressive.” Do you think there are other ways to interpret their reactions to Prashant’s speech? How so?
9. Did your opinions about Teddy change at all when you read his backstory in Part III? How so?
10. Toward the end of the novel, Harit realizes that, despite his resistance, Teddy has become a true friend and tells him about his family’s tragedy. He decides, however, to tell him everything “but his many times wrapped in a sari.” In fact, he decides “that he will keep this between his mother and himself. He will not even tell Ranjana.” Why do you think Harit decides to keep this practice between himself and his mother?

11. The ways in which the different characters communicate, fail to communicate, or miscommunicate, is a major preoccupation of the novel. How do you see different characters change their communication styles—in romantic relationships, with colleagues, and across generations—throughout the story?

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