

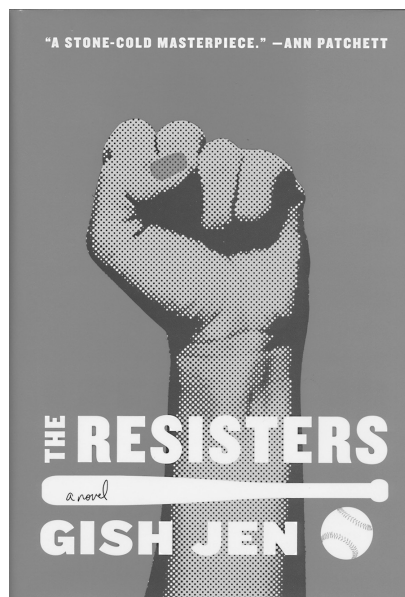
THE RESISTERS

Gish Jen

Alfred A. Knopf (\$26.95)

In this compelling novel by Gish Jen, “Autoamerica” has replaced the United States. The population is divided into the lighter skinned Netted, who have careers, and the darker skinned Surplus, who are relegated to islands of trash called Flotsam Towns. Those who resist are Castoffs, and are dumped like garbage, “winnowed.” As with the best dystopian fiction, much of this tale may be eerily prescient; this is all the more reason to read it now.

Especially if they are Surplus, Autoamericans must be creative to have any semblance of freedom. They are always electronically monitored. They have no public schools and universities. Sports teams are banned. They live in toxic wastelands. None the less, teenage Gwen has a good education, thanks



to creative parents. She, her family, and her baseball teammates are the resisters, whom the author portrays lovingly and realistically. That they resist we know from the title; to tell whether they succeed would be a spoiler. Their resistance makes for a fast-paced novel with exciting, poetic writing.

Baseball seems an unlikely theme for a dystopian novel, yet Jen succeeds as she develops strong characters set against an autocratic, polluted nation in which beauty is elusive. Gwen is smart, sensitive, creative, and one of the best pitchers in the world. “The morning of the tryouts, Gwen knit a few rows of the scarf she was making—a glorious thing, with silver bats and copper gloves and golden baseballs, all against a blue sky with fluffy white clouds such as we did not see much anymore . . .”

This novel stands with the best of dystopian literature. Nearly three decades ago, Marge Piercy in *He, She and It* foresaw a world devastated by pollution, an outcast class of people, and implanted electronics used to control minds. In the more recent *Hunger Games* trilogy, Suzanne Collins similarly depicted castes, with the lowest relegated to gray lives in hinterlands. Since Orwell’s 1984, technology has become more sophisticated, yet the theme is the same: The State will constantly monitor us if we don’t resist. Jen builds on her predecessors, illustrating these dystopian themes with a unique plot and cleverly drawn characters.

— George Longenecker

THE SHAPE OF FAMILY

Shilpi Somaya Gowda

William Morrow (\$27.99)

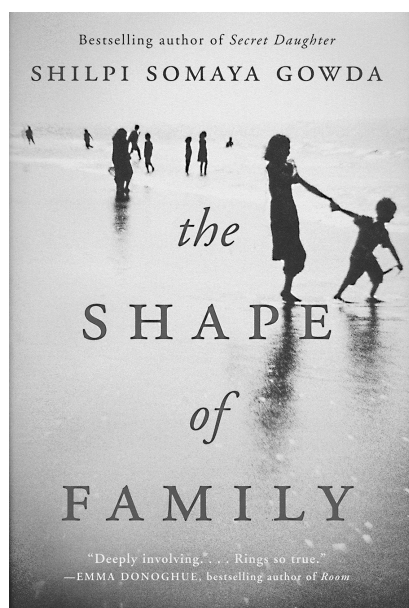
Behind many a normal family lies a dark secret or a stray incident that strains the fabric of their inner lives, human frailties exposed in ways that remain hidden to the outside world. In Shilpi Somaya Gowda’s poignant and occasionally heartbreaking novel *The Shape of Family*, we see a singular tragic event plunge an Indian American family into a tailspin of disintegration, despair, and loss.

With her deft and nuanced language, Gowda portrays her characters’ individual journeys of self-exploration, but also shows how they embrace the one true connection that always provided sustenance—each other.

The novel opens with a family of four: Jaya, a naturalized Indian and daughter of a diplomat, steeped in the arts and proud of her Indian ancestry; Keith, an ambitious investment banker immersed in moving up the corporate ladder at any cost; Karina, aged twelve and facing conflicted teen years while still being a straight-A student and source of inspiration for her parents; and Prem, a precocious seven-year-old exploring his outside world and occasionally getting into trouble. Gowda wastes no time, delving into the emotional bonds of the family members without sounding contrived. We see Karina’s deep affection and protectiveness toward her brother, the occasional churlishness of Keith from tensions in his workplace, and the

delicate balancing act of Jaya in keeping her Indian cultural values intact while remaining true to her children’s aspirations and her husband’s needs. Through simple prose that wastes nary a word, we are drawn into their intimate worlds as they go about their everyday lives.

Then tragedy strikes; the family gradually drifts apart while grappling with grief, but the shift is so imperceptible and nuanced that at first one can feel the emotional tug, a sense of regret at every misstep. It’s almost as if we want them to stay connected and unaffected rather than see Keith plunging anew into his work to distance himself from sorrow, Jaya drawing strength from Indian spirituality and drifting apart from Keith, and Karina dealing with her inner turmoil alone amid a sudden loss of emotional support. As Keith and Jaya’s relationship unwinds, they continue to pin their hopes on Karina’s academic brilliance and admission into an Ivy League school, but



as Karina's emotional stability weakens in the face of her trauma, the reader is well aware of the rift waiting to happen.

Enter a mysterious self-styled cult leader, Micah, who leads Karina down a dangerous path of blind devotion, self-effacement, and recreational drugs, with the specter of latent violence always lurking in the shadows. According to one of the novel's tragic heroes, August, "Micah doesn't believe in labels. They get in the way of your authentic self. It's one of the reasons he started the Sanctuary, where we can all be our best selves." Micah further preys on Karina's vulnerability by placing the blame for her brother's death on her parents, saying "That's why they can't help you with this. They have their own pain consuming them. But you have me. You have all of us now." Karina is increasingly forced to choose between the love of her family and the seemingly ideal world she has stumbled upon until Micah's ulterior motives are unmasked, resulting in disillusionment and despair for Karina, who had eschewed her education for what she felt was a bold move out on her own. We sense her desperation and relief as she eventually makes good her escape, even while the separation among her family members seems vast and bereft of hope. Eventually Jaya, fresh from her own spiritual quest, soothes her daughter's spirit by remarking, "Pain is always there to serve a purpose. . . . And once we've learned what we've meant to learn, . . . we are better than

before." Gowda then delves deep, and by talking through the characters of departed souls she adopts a fresh take on issues of death, our inner voices, and coping with the loss of a loved one.

Jaya, one of the main characters of the book, is cast as a proud Indian woman, comfortable in her worldview and deeply steeped in Indian arts and culture, without appearing hesitant about building a life in the U.S. Gowda's characterization of Keith is also quite balanced, although her portrayal of Karina is the most involved and nuanced of the three. The voice of Prem, meanwhile, instructs the rest of the family and speaks to the lack of emotional maturity in the characters and their obsession with the Inner Child within themselves.

In the end the reader bears witness to the family united and cherishing each other's presence. Life will never be the same and the family's bonds are changed forever, but ultimately, it's the sharing and support system within the family that can truly transform and heal them in ways they could not achieve on their own. As one of the characters intones in the end, one can indeed die without leaving the world, even as the departed souls of our loved ones continue to imbue our lives with meaning and hope. There are many parallels in this novel with other Indian American authors that successfully deal with feelings of emotional loss, despair, and cultural conflict, including Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. Frequently, the themes are diasporic in nature and deal with culture clash as in Lahiri's *The Namesake*, colonialism and its aftermath as in Desai's *An Inheritance of Loss*, or conflict between staying and returning as in Lahiri's *The Lowland*.

Gowda has forged a fresh, new era in realist fiction by depicting the lives and inner worlds of everyday individuals at the nexus of Indian and American cultures. She has the innate ability to transport the reader into the inner lives of her characters with disarmingly simple language. Her novels speak directly to the experiences and yearnings of South Asians within the U.S. and her luminous works should continue to appeal to younger generations of Indian Americans no longer living across two cultures for many years to come.

— Rajiv Ramchandran

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