



First Darling of the Morning

By Thrity Umrigar
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Introduction

First Darling of the Morning is the powerful and poignant memoir of bestselling author Thrity Umrigar, tracing the arc of her Bombay childhood and adolescence from her earliest memories to her eventual departure for the United States at age twenty-one. An evocative, emotionally charged story of a young life steeped in paradox; of a middle-class Parsi girl attending Catholic school in a predominantly Hindu city; of a guilt-ridden stranger in her own land, an affluent child in a country mired in abysmal poverty. She reveals intimate secrets and offers an unflinching look at family issues once considered unspeakable as she interweaves two fascinating coming-of-age stories—one of a small child, and one of a nation.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Are there hints in this memoir that Umrigar would grow up to be a writer? If so, what are the different signposts and events that point to an eventual writing life? What are the ingredients that create writers?
- 2) Growing up in Bombay, Umrigar is exposed to many different cultural identities. When her teacher asks the class to come up with real Indian names for their story instead of English names, Umrigar finds herself at a loss. This theme, of not being in touch with Indian culture even though she is living within it, is very prominent throughout the narrative. What other Indian disconnects from culture does Umrigar experience?
- 3) Umrigar was told by her elders to give up her Enid Blyton stories for more mature material. She felt she had lost a loyal friend, since these stories were always there for her while she was growing up. Did you feel this way during those transitional years when adult material was being presented to you, but you still held on tight to those trustworthy books of your childhood? What role or importance do those early books have in our lives?
- 4) Throughout the memoir Umrigar describes her various relationships and how they changed the way she defined herself. One such relationship was with her friend Jenny, who was from New York City, and made Umrigar feel she had a connection to America. Have you ever known someone who provided you with insight into another culture, whether it be a country, business, educational institution, etc., where you felt more connected and therefore more knowledgeable about than your peers?
- 5) Umrigar has a very strained relationship with her mother that is seen during most of their encounters. Umrigar is often the victim of her mother's unstable emotions and her need to control. How did this affect Umrigar? What signs of affection appear amidst the turmoil of emotions between mother and daughter?
- 6) Umrigar searches for a sense of identity, as India undergoes a similar transition from colonialism. Do you see these parallels throughout the memoir? Do you think India's fluctuating identity had an impact on Umrigar's own journey toward self-identification? Do you think it helped turn her interest towards the United States?
- 7) All of the people in Umrigar's life play important roles in developing who she will become. Which individual seems to have the biggest impact on her life?
- 8) Umrigar constantly desires to escape throughout the memoir. Which aspects of her life is she trying to flee? Do you see any parallels to your own life?
- 9) The feeling of disconnect with India is prominent throughout the memoir. When Umrigar leaves for the United States, do you think she had a difficult time adjusting to a new culture? Do you think she may feel more at home in the United States where she can distance herself from all of the conflicts in her life?
- 10) The memoir is filled with descriptions of India and of a middle class family trying to survive in a time of great political tension. Did any of the details surprise you? Were any of your preconceived notions of India and Indian culture challenged by the author?

About the Author

Thrity Umrigar is the author of the acclaimed novels *Bombay Time*, *The Space Between Us*, and *If Today Be Sweet*. She has written for the *Washington Post* and other national newspapers, and contributes regularly to the book pages of the *Boston Globe*. An associate professor of English, she teaches creative writing, journalism, and literature at Case Western Reserve University. She lives in Cleveland, Ohio.