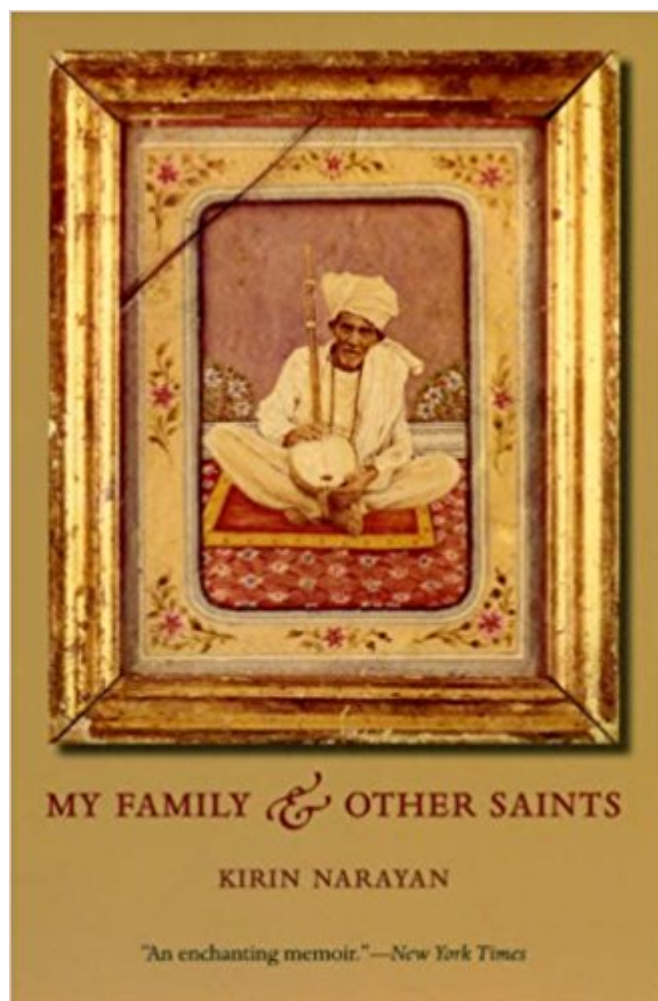


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# My Family And Other Saints



## Synopsis

In 1969, young Kirin Narayan's older brother, Rahoul, announced that he was quitting school and leaving home to seek enlightenment with a guru. From boyhood, his restless creativity had continually surprised his family, but his departure shook up everyone—especially Kirin, who adored her high-spirited, charismatic brother. A touching, funny, and always affectionate memoir, *My Family and Other Saints* traces the reverberations of Rahoul's spiritual journey through the entire family. As their beachside Bombay home becomes a crossroads for Westerners seeking Eastern enlightenment, Kirin's sari-wearing American mother wholeheartedly embraces ashrams and gurus, adopting her son's spiritual quest as her own. Her Indian father, however, coins the term "uruguru" spelled backward—to mock these seekers, while young Kirin, surrounded by radiant holy men, parents drifting apart, and a motley of young, often eccentric Westerners, is left to find her own answers. Deftly recreating the turbulent emotional world of her bicultural adolescence, but overlaying it with the hard-won understanding of adulthood, Narayan presents a large, rambunctious cast of quirky characters. Throughout, she brings to life not just a family but also a time when just about everyone, it seemed, was consumed by some sort of spiritual quest. "A lovely book about the author's youth in Bombay, India. . . . The family home becomes a magnet for truth-seekers, and Narayan is there to affectionately document all of it. Body + Soul" "Gods, gurus and eccentric relatives compete for primacy in Kirin Narayan's enchanting memoir of her childhood in Bombay."—William Grimes, *New York Times*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Gods, gurus, and eccentric relatives compete for primacy in Kirin Narayan's enchanting memoir of her childhood in Bombay." —William Grimes, *New York Times* (William Grimes *New York Times*) —"A lovely book about the author's youth in Bombay, India. Her stable family is rattled when the author's older brother announces he's off to seek wisdom from a guru. Their mother's all for it; their father's skeptical. The family home becomes a magnet for truth-seekers, and Narayan is there to affectionately document all of it." —(Body + Soul)"When the 16-year-old son and brother of a liberal urban family in Bombay becomes enamored of gurus and holy men, the family responds in various ways. The sari-wearing American-born mother, who loves all things Indian, embraces her son's quest. The Indian father does not trust anything that comes attached to religion or mysticism. Throughout, the house is continuously bursting with visiting Westerners seeking enlightenment. The memoir, written through the younger sister's eyes, is informed by her professional anthropologist's view: she brings the food, clothing, and colors of the unique period in the late 1960s to life. She is to be commended for her ability to re-create the era and populate it with a host of colorful characters: visitors, locals, the holy, and, of course, relatives, both American and Indian. They are supported by wonderful photos and her wry observations. A revealingly honest, humorous, and loving portrayal of unique times makes this a splendid read." (Library Journal) —"My Family and Other Saints echoes Gerald Durrell's classic memoir, *My Family and Other Animals*, not only in its title, but in its wonderful humor and lyrical prose. Like Durrell, Kirin Narayan takes the reader to a fascinating world far from our own, and brings to life its myriad sights, sounds and smells, while revealing the profound cultural beliefs of its people. India is just the most complex character among a cast of characters — family members, gurus, hippies, and neighbors — all of whom I now count as old friends." —Judith Barrington, author of *Lifesaving: A Memoir and Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art* (Judith Barrington)"An engrossing account of a childhood spent with Indian gurus and their American disciples. Enlightenment and growing up are tossed together in the riotous and tender household presided over by Didi, Narayan, and an extended circle of family and friends. Kirin Narayan's impressive gifts of memory, imagination, and storytelling carry us into this unexpected world of 'crazy saints;' the journey is so much fun that it's hard to put the book down." (Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, author of *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*)"Kirin Narayan brings her detailed powers of observation and nuanced description, together with her insightful and humorous

appreciation of human beings as quirky individuals and products of their cultures, to present us with a few years in the history of her own family. These are extraordinary years and an extraordinary family, and this delightful and unique memoir documents much more than growing up acutely observant in a turbulent household. It also brings to life an era now almost mythical, when American and European hippies and seekers poured into India looking for many kinds of experiences. I loved this book." (Ann Grodzins Gold, Syracuse University)"Narayan has created a portrait of [her family] that is realistic in its depiction of their flaws and foibles but generous and always loving. . . . Narayan . . . finds the wonder and joy in her family's journey and presents it to us with insight and grace." (Debra Ginsberg Shelf Awareness)

Kirin Narayan is the author of *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon*, and the novel *Love, Stars, and All That*. A former Guggenheim fellow, she is professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Kirin Narayan writes with a voice of profound personal honesty as she reflects about her cross-cultural family. Her generation has carried the burden of bridging cultures between East and West that has so nourished both cultures. The intimate personal pain that she shares so well with her readers both tears my heart and strengthens my identity as a citizen of the world.

*My Family & Other Saints* by Kirin Narayan, Copyright, 2007, The University of Chicago Press, 236 pages. A spellbinding memoir told from the eyes of a middle class, little girl growing up in a small village near Bombay where her Indian father is an alcoholic and her American mother is an expatriate who befriends any and all hippies and drugs (guru searching Americans) that literally come knocking at her door. The story starts in the 1970's and ends soberly in 1985 when the writer is in college facing the loss of her oldest brother, Rahoul. Throughout the book, she tries to live the life of a traditional Indian girl but is surrounded by an untraditional, dysfunctional family who has a penchant for inviting into their lives a score of American tourists who are traveling through India making pilgrimages to various gurus in search of India's ancient, spiritual wisdom. The exoticness of India and its holy men play like a character throughout the book shaping her, her family, and the spiritual seekers surrounding them as they try to grapple with ancient customs & traditions against the backdrop of westernized tourists in modern day India. This book definitely is a rare treat, a true gem of a book. However, a Hindu/Sanskrit glossary would have been useful at times in understanding more thoroughly some of India's customs and heritage. Also, providing more

background knowledge regarding some of the gurus and sadhus (holy men) mentioned would have made the story even more interesting.

Well written narrative about life in India in the 1960s and 1970s.

The authentic voice of the author is delightfully evident throughout this book....I was totally enthralled by the story and captivated by the author's fine ability to tell it.

I really enjoyed this book. I was a "hippie" myself back in the 60s and 70s, but, alas, never made it out of the Midwest. Still, I shared an interest in Eastern philosophies with much of my generation, and watched with fascination as many went abroad to study meditation in India. Kirin Narayan's memoir of her childhood provides a very refreshing perspective on that era -- from the Indian side. The daughter of a spiritually skeptical Indian father and a spiritually adventurous American mother, Narayan's childhood family home in a beach community outside Bombay was quite literally a cultural crossroads. As a sensitive adolescent who just wanted to be "normal," Narayan watched with ever-changing emotions as her many colorful Indian relatives interacted with the almost constant stream of bliss-seeking hippie tourists who sought out her family's home as a crash pad and her mother for advice on everything from renewing a visa to clearing their chakras. She tracks the course of her beloved older brother's spiritual growth, and his relationships with gurus who ended up becoming family friends (and well-known spiritual leaders). There are many entertaining anecdotes and character sketches -- about her Indian grandmother who talks to her cow and always seems to be bumping into the spirits of dead gurus, about an artistic American grandmother who lives in a beach hut nearby, about her enlightenment-seeking brother Rahoul who teases young Kirin and makes little god-statues, about her mother's hopping from ashram to ashram in search of her own spiritual path. And not least about Kirin herself and her struggle to fashion her own identity in this mix of East and West, ancient and modern. The book is sometimes quite funny, sometimes quite sober, and sometimes quite sad, and I was carried along by the narrative. If I had to cite a shortcoming, I'd probably agree with the New York Times reviewer who wished the father's story had been more completely told -- he is both a sympathetic and worrisome presence throughout the book. Also, I would have liked a glossary -- even just a short one -- of the many Indian words and phrases sprinkled throughout the text. Some of them one understands from the context, but others I never did figure out. If you enjoy books that immerse you in another culture and paint a picture through stories and anecdotes of lives very different from your own, you'll like this book.

Novels, movies, and ethnographies on the challenges second-generation Indians face while growing up in the United States are growing in popularity. Kirin Narayan's book echoes this expanding genre, yet offers a different perspective. Rather than taking place in the U.S., her struggle to integrate cultural outlooks occurs in her home near Bombay where, as a child and teenager, she is confronted by a continual barrage of westerners who take over spare bedrooms and hang out on her porch on their way to visit gurus. The book chronicles her relationships and confrontations with her American guru-following, sari-wearing mother and her witty, intellectual, and tragically disillusioned Indian father. As her older siblings leave India for American educations, Kirin is left to find her own way of dealing with the unsettledness of living in two worlds. She seeks consolation for her troubles from both those worlds, drawing consolation equally from reading 19th century British novels and from chanting to the goddess in the early morning. The thread that ties the disparate parts of her life together is her brother Rahoul, who seems to symbolize the creativity and energy it takes to embrace life and death with all its complexity (Rahoul is one of the first victims of AIDS). The book would be appealing to anyone interested in the tricky business of identity formation. Reading this book brought back memories of my own growing up years. Whether we have to deal with the extra challenges of uniting different cultures or not, I think most people will relate to Narayan's struggle to find out who she is in the midst of a chaotic world. It would also, of course, appeal to those interested in India, and particularly the Indian guru scene.

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