Curry: Eating, Reading, and Race

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Curry is a dish that doesn't quite exist, but, as this wildly funny and sharp essay points out, a dish that doesn't properly exist can have infinite, equally authentic variations. By grappling with novels, recipes, travelogues, pop culture, and his own upbringing, Naben Ruthnum depicts how the distinctive taste of curry has often become maladroit shorthand for brown identity. With the sardonic wit of Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola* and the refined, obsessive palette of Bill Buford's *Heat*, Ruthnum sinks his teeth into the story of how the beloved flavor calcified into an aesthetic genre that limits the imaginations of writers, readers, and eaters. Following in the footsteps of Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, Curry cracks open anew the staid narrative of an authentically Indian diasporic experience.

Naben Ruthnum won the Journey Prize for his short fiction, has been a *National Post* books columnist, and has written books and cultural criticism for the *Globe and Mail*, Hazlitt, and the *Walrus*. His crime fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Joyland*, and his pseudonym Nathan Ripley's first novel will appear in 2018. Ruthnum lives in Toronto.

Curry: Eating, Reading, and Race Details

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From Reader Review Curry: Eating, Reading, and Race for online ebook

Edward Lorn says

I bought this book because I enjoyed the author's fiction debut, FIND YOU IN THE DARK, an amazing psychological suspense novel that stood out boldly in a genre overflowing with unoriginal ideas and basic/boring writing. Naben Ruthnum, or Nathan Ripley when he's writing fiction, is a fantastic author, and this book is a testament to his skill. While I did not understand every aspect of this book regarding Indian culture and cuisine, I was always entertained, and not once did I consider not finishing the book. I hope to one day break bread with this author and pick his brain over a variety of topics.

CURRY: EATING, READING, AND RACE is a great conversation starter and a welcome addition to any eclectic reader's library.

Text Publishing says

‘Drawing parallels between food and literature, Ruthnum writes incisively about the danger of letting a singular narrative abound when it’s a narrative that creates stereotypes and feeds tired notions of what it means to be part of the Indian diaspora…But by playing the messy notions of what a curry is or isn’t, Ruthnum has penned his own currybook, albeit one that tells the story of what it means to be a brown person on his own terms without pandering to external preconceptions of what South Asian writing should be.’
Big Issue

‘In Curry: Eating, Reading and Race*, Ruthnum has written a curry book—the word ‘curry’ certainly appears more times than one could count—but it’s one where he explores what it means to be a brown person on his own terms. It’s not a brown nostalgia tale. There are no mangoes. There are no scattered cardamom seeds…By defying what ingredients he’s expected to put into his curries, what he’s expected to read and what he should write about, Ruthnum issues to other brown writers a call to arms to break out of the box that the west insists on putting them in.’*
Lifted Brow

Subashini says

I enjoyed this extended essay that looks at curry as a cultural signifier. Curry is Ruthnum’s starting point for a rumination on race and representation in pop culture and literature. To use an analogy that will no doubt drive Ruthnum crazy, his prose has just the right amount of fiery wit, spicy humour, and heat.

Particularly sharp is the discussion about what Ruthnum calls “currybooks”, or what others have called mangobooks, or sari-and-spice books. You know the covers: colourful sari borders, mangoes, spices, and maybe the top of a woman’s lovely head of glistening black hair, or a close-up of one artfully kohl-lined eye. The stories might be complex and interesting, or they might be typical diaspora narratives by brown authors that traffic in nostalgia and stereotypes, where the pure, dirty and colourful and backward East is contrasted with the spiritually-corrupt, pristine, cool and monochrome yet progressive West.

“The popularity of these narratives,” Ruthnum explains, “and the relationships that diasporic writers have with the as both authors and readers, are part of another tangled story we tell each other and ourselves, wondering ultimately if they are something that white Westerners are interested in for reasons that would make us uncomfortable”.

Ruthnum is interested in how brown people in the West produce and circulate exoticism of their own culture, either because it’s marketable or because they have bought into the stereotypical narratives that claim the “home country” as the place of one’s essential roots and authenticity. But as any immigrant in the West who’s been on the receiving end of the racist “Go back to _____” knows, there is danger in the nostalgia for cultural purity and the assertion that some people have to go back “home” (i.e. they have to get out of where there are now) to become fully human or to be understood or to find commonality with others.

He writes about Pasha Malla, an author I haven’t read and now want to:

“Malla’s previous work successfully evaded addressing the clichés: in the story collection and novel preceeding *Fugue States*, Malla had sidestepped the curry game completely, delivering closely observed and sometimes surreal character-based stories that had little to do with his racial or cultural origin.”

I take Ruthnum’s point but I also wonder if it’s ever possible to write something that has “little to do with [one’s] racial or cultural origin”. Even in a piece of writing that is expressly not about race or culture or identity, a writer’s background informs the perspective, the worldview, of the story. It’s something I think about a lot in relation to what’s celebrated as experimental or avant-garde writing: it’s very white. If a brown woman wrote like Fleur Jaeggy or Clarice Lispector, would she even have the space and support to nurture her work? Would she even be published if she’s not writing a sprawling inter-generational family saga or something that doesn’t overtly allude to the “immigrant experience” or the “clash” between cultures?

Elsewhere, Ruthnum talks about *Bend It Like Beckham*, saying that the film is a “shallow parade of annoying stereotypes of older-generation South Asian stiffness and their grudgingly dutiful, big-dreamin’ children”. While I love the film, I also recognise his statement as true, and I’ve always avoided thinking too much about it because I know it will complicate my very (simple) love for the cheesy feel-good vibes when I watch it. As he points out, “the film’s power isn’t in how fresh and South Asian it is, but in how familiar and Western it is”. He understands that he isn’t the target audience of Gurinder Chadha’s film, which is probably beloved to many brown girls everywhere, but he also considers a film that made him feel seen in the same light: “[*Bend It Like Beckham*] shares this with *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*: both films are mainstreaming narratives, stories that don’t efface the unique effects of diasporic experience, but do concentrate on just how Western brown people in the West can be”.

Curry isn’t a long read, but it’s a dense, sharp little read that asks hard questions. I’ll just end this with a whole slew of quotes from the book:

“Being second-gen made me counterfeit Mauritian back in my old country, and I continued to ring false to South Asians who were more closely aligned with India, Pakistan, Bangladesh?the core that we scattered from […] If *Indian* is a baggy term, *South Asian* is parachute pants.”

“Shouldn’t approaching pain, alienation, displacement, and a sense of cultural unbelonging come from a place of incomprehension, not a predetermined inquiry that holds that the East has answers to the dissatisfactions of a life in the West? I’m not telling you, I’m asking. But it’s a pointed ask.”

“As brown people in the West, our stories don’t have to explain ourselves to white people, or to each

other?they don’t have to explain shit.”

Wade Arthur says

Really sharp insights and arguments about the importance of particularity and familiarity in fiction, especially as it relates to stories of immigration, dislocation and race. And it's all delivered in a voice that is precise, deprecating, and subtly hilarious. Highly recommended.

Kay says

Loved it. Naben speaks candidly about race, writing and of course food. There is some "serious" humour included as well.

Lauren says

"The cycling story of diaspora, of human movement across great spaces, constant dislocation and relation, is present in mouthfuls of this dish: curry's reassuring power isn't a resurrection of a stable past, but a reminder that the past, and our former countries, are as fractious and adaptable as the present."

In 144 pages, Ruthnum crafts a strong food memoir, cultural criticism, and literary review. The larger theme of curry relates to his Indian cultural background, but he never lived on the Indian subcontinent, instead born in Mauritius, a small Indian Ocean island, and then moving to Canada later in his youth. Ruthnum traces this diasporic link to curry, the quintessential Indian food, and then moves into a critical look at other writers and public figures of South Asian descent. The majority of the book is reserved for an analysis of "currybooks" as he terms them:

"This thread of diasporic literature become a subgenre unto itself, and it's now a sure thing that you'll find a disconnected-family/roots-discovery page-turner with exotic red silks, black braided hair, and perhaps a mango on the cover along the stacked books at Costco..."

He delves into specific books - nearly 20 or 30 titles all gathered in a Works Cited addendeum at the end. Some I was familiar with (Jhumpa Lahiri, Monica Ali, and many others), others were new, but I recognize the genre and what Ruthnum calls the nostaligic look at the home country. He brings in some other cultural highlights too - television and films to continue the point.

After reading this treatise on South Asian diaspora, Ruthnum shares in the Coda about his decision to use a pseudonym, Nathan Ripley, to write thriller titles. It was an intriguing addition to this book about identity to include this at the end. I like when writers showcase their wide range in this way, and I enjoyed exploring more through Ruthnum's essays.

Ankur says

I wanted to enjoy this book more than I did. However, the book turned out to be more educational than enjoyable. It was a series of essays about the depiction of disaporic South Asians in books and pop culture. It was quite eye opening, with some really great quotes in here. It felt like I was reading a sociology textbook at times, which is not a bad thing.

Recommend it for anyone who loves reading about books and representation.

Graham Oliver says

I simultaneously wanted more and less of this book. More because it was smart and did an amazing job of weaving together so much material while remaining coherent and still *saying* something, but less because I feel like the book really should've had a heavier hand at editing. A good deal of over-reiteration, especially in the first half. That said, in writing this I'm thinking about the length of the book - it's already only 110 pages with a lot of block quotes. I feel like it would've been better at 80, but where does it go then as far as publication? Would I have heard about this work if it were only 80 pages? My instinct is to say that it could've been a section of a larger work, but is that a fair expectation just because of the length? I don't think so, but the reality is that I think it's both true that this would've been a higher quality work if it were much shorter and that I probably would not have encountered the work if it had been much shorter. Which is disconcerting.

Anyways, long story short, you should read this.

Ruth says

Ruthnum's essay is an examination of South Asian identity that's told through the lenses of curry and immigrant fiction. He talks about how curry doesn't actually exist as a singular thing and about how South Asian writing becomes unauthenticated by "imagined homelands" seen through a veil of nostalgia and the use of tropes. He talks about how South Asian people are represented in the media (*The Simpsons, Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle, Master of None, The Mindy Project*). And he talks about how publishers and readers are uninterested in books produced by South Asians that are anything other than the immigrant fiction described above, which Ruthnum calls "curry books."

Some of my favourite books would be classified under immigrant or cultural fiction. Maybe because I like learning about other cultures, maybe because I relate to the immigrant experience. Obviously I don't draw any parallels from my experience to that of people fleeing persecution or poverty, but rather the idea of an 'imagined homeland' or imagined alternative self. There's a quote in The Wangs vs. the World that explains this perfectly:

"Every immigrant is the person he might have been and the person he is, and the homeland is at once the place it would have been to him from the inside and the place it must be to him from the outside."

Is any immigrant able to accurately portray the homeland they're no longer fully immersed in? Especially when we know that our memories are fallible...

Ruthnum's essay really made me think about why I like immigrant/cultural fiction. Where before I thought they were untouchable, now I consider whether the ones I've read and enjoyed are authentic. Is there truth in this representation? How does each book contribute to South Asian identity?

Ruthnum also made me think about how South Asian people are often blanketed under a single set of stereotypes or characteristics. We don't always take the time to learn the various nuances or experiences (the differences between Indians and Malaysians, for example). I love the quote he included by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *"The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."*

Curry: Eating, Reading, and Race was a very thought-provoking read.

Andrea says

Thank you to NetGalley and Coach House Books for providing me with a free copy in exchange for an honest review.

This title is part of Coach House's Exploded Views series that aims at looking at most current social and cultural issues from politics, to art, to class, race, and everything in between. Curry is a heartfelt, emotionally engaging collection of essays on what it feels like to be a "brown person" in the West. Ruthnum uses such a broad term to categorize his own culture to reflect how the Western audience tends to clamp together multiple nationalities, very much like any saucy, fragrant rice dish is categorized as curry. He discusses the literature by South Asian authors that is often plagued by the tropes of exoticism, alienation, and nostalgia that seem to be the only elements publishers seek out in writers like himself. The "currybooks", as he calls them. Ruthnum also writes about his own fears of falling into this trap, and what it means to him and his cultural identity. Each essay is an eye-opener and provides multiple arguments to chew on.

It's interesting that while Ruthnum is speaking on behalf of this very specific demographic, I find myself relating a lot as a daughter of immigrants of Eastern European heritage. When he speaks about being a peg forced into a Western-shaped hole with all the accompanying stereotypes, I see myself nod. When he describes his frustration with the endless silks, mangoes, spices, and grains of rice on the covers of South Asian lit, I remember my own gripes with garish red, blocky, pseudo-Cyrillic lettering, onion domes, and ever present matryoshka. It seems that Western audiences crave the stories they consider exotic, yet insist on them being comfortably familiar, shaped according to their own understanding of our foreign-ness. It is incredible how much I can relate to this book!

Anyone who likes to question the to understand the world from multiple perspectives should read this book. It will teach you a thing or two.

Krystal says

This book was a captivating exploration of food, literature, and identity from the perspective of the South

Asian diaspora! I look forward to reading this talented author's upcoming debut novel.

Adam Sol says

A smart and sensitive take on how ethnic experience is served to readers.

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roxi Net says

I wasn't sure what to make of this essay, but I'm pretty sure I enjoyed reading it -- but not more than enjoying curry; in it's many forms defined by the author. I hadn't been aware of how curry can be perceived in various cultures, and it was fairly eye-opening. I hadn't even known of the Mauritius Island off the coast of Africa; overall, I learned quite a bit from "Curry".

Kazen says

A deep and thoughtful look at what Ruthnum calls "currybooks", or books of the South Asian diaspora. Curry has adapted to the many parts of the world it has been brought to, with spices and cream added and subtracted to cater to the tastes of a particular people. Likewise, currybooks charge form based on different factors but have nostalgia, authenticity, and the idea of getting back to one's roots as overarching themes.

> Is there a problem with these expectations in the genre? Only that they constrain and limit the potential methods of expression for brown writers.

Ruthnum examines novels, cookbooks, movies, and touches on his own experience as the son of Mauritian immigrants. The writing is well-done and interesting, falling more on the educational side of things than entertaining. There's nothing wrong with that, but go in knowing that *Curry* will require (and reward) your mental effort. My e-copy is full of highlights that I suspect I'll be returning to as I read more books set in and by authors from this part of the world.

Great for those interested in representation, the immigrant experience, race, and how they're expressed in literature.

Thanks to Coach House Books and Edelweiss for providing a review copy.

Liz Mc2 says

I read this after enjoying an excerpt in The Paris Review: https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2...

There are three essays here, Eating, Reading, and Race, and I might have done better to space them out (if I hadn’t had to get the book back to the library) because there’s some repetition. Ruthnum explores the way a standard definition of “authenticity” limits representations of and writing by brown people (his focus is

mostly on fellow South Asians though the ideas could apply more broadly), who are expected to produce nostalgic, trope-y “currybooks,” stories of finding your authentic self through a return to the homeland/learning to cook your mother’s way, for both white Western audiences and perhaps fellow members of the diaspora.

Most interesting is his challenge to ideas of a stable “authenticity.” Curry, he points out, is always already a product of empire and cultural mixture—chilies, for example, were brought to India by the Portuguese. And the blanket term “South Asian,” though useful in some ways, elides historical and present conflicts and differences between members of this group. Some currybooks are shallow and trope-ridden, others are good. And while the popularity of certain tropes can erase other stories, they are also true to many people’s lives. Ruthnum’s own book has a recipe for one of his mother’s curries and an account of his one childhood trip to his parents’ homeland, Mauritius (he’s more than one remove from India, and I wondered how that influenced his desire to challenge what is “authentic”).

Ruthnum writes of how he’s most at home in diverse cities where he can pass unnoticed, normal. When I first started reading this, I looked him up and discovered he is also thriller writer Nathan Ripley, and I wondered how the choice of an Anglo penname might support his argument about what brown people are allowed to write (and also whether this represented an unsuccessful challenge to those “rules”). That’s something he addresses, to some extent, in the Coda, where he argues that writing a thriller feels freeing because readers want to be surprised, want an author to twist the tropes. Which is true, I guess, but it also comes with rules and expectations, like any genre. But that kind of complexity and nuance is acknowledged in this thoughtful book, which I really enjoyed. (I didn’t even mention his thoughts on Harold and Kumar or Bend it Like Beckham!).
