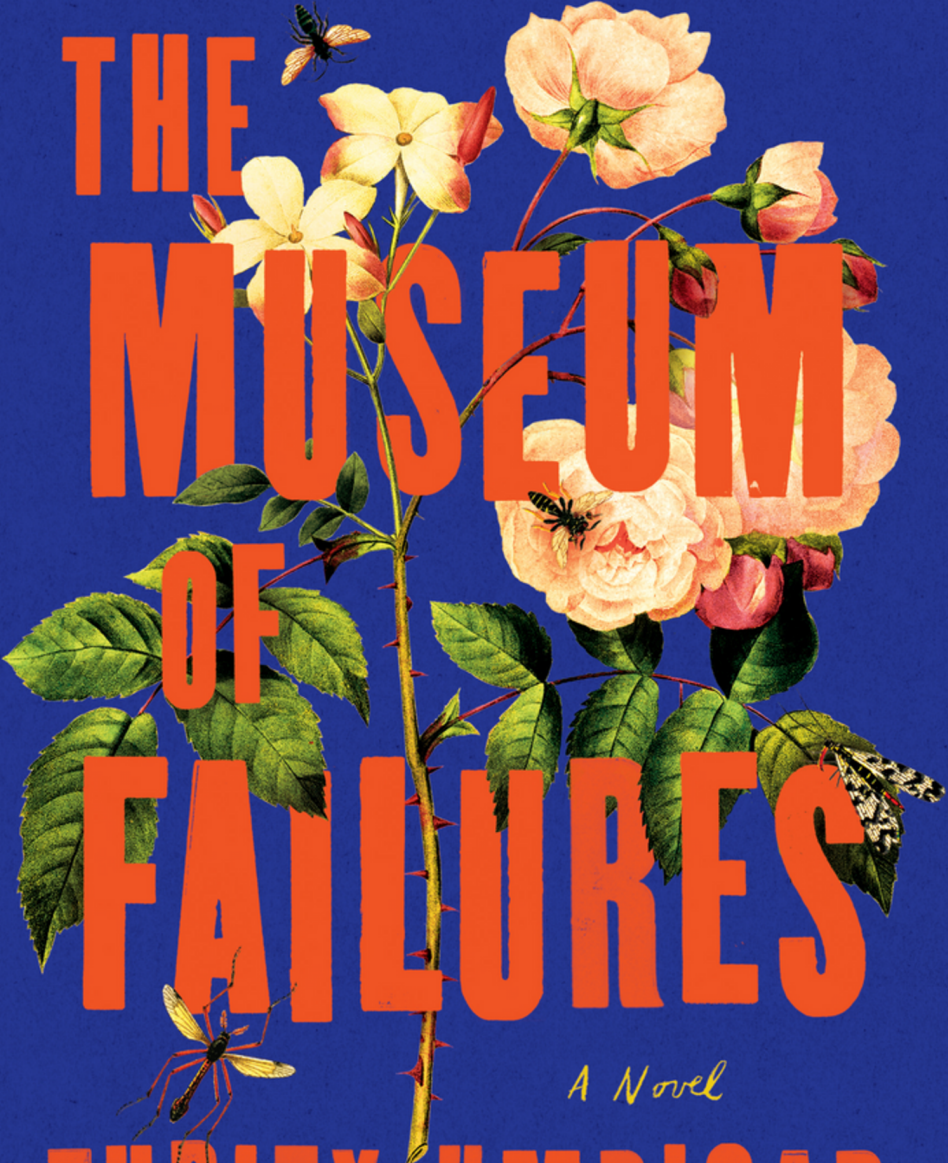


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BOOK CLUB KIT

"A symphony of secrets and lies, love and hate, regret and forgiveness . . . Powerful and engrossing."
—MARLON JAMES, Booker Prize-winning author of *Moon Witch*, *Spider King*



THE MUSEUM OF FAILURES

A Novel

THRITY UMRIGAR

Author of Reese's Book Club pick HONOR

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Readers,

The idea for creating a character like Remy, the protagonist of *The Museum of Failures*, came to me while watching the 2019 movie, *The Farewell*. After a teary parting from her beloved grandmother Nai Nai in China, the main character, Billi, a Chinese-American woman, is riding with her parents to the airport, to make their way back to New York. Billi watches as her stoic mother wipes away her tears as Nai Nai stands outside her home waving goodbye. Leonard Cohen's great hymn of solace, *Come Healing*, plays in the background as Billi sobs her way to the airport.

The splinters that you carried

The cross you left behind

Come healing of the body

Come healing of the mind

Has there ever been a more poetic description of voluntary immigration, its pull and push, its promise and its punishment? And does one ever stop carrying those splinters in one's soul? Can the body and mind ever truly heal from what, in some ways, is the most counterintuitive thing of all—leaving behind those you love?

I felt that scene in my bones, on my skin, my tears merging with those shed by the characters on the screen. I remembered anew that searing pain of leaving behind family and friends, that heaviness with which one departs for the airport, a rending that never gets easier, that hollow feeling of the divided self, transplanted in new soil, yes, but also rooted in another.

I didn't know the plot to *The Museum of Failures* at that moment. But I carried that feeling with me out of the movie theater and thought that I would perhaps try and capture it in a book someday.

Also, years earlier, I'd come across an article about the original Museum of Failure, an exhibit of failed inventions and products based in Sweden. The museum itself had eventually closed, a delicious irony that I cherished. But the instant I read that article, I squirrelled away the name as a possible title for a future book. Once I conceived of the character of Remy—an Indian-American man, successful in his new life in America, but with many unresolved issues about his early years in India, a man always in conflict with the city of his birth—I knew that he would see Bombay, with the sadness and pain it held for him, as a museum of failures. The book came together quickly after that.

Like me, Remy is a Parsi, a member of a tiny ethnic and religious minority in India, practitioners of the ancient faith of Zoroastrianism. Like me, he is not particularly religious. But when events conspire to make Remy spend time in Bombay, he feels a renewed appreciation for this small, tolerant, fun-loving and warm-hearted community in which he was raised. Hovering over that appreciation is the existential dread of knowing that this community is on the verge of extinction. By forbidding religious conversion and having a death rate much higher than their birth rate, the Parsis of India—who, despite their low numbers, have been foundational to the development of modern India—may disappear within a generation or two.

The older I get, the more I feel the need to commemorate this quirky, eccentric, cultured, philanthropic community, which, for the most part, seems to have avoided the fanaticism and bigotries that bedevil so many other faiths. This is a culture that celebrates modernity and prosperity and good food, that educates its girls, that follows a resolutely carnivorous diet and believes that everything tastes better—vegetables, cooked tomatoes, and, in a pinch, even potato chips—if topped with a fried egg. This is the community that gave birth to Zubin Mehta and Freddie Mercury, to Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa, to the nuclear physicist Homi Bhaba, and to Jamshedji Tata, who built the iconic Taj Hotel in Bombay, the first grand hotel in India. This is a community that has lived up to its ancient promise, made to the Hindu ruler who allowed these Persian refugees into India, to make life better for the people around them.

The novel is, to some extent, a paean to this fading culture, so intrinsically woven into the fabric of Bombay—its architecture and its theaters, its art galleries and its science centers.


Finally, this book is also about secrets, corrosive family secrets and the attempt to let light into the dark corners of family life. As Leonard Cohen said in another song:

*There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in*

By shedding light on longtime secrets, Remy hopes to let forgiveness and reconciliation take their place, thereby crumbling the walls of the museum of failures.

I hope you enjoy reading *The Museum of Failures*.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Thrity Umrigar". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Thrity Umrigar

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Remy has so many advantages in his life in America. Why does he still feel divided about living there?
2. What do you think of Cyrus's decision? Do you understand it, or do you think it was selfish? Would you have been able to forgive a parent who made such a decision? As a parent, what kinds of information have you kept from your children and how does that make you feel?
3. How do you think Remy's ignorance of his true past affected his personality?
4. What do you think would have happened had Shirin told Remy the truth? Why didn't she? How do you feel about her choice? How did your feelings for her change as you heard her version of their past?
5. The flashback scenes are sometimes told from Shirin's first-person perspective. Is this a successful strategy?
6. What did you make of Dina's role in this? How did you end up feeling about her choices?
7. Why does Shirin side with Dina after the party?
8. What did you learn about the Parsi community as you read?
9. What do you think of Remy's colleague greeting him daily with "namaste" in a mock Indian accent and how Remy reacts to that? Remy struggles to find the right word for this daily provocation. It's not exactly racism, or is it?
10. How did you feel about Remy's school friends? What does he have in common with them, and it is enough?
11. Why does Remy think of Bombay as a Museum of Failures? How does his past color his view?
12. How do you feel about Remy's motivations for the adoption? Is Kathy right in pressing him to adopt a child from India?
13. What do you make of the fact that it takes a trifecta of women—Shirin, Dina, and Hillary—to give Remy what his heart desires?
14. Both of Remy's parents advise him to not look back when he leaves India. Why? Is this good advice, given everything that he's learned?
15. If you could add one more chapter what would happen?