

Family Matters, by Rohinton Mistry

reviewed by [Gordon Houser](#) in the [February 22, 2003](#) issue

Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry's novel is as straightforward and unpretentious as its title. No pyrotechnics, no metafictional irony, no attempts to draw attention to itself. Yet, like its title ("family" as adjective or noun, "matters" as noun or verb), it invites multiple readings. Set in 1990s Bombay, this spacious novel tells the story of the extended family of Nariman Vakeel, a retired 79-year-old English professor who has Parkinson's disease and osteoporosis. Family conflict begins in earnest when Nariman falls and breaks his ankle, thus requiring nursing care.

He has been living with his stepson and stepdaughter, Jal and Coomy, in a spacious apartment in a building called Chateau Felicity. The caregiving becomes too much for them, and Coomy, the more aggressive of the two, who resents what she sees as her stepfather's role in her mother's death, convinces Jal to have their sister Roxana care for him.

Devoted to Nariman, Roxana agrees to take him for the three weeks the doctor says his ankle needs to heal. However, the problems mount. Roxana lives in a tiny apartment with her husband, Yezad Chenoy, and sons Murad, 13, and Jehangir, ten. Coomy arranges things to force Roxana to keep her father longer, much to Yezad's distress.

Mistry's accumulation of detail, polished prose and omniscient narrator bring readers into the lives of each character. Our sympathy grows as each tries to make the best of the situation, fails and hurts or is hurt by others. We come to agree with Yezad's boss, Mr. Kapur, that "no matter where you go in the world, there is only one important story: of youth, and loss, and yearning for redemption."

Caught up in the story's surface, we may overlook Mistry's deft weaving of tragic themes that parallel Shakespeare's. Mistry's political criticism is so closely tied to the lives of his characters that we notice but are not put off by it. Bombay itself becomes a character in the story. Like people, the city also experiences youth, loss and yearning for redemption. And the book is sprinkled with humor. One example: Yezad applies to emigrate to Canada but is turned down because he doesn't know

the intricacies of ice hockey. He says, "I think I was better informed about Canada than many people born there. Except for Canadian sporting events."

Another level of the novel regards religion. The extended family members are Parsis--Zoroastrians whose religion emphasizes purity and purification rituals. Mistry includes much detail about this belief system and how its adherents interact with those of other religious systems, particularly Hinduism and Islam. He also captures the universal irony of religions: peace and freedom all too often turned into intolerance and oppression. Yezad finds solace in reembracing Zoroastrianism but becomes tyrannical toward his own son, much as Nariman's father was to Nariman.

While *Family Matters* creates a world with the spaciousness and heft of a novel by Dickens or a Tolstoy, Mistry keeps the plot manageable and the philosophizing minimal. He has Roxana understand "the meaning of it all, of birth and life and death" and Yezad wonder about "the workings of . . . fate." Yet the final lesson of the story comes in the words of the younger son, Jehangir, who writes in an epilogue five years after the novel's main events about "how my world suddenly became a much bigger place, much more complicated, and painful."

The details of this novel's world, especially the particulars of Zoroastrianism, may seem foreign to American readers, yet the struggles of families dealing with ailing parents and economic problems are universal. So, too, are the efforts to live faithfully within one's tradition while seeking to be compassionate. Compassion is yet another, perhaps the primary, focus of the book. As Nariman says in one scene, "In the end all human beings become candidates for compassion, all of us, without exception."