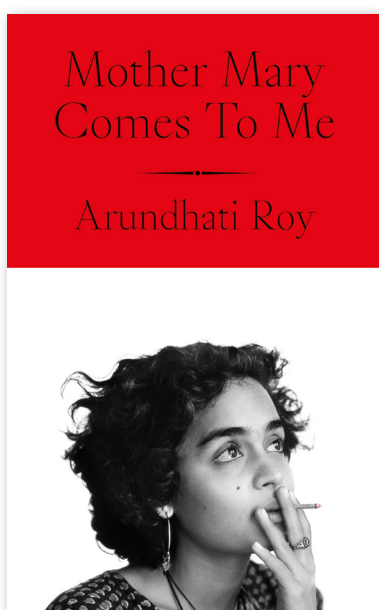


Mother Mary Comes To Me

Arundhati Roy



PLOT SUMMARY

Arundhati Roy's first work of memoir is a soaring account, both intimate and inspiring, of how the author came to be the person and the writer she is, shaped by circumstance, but above all by her relationship to her extraordinary, singular mother, Mary, who she describes as 'my shelter and my storm'.

Distraught and even a 'little ashamed' at the intensity of her response to the death of the mother she ran from at age eighteen, Roy began to write *Mother Mary Comes To Me*. The result is this astonishing, disconcerting, surprisingly funny chronicle – unique and simultaneously universal – of the author's life, from childhood to the present, from Kerala to Delhi.

With the scale, sweep and depth of her novels, and the passion, political clarity and warmth of her essays, *Mother Mary Comes To Me* is an ode to freedom, a tribute to thorny love and savage grace – a memoir like no other.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

At the beginning of *Mother Mary Comes To Me*, Roy says:

'Most of us are a living, breathing soup of memory and imagination – and we may not be the best arbiters of which is which'.

In fact, Roy's memoir is as much an authoritative guide through the history of Kerala in the twentieth century and an insight into her political activism and philanthropy, as it is her memories of childhood and growing up with Mary. As with the best memoirs, Roy reflects on how her life intersects with the larger social changes around her, such as the influence of western rock 'n' roll in her teenage years; with her later involvement in TV, in which she and Pradip attempt to make diverse shows for a British TV audience; or when, later still, she is the subject of three different criminal cases because of expressing her political views in essays and articles. Roy's life, like all of our lives,



Shortlist
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“...[this] is an extraordinarily layered memoir which addresses a complex relationship between mother and daughter...”

ROMA AGRAWAL
2026 JUDGE



doesn't happen in a vacuum; it moulds and shapes with the world around her, at the same time as she is making the world her own with her writing.

Mother Mary Comes To Me strikes the reader not as an imagined history at all, but a real and visceral journey which is vividly recalled and told without flinching. It's this startling honesty, where uncomfortable memories such as the young Arundhati being harassed by the police officer in her flat, being beaten and intimidated by her mother or pursued by her creepy uncle, are told with a calm truth that is breathtaking to read.

DISCUSSION POINTS

One question that looms large for the reader in *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is whether Mary Roy was a good mother?

Roy takes her time to investigate the role of motherhood in her own life, and what 'a good mother' even means. On one hand, Mary was physically and psychologically abusive of her children. When Roy becomes a stepmother herself, she is determined not to repeat the experiences of her own mother-daughter relationship.

On the other, Roy presents her as an admirable warrior and force of nature that builds a school out of nothing and runs it successfully until her own death, inspiring her students with a deep love she seemed to find it difficult to bestow upon her own children: '[the school] was such a happy place. Quite often I found myself wishing I were her student and not her daughter.'

Mary also made it her mission to overturn the Travancore Christian Succession Act, giving Christian women in Kerala equal rights in their fathers' properties, for which Roy calls her mother a feminist icon – and reflects that perhaps it was only Mary's 'crazy-lady' style that would have worked for her, as a single mother and independent woman, in the conservative Kottayam. Roy often notes how difficult her life was, and thinks that Mary lashed out at her children because she had no one else to be able to express her anger to. However, the intensity of her attacks are shocking and saddening.

Finally, Roy reveals that Mary's gravestone describes her as 'Dreamer, Warrior, Teacher' – not a mother or a sister.

What were your thoughts about Mary Roy as a mother? What makes a good mother? Were there good things that Mary taught Arundhati? Roy describes her mother as 'my shelter and my storm'. Can you relate to her ambiguous relationship with her mother? Are we too hard on mothers? How important is a mother in our lives?



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QUESTIONS

Roy says, 'Fathers seemed like an extremely risky proposition to me.' Was she right to think this? Is Micky a good father? Is Pradip?

More than once, Roy says that on the occasions when she is being applauded or praised, she feels that someone else is being beaten in another room as a kind of balance, or as a consequence. Do you relate to this feeling? Do you think this is something that women feel more than men?

How did you feel about the film about Phoolan Devi, and the effect it had on her court case?

Roy writes, 'Literature can join humans in a bond of quiet intimacy the way almost nothing else can.' Do you agree? Is there anything else that provides this connection in your life?

NEXT STEPS

Research and write your mother's life story, or the life story of an important woman in your life. You might like to interview her if you can, or ask if she has any diaries, photo albums or journals she wouldn't mind you looking at. If she's no longer with us, you might have some possessions belonging to her which tell a story. Talk to other people that knew her, or know her still. It could end up being a long story!

Alternatively, write your own memoir, or a short story, about your relationship with your mother or a significant woman in your family. Are there key moments that you remember? Choose just one and focus on it, and build up a number of those moments over time as a longer project. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arundhati Roy is the author of the novels *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which was longlisted for the 2017 Women's Prize for Fiction. She is the author of various works of non-fiction including *My Seditious Heart*, *Azadi* and, most recently, *The Architecture of Modern Empire*.



If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy tells the story of twins Esthappen and Rahel as they try to craft a childhood for themselves amidst what constitutes their family – their lonely, lovely mother, their beloved Uncle Chacko and their avowed enemy Baby Kochamma. In *Mom & Me & Mom*, Maya Angelou presents a stunning portrait of her mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson – the first black woman officer in the Merchant Marines, purveyor of a gambling business and rooming house – and their relationship as mother and daughter.

Want more? Our website is packed full of book recommendations, reading lists, author interviews and more. And our Women’s Prize library is brimming with books, both fiction and non-fiction, that will satisfy every reader from gripping mysteries and inspiring memoirs to magical romances and thrilling historical accounts.

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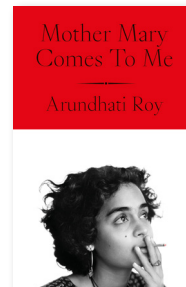
The Finest Hotel in Kabul: A People’s History of Afghanistan
by Lyse Doucet



Hotel Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War
by Jane Rogoyska



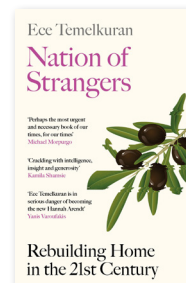
Art Cure: The Science of How the Arts Transform Our Health
by Daisy Fancourt



Mother Mary Comes to Me
by Arundhati Roy



Artists, Siblings, Visionaries: The Lives and Loves of Gwen and Augustus John
by Judith Mackrell



Nation of Strangers: Rebuilding Home in the 21st Century
by Ece Temelkuran

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discusses the impact they have had on her life and career.

The Women’s Prize Trust is a registered charity, and we appreciate donations of any size to support our outreach work with writers and readers from disadvantaged backgrounds. So, however you wish to, **join us and help put more books written by women into the hands of more readers.**

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