

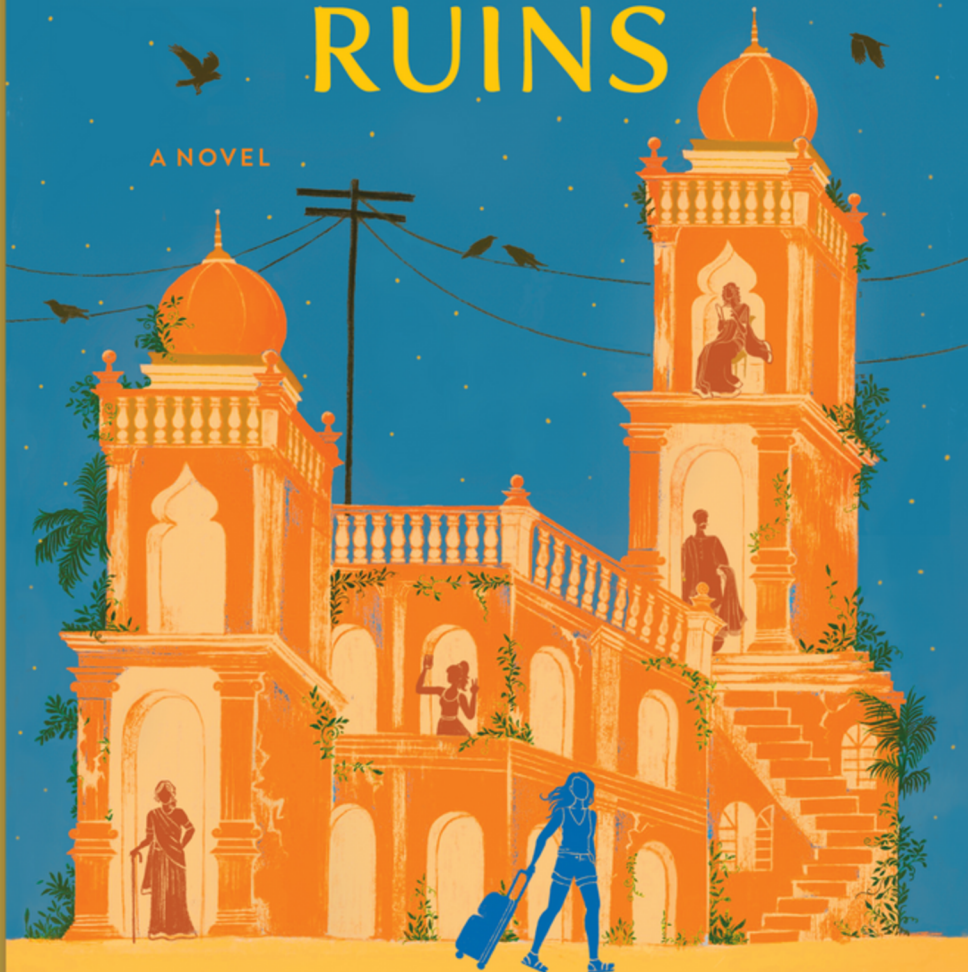
A

BOOK CLUB KIT

"Gripped me from the first page and moved me to tears on the last . . . This novel will stay close to my heart for a long, long time to come." —THRITY UMRIGAR, bestselling author of *The Museum of Failures* and Reese's Book Club Pick Honor

THE MAGNIFICENT RUINS

A NOVEL



NAYANTARA ROY

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Readers,

A year into my film and television degree at Columbia University, I read about a creative writing class that the author Benjamin Taylor was teaching that semester for the aspiring novelists on the second floor (I was an aspiring television executive on the floor above). The class was called *Other People's Secrets*, and we read excellent fiction for twelve weeks. The class was meant to examine “the endless varieties of inner experience and how outer life disguises and intimates the fortress of secrets within,” and we were to read “in order to make prolonged and intimate contact with other hidden selves, because in life we are largely opaque to each other; in literature, by contrast, there are no secrets.” As the weeks went by, I felt myself exported to my own recesses by the material and the lectures—something intimate and thrilling seemed to stir inside me, and after each class I always felt in need of a long, solitary walk to soak in the experience. The assignment at the end of the semester was to write a six-thousand-word story that might capture our individual learnings. I did not know what I wanted to write about, but when I sat down in a café to work on the piece, I found myself with a first-person, twelve-page short story about a mother and a daughter. It had rushed out of me in one sitting because that is how dams burst, and it would become the genesis of *The Magnificent Ruins*.

The complexity of the relationship that exists in my novel between three generations of women, stretching from the youngest and most Americanized, Lila, through to her mother and grandmother, is intensely familiar to me, not just because of the relationship between the women in my own family and families like mine but also because it portrays a South Asian community where the border between discipline and unacceptable punishment is often blurred. To me it felt like an optical illusion: heinous in the West, yet dismissed by cousins and aunts and siblings and my own mother as so commonplace that it might be boring. This was an open secret that nobody ever talked about—a way to make sure children were shaped into excellent adults.

I also wanted to write about the cultures of silence that shroud the postcolonial land-owning families of Bengal, those who live in grand old mansions and whose families paper over the less savory parts of their personal history, and the ways in which narratives can feel entirely unreliable until spoken aloud. The book opens with the whiff of a murder, a body in front of Lila's feet, and proceeds to unravel the complex threads of a family drama as it navigates Lila's own secrets and lies.



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Ultimately, the book explores the power of secrets—having them, knowing them, and inheriting them over generations. I set the novel in a world that I knew intimately and a city that I had lived in until I was eighteen, and proceeded to invent the rest. The result has been a work of fiction that I hope will compel in its plot but also excavate for the reader the universal truth of generational trauma through the lens of a specific culture; the staggering yet hopeful work that it takes for those cycles to finally begin to break; and the way one young woman manages to free herself from those traditions while holding on to all that she values.

Nayantara Roy



NAYANTARA ROY was born in Kolkata and lives in Los Angeles. *The Magnificent Ruins* is her debut novel. In 2018, Roy won the Rick DeMarinis Short Story Prize for her short story, “8C.” Her plays have been performed in India and the UK. She is also a television executive at STARZ/Lionsgate, where she acquires and develops original scripted television series.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Lila has a good job, a loving family, and a circle of trusted friends and colleagues. Despite the advantages of her American life, why do you think she feels so divided between being American and Indian?
2. One of the novel's biggest themes is the power of secrets and secret keeping. Which characters keep secrets and what are their motivations? How might you have acted if you were Lila or any of the other Lahiri women?
3. Why do you think Roy included chapters devoted to Maya and Geeta's pasts?
4. Why does Lila tell the story of her childhood from the POV of specific objects?
5. How did your feelings toward Mihir, Lila's father, change over the course of the book? What about his wife, Iva?
6. What does the Lahiri mansion represent to you? How did it make you feel to be in the Lahiri mansion for so much of the novel?
7. Why do you think Lila's grandfather left the house to her?
8. What did you learn about Kolkata and the Bengali community from the book?
9. In what ways are men treated differently in the Lahiri family? How does this affect the behavior of the women in the family? In what ways do you detect the same patterns in American families?



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- I0. Biddu is a complicated character, particularly in relation to her parents. And yet she tries to convey a sense of herself as having very little depth, preoccupied as she is with her social media presence. How did you feel about her by the conclusion of the novel?

- II. How does the Indian wedding presented in the novel differ from that of American weddings? What do you think is gained by the elongated celebration?

- I2. How did you feel about Lila's relationship with Adil? How did you feel about Adil's choices? What did you think of Lila's choice she made in the end, vis-à-vis Adil and Seth?

- I3. What does Inspector Moiz Khan's perspective add to the novel?

- I4. What is the connection between the politics in India and the dynamics of the Lahiri family?

- I5. What do you think the book is trying to say about the relationship between Lila, her mother, and her grandmother and what is inherited by each generation?

- I6. Where do you think Lila feels happiest, in America or in India?

- I7. What do you think the novel says about forgiveness?

PRAISE FOR THE MAGNIFICENT RUINS

"*The Magnificent Ruins* gripped me from the first page and moved me to tears on the last. A wise, beautiful, and haunting story about difficult mothers and daughters, the complications of family life, and redefining the meaning of home, this novel will stay close to my heart for a long, long time to come." –[THRITY UMRIGAR](#), bestselling author of *The Museum of Failures* and Reese's Book Club Pick Honor

"As gorgeous as it is wise, Roy's voice soars and whispers with uncanny insight and wit, transporting us across continents, charting not only the distance between Calcutta and New York, but the stranger more mysterious abyss between childhood and adulthood, between family and home, between daughter and mother, and perhaps between life as we want it to be and life as it is--messy, complicated, beautiful, and sad. A page-turning, heart-rending family epic, this is a wickedly smart novel with an incredible generosity for characters and readers, and one that that eschews easy villains and easy answers and asks - how do we love one another across the entangled loyalties of geography and time? The answer will surely enlarge your life, and keep you reading long into the night. Quite simply one of the best novels I've ever read about what it means to call two places home." –[SUNIL YAPA](#), author of *Your Heart Is a Muscle the Size of a Fist*, Pen/Faulkner Award finalist

"Shakespearean in scope and cinematic in vision, *The Magnificent Ruins* is a rare feast of a novel about the power, burden, and gift of inheritances both concrete and intangible. I read it with hunger—absorbed by Lila De's story, invested in her family's dynamics, and craving complete immersion in the colors, flavors, and politics of the complex Kolkata they call home—and finished it utterly satisfied" –[RACHEL LYON](#), author of *Fruit of the Dead* and *Self-Portrait with Boy*

"*The Magnificent Ruins* utterly transported me to the Lahiri family's Kolkata. I felt as though I were occupying a room in their house, bearing witness to its fading glory, the political unrest beyond its gates and—most vividly—the tangle of relatives whose complicated love is at the heart of the story. Nayantara Roy brings these characters to life with such humanity and conviction that I believed they were real, and I missed them intensely when I reached the end." –[SHEILA SUNDAR](#), author of *Habitations*

