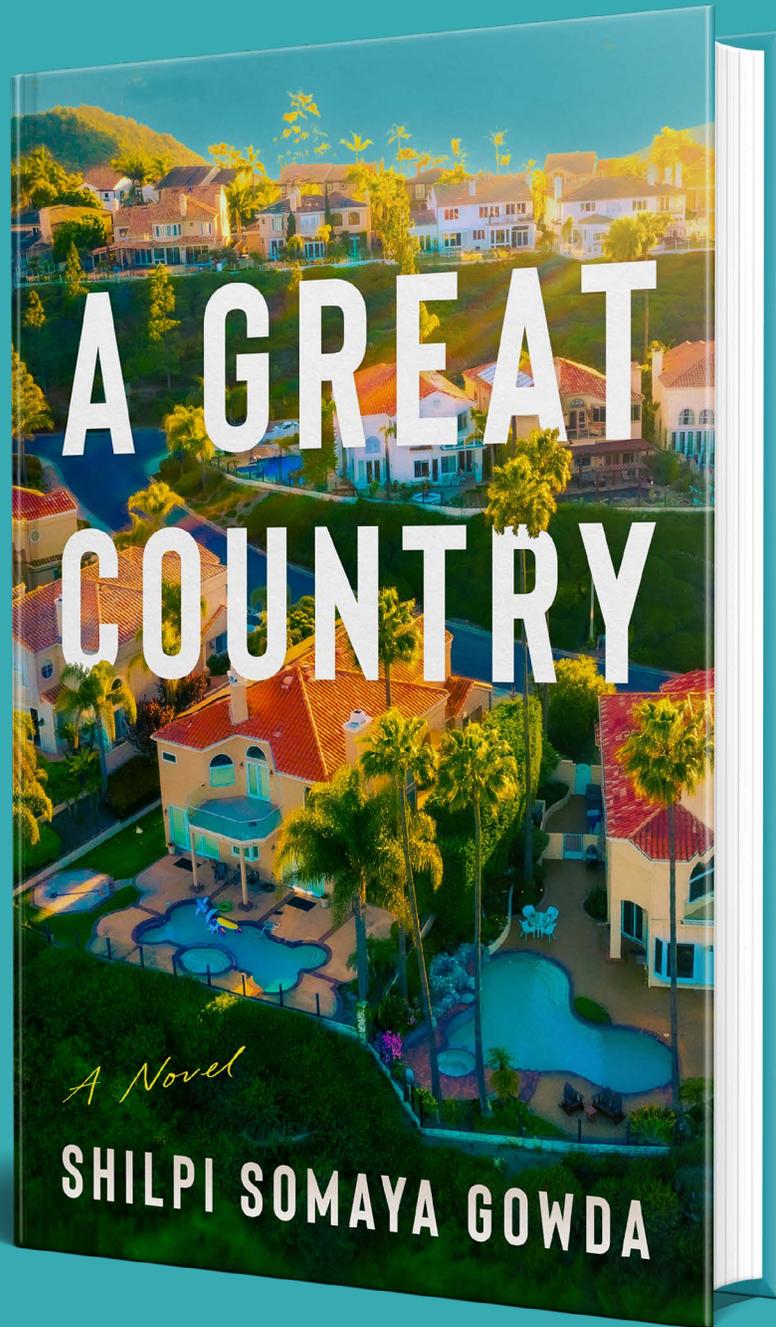


READING GROUP KIT

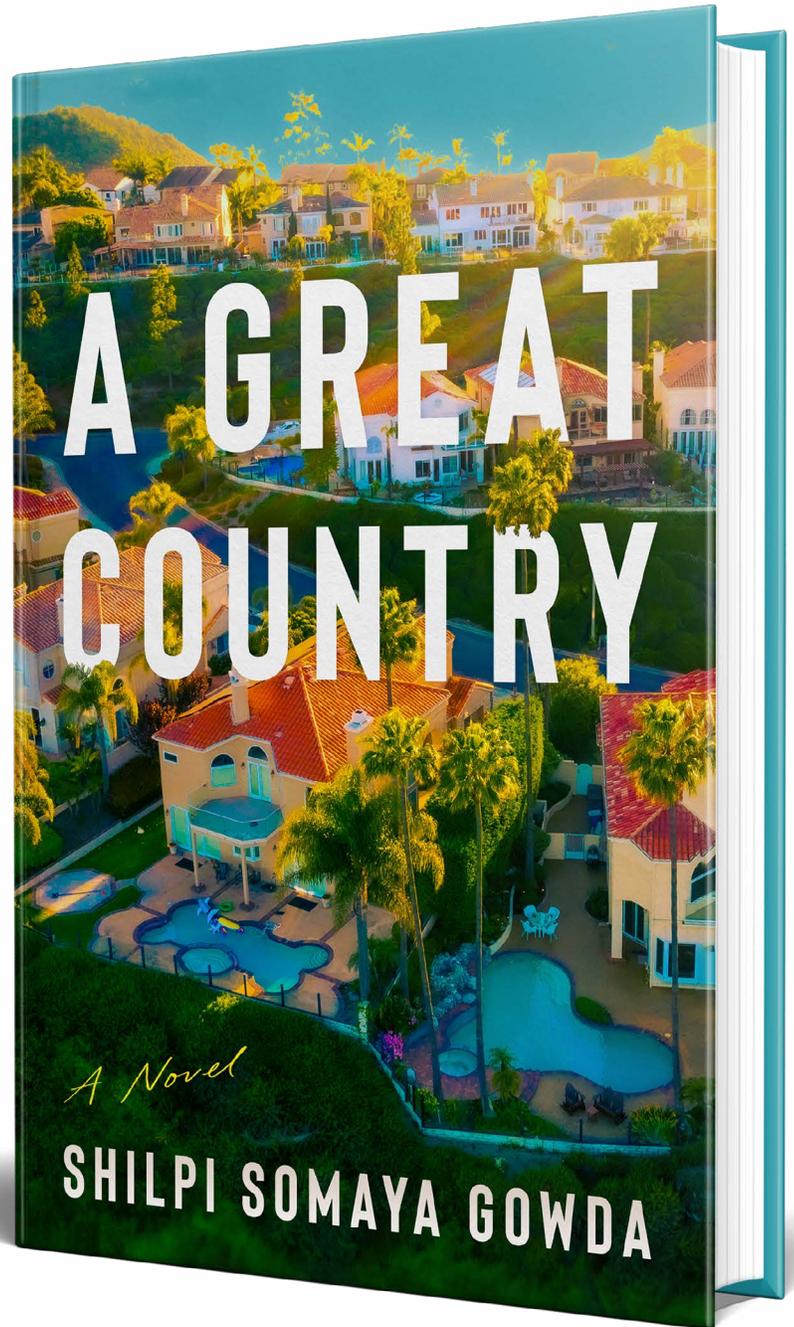


From the *New York Times* bestselling author, a novel in the tradition of Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, exploring the ties and fractures of a close-knit Indian-American family in the aftermath of a violent encounter with the police.

Pacific Hills, California: Gated communities, ocean views, well-tended lawns, serene pools, and now the new home of the Shah family. For the Shah parents, who came to America twenty years earlier with little more than an education and their new marriage, this move represents the culmination of years of hard work and dreaming. For their children, born and raised in America, success is not so simple.

For the most part, the differences among the five members of the Shah family are minor irritants, arguments between parents and children, older and younger siblings. But one Saturday night, the twelve-year-old son is arrested. The fallout from that event will shake each family member's perception of themselves as individuals, as community members, as Americans, and will lead each to consider: How do we define success? At what cost comes ambition? And what is our role and responsibility in the cultural mosaic of modern America?

For readers of *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett and *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid, *A Great Country* explores themes of immigration, generational conflict, social class and privilege as it reconsiders the myth of the model minority and questions the price of the American dream.



Shilpi Somaya Gowda was born and raised in Toronto, Canada. Her previous novels, *Secret Daughter*, *The Golden Son*, and *The Shape of Family* became international bestsellers, selling over two million copies worldwide, in over 30 languages. She holds degrees from Stanford University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she was a Morehead-Cain scholar. She lives in California with her husband and children.

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A CONVERSATION WITH SHILPI SOMAYA GOWDA ABOUT *A GREAT COUNTRY*

Q: What made you want to write this book? How much of *A Great Country* is drawn from your own experiences?

A: In the summer of 1989, I worked as an intern with the Minneapolis Police Department as part of my college scholarship. I developed appreciation for the dangers police officers face every day, and respect for those who put their lives on the line to improve their communities.

Thirty years later, when the Minneapolis Police Department was in the news, I watched in shock and sorrow, as did many others, as the life of George Floyd was extinguished by an officer of the law. I thought more about what I'd seen that summer as a nineteen-year-old, trying to reconcile the many brave and decent officers I'd met with what I now saw in a horrific 8:46 minute video clip. It was not, of course, the first nor the last time such a tragedy would occur. Incidents of police brutality have always been part of our society, but the rise of smartphones and social media have made it more visible, and made us all more aware. In the following months, the discussions I witnessed were fraught and often extreme, with people starkly defending one side or the other, and most eager for a decisive solution. It struck me that these conversations were lacking.

At the same time, in those early months of the pandemic, violence against Asian-Americans saw a disturbing rise in frequency and boldness. A new conversation was starting to emerge in South Asian American circles. The minority group often deemed to be "model" in the U.S. was being forced to reconsider its role and comfort level in this country.

“SHOULD WE BE SEEKING COMMON CAUSE WITH OTHER COMMUNITIES OF COLOR? OR PROTECTING OURSELVES IN DANGEROUS TIMES? WHAT DID IT MEAN TO BE AN AMERICAN IN THIS NEW CONTEXT, HYPHENATED OR OTHERWISE?”

These were the ideas — the social, cultural, political forces in America today — I wanted to explore in this novel.

Q: The novel opens with a pivotal event that involves police violence. How do you hope readers interpret that scene?

I didn't want the story to be overwhelmed by an act of extreme violence, or preoccupied by the internal investigations that ensue after an officer-involved shooting. I wanted the incident to be more ambiguous, in terms of fault and cause. These subtler incidents occur far more often, and form much of the fabric between the police and the community. While they may not be caught on camera or capture public attention, collectively, they do great damage to our societal trust. It's harder to have a productive discussion at the extremes, so I wanted this story to stay in the area of complexity and nuance.

Q: What do you think is the role of fiction when it comes to contentious social or political issues?

A: Much of our perspective is naturally informed by our own life experience. But in the pages of a great story, the reader can also dare to stretch a little — to step into another person's shoes and mindset for a moment, to see how decisions that seem irrational to us might make perfect sense for someone else.

Contentious social or political issues have the tendency to drive people to extremes. It's much easier to dislike someone in the abstract. When that person is your colleague, your classmate, or your neighbor, it can become easier to see their goodness, to extend the benefit of the doubt, or even some grace.

Fiction is, after all, a product of imagination. I'd like to believe it can carry us to a place of empathy, understanding, and perhaps even forgiveness that's harder to reach in our daily lives. If we are to face some of our society's greatest challenges, we must be willing to explore these issues and perspectives in an earnest and open way, and try to find common ground.



Q: Priya, the matriarch of the family, has a profound evolution throughout the course of the novel. How do you think about her character development?

A: Priya is challenged to rethink her world view twice during this story. The first time occurs when she leaves India to immigrate to America. Although it's a move driven by much optimism, it's also destabilizing. A new country, a new marriage, and new parenthood force her to recast her life and future. After Priya adapts to life in the U.S., she finds some comfort until the incident with her son shatters her world view again. After a rapid crumbling of her beliefs, Priya reconsiders her assumptions around success, striving, and safety. She wonders where she went wrong as a parent. She finds empathy for others in new ways. Priya's evolution is in response to a sudden shock, but it's also a compression of how new understanding can come to all of us when we're willing to have an attitude of humility and openness.

Q: You craft a central portrait of friendship between the Shah parents, Priya and Ashok, and their longtime friends Archie and Ricky. How does the bond between these two couples help shape the events in the novel?

A: These two couples are vital to each other in a way that I hope will resonate with many readers. Strangers in a strange land together, they are adopted family without the baggage of family. The Dhillons are familiar enough to provide comfort, but coming from a different region of India, they also provide an expansion of perspective for the Shahs. These friends have known each other at their most hopeful and most vulnerable, and before the responsibilities of careers, homes, and children weigh on them. In the period of crisis in the story, the Dhillons

are both a steady source of strength to the Shahs, and a reminder of what they left behind. In my experience, these friendships are one of the greatest gifts of growing older: drawing on the wisdom, support, and love of those I've been lucky to find along the way, and I wanted to portray that in the novel.

Q: What informed the perspectives of the Shah parents, who immigrated from India two decades ago, compared to their children who have been born and raised in America?

A: Ashok is shaped by his upbringing in a lower-caste, working-class family in Mumbai. There's not much upward mobility for him in India, and his best path out is through education. He idealizes America as a pure meritocracy where he can prove himself, "a great country" as his father calls it. Growing up in a country riddled with inefficiency and corruption, he takes a dim view of political protests that never seem to improve conditions. Priya also invests great faith in playing by the rules and working hard. She believes their struggles to build a life in America will pay off in the lives of their children. Those children, however, are largely impervious to their parents' perspective. The Shah kids are influenced by their peers, media, and American culture. While some of their values align with their parents, on other issues, they seem oceans apart. I think every generation naturally has its conflicts, and cultural differences can complicate these. As the bridge generation (whose parents immigrated, and whose children are fully Westernized) to which I and many of my friends belong, it can sometimes feel like a yawning gap to cross. But it also presents an opportunity to take the best of two worlds and shape a unique set of family values.

“ASHOK IDEALIZES AMERICA AS A PURE MERITOCRACY WHERE HE CAN PROVE HIMSELF, ‘A GREAT COUNTRY’ AS HIS FATHER CALLS IT.”



MEET THE FAMILIES OF A *GREAT COUNTRY*



THE SHAHS are a middle-class Indian-American family in Orange County, Southern California. The parents, Priya and Ashok, immigrated in 2000 after marrying in India, and have recently achieved their ambition of moving into tony Pacific Hills with their children. Deepa (16) is rebellious and adamant about staying at her gritty urban high school, while Maya (14), an assimilating striver like her parents, is thrilled to start at her posh new high school. Ajay (12) is a gangly quiet boy absorbed in his own pursuits, and flies beneath the family's radar until his fateful actions set the story in motion.



THE SHARMAS are the Indian pioneers into Pacific Hills and encouraged the Shahs to stretch their way into the neighborhood. Vikram is a celebrated biotech entrepreneur who is ruthless in business and in life, and we learn how this behavior gets him into trouble. His wife, Veena, embodies the good taste afforded by the Sharmas' wealth, a woman who is always impeccably styled, just like her showcase home. Their two young children are usually tucked away, cared for by an undocumented nanny who commutes from Tijuana.



THE DHILLONS are the Shahs' closest friends in America. They met Archana (Archie), a psychologist, and Shrikesh (Ricky), an IT engineer, in grad student housing when they were all new immigrants. The two couples have been a lifeline for each other ever since, weathering career stalls, marital problems, and parenting challenges. The Dhillons, with their twin teen boys, stayed in the old neighborhood while the Shahs moved up, and their friendship is both a steady source of strength and a reminder of what they left behind.



THE BAKERS live on an estate at the crest of Pacific Hills and are known throughout the region for their eponymous development company, which has created intergenerational wealth and a life of comfort and mediocrity for their children. Spence is an unabashed capitalist; his wife, Miranda, privileged but well-meaning, tries to befriend Priya when their daughters, Ashley and Maya, play field hockey together. Their older son, Chase, toys with Maya's affections, leading to some inadvisable adolescent behavior.



THE GARCIAS* are a typical family at Cesar Chavez High School, where Deepa ends up staying after the Shahs move neighborhoods. Her best friend Paco is an outwardly macho but tender-hearted boy, coming to terms with being gay in his strict Catholic family. After Paco's father, Francisco, dies unexpectedly, Paco becomes the man of the family, helping to care for his two younger sisters and perennially worrying over his mother Lucia's undocumented status.

*This surname is not referenced in the novel; characters are only referenced by their first names.



LOS ANGELES



FIND YOUR WAY AROUND *A GREAT COUNTRY*

DISNEYLAND

PACIFIC HILLS*

BAKERS
SHARMS
SHAHS (NEW)

COUNTY JAIL

CITY OF IRVINE

HINDU TEMPLE
DHILLONS
SHARMS (OLD)
CESAR CHAVEZ HIGH SCHOOL*

JOHN WAYNE AIRPORT

PACIFIC OCEAN

CALIFORNIA (UNITED STATES)

SAN DIEGO

SAN YSIDRO CROSSING

TIJUANA

BAJA CALIFORNIA (MEXICO)

*FICTIONAL

BEVERAGE RECIPES FOR YOUR CLUB MEETING

MASALA CHAI is ubiquitous in Indian households and can be made myriad different ways, but it always means warmth and hospitality. It's an act of love to make chai for someone else, and the first sip brings comfort, regardless of what else is going on. This is the tea that Archie makes for Priya in Chapter 30, one week into her family nightmare. I envision the tea simmering on the stove, with the fragrance of cardamom, ginger and cinnamon filling the kitchen as they all grapple with their new circumstances. Save any extra chai to use in the evening for Chai-Spiced cocktails, as these friends do many nights.

BEST FRIENDS MASALA CHAI (SPICED TEA) MAKES 4-6 CUPS

8 (white or green) cardamom pods

2 whole cinnamon sticks

6 whole cloves

1 inch gingerroot, or 1/2 tbsp fresh ginger paste

1 star anise (optional)

1-2 springs fresh mint leaves (optional)

2 tbsp loose black tea leaves

(or 4-6 black tea bags)

2 cups milk (whole or 2%)

1 tbsp (or more) honey (or sugar)

1. Gather whole spices (cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, gingerroot, star anise) and pound a few times — either in a mortar and pestle, or on a butcher block with a heavy object — just enough to crack open.
2. Bring 4 cups of water and 2 cups milk in a pot to boil.
3. After the mixture boils, add all spices and tea leaves and lower to a simmer for several minutes.
4. Add honey (or other sweetener) to taste. Remove from heat. Pour chai through sieve or strainer into cups.
5. Refrigerate any leftovers for evening cocktails.



CHAI-SPICE COCKTAIL MAKES 4 DRINKS

4 shots dark rum

1 tsp orange bitters

½ cup fresh orange juice

2 cups strong masala chai, cold

Optional garnish: raw sugar, cinnamon powder, cinnamon stick, orange peel, mint, star anise

1. Mix rum, orange bitters, orange juice and chai — shake with ice or refrigerate until cold.
2. Dampen glass rim and dip in raw sugar-cinnamon mixture
3. Pour cocktail into glass over single large ice cube
4. Garnish with orange peel wrapped around cinnamon stick, or other garnish of choice



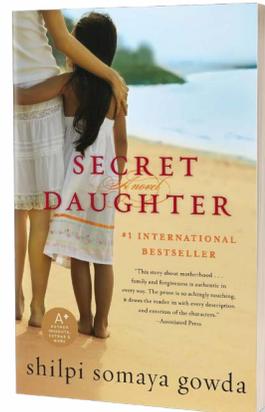
DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Consider the title and how it works with the story. Why do you think the author, Shilpi Somaya Gowda, chose it?
2. Did you find yourself torn about how to feel about any of the characters' reactions or decisions? What moments were particularly controversial to you, and how did they challenge your perceptions? Were there parts of *A Great Country* that made you uncomfortable? Why?
3. Did the alternating perspectives of each character highlight any important similarities or differences about their experiences and how they move through the world? Did you come away with a better understanding of any one character in particular?
4. Vikram says: "No one willingly gives up their place of privilege for someone new." How is this statement proven or disproven by different characters throughout the novel? How accurate do you think this sentiment is in reflecting society?
5. How does including the perspectives of police officers, including that of Officer Diaz and Sergeant O'Reilly affect the story? How did this affect your views on the issue of police violence?
6. Priya and Ashok struggle with the decisions that they've made about their children and their ability to protect them. Deepa struggles with reconciling her parents' sacrifices with the society in which she was raised, Maya struggles with fitting in—in more ways than one. How does family influence your decisions? How has your own family influenced your decisions?
7. Deepa covers for Maya when she skips school, and Maya is highly attuned to Ajay's idiosyncrasies. What do you think of the Shah sibling relationship? What are your relationships like with your siblings or sibling-type people around you?
8. Compare Deepa's friendship with Paco to Maya's with Ashley. Where does each friendship stand by the end of the novel? What do you think would happen between them over more time?
9. Food is important to the Shah family, as well as others in their lives. How is food and cuisine used at different points to demonstrate the emotions of the characters or the state of their relationships?
10. Jonathan Stern and Helen Wu briefly provide accounts of their families' different experiences with immigration to the United States. How do they compare to the Shahs' story?
11. When Jonathan Stern tells the Shahs to play into the "model minority" myth because they are "well integrated into American society," what is he really asking of them? If the Shahs agree to this narrative of the assimilated immigrant family, do you think they are giving up a part of their culture or identity? What would you do in their situation?

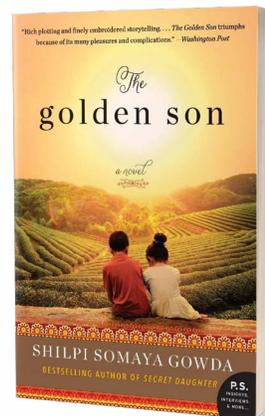


ALSO BY SHILPI SOMAYA GOWDA

“A nuanced coming-of-age story that is faithful to the economic and emotional realities of two very different cultures.”
—*Washington Post*



“An illuminating portrait of a young Indian man who must learn to reconcile his career ambitions in America with the traditional values and expectations of his family in India. Compelling.”
—Vanessa Diffenbaugh,
New York Times–bestselling author
of *The Language of Flowers*



“A deeply involving story of a family falling apart, *The Shape of Family* rings so true.”
—Emma Donoghue, *New York Times*–
bestselling author of *Room*

