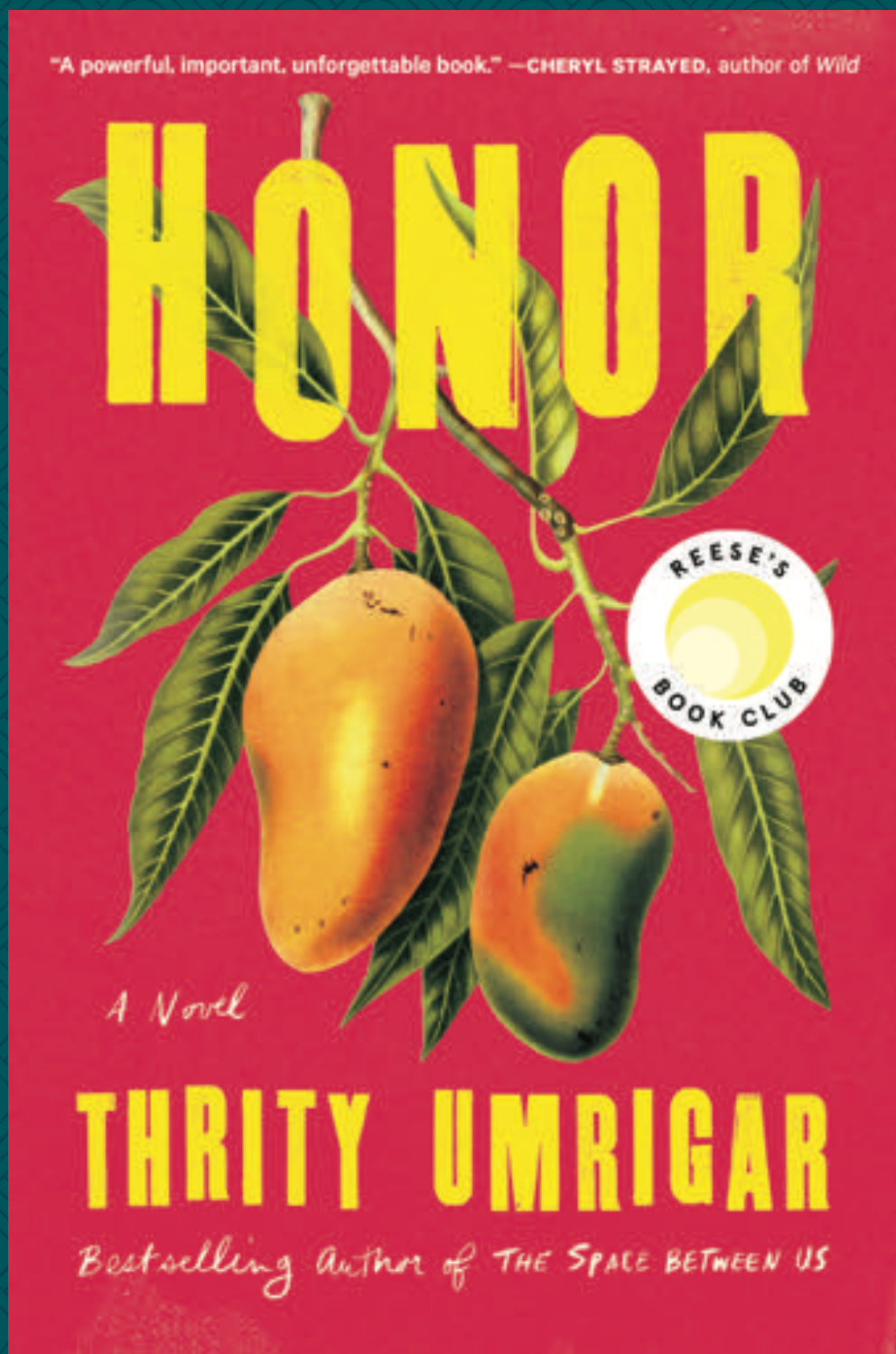




BOOK CLUB KIT



A Note from the Author



Fresh starts.

As I sit here deciding what I want to convey to you, my dear reader, how to describe my new novel, *Honor*, it occurs to me that the plot can be summarized in those two words. Many of the characters are looking for new beginnings—a way to heal for Meena; a brighter future for her daughter, Abru; a new chapter in Smita's love-hate relationship with India; the possibility of romance for Mohan.

And indeed, writing *Honor* was a fresh start for me. Almost all my other novels have been set in urban India, in Mumbai, the megacity in which I grew up. But now I was interested in a journey into the heart of India, its villages—with their ancient enmities, prejudices, and traditions, but also acts of courage and sacrifice and devotion.

Many factors spurred this new direction. The most immediate was the shock I experienced after reading *New York Times* correspondent Ellen Barry's reporting of village life in India, especially as it pertained to the patriarchal treatment of rural women. Some of the punishments meted out to women who transgressed seemed straight out of medieval times. How could this be so? How could a country that produces a quarter of the world's doctors and engineers each year also be so mired in tradition? I felt compelled to find out. After all, that is the place where literature flourishes—in the gray areas, in the nooks and crannies, in the contradictions between human aspiration and actual behavior.

I was also increasingly dismayed by how minority rights were being trampled upon in contemporary India. I wanted to write about this from America in 2018, when similar assaults against the Other were going on in my beloved adopted country. The similarities often left me slack-jawed and heartbroken.

I believe that the role of literature is to illuminate the dark areas of our lives and cultures, to hold a mirror to our own beliefs and bigotries. My fondest hope is that this novel inspires readers like you to see a bit of yourself in women like Meena and Smita. This, I believe, is literature's truest ideal—to build a community of readers that transcends time, space, nationality, and other boundaries.

Thanks for being part of this beloved community.

With deepest gratitude,

Thrity Umrigar

The Music of HONOR

India is a country divided by class, caste, and religious differences. Each state has a different language and every region has a distinctive cuisine. The Indian Constitution recognizes twenty-two official languages and there are numerous dialects spoken.

But the one thing that unites vast swaths of the country is its love for Bollywood music. Certain classic Bollywood songs are universally beloved. Indeed, music acts as a great unifier in a country that sometimes appears to be hopelessly divided. Those living in skyscrapers hum the same tunes as those living in the slums.

I used this phenomenon by choosing songs for the novel that act as a kind of musical shorthand and will evoke a common sense of nostalgia and memory. Here is a playlist featuring three songs mentioned in the book, and others that I can imagine the characters listening to.

Head over to Spotify to give them a listen:
<https://spoti.fi/32JKn9W>

Track 1: "YEH HAI BOMBAY MERI JAAN"

by Mohammed Rafi & Geeta Dutt, from the film *C.I.D.*

Track 2: "ZINDAGI EK SAFAR HAI SUHANA"

by Kishore Kumar, from the film *Andaz*

Track 3: "TUM PAKAR LO TUMHARA INTEZAR HAI"

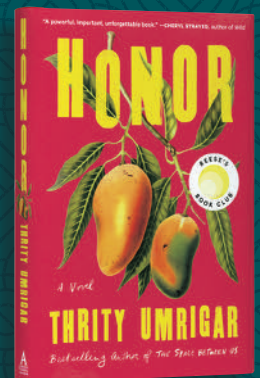
by Hemant Kumar, from the film *Khamoshi*

Track 4: "TUJHE DEKHA TOH YE JAANA SANAM"

by Lata Mangeshkar & Kumar Sanu, from the film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*

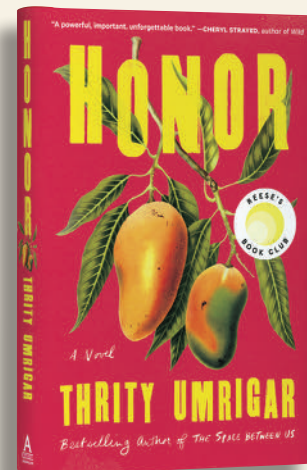
Track 5: "IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT" by R.E.M.

Track 6: "ACROSS THE UNIVERSE" by the Beatles



Discussion Questions for HONOR

1. Smita tells Mohan that her India is not his India. What does she mean?
2. How is Meena's India different from Smita's? What explains the differences?
3. Meena relates her story to us directly, in the first person. Why do you think the author chose this point of view?
4. Meena's brothers think they are doing the moral thing, the right thing, by punishing their sister and her husband. Honor killings are a fact of life in many parts of the world. What do you think it will take to change this cultural practice?
5. What do you think of a system where the village council and the head of that council have so much power? What are the consequences of those positions being held by men?
6. Why didn't Smita's father change their name back to their family name after settling in America? Do you understand why he didn't?
7. Smita and Meena both fall in love. How do their cultures inform their relationships; the level of intimacy, communication, decision-making for each woman? If you are in a committed relationship, how do you think it would have been affected if it had begun in a different culture?
8. As strange as the customs and traditions described in this book may seem to an American reader, did you recognize any common touchpoints across the two cultures? What aspects of the novel reminded you of life in America?
9. Trace Mohan's evolution in the course of his travels with Smita.
10. What do you think of Smita's decision in the conclusion of the novel? What do you foresee for the future of Smita and Mohan?
11. There are many different levels of privilege described in this book. What are some of them and how do they affect the characters' behavior?
12. There is a moment when Smita remembers the marigolds tied around the oxen's horns, and it makes her feel tender toward India. Why?
13. The notion of objectivity is the foundational belief in mainstream American journalism. What happens when journalists cover places and people whose culture is completely different from theirs? Should they strive to be objective or should they identify a moral ground from which to report a story? If so, how do they determine what that moral ground should be? Or are they imposing their morality on others?
14. What do you think of the final chapter? What function does it serve?
15. What are the various meanings of the book's title?



RECLAIMING HONOR

An Essay by **THRITY UMRIGAR**



In 1993, my middle-aged father stood on our balcony and watched helplessly as the apartment building across the street burned. It had been set on fire by a mob of angry Hindus who had heard that a Muslim family lived on the ground floor.

By this time, I was living in faraway America, safe from the paroxysm of insanity and violence that gripped Bombay—the erstwhile most tolerant and cosmopolitan of Indian cities—during that terrible period. But I can still hear the bewilderment in my father’s voice as he later recounted the incident during our weekly phone chat. I immediately worried about my family’s well-being, but he brushed aside my fretting. We were Parsis, a small, prosperous, and educated religious minority in India; the joke was that there were so few of us, nobody saw us as any kind of threat.

What I learned much later from the Muslim family who lived next door to us was that they had earlier brought all their jewelry to Dad for safekeeping before they fled the neighborhood for a few weeks. There were many sad stories of families returning home after the riots ended and finding that those whom they’d trusted with their assets had swindled them. My dad, on the other hand, had made our neighbors put their jewelry in his locker themselves and then given them the key to it. “When you return,” he said, “please come and use the key to remove your belongings.”

The whole experience stayed with me, even though I heard and read about it secondhand, even though I was no longer in the city of my birth. But I certainly wasn’t thinking of it as literary material, just a personal story that made me worry about my father even as it made me more proud of him.

Then, a few years ago, I came across a series of stories written by Ellen Barry in the *New York Times* about the oppressive conditions of women in parts of rural India. Barry’s description of the punishment meted out to those who strayed from tradition made my hair stand up. Things we take for granted, such as women

working outside the home, were considered transgressions punishable in ways that recalled the Dark Ages. Naturally, Barry's stories also described the corrupt police and politicians who allowed such barbarity to flourish.

The world that Barry described was alien to me. I was a city kid, raised in a tolerant, Westernized, middle-class family in which it went without saying that women had to be educated and independent. But even so, I had spent the first twenty-one years of my life in India. How had my privilege blinded me to such injustice? I was aware of urban poverty, of course, and had written about homelessness and the struggles of the working poor, but I was as stunned by the medieval punishments Barry described as I was by the patriarchal mindset. But at the same time, I was impressed by the determination displayed by the women of the village who rebelled against the old ways.

It was that respect for women who persisted against insurmountable odds, who questioned traditions that had prevailed for thousands of years, that gave birth to Meena, one of the two protagonists of *Honor*. She came to me, urgent with the need to tell her own story. She shares that story with Smita, a young Indian American journalist haunted by a family secret, tormented by her own love-hate relationship with India. Smita is everything Meena is not—emotionally closed off, terrified of intimacy, afraid of love. In a traditional “privileged savior” novel, the modern, worldly Smita would lead the impoverished, illiterate Meena to enlightenment and safety. But what if Meena were the teacher in *Honor*?

The word *honor* has been abused and shorn of its meaning in traditional, male-dominated societies, where it is simply a cover for the domination of women by their fathers, brothers, and sons. The sexual politics of the so-called honor killings are impossible to avoid. Women are raped, killed, and sacrificed to preserve male pride and reputations.

In this novel, I wanted to reclaim the word and give it back to the people to whom it belongs—people like Meena, a Hindu woman, and her Muslim husband, Abdul, who allow their love to blind them to the bigotries and religious fervor that surround them, who transcend their own upbringing to imagine a new and better world. It seems to me that every time we read a story about an honor killing, it's always told from the point of view of the killers. But my interests lay in the victims. I wanted to tell the story of their everyday lives: how they met, how they fell in love, how they lived. There is something incredibly tender and beautiful about people who have never known a day's freedom deciding to love whomever their heart chooses.