

The Isolation Door

Anish Majumdar

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Neil's college theatre group and family members strike a chord with their vivid realism.

The Isolation Door is the first novel of journalist Anish Majumdar, a man of complex heritage. Bengali-born, raised in Montreal, and currently living in the United States, Majumdar entwines elements of experience and perception into fiction both finely textured and eloquently fragmented.

Niladri “Neil” Kapoor is a twenty-three-year-old college student, but his story goes beyond the usual angst and ardor of twentysomethings. Priya, Neil’s beautiful and charismatic mother, is losing her prolonged battle with schizophrenia, a condition which has a seismic effect on Neil and his own hopes for the future. Although Priya has suffered another serious breakdown, Neil enrolls in a theatre program at a local university. The claustrophobic world of his home life begins to open up through his studies, and he meets new friends and lovers. Majumdar deftly uses his protagonist’s drama coursework to parallel the more disturbing drama of his personal reality. Emotions are exposed and manipulated to learn the craft of acting, and Neil is no longer able to be so guarded and self-contained.

As Gary, Neil’s sage and sometimes ruthless professor, notes, “Actors have worked on this stage for over forty years. Fighting demons, opening their hearts, discovering, magically, that they’re not alone ... [w]hat we show others creates the most amazing energy. One with the power to heal.”

Beyond the classroom, however, Neil feels overwhelmed by his mother’s hospitalization and her ineffective and even sadistic treatments. Majumdar enters dark territory here, guiding us through the labyrinth of mental-health care and the strain it can place on families. And while Neil’s college comrades, Emily, Tim, and Quincy, are convincingly defined and intriguingly flawed, the characters of his family network truly resonate. His haplessly determined father, fiery yet vulnerable mother, wealthy Auntie, and jovial, pragmatic Ganguly Uncle are all vivid and memorable.

The spice and savor of bhajis and dosas in yogurt sauce mingle with the packaged turkey and Caesar salad Neil and his father share alone on Thanksgiving. Surreal funeral pyres are followed by cocktails, gossip, and conversation. In the end, Neil strives to use what he’s learned beyond the family to help heal his mother, who lives for “the pauses between conversations” and things “beyond the reach of facts”—just as he does.

The Isolation Door is recommended for its especially appealing narrative voice and cultural contrasts. Fans of Jhumpa Lahiri may enjoy this novel, as may anyone who has experienced the unnerving challenge of coping with the mental illness of a loved one.

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