

Invitation to World Literature: The God of Small Things Video Transcript

Iyer:

It's a book that's a love letter to the powerless. Whether it's women who aren't allowed to follow the direction of their hearts, men who suffer because they're from the wrong caste, children who suffer because they're too young to know better.

Salie:

The essential story is one of love. And even if the ending is certainly sad, it's so much more than that. It's a transcendent story.

Roy:

Even though you know that what happened was tragic, the fact that it happened was wonderful.

GRAPHIC: THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

Roy:

(Reading): To say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it. Equally it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago long before the Marxists came, before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendancy, before da Gama arrived, before the 's conquest of Calicut. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a tea bag. But it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much.

Iyer:

I read *The God of Small Things* as soon as it came out in 1997 and at first I didn't really know what to make of it. The language was so different from anything I was prepared for and jumped off the page so vividly almost as if its hands were around my throat. And then I was able to sink into the emotional momentum of the current of the book and got swept away and put it down feeling as if I'd been torn in two.

Salie:

I will confess that I struggled with the first 25 pages. Maybe more of this book, because not only are you entering India, which is a world that's quite foreign to me, but the language is so unique. And unique only to this story. Yet it was and I believe continues to be an international best seller. And so many people, so many different cultures have embraced it.

Cusset:

I read it when it came out but it was...it just stayed in my mind. I remembered it so vividly. And it's of course is because I was writing. And even when I was...I wanted to take notes, you know, just, you know, to talk about it. And I started reading the beginning again. Instead of taking notes I was reading line after line again.

Ch'ien:

(Reading): found a whole column of juicy ants. They were on their way to church. All dressed in red. They had to be killed before they got there. Squished and squashed with a stone. You can't have smelly ants in church. The ants made a faint crunchy sound as life left them. Like an elf eating toast, or a crisp biscuit.

Wow.

GRAPHIC: GLOBAL AND LOCAL

Damrosch:

Roy is a quintessentially glocal writer. Both global and local with one in the same time. This is a sprawling story, granted in very specific local details. Small things.

Gikandi:

When this book is published in 1997 it was the 50th anniversary of Indian Independence. Whereas, Indian fiction of the time was taking up very familiar, large themes, Questions of migration and the transformation of Indian cultures, this one was interested in relationships between individuals, and was also of course taking up some taboo subjects

Damrosch:

Sexuality is both the deepest form of human connection in the novel, and also wildly inappropriate, improper, she was sued for obscenity when the book was published.

Gikandi:

The other thing I noticed about the book that made it, unique is that Roy set the novel not in the big city, such as Bombay but in small towns in Southern India.

Iyer:

The story takes place in Kerala in southern India. it's fragrant with the smell I think of coconut trees and cashew trees and mangos. Salman Rushdie so excitingly I think, hymned into being a new kind of language with his mish-mashed Bombay street language especially with *Midnight's Children*. But Arundhati Roy is able to take that door that he began to open and just tear it off its hinges.

Roy:

When I wrote *The God of Small Things* I hadn't been back to Kerala for many years. And I was so shocked that that river was inside me, as I grew up, I knew every bush, every plant, exactly where I could find what insect. I knew the physical landscape very intimately.

GRAPHIC: YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE

Salie:

The God of Small Things is an unusual mystery story because you know what happens from virtually page one. So the mystery for the reader then becomes well how did that happen? Why did that happen?

Damrosch:

The story centers on two kids, Rahel and her brother Estha twin brother and sister. They provide a kind of knowing child's eye view to see the world around them.

Roy:

Sometimes they're almost one person, you know, two aspects of one person. Rahel wakes up laughing at Estha's funny dream. She has memories that she has no right to have because they're his memories.

Salie:

The reader knows almost right away that Sophie Mol, this little girl, the cousin of Estha and Rahel has died.

Iyer:

(Reading): She lay in it in her yellow Crimplene bell-bottoms with her hair in a ribbon, and her Made-in-England go-go bag that she loved. Her face was pale and as wrinkled as a dhobi's thumb from being in water for too long. The congregation gathered around the coffin, and the yellow church swelled like a throat with the sound of sad singing

Cusset:

From the first six pages of the book. We already know that her little nine year old girl is going to die, Sophie Mol. We know that the mother, Ammu, is dying at age thirty-one. We know that there's a man named Velutha whose body is going to be broken and whose blood we are going to smell. And we know that there's a little boy, Estha, who is going to be returned.

Iyer:

When we come to this funeral part, it comes out of nowhere, we have no context for it, and I think part of the art of the book is she propels us into an incident like this. We read it without much investment or feeling because we don't know everything that's around it. And as we progress around the book we understand more and more the weight that this funeral carries. So that ideally it would detonate like a bomb inside us, 200 pages later.

Cusset:

The way I see it is the movement of the book is a spiral. You know the end at the beginning and then it works like a telescope. You get closer and closer to the scenes which are alluded to at the beginning. So you already know the end but you want to know, you want to know more. You want to hear again. You want to know.

Roy:

Before I wrote The God of Small Things I used to be a screen play writer and a production designer. And before that I studied architecture. And both those disciplines

helped me enormously. It's a bit like designing a building. You don't start at the front door and, you know, end at the exit. It just keeps clarifying itself.

GRAPHIC: AMMU

Damrosch:

The children's mother Ammu, has had a tragic history. She tried to get up and out of the village. She married a Bengali man from the north, who turned out to be alcoholic and abusive. Having divorced him, she's back now with her kids, with her life more or less at a standstill, not knowing what to do.

Roy:

Ammu knows that she's used up, you know, her ration of oxygen. There's...there's nothing more for her. You know, there's not gonna be another man. There's not gonna be romance. There's nothing. It's like being entombed in a way. You're the living dead.

(Reading) :This filled Ammu with an awful dread because she was not the kind of woman who wanted her future told. She dreaded it too much. And what Ammu knew (or thought she knew) smelled of the vapid, vinegary fumes that rose from the cement vats of Paradise Pickles. Fumes that wrinkled youth and pickled futures.

Hooded in her own hair, Ammu leaned against her self in the bathroom mirror and tried to weep. For herself. For the God of Small Things.: For the sugar-dusted twin midwives of her dream.

Iyer:

I see the book as mostly about lines between gender, lines between caste, lines between race. The artificial limits and barriers placed between people. And Ammu at the center of it, is first the victim of circumstance because she's a woman; she's not allowed to do the things that a man would. And secondly, she is told whom to love. And when she falls in love with a person who's deemed the wrong kind of person because he's from a different caste and a different place in society, lives are lost.

GRAPHIC: THE TORN IDENTITY

Damrosch:

The characters have a kind of a shifting relation to the colonial past. It's kind of haunting the landscape. And in some way the British are long gone and some way they've never left.

Cusset:

Chacko, Ammu's brother, the uncle of the twins, studied at Oxford. And there's this whole prestige. I mean you can...you see this in every...I mean every third world country, you know, anyone coming from England or America and English speaking has such a prestige.

Ch'ien:

My most compelling images of him, is somebody in an English suit who looks like he's walking upward. He has a particular posture, where his back is arched, and he looks like he's always walking up a hill.

Iyer

(Reading) Chacko said; you don't go to Oxford, you read at Oxford. And (b) After reading at Oxford, you come down.

"Down to earth, d'you mean?" Ammu would ask. "That you definitely do, like your famous airplanes."

It really is a dialogue between the two sides of India. 22 years after Indian independence from Britain, the country still doesn't know where to turn. Some are very fiercely devoted just to India. And others have gone off to England and wanted to come back as somewhat Englished Indians.

Damrosch:

Counterpointing the earlier period of the 1960's Roy brings the story up to the mid-1990's, the period that's sort of American globalization, starting to come in. Satellite TV comes bringing the Phil Donahue show, which fascinates Baby Kochamma.

Salie:

Baby Kochamma, the great aunt, stuffs herself with food and watches Donahue and The Bold and the Beautiful.

Iyer:

When I'm in Morocco or Bolivia or Ethiopia, I essentially see The God of Small Things playing out there. Because every one of those cultures is hungry for everything that the global empire has to bring to it, and hungry for American pop culture and Britney Spears and MTV, and Phil Donahue. And yet, doesn't feel that it has to surrender or relinquish its own culture in the process of embracing ours. That's why it's a classic global novel, because I think somebody from Egypt could read this book and say, That is me.

GRAPHIC: SMALL THINGS

Salie:

The God of Small Things is a title that sort of begs for an answer from the time you pick up the book. You want to know well who is the God of small things, and what are the small things?

Damrosch:

Small things are the way the world plays out. They are the little things that you notice. They're the stuff of a novelist's life and they're the little things that can make you stumble. That can throw you, that can cause tragedy all of a sudden.

Cusset:

The whole book is about these details which brings a past to life and which also makes tragedy so visual.

Salie:

In my reading of it, Velutha is conflated with the God of small things. He is an untouchable who has dared to break the love laws as Roy calls them.

Ch'ien:

Velutha who is so close to nature. He's the one that actually appreciates these things and brings them to life.

Roy:

I think what The God of Small Things is about is how the smallest things connect to the very biggest things; how history intrudes into a family's personal life.

GRAPHIC: CHILD'S PLAY

Salie:

Roy is able to create the humor in the book by really being able to get into a child's mind and the way a child perceives the world.

Gikandi:

(Reading) Rahel returned to contemplating toads. Fat. Yellow. From stone to scummy stone. She touched one gently. It moved its eyelids upwards. Nictating membrane, she remembered she and Estha once spent a whole day saying. Nictating

ictating
ctating
tating
ating,
ting

Ch'ien:

Yeah, there's a lot of humor in this book. kids can't find the words for something they're trying to refer to, they'll often use something that is startlingly appropriate even though perhaps never done before. They expose English for a language that can't capture their experience entirely.

Salie:

(Reading): Miss Mitten complained to Baby Kochamma about Estha's rudeness, and about their reading backwards. She told Baby Kochamma that she had seen Satan in their eyes. nataS ni rieht seye. They remained to write- In future we will not read backwards. In future we will not read backwards. A hundred times. Forwards. A few months later Miss Mitten was killed by a milk van in Hobart across the road from a cricket opal. To the twins there was a hidden justice in the fact that the milk van had been reversing.

Iyer:

One thing that took me back when I first read the book and now makes absolute sense is the way in which Roy mixes, a child's point of a view and an adult's vision. A child is taking things in, in the context of excitement, adventure, play, discovery, novelty. And we as adults are seeing these much more sinister shadows.

Roy:

Sometimes it's hard for me to know which parts are fiction, and which aren't, you know, because I did grow up in that village on that river. As an unwanted child or children on the edge of this very wealthy and very traditional self-regarding community. If you had any kind of writers' genes or writers' chromosomes in you, it was a good place to watch a kind of subcutaneous cruelty that's accepted and not spoken about which even today I find hard to believe you know, the things that go on where I live and how little it seems to matter that people are treated in this way and people think in this way.

GRAPHIC: THE UNTOUCHABLES

Damrosch:

For thousands of years Hindu society was based on the caste system, different classes and categories of people who are the rulers and the warriors at the top. There were the merchants, there were the farmers, and then there were the Untouchables, the people who did the dirty work that no one else would do.

Ch'ien:

There are certain rules that the untouchables had to live by, you know, one is that you couldn't wear any apparel in the upper part of your body. Several decades ago, you had to sweep away your footprints, so that people wouldn't dirty themselves by accidentally contaminating their feet with your imprints.

Damrosch:

(Reading): In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads. Not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed.

Gikandi:

Mahatma Gandhi himself went out of his way to get people to transgress caste laws. They're not laws written in the books. They are laws about social behavior Who can you touch? Who can you give money to? Who can you invite into your house? And most importantly who can you love?

GRAPHIC: BREAKING TABOOS

Roy:

Even though I am specifically in this book referring to the caste system in India, it is also generally suggesting how love is such a taboo amongst divisions that human beings

have chosen to make for themselves and what the price that is paid for breaking those taboos is.

Cusset:

Velutha, it's obvious of course is Untouchable and he's a perfect man, perfect carpenter, gentleman, and he becomes Ammu's lover. They have looked at each other once and that one time was enough and the desire between them was so strong and they're going to meet at the river.

Salie:

Velutha is – his stomach is described is – it sounds like a chocolate six-pack. I mean his skin is beautiful and flat and muscle-y and, and there's so much passion there from Ammu.

Gikandi:

The reason Velutha feels he can transgress caste lines is because he's coming from a political faction that has set out to break down barriers of religion, of class and caste. In the politics of India after Independence, Southern India has been dominated by the Communist party. And that's important because what the Communists promised was a secular state where questions of caste would not become important.

Damrosch:

Particularly striking is the way the novel treats the political repercussions of this forbidden love affair. Because the communist party has been promoting the interest of the farmers and the Untouchables to build their political power but it turns out that they actually don't want to cause too much trouble, they really don't want to rock the boat. And in the end they sign off on the betrayal of Velutha once he's caught.

GRAPHIC: Roy'S WORLD

Roy:

It seemed like the last thing in the world I could ever be was a writer because, you know, how do you survive as one. The first time I felt that I was able to pull the tent flaps down and sit down and write I wrote it because I had to. And I never spoke to anybody about it. I never showed it to anybody. It was like living in a little bomb shelter. And by the time I finished it I had no idea whether it would make sense to anybody at all. Within a few weeks of finishing I think it already had something like eighteen or nineteen publishers in different languages.

Damrosch:

Remarkably for a first novel, *The God of Small Things* won England's Booker Prize, the most prestigious literary prize in the English-speaking world.

Ch'ien:

Arundhati Roy used that fame in a really productive way for activism. She's constantly advocating on the behalf of particularly vulnerable groups.

Cusset:

It's not surprising at all that she would contribute to political causes and try to change the world that way. This book for me is really born from a deep empathy with the powerless, the children, the Untouchables, the women.

Salie:

I understand that Roy took four years to write this book and has never written a fiction book since.

Roy:

I knew that I commanded the space to raise a voice of dissent. Suddenly a whole new universe opened, you know, and I began a journey which...which just hasn't stopped. Of trying to make sense and trying to intervene in ways that change the, the nature of the debate of what's going on in...in the place that I live in.

Iyer:

Insofar as the book was tried for obscenity, she's in a very regal lineage there following James Joyce and Henry Miller and DH Lawrence and – most of the great writers

Roy:

When they filed the case in a small district court, they just photocopied the last chapter and gave it and said that this is obscene and is corrupting public morality. It went on for many years. But it was just dismissed recently.

Gikandi:

There were people who thought that it was obscene in its language. And there were people who were just unhappy that a subject such as caste could actually be the subject of a major international award-winning book

Iyer:

Many of us would love to have nay-sayers because that's a sign, a) that one has become part of the global debate and b) that people are engaged in one's book. There's nothing worse than bringing out a book and everyone's silent or just smiles mildly.

GRAPHIC: HISTORY IN LIVE PERFORMANCE

Cusset:

Baby Kochamma went to the police to denounce Velutha in order to save the family name because she found out that Velutha was sleeping with her niece, Ammu. And, you know, a woman from a good family sleeping with an Untouchable, this is destroying the good name of the family.

Gikandi:

All the police need is a charge, which might have some standing however flimsy in the civil courts. So they arrest Velutha and in these situations because everybody knows why you are arrested. The moment you are arrested you're going to be destroyed.

Damrosch:

(Reading): What Esthappen and Rahel witnessed that morning, though they didn't know it then, was a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions (this was not war after all or genocide), of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly. It was no stray mugging or personal settling of scores. This was an era, imprinting itself on those who lived in it. History in live performance.

GRAPHIC: LOVE

Salie:

When you get to the end of *The God of Small Things*, you've lost so much. You've loved these characters and you've seen them beaten emotionally and physically. I feel it's almost a gift that the author gives us, to return to us just this one brief scene of...of love.

Ch'ien:

It's the first moment in which Ammu and Velutha sort of submit to their love for each other. They make love and they sort of, you know, take joy, you know, in this moment with each other. And it's a really beautiful, beautiful passage.

Cusset:

(Reading): They had nothing, no future. So they stuck to the small things. They laughed at ant-bites on each other's bottoms ..at the minute spider who lived in a crack in the wall of the back verandah of the History House and camouflaged himself by covering his body with bits of rubbish. Chappu Thamburan, Velutha called him, Lord Rubbish. They were wrong about Chappu Thamburan though. He outlived Velutha. He fathered future generations.

He died of natural causes.

Gikandi:

The final scene has poetry so that we separate the language of the book, the possibilities of redemption, from the actual tragedy. And I think that is part of Roy's style. She does not want us to be fixated on the violence. We have to transcend it because in the end we have to discover another place where these small stories might actually be redeemed.

Roy:

It isn't necessarily true that just because people die it's a tragedy, you know, in a larger sense. What did they die for? It was...it was...it was something hopeful in the end. It was...it was love. It was...it was a love that was never supposed to be.

Salie:

I think so many people have embraced this book because the characters are so specific and loveable. It's woven through with humor that gives you a relief from the tragic story. But the bottom line is it's about love. It's about loss and love and death and love and love and love. And everyone – everyone can relate to that.

Roy:

(Reading): The secret of the Great Stories is that they have no secrets. The great stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. They're as familiar as the house you live in or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. In the way that you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won't. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again. That is their mystery and their magic.

GRAPHIC: THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

© Annenberg Foundation 2011.
www.learner.org