

Book Reviews: Fast Focus

Any talk of *The Namesake* must begin with a name: Gogol Ganguli. Born to an Indian academic and his wife, Gogol is afflicted from birth with a name that is neither Indian nor American nor even really a first name at all. He is given the name by his father who, before he came to America to study at MIT, was almost killed in a train wreck in India. Rescuers caught sight of the volume of Nikolai Gogol's short stories that he held, and hauled him from the train. Ashoke gives his American-born son the name as a kind of placeholder, and the awkward thing sticks.

Gogol grows up a bright American boy, goes to Yale and becomes a successful architect, but like many second-generation immigrants, he can never quite find his place in the world. A new girlfriend, Moushumi, is also at odds with the Indian-American world she inhabits. She has found an escape in college, immersing herself in a third language — she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind.

There's no cleverness or showing-off in *The Namesake*, just beautifully confident storytelling. Gogol's story is neither comedy nor tragedy; it's simply that ordinary, hard-to-get-down-on-paper commodity: real life.

In *The Tortilla Curtain*, T. Coraghessan Boyle explores an issue that is at the forefront of the political arena. He confronts the controversy over illegal immigration head-on, illuminating through a poignant, gripping story the people on both sides of the issue, the haves and the have-nots.

In Southern California, two couples live in close proximity and yet are worlds apart. High atop a hill overlooking the canyon, nature writer Delaney Mossbacher and his wife, real estate agent Kyra Menaker-Mossbacher, reside in an exclusive, secluded housing development with their son, Jordan. The Mossbachers are agnostic liberals with a passion for recycling and fitness. Camped out in a ravine at the bottom of the canyon are a Mexican couple who have crossed the border illegally. On the edge of starvation, they search desperately for work in the hope of moving into an apartment before their baby is born. They cling to their vision of the American dream, which, no matter how hard they try to achieve it, manages to elude their grasp at every turn.

The RincÔns search for the American dream, and the Mossbachers attempt to protect it. In scenes that are alternately comic, frightening, and satirical, Boyle confronts not only immigration but social consciousness, environmental awareness, crime, and unemployment in a tale that raises the curtain on the dark side of the American dream.

Andre Dubus III wastes no time in capturing the dark side of the immigrant experience in America at the end of the 20th century.

House of Sand and Fog opens with a highway crew composed of several nationalities picking up litter on a hot California summer day. Massoud Amir Behrani, a former colonel in the Iranian military under the Shah, reflects on his job-search efforts since arriving in the U.S. four years before: "I have spent hundreds of dollars copying my credentials; I have worn my French suits and my Italian shoes to hand-deliver my qualifications; I have waited and then called back after the correct waiting time; but there is nothing."

The father of two, Behrani has spent most of the money he brought with him from Iran on an apartment and furnishings that are too expensive, desperately trying to keep up appearances in order to enhance his daughter's chances of making a good marriage. Now the daughter is married, and on impulse he sinks his remaining funds into a house he buys at auction, thus unwittingly putting himself and his family on a trajectory to disaster. The house, it seems, once belonged to Kathy Nicolo, a self-destructive alcoholic who wants it back. What starts out as a legal tussle soon escalates into a personal confrontation--with dire results.