

Arundhati Roy: *The God of Small Things*—A Review  
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I have been moved and enchanted by Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Random House, 1997, 321 pages. The book won the prestigious Booker Prize in London in 1997.

I read the book twice; the first time for its plot and the second time to enjoy the beauty of its language. I do not usually read works of fiction.

I had difficulty following the story line initially because the story goes forward and backward in time. The plot is not a linear description.

Set in the southern Indian state of Kerala in 1969, *The God of Small Things* is the story of a 7-year old girl Rahel and her twin brother Estha. The children live with their divorced mother Ammu. The Kerala society is described as being tradition-bound and conventional. The children soon learn that their whole life can change in a day and that love and happiness can be lost in a moment. Sophie Mol is on a visit to their home in Kerala from Britain. Sophie Mol is children's English cousin. She is the daughter of their uncle and a British woman he married while a student in England. While playing in the bayou known as backwaters, Sophie Mol is drowned. Tragedy strikes without notice.

To further complicate matters, children's mother Ammu gets involved in an ill-fated love affair with Velutha. Ammu is an upper-caste Christian woman, while Velutha is an Untouchable, member of the lowest caste in India. For this caste transgression, the untouchable is beaten to death by the police and Ammu is shunned by her family and friends. Ammu age 31 dies "at a viable die-able age." It is true that things can change in a day.

The book is autobiographical in parts. Arundhati Roy says in an interview: "A lot of the atmosphere in 'God of Small Things' is based on my experiences of what it was like to grow up in Kerala. Most interestingly, it was the only place in the world where religions coincide; there's Christianity, Hinduism, Marxism and Islam and they all live together and rub each other down. When I grew up it was the Marxism that was very strong; it was like the revolution was coming next week."

I was enchanted by Roy's writing style: short crisp sentences, novel and memorable idioms and cute turns of the phrase. Roy is master of the English expression even though English is not her first language. The work is very imaginative. People, places and events are vividly described.

Some phrases in the book repeat like the sound of a drum beat—"it is true that things can change in a day, "a viable die-able age," "who should be loved, and how, and how much?" and "History's laws."

The author impressed me with her knowledge of many topics. For example, I learned:

- about Kerala rivers and bayous, “with fish in it; with the sky and trees in it; and at night, the broken yellow moon in it.”
- about the 1960s Kerala politics that brought to power the first “elected” Communist government anywhere in the world
- about backward walking untouchables, and color bars
- about Kerala’s Syrian Christian community, which predates Christianity in Europe
- about the fading Hindu classical art of Kathakali dancers and their attempts at survival
- about history’s laws, and what happens when they are violated

Arundhati Roy is the daughter of a Kerala Christian mother Mary Roy and a Bengali Hindu father. She studied architecture in New Delhi and has two children. She taught aerobics in New Delhi before she became famous as a writer. She is a controversial figure, left leaning and even a communist sympathizer. She is socially and politically active and fights to protect the rights of tribal people in India. She is vitriolic and trenchant. Her words do not spare Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and even the great Mahatma, Mohandas Gandhi.