

Amla Mater

Devi Menon

Yali Books (Jun 15, 2018)

Softcover \$11.99 (146pp)

978-0-9890615-9-9

In *Amla Mater*, Devi Menon presents the sweet and nostalgic story of Mili, a woman who recalls her past in India from her new home in the United Kingdom.

For Mili, it's an *amla*, or Indian gooseberry, that triggers her series of recollections of growing up in India, much like Marcel Proust's madeleine in *Remembrance of Things Past*. She recalls her childhood friend Maya, her first job, former flatmates, and her parents' accident.

But Mili has the present and future on her mind as well. She's living with a man, and is pregnant. One day, Mili notices that a jar of store-bought *amla* pickles has the same logo she and Maya designed as children. She calls the company and reconnects with Maya, its founder; it's a joyous event. Maya has a son, who has a friend; together, she says, the boys remind her of Mili and herself as children. The book concludes with Mili looking toward the future, hopeful that her own daughter's memories will one day provide "a friend, a sister, a little bit of home."

Amla Mater is a meditation on memory, often touching in simple ways, but never maudlin or manipulative. Menon's art is simple but graceful, and carries an air of intimacy as it translates her character's memories to the page. The book's title can be seen as a play on "alma mater," the Latin term for a center of learning that nourishes an individual's development, as Mili's time in India was for her. Recommended for anyone, but perhaps especially for those whose childhoods are far away in memory and in distance.

PETER DABBENE (July/August 2018)

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