



The World We Found

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Thrity Umrigar, acclaimed author of *The Space Between Us* and *The Weight of Heaven*, returns with a breathtaking new novel—a skillfully wrought, emotionally resonant story of four women and the indelible friendship they share. Fans of Jennifer Haigh's *Faith*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, and Katrina Kittle's *The Kindness of Strangers* will be captivated by Umrigar's *The World We Found*—a moving story of bottled secrets, unfulfilled dreams, and the acceptance that can still lead to redemption, from a writer whom the *New York Times* calls “perceptive and often piercing.”

The World We Found Details

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Author : Thrity Umrigar

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From Reader Review *The World We Found* for online ebook

Will Byrnes says

Thrity Umrigar is the internationally renowned author of *The Space Between Us*, an impressive tale of class and family in India. In the *World We Found*, she widens her domain while still writing about caste, class, religion, relationships between women and the need to make difficult choices in life.

Amraiti, Kavita, Laleh, and Nishta were close friends in college back in 1970s Bombay (Umrigar's birthplace). The world in which they lived was vibrant and dangerous. With great optimism that they could effect meaningful change and make their world a far better place, they were bound to each other, sharing politics, demonstrations, idealism, and mutual affection.

Thrity Umrigar - image from The Daily at Case Western Reserve

Decades passed and their lives changed. One married an American and is living in the States. One is still in the closet, but getting closer to opening the door. One is married to a very successful businessman, and struggles to cope with her youthful idealism in a realistic world. And one is caught in a stifling marriage, hidden beneath a burkah. When now-American Amraiti learns that she has terminal cancer, and seeks to gather her friends together one last time, this offers the friends the prodding they need to examine the lives they have led, reconnect with each other and consider where they want to go in the years ahead.

The World We Found is a long-view coming of age tale, (coming of middle age?) not the usual metamorphosis from child to adult but the arrival at a certain place much later in life from the place inhabited, in a time long past, by young adults. Here in the 21st century, four middle-aged women trace their passage from there to here. They look at the events that shaped their lives, the decisions they made, and the values they held then in light of decades of experience. Does who we are remain the same?

One character says that "misery was the connective tissue that bonded humans to each other." There was certainly that with these four, but there was more. If difficulty was an element in the friends' bond what happens when that challenge is overcome, sidestepped, or forgotten? What happens when a friendship is no longer nourished? Can it be revived?

Umrigar uses a very wide stage for her characters. There is particular attention to religious pogroms in India, in both the 20th and 21st centuries. One character visits Czechoslovakia before the fall of the Berlin Wall and what she sees changes her life, and the lives of those around her. We see Amraiti and her family living in the USA. Both men and women are injured in Indian street violence, but the victims are targeted for different reasons and choose far different solutions. Spiritual directions are portrayed, from Hindu to Islam to Parsi to atheism

I was very pleased to see that Umrigar paid attention to her male characters as well. The Muslim man, Iqbal, who wants his wife to wear the burkha is not portrayed as a wild-eyed fanatic, but has a very heart-rending story that explains a lot about who he became, and why he espouses what most of us consider extreme views. The successful business man is shown not only as someone who can cope in the world of money, but as someone who uses his skills for helping others as well, someone who is caring, and who has a spiritual life. People here, male and female, are confronted with difficult situations and are challenged to make moral choices.

Umrigar has offered some images of times that will not be familiar to most western readers. That certainly adds to our appreciation of the complexity of Indian history. But mostly, she has offered an outstanding group of well-developed, interesting characters. You will care about what decisions they make. You will want to know more about what happens to their lives after their page-bound tales end. Umrigar also promotes the idea that our lives *are* worth examining. Socrates would be pleased. *The World We Found* finds a great writer at the top of her game. You will find *this* world one worth exploring.

Reviews of other books by Thrity Umrigar

-----The Space Between Us - 2008

-----The Weight of Heaven - 2009

-----Everybody's Son - 2016

-----The Secrets Between Us - 2018

Ciara says

a middle-aged woman who immigrated from india to the u.s. for college has been diagnosed with an inoperable terminal brain tumor. she decides that she wants to see her three best friends from her youthful days as a socialist revolutionary again before she dies. two of the friends are easily found. one is a successful, if closeted, architect. the other seems to have no job other than a weekly volunteer gig at a women's shelter, but she is all feisty & independent & leading a very comfortable life of privilege with her husband, whom everyone calls mr. fixit because he can fix any problem.

the big problem the women have is tracking down the fourth friend, nishta. they know she married her revolutionary boyfriend iqbal, & it was a big deal because iqbal was muslim (although secular) & nishta was hindu. but no one has heard from nishta in years.

the two women still in bombay, kavita & laleh, visit nishta's parents' house to ask if they have heard from her. nishta's parents were very disapproving of her marriage to iqbal & when they say they cut off ties, they really mean it. but nishta's mother does give them an envelope nishta sent her, with a return address.

they find nishta living in a muslim slum, living with a muslim name (zoha), still married to iqbal, who has become extremely religious. he makes her wear a burkha & adhere to muslim customs. they explain about the sick friend, but nishta says iqbal would never allow her to go. laleh decides it is their duty to help free nishta from iqbal so they can all go to the united states & see their friend. she sends her husband to convince iqbal to let nishta go, but instead iqbal explains why he has become so pious & protective (some might say abusive) toward nishta. it has to do with all the discrimination he faced as even a secular muslim, & i guess i am missing something big about religion & indian culture because i don't understand how someone would know someone was "born muslim" unless they said so. i mean, it's a religion, right? maybe names are a signifier? i don't get it. a lot of what iqbal describes as "unbearable abuse" he suffered for being muslim doesn't really sound like that big a deal either. mostly people saying stuff like, "hey iqbal, did you sacrifice a goat before you came to work today?" i mean, that's definitely not cool, it's really ignorant, but it doesn't really seem worth quitting your job & moving your entire family, including parents & siblings, to a slum, forcing the women to wear burkhas, & forcing your sister into an arranged marriage with a man fifteen years older than her. iqbal was apparently also traumatized by riots in which many muslims were slaughtered by hindus. that is a lot more understandable...but everyone else in his family was also traumatized by the riots & they weren't forcing anyone to live in slums as a result. he keeps harping on how he was just trying to keep

everyone safe, & everyone is alive, so i guess he accomplished his mission, but...

the bottom line here, i think, is just that the writing isn't that good. the whole narrative hinges on the fact that iqbal has made a remarkable transformation, from a freewheeling young revolutionary to a pious & controlling islamic stereotype. this is contrasted against the transformations other characters have made, from determined & idealistic young activists to wealthy, privileged middle aged liberals, i guess. iqbal's transformation was supposedly triggered by the fact that he was of a marginalized identity that couldn't be overcome through sheer force of will, while the others were able to drift back into their safe, comfortable lives because they were privileged already. i totally get what the author was going for; i just don't think it was entirely earned. the way iqbal treats his wife & his sister is justified again & again by the discrimination he has faced as a muslim, but...his wife & sister are muslim as well (nishta converted) & are arguably facing the same degree of discrimination on that front, plus they're putting up with iqbal's rather breathtaking levels of abuse.

at the end of the book, when laleh's husband invokes his privilege in order to thwart iqbal in pretty much the most fucked up possible way, i found myself less taken with the contrast & death of idealism among these characters & more just kind of disgusted with everyone & all out of sympathy. & although the book starts with the premise that a woman has a brain tumor & wants to see her friends one last time (with many asides about how kavirati was always secretly in love with this friend & may finally admit it & see what happens), the book ends before the friends are reunited. in fact, many loose ends are left dangling, which makes it even more difficult to invest in the characters & their journeys.

& the writing...oof. i haven't read metaphors this labored since the last time i checked out some of the bulwer-lytton fiction contest entries. it reads rather like an undergraduate creative writing assignment before the first round of workshopping. give this one a pass.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Traditional attitudes still linger in India, but they're not held equally in all quarters of Indian society. Some Indians are more liberal than many Americans, while others cling desperately to the old ways and steep themselves in fundamentalist practices. Thrity Umrigar highlights that clash between the old and the new in this story of renewed friendships in modern Bombay.

Laleh, Kavita, Armaiti and Nishta were fast friends and fellow revolutionaries in their Bombay college days 30 years ago. Now they've mostly lost touch, and their lives have diverged greatly, leaving them with little in common but a shared history. When Armaiti reaches out from America with news of cancer and a dying wish to have them all together one last time, they reconnect and prove that the sisterhood stands stronger than ever.

The contrasting experiences of these four women reflect the complex challenges facing a nation caught between the past and the present.

Laleh enjoys a marriage of equals with Adish, her college sweetheart.

Kavita is a successful architect. She is a lesbian, happy in her current relationship and aching to reveal her authentic self to her old friends.

Armaiti is the deserter. She's the one who ran off to America, and worse yet, married an American.

Nishta also married her college sweetheart, but Iqbal is no longer the liberal socialist she married. He has

returned to his fundamentalist Muslim roots. He keeps Nishta on a short leash, essentially a prisoner in their home.

Nishta's plight becomes pivotal as the friends race against time and Armaiti's imminent death. This is where Laleh's husband Adish really shines, faced with divided loyalties and possessed of a chivalrous heart. Can he live up to his old reputation as "Mr. Fix-It" and come through for them one more time?

The World We Found has a lot to recommend it. Character development is superb. The presentation of modern Bombay's paradoxes is nuanced and fascinating. The book even has some expertly-paced suspense that will keep you turning pages right up to the end. Some readers may find the regularly shifting points of view distracting. It does at times interrupt the fluidity of the story, but Umrigar handles the transitions more deftly than many contemporary authors.

The essence of this story is that there are no friends like old friends. Neither changing fortunes nor the distance between us can break those bonds.

Larraine says

I'm not sure how I missed one of the finest novelists I've read in a long time. Having just finished this wonderfully compelling and beautifully written novel (which I read in less than two days because I was virtually unable to put it down!), I realize that I have found an author who I will want to go back and read everything she has written. I'm already making a mental note to look for her next book.

We meet four women now approaching 50 who have grown apart. One moved to the United States and married a well-off American. Two of the women are still in touch. They have all lost touch with the fourth who married a Muslim in defiance of her family. Now one of the women is dying and wants to see her friends one more time. As the women come to grip with the news that their friend is dying, they remember their college years together. The dying woman also remembers and wants to see them just one more time.

The things we thought we knew, the things that were black and white when we were young - what happens to them? "Life happens." What a wonderful, joyful, sad, and exhilarating statement. Ms. Umrigar knows that nothing is simple. Life isn't simple. This is one of those books with so many layers of thought and ideas. It would make for an extremely lively book club meeting - one that might even go late in the night!

Ms. Umrigar knows how to weave a skillful narrative about these four women against a backdrop of class, money and political power. Life is messy and glorious. It's a good lesson told in a joyful way.

Josiphine/Tessa says

2.5

This book was just okay. I really enjoyed reading Umrigar's other book (*The Space Between Us*) and it's stuck with me, even a year later. Compared to SPU, this book felt kind of light and simplified. The characters were not as compelling--possibly because there are so many of them--and the plot took a long time to get off the ground. I thought that this was going to be about their time in America but it really is not: the book ends when they are just getting on the plane. It instead focuses on the time leading up to the trip, which was okay

but not what I was expecting.

I'm not expecting to remember this book or really think about it again. It held my interest while I was reading it but it was not as hard-hitting as *The Space Between Us*.

Emily Cait says

Without spoiling anything: not sure if Umrigar was trying to start a discussion about how Muslims are depicted/expected to behave with Iqbal OR if this is actually Umrigar's idea of how Muslim men treat women (there are no other Muslim men in the book to offer an alternative POV).

Not sure how I feel about this book yet. Perhaps research + a re-read will help decide.

Connie says

In the late 1970s, four women friends were politically active students in Bombay. Thirty years later, Armaiti has terminal cancer and wants the other three women to fly to her home in America for a bittersweet reunion. Laleh lives a comfortable life in Bombay with her successful husband and their children. Kavita, who has a secret relationship, is finally at peace with her lifestyle. Nishta, a Hindu woman who converted to Islam at her husband Iqbal's request, has become a virtual prisoner in her home since he became deeply religious. Iqbal turned to fundamentalism after Bombay's Moslems were beaten, murdered, and forced from their homes and jobs in 1993.

Umrigar tells about their politically active student days when they protested against injustice, and the world they found now. India had gone through many social changes in those thirty years. Although there has been improvement, there is still widespread discrimination against people of certain social classes, religions, and gender. Some husbands still treat their wives like second-class citizens. The author shows us a slice of life in India through the lives of the friends and their spouses.

The final pages of the book are rather open-ended. While the college friends may not have the burning idealism of their youth, they are still willing to help someone in a meaningful way thirty years later.

Kali says

Don't look to this book to teach you anything authentic about India, Bombay or even young college-going youth in the 1970s which is where the four women Laleh, Kavita, Nishta and Amraiti are supposed to have forged their bond. Characters seriously lack dimension and the story-line is silly. The two Parsi protagonists are very (upper) middle class Mumbai and imho pretentious.

The characters go to college (and presumably obtain a nondescript 'degree') only as a waystation en route their ordained position in the social strata of the city.

Provides some insight into Parsi life-style and customs since the author is Parsi but none at all into Hindu (or Christian) except for silly remarks about Parsis being the best of the Indian 'minorities'. Yeah, right!

The Muslim community in Mumbai has hatred and prejudice (and again ignorance) poured on it although this is done somewhat cleverly to hide the inherent bigotry . This is done to pander to Indian and US readership at this point in history, no doubt. Ka-ching!

Also gratuitous, ignorant insults towards Germans and a caricature for "Ingrid" the German lesbian. Give me a break...

Alena says

I won this through First Reads and finished it in one day because I never wanted to put it down. I don't know what it is about books by Indian writers, but they seem more lush and intimate to me than many American or British authors.

Here Umbrigar is exploring the bonds forged by 4 women who came of age in the tumultuous India of the 1970s. 30 years later an illness brings them together again. As you would expect, there are lingering dramas, unclaimed passions and misunderstandings. All those issues are handled deftly by the author as she shifts narrators among, not just the four women, but some of their husbands as well.

She explores the cultural differences among these friends, both in light of their idealistic youth, and from the perspective of "middle age." Muslim, Parsi, athiest, wealthy, American -- all these labels come into play without being stereotyped.

Well done.

Kim Fay says

This is my third of three installments of reviews of books by new (to me) writers I encountered at the Tucson Festival of Books. I was on a panel by Thrity and was enthralled as she discussed her novels. When I read "The World We Found," I was impressed by the tenderness shared by the characters. They felt real to me, with many flaws, but at the same time I liked how Thrity focused on the soft place in their hearts ... and by this I do not mean their weaknesses. This is the story of four idealistic women who went to university together in Bombay in the late 1970s; they drift apart and decades later, one is dying of cancer (this is not a spoiler), and she wants to reunite with her friends before she dies. The obstacle is that one of the women's husbands has become a religious extremist over the years and scarcely lets his wife leave the house; the possibility of her flying to America to see her dying friend is out of the question. Told from multiple points of view, the novel takes readers on the journey each woman (and two of their husbands) made from youth to middle age. I appreciated that when it came to events of major consequence in the women's lives, Thrity did not overwrite. Some of the most devastating moments are given only a few paragraphs, or even sentences, and yet this somehow makes them stronger and more memorable -- they linger on the edges of the story, coloring everything that's taking place in the present day. This is definitely a good book club book. I'm looking forward to reading more of Thrity's books.

Adite says

I wish there was a rating between "It was ok" and "I liked it". Maybe a 2.5 stars... an "I liked it in parts."

First what I loved about this book. I LOVED the premise of the book. How four friends (Laleh, Kavita,

Nishtha/Zoha) connect with each other when one of them (Armaiti) is dying of cancer. I loved the fact that it is set in 1970s Bombay, a city in which I was growing up at the same time. I loved how it touches upon issues that we tend to sweep under the carpet, such as the compromises that we make with our ideals, the easy justifications, how we deal (or rather prefer not to deal with) our prejudices. I loved the evocative descriptions of Armaiti's feelings (and her inner world) as she inexorably inches towards death.

As for the parts that didn't appeal to me -- I thought the author missed out on a huge opportunity, given its great premise, to let the friendship evolve into something more real, more dramatic, more intensely-felt. The friends never have anything but love for each other. Also, the characters remain kind of stuck in the past, they don't really evolve with the 'world that they found', and even when they reject the past (as Armaiti rejects her old college-days ideologies), this rejection comes not from powerful, viscerally felt emotions or observations or situations, but wishy-washy situations. The only character that feels real and changes/evolves/grows (even if it is in a negative way) is the character of the Muslim guy, Iqbal. Nishtha's character arc of a liberal Hindu girl who falls in love with and marries her Muslim college mate, Iqbal, could have been more powerfully rendered, but instead the author falls into the trap of exploring her dilemma in a cliched way. But most disappointing of all is Laleh (the protagonist) who perhaps has no character arc whatsoever. The sub-plot of Kavita's lesbian relationship felt forced and unreal.

Overall, I was hugely disappointed at the missed opportunities and the potential of telling a real, dramatic story set in the hugely dramatic times of 1970's and 1990's Bombay.

Dana says

Ugh. FINALLY, after too many weeks, finished *THE WORLD WE FOUND*, by Thrity Umrigar. Dull, anticlimactic, annoying. The premise was great: 4 women who were great friends in college in India 30 years ago, are about to be reunited at the request of the one of the 4 who moved to America. That 1 has a terminal brain tumor and wants them all to be together again. The book ends before they are all together in America, and we are left not knowing when or if she dies. One of the women in India, a former hindu radical, is now married to a very conservative muslim who forces her to wear a burka and to cut off all ties with her past. Her only hope to get to America (will she stay there forever?) is to escape in a dangerous cat and mouse scene. Another of the women has a modern marriage but fears she is the cause of her friend's brain tumor. I could go on, but won't bother. I normally LOVE the Indian writers. Not this time. I forced myself to finish, but there was no satisfaction in doing so.

Diane S ? says

What a terrifically engaging read. Covers so many different aspects of life, like friendship, political activism, how and why people change, how they lie to themselves to stay with something that is not working. This book could have easily been maudlin and sad, concerning a group of four women who had been great friends and had drifted apart yet come together again when one falls ill, but instead it is a poignant and interesting story. Taught me things I didnt know, about Bombay, India and the 1993 riots between the Hindus and the

Muslims, about the Indian culture and how important the little things in life are. Now I need to go back and read previous books by this author because her writing as quite won me over.

Anna says

This definitely wasn't my favorite Thrity Umrigar book. I did read it to the end, just to find out what happened. Although unlike others before me, I thought the characters were well filled out, and even interesting and varied. I did find it dragged on a bit, and I found the airport scene disturbing and unresolved, and felt I was left hanging at the end, especially about Iqbal's sister, who risked so much to help her sister-in-law. I think there could be a sequel to this novel, and I would probably read it. I think I gave it 3 stars, as it was sort of a dark novel to me, I didn't REALLY like it, nor did I love it, so Three stars meant: I liked it, but that's it.

Just a pet peeve of mine: Why do reviewers think they need to tell the whole storyline of a novel when giving a review? It is not meant to be a book report! I never read those reviews in their entirety because they ruin the book for me. Just give your opinion, what you liked and didn't like, but not the whole damn story. Just sayin...

Susanne says

Oh my. What a powerful and moving read! I read this somewhat reluctantly for a book group, fearing it would be just another meandering 'women's friendship' tale, albeit with an exotic setting to add some interest, but it was SO much more than that! I'll never think of the tensions between social classes and religious groups in India (or other parts of the world) in the same way again. I didn't have to like the frustrated muslim husband Iqbal to understand the rage his situation engenders; and my easy western identification with Laleh and her kind, wealthy husband Adish didn't make their casual sense of entitlement any less horrifying. Other readers have complained that the ending was unsatisfying: I think it was just right -- perfectly appropriate that the story literally closes 'up in the air.' The tension of the last pages had me literally on the edge of my seat, and I expect I'll spend days brooding over what the most likely outcomes could be. We're meant to realize that this story is far from over, and to THINK about consequences.
