



A Suitable Boy

Vikram Seth

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Vikram Seth's novel is, at its core, a love story: Lata and her mother, Mrs. Rupa Mehra, are both trying to find—through love or through exacting maternal appraisal—a suitable boy for Lata to marry. Set in the early 1950s, in an India newly independent and struggling through a time of crisis, *A Suitable Boy* takes us into the richly imagined world of four large extended families and spins a compulsively readable tale of their lives and loves. A sweeping panoramic portrait of a complex, multiethnic society in flux, *A Suitable Boy* remains the story of ordinary people caught up in a web of love and ambition, humor and sadness, prejudice and reconciliation, the most delicate social etiquette and the most appalling violence.

A Suitable Boy Details

Date : Published October 4th 2005 by Harper Perennial Modern Classics (first published 1993)

ISBN : 9780060786526

Author : Vikram Seth

Format : Paperback 1474 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, India, Historical, Historical Fiction, Asian Literature, Indian Literature

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From Reader Review **A Suitable Boy** for online ebook

Arah-Lynda says

I finished Vikram Seth's tome **A Suitable Boy** this Sunday morning while enjoying my coffee and a white chocolate, coconut Christmas cookie that my daughter had baked just last night. All right, all right, I confess it was actually two white chocolate, coconut Christmas cookies. But who can blame me really. They were so good. Not too sweet, she had gone ahead and reduced the suggested amount of sugar, resulting in a perfect blend of sweet with just a hint of salt and a nice moist and chewy texture. And just the right size, one is not enough but two, hmmmmmm just right. Yum yum.

I wish I could say that this book also displayed just the right balance. Set in the early 1950's in a newly independent India, **A Suitable Boy** focuses on the lives of four large families, connected by marriage or friendship, though most notably that of Lata Mehra, whose mother Mrs. Rupa Mehra, is intent on conducting an agonizing (hers) search, that pulls in all members of her immediate and extended family, to find a suitable husband for Lata.

The story immerses you into the daily details of these families' lives and indeed of India at that time and place. No stone is left unturned and no player too insignificant to escape the authors unquestionable skill in drawing rich characterizations and beautifully imagined settings. Through these people the reader is swept into a multiethnic society during an unsettling time of religious fervour and political unrest. It is all here: love, beauty, squalor, hatred, the caste system, prejudice, appalling violence and heart stopping tenderness.

For me however there was just way too much detail. I really did not need to dive so deeply into the political manoeuvrings involved in passing a bill or the entire history of their philosophic or cultural rituals. There was so much detail, so deeply layered into the story that it detracted from, rather than enhanced my enjoyment of it. I found myself remembering John Galt's speech way too often. I mean there is such a thing as too much icing on what is an already delicious cinnamon bun.

It is unfortunate, I believe that the editors did not cut some of that detail away, allowing the story to blossom in its own right as my daughter did with the sugar in her cookie recipe.

Ted says

Have to remove this one. I know I liked it, but at over 1300 pages, and occupying almost 2 inches of shelf space, it must go.

I have to admit I remember little about the novel, except enjoying the story very much when I read it. (Given that, it could be argued that a 3 rating would make more sense? But no.)

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Previous review: Song of Solomon

Random review: Inventing the Middle Ages

Next review: The Sweet Forever *George Pelecanos*

Previous library review: The God of Small Things

Next library review: The First Man in Rome

Margitte says

The book blurb says it all. I will only add my comments.

While reading this monumental novel of 1535 pages, I was wondering how much of the original offering was edited out to end up with this number of pages as the final result! I also wondered, while ploughing through it, how much of the existing book can be cut out and still leave the essential core. Probably half of it. Compared to Barbara Kingsolver and Yung Chang, Vikram Seth needed twice as much pages to tell similar stories as these two authors.

So yes, it was a long-winded journey: a story of India after Partition, that was told through the eyes of four extended families with each member profiled to the last red spot of *paan* on the teeth. This book really celebrates the good, the bad and the ugly of humankind. Mrs. Rupa Mehra, with her daughter, Lata, get the train rolling when it becomes time to find a suitable husband for Lata. India in all its colorful splendor is presented to the reader to almost the puking stage, to be really honest! But how fascinating the journey!

Enough! Enough! Enough! I often wanted to just run away, and I did, since it is the end of the financial year (February) and what is normally a quiet relaxed month turned out to be one of the craziest in recent history. But each evening I sneaked off to bed and grabbed the book as though my life depended on it.

In retrospect this book was amazing. The drama lasted the entire 1535 pages and that really makes this book outstanding! There's no villains, only ordinary people writing their own histories while living their lives.

I do not want to add too much spoilers and blow the plot, or give away the story. But I cannot leave out one of the most outstanding moments in the book, for me: it was the passing of a mother and it had me crying like losing my own.

(view spoiler)

Much of India's modern history could have been my own country's. Even the name of political parties, the titles of new bills, the speeches made in parliament, the way landowners got treated, sounded like it was written for South Africa. Much of the events are disturbingly similar. In fact, it is a blueprint and it turned my stomach upside down. Not that it is a surprise, but it is still upsetting to experience.

I liked this book. It was a brilliant presentation of Mother India and all her beautiful children.

Faroukh Naseem says

I have always been impressed and awed by writers mainly because of the research and effort they put in to write the perfect tale and their imagination in bringing together characters and the details that govern each characters features...

Vikram Seth has to be applauded for his effort (which seems to be such a petty word) when we talk about this Herculean book!

****Extremely Mild Spoilers****

The Basic plot is about Mrs. Rupa Mehra wanting to find a Suitable Boy for her youngest daughter, Lata but the story dwells into a lot lot more...Politics, Religion, intolerance, Shoe Making, Farming, Teaching...its like he has described what India literally would have felt like through the eyes of Mothers, daughters, ministers, Royals (Nawabs), Religious people, Actors, Musicians...You name it and VS has given you at least a hint on their insights to India.

At its heart it really is about India, and how India deals with suddenly having to take care of itself instead of being told how to 'take care' of itself by the British....

The way minute details are dealt with is exemplary and the vocabulary used is very easy to comprehend although some words were totally new to me.

The way he understood Islamic laws for example prove the detailed manner in which he must have spoken to religious scholars. And how he describes the shoe making process starting from the sacrifice of the animal...to the finished product...

The chapters are long (80 pages approx) and they swing between Brahmputr/Calcutta/Delhi/Kanpur.

The court scenes really bored me and more so because i reached the first one on a weekend where i excitedly woke up at 6 to read.

I've never really appreciated poetry because of the cheesiness but i loved some of the poetry included in the book (and VS being a poet couldn't refrain from including dozens) , And i was glad!

Some of the characters you long for while reading and VS made sure you cant get enough of so many of them.

One Character i was so excited about was Zainab but she doesn't really show up later in the book.

My favorites were and you will know why when you read the book - Maan, Zainab's Cameo, Dipankar, Saeeda Begum, Dr. Durrani, Rasheed.

But my absolute favorite hands down was Mrs Rupa Mehra. I have used so many tags to mark pages of hers...! The way i could picture so many of my aunts acting like Rupa Mehra was hilarious....!

That is one fictional Character i could literally relate someone to :)

I don't want to get into too much details and spoil a mammoth book for anyone of you who might be interested in giving away at least a month of your reading time...But i really wish people would read such books to give them not just a great reading experience but a lifetime experience about how life has always been complicated, not just for us but our parents and theirs...

Sarah says

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is one of the best books I've ever read in my entire life. It's a long book. But it is very engaging; I managed to read it in one stretch, with a break to sleep, while I awaited the movers to take me and my belongings across the country. To my chagrin I had completed it before my flight, and when it finished I didn't want the book to be over, I wanted to go back and re-read it from the beginning. It is one of the best books about life in India I've ever read, it is the anti-Kite Runner book. There is nothing trite or stereotyped about the characterization; it believably describes elements of society that are even oblique to people within the mainstream of modern Indian society; the plot is not simple, nor is it a convoluted mystery story.

Writing this up I think I should go get it and read it again. Like most of my favorite books I gave it away a long time ago.

Shriya says

A fact : I never ever understood how postpartum depression works or why women suffer from it.

Yet another fact: Having finished *A Suitable Boy* arouses similar feelings in a reader as postpartum depression in a new Mum.

Why?

Well, by the you finish reading one of the longest English novels ever written and the longest English Novel written by an Indian and that Indian is Vikram Seth, you're kind of used to the story, the characters, the way their life goes on. So, when you turn the last page of something that has sprained your wrists for days, you certainly feel the sense of accomplishment which matches in effort if not in pain, to delivering a baby but at the same time you're depressed you'd NEVER be able to read this book again for the first time, that its time with you in that unique one to one bond, though cherished, will never be intimate in the same sense as before.

Having expressed my feelings, thus, I will now proceed to review one of my favourite author's biggest masterpiece.

To all those who wonder and have asked me, "Is there a dull moment or dry spells in the book?" : NO! Not one! Not half a page and no, my blind love for Vikram Seth doesn't make me say so. In fact, as I said weeks ago about *The Color Purple*, it is as complete in every sense as a book could be.

I love how Vikram Seth seems to have a laugh at everyone including himself. I love how his mother's life was the theme for this story. And I love how if you're remotely interested in anything in the world, be in

Schubert or Classical Indian Music, Post Independence History or Indian Politics, Religion or Riots, English Literature or poems by Urdu/Arabic/Persian poets like Mast, Daagh, Minai or Rumi, you will not fail to love this book!

Vikram Seth's characters are a class apart, supremely hilarious even in the gravest of situations, laughably filmy and over dramatic and yet as close to being real as characters could be. They don't claim to be perfect, they all have flaws, you will probably be angry at one or more of them during the course of the novel but you will not fail to love them despite all their faults!

Should you read it?

Certainly! I don't see why being daunted by the length of the novel, you should miss on something so exquisitely well written as this book.

Will you regret spending a thousand bucks/ a couple of pounds/ a few dollars?

Not at all if you claim to love literature for it is the finest piece of contemporary literature there is!

Any tip for how to go about it?

1.If you're Indian, try and think of Bollywood film stars for every character. That makes the book even more fun and more lucid than it already is but that's entirely optional!

2. Have someone else read it with you, a friend or someone from your book club. You need to keep discussing it and gushing about it with someone. It's like *Harry Potter* that way!

More than just a good read! Rather, a BRILLIANT read and already my novel of the year!

Tea Jovanovi? says

Remek-delo Vikrama Seta! MUST READ... Odli?an prevod Brane Radevi?... Još jedna indijska pri?a koja je postala savremeni klasik...

James says

This is a novel of India set in the early 1950s just after the partition, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* provides a window into the culture and history of India at that juncture in its history through a romance about a young girl, Lata, whose mother, Mrs. Rupa Mehra, is searching for a "suitable boy" for her to marry. The novel's opening section succeeded in immediately arresting my attention. Some of the most notable aspects of the novel include the subtle ways that the author suggests the continuing cultural influence of England, from the impact of literary awards to the reading habits of several of the characters. Moreover the novel successfully includes all aspects of Indian life and nationality from the caste system to religious differences between Hindus and Muslims to the impact of changes in business and government life on the four families at the center of the novel. Seth's novel is a tour de force that demonstrates his skill in writing, knowledge of India, and his ability to marry the charms of a classical romance novel within the broad reach of a realistic family

and nationalistic saga. Without disclosing the plot details I can only assure the reader that it is worth all 1400 plus pages. The thematic development of the clash between Hindu and Muslim cultures is particularly well portrayed with the impact of historical events on the national level mirrored by dramatic events among the main families whose lives fill the plot and subplots of the novel. It is rare that such a long book is both an entertaining read and an intellectually satisfying challenge. Vikram Seth has succeeded in both areas.

El says

For Thanksgiving 2010 I spent the day finishing up *Infinite Jest*. For a while there I thought maybe I'd always try to finish up some sort of behemoth on Thanksgiving day, since the day to me means staying in my jammies and watching *The Godfather* on TV while I read. The food involved can easily be made while reading or the Boyfriend steps up and makes the yummys. But then last year I went with a shorter book choice which I was able to read all on Thanksgiving. Boy, was that a mistake.

But then it so happened that I wasn't able to finish *this* book when I had anticipated (which was about a month ago), so it wound up getting to be close to Thanksgiving. Could I finish it off on Turkey Day? You challenging me??

Yeah, I finished it today. And it feels good. It's a different kind of feeling than what I experienced with *Infinite Jest*. *A Suitable Boy* is another whopper of a book, but even the parts I didn't necessarily understand still made more sense to me than most parts of *Infinite Jest*. *Infinite Jest* was *work*, albeit a fun flavor of work most of the time. *A Suitable Boy* felt like I was in a different country (hello, India!), totally immersed in the culture.

When I get right down to it, that's what I have loved about *A Suitable Boy* - the flavor dripping from each page. This isn't just a story; it's an experience. The reader experiences the music, the food, the costumes, the scents, the emotions, the politics, and the family dynamics. I can't remember the last time I read a book with so many *layers*. I started out reading this alongside *Freedom at Midnight*, hoping that book would help me understand some of the politics I didn't know much about going into it. And it did, probably more than I had originally expected.

At first my biggest question was why Seth decided to write a book about the Republic of India in 1952, when it seems the logical (maybe laziest? easiest?) starting point should have been 1947, during the Partition. But then a couple things became obvious to me. One was that 1952 was an important year too, it was an election year. Anyone who pays attention to politics in our own country knows just how important an election year is, and just how effing crazy everything gets. That's not exclusive just to the United States. Now imagine it's the *first* national election after gaining independence. Yeah, that sounds crazy-making.

The other thing that became obvious was what I read in the author bio at the beginning of the book (which, for some reason, I didn't read at first). Vikram Seth himself was born 1952. Now, maybe that's just a coincidence, but maybe it's not. Maybe Seth was writing his own personal history in these 1400+ pages. It's evident to me he poured his heart and soul into this work. Seems to me this was an important novel for him to write. Makes sense to me.

Somewhere in all this political turmoil and unrest is a love story, or a few different love stories. There's a huge genealogy here - the family tree at the beginning of the book helps considerably, but an understanding of the entire tree is not completely necessary in enjoying the book. The chapters flow by easily, it's not a

difficult read, aside from the fact that the book itself breaks your wrists as you hold it. As one reads, the genealogy comes together on its own. My point is, don't stress about it.

I was most invested in Lata's story since that's where the title comes from and also I am a girl and sometimes find myself drawn towards other girls in literature. Lata and I have had completely different upbringings and family dynamics, but I can still relate to her on some level. She's an interesting character, and I believe she's the first woman in her family to have a sense of - and desire for - independence. Finding 'a suitable boy' and getting married is not her goal in life, not at this point. She's educated, going to college, she gets a part in a school play, she has some love interest(s), she's doing her own thing. She's doing *her*.

But society isn't ready for that. With all of the changes the society is going through, fully independent women is not quite where it is yet in 1952. Lata's family isn't thrilled with it and ultimately Lata needs to make a decision with how she will proceed.

Seth makes it all seem absolutely riveting. I don't know what else to say.

Rumor has it (although I think it's beyond rumor stage at this point) that Seth is working on a sequel, *A Suitable Girl*. If it's anything as wonderful as *A Suitable Boy* I think we're all in for a treat. If, however, as I fear, he's just banking on the popularity of *A Suitable Boy*... then it could be quite the loser and snoozer. But he's won me over with this one and I will be excited to see what comes next. And, because I'm a serious nerd, I hope it's as much a whopper of a book as this one.

"Oh, I don't know how it grew to be so long," said Amit. "I'm very undisciplined. But I too hate long books: the better, the worse. If they're bad, they merely make me pant with the effort of holding them up for a few minutes. But if they're good, I turn into a social moron for days, refusing to go out of my room, scowling and growling at interruptions, ignoring weddings and funerals, and making enemies out of friends. I still bear the scars of *Middlemarch*."
(p 1370-71)

Rebecca says

[I get THAT ending? Some review

Lynne King says

This is a magnificent saga, which left me breathless and awaiting the next word, set in India at the beginning of the fifties.

"*Suitable Boy*" by Vikram Seth's "epic love story set in India. Funny and tragic, with engaging, brilliantly observed characters, it is as close as you can get to Dickens for the twentieth century. The story unfolds through four middle class families - the Mehra's, Kappoors, Khans and Chatterjis. Lata Mehra, a university student, is under pressure from her mother to get married. But not to just anyone she happens to fall in love with. There are standards to be met and finding a husband for Lata becomes a family affair in which all the members are to play a part."

“The richness of this book is remarkable. What with marriage, religion, customs, etc. it has been a really fascinating read for me.”

India's caste system has four main classes (also called varnas) based originally on personality, profession and birth.

I'm eternally grateful to Fionnuala for suggesting that I may perhaps like this author. Do I like Vikram Seth? No, of course not. I just happen to adore him. I think that he's absolutely splendid. I get the same pleasure reading this book as when I'm eating lobster or tasting a superb Burgundy wine or whatever sublime other pleasures that we have in life...My...

I must confess that I had never heard of Seth before and I wouldn't if it hadn't been for Goodreads. It's one of those remarkable books that becomes a reference book that once read, you can open it at any page and still get that continual enjoyment. It's a wonderful sensation to savour...

It's always so difficult for me to write a review on a book that I “love to death” but that has been the case here. This is now my second favourite fiction book after “The Alexandria Quartet” and I could never do that justice. Bravo for the past for Durrell and for the present for Vikram Seth.

In conclusion, Fionnuala and Seth – thank you for giving me so much pleasure. What a serendipitous find. I love this book.

Whitaker says

I know some GR'ers didn't really cotton on to the style of this book. And maybe it was because I read this while on vacation in India itself, but wow! Just W.O.W! It's a fucking long book—1,500 pages. And every single page was worth the time I spent on it and more.

If *Midnight's Children* is India's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, then *A Suitable Boy* must be its *War and Peace*. It's got the same melding of personal lives seen in amidst great national events. Instead of the romance of Natasha and Pierre, it's that of Lata and her three suitors. Instead of the war with France, we have the post-Independence and post-Partition politics of a nation searching for an identity. And instead of descriptions of war, we get exchanges of heated debate on the floor of the state parliament, and the passing of a contentious bill.

Seth looks at the lives of four families intertwined by marriage and friendship. And all the detail—and it is indeed loving detail—is very very necessary to immerse you in the India of the 1950s, and what it felt like to be alive then. We get details of village life, life in the city, life of the different castes, business life, religious life, modern life, traditional life. It's all there. And it works in tandem with several great stories of love and passion, and what these mean, both at the level of family, romance, and nation.

Word has it that Seth is working on a follow up (not sure if it's a sequel as such) to be called “A Suitable Girl”. I, for one, can't wait.

Rajat Ubhaykar says

I don't even know where to begin gushing about this one, so panoramic is its scope and so delightful its literary charms. Vikram Seth's 800,000 word magnum opus is lengthier than War and Peace and more compulsively readable than a well-paced soap opera. It is an event in one's life. I call it a soap opera, because fundamentally, the plot is a family drama, revolving around the wooers of its principal character, Lata Mehra.

Set in the early 1950s and written with a forceful simplicity akin to R K Narayan, it covers 18 months in the entwined lives of four families - the Mehra, Kapoor, Chatterji, and Khan - and through these characters proffers an intricate peek into a most fascinating (and neglected) period in Indian history. It is an uncertain era; the subcontinent has been Partitioned on religious grounds and India is making its wobbly transition from feudalism to democracy. The First Great General Elections are to be held in 1952 and the central legislative event is the abolition of the oppressive zamindari system, and with it, an entire way of life: courtesans, Hindustani classical musicians and purana khidmatgars. Caste is beginning to make itself felt in electoral calculations, and Nehru remains a force to be reckoned with. On this level, A Suitable Boy is painstakingly researched historical fiction. Seth writes with a level of detail that is unreal. As one reviewer notes, "he writes with the omniscience and authority of a large, orderly committee of experts on Indian politics, law, medicine, crowd psychology, urban and rural social customs, dress, cuisine, horticulture, funerary rites, cricket and even the technicalities of shoe manufacture."

A Suitable Boy is undoubtedly one of the biggest achievements of world literature and will remain one of my all-time favourites. I feel lucky to have read it at this point in time since I can't wait for its sequel coming out next year, the appropriately titled A Suitable Girl.

Alex says

Dynasty in India is what this book really is, for all its allusions to Victorian novels. But sure, yes, it's longer than War & Peace, ensuring its place on the Books Your Friends Didn't Finish list:

The Hawking Index according to me

- Brief History of Time
- Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell
- Suitable Boy
- Every book published before 1940
- The Bible

And it shares with War & Peace a panoramic, many-charactered view of an entire society, against the backdrop of real events - here, the 1951 abolition of the feudal Zamindari system, and the taut relationship between Hindus and Muslims in post-colonial India, which had just divided itself in two in order to pack most of its Muslims off to Pakistan.

Vikram Seth's real love is for Jane Austen, though, and the major plot is pure Austen: whom will Lata Mehra marry? The suitors include ambitious Haresh, who reads pessimistic Hardy; the poet and Seth stand-in Amit

Chatterji, who (along with Lata herself) reads Austen; and the Muslim Kabir, who is in no way suitable and does not read novels (but he does act in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night).

The other major plotline involves the growing up of Lata's brother-in-law Maan Kapoor, who has an affair with musical courtesan Saeeda Bai. These two families, the Mehras and the Kapoors, twine together throughout the book, along with the Chatterjis and the Muslim Khans. It can get confusing. Here are the major characters:

MEHRAS (Rupa & dead husband)

Arun (business douche) -> Meenakshi Chatterji
daughter Aparna

Varun (milquetoast)

Savita -> Pran Kapoor

Lata

KAPOORS (Mahesh and Mrs.)

Pran (professor) -> Savita Mehra

Maan (Saeeda Bai, best friends with Firoz Khan)

Veena -> Kedarnath Tandon the shoe guy
son Bhaskar is good at math

KHANS (Nawab Sahib of Baitar)

Begun Abida Khan, sister-in-law politician

Zainab (daughter)

Imtiaz

Firoz (into Tasneem, Saeeda Bai's younger sister; best friends with Maan Kapoor)

CHATTERJIS (Justice & Mrs.)

Amit - poet

Meenakshi (a shitty person) -> Arun Mehra

Dipankar (the religious one)

Kakoli (silly but fun)

Tapan (nobody cares about Tapan)

EVERYONE ELSE

Saeeda Bai the singing courtesan & her sister Tasneem - (view spoiler)

LN Agarwal (incompetent politician)

Raja of Marh (asshole with gay son)

Dr. Durrani (Muslim mathematician)

Kabir Durrani (potential match for Lata)

Hareesh (ambitious shoemaker, potential Lata match)

Malati (Lata's best friend)

Whew. There are of course family trees at the beginning of the book that you should bookmark. My book club has also put together a glossary that may help you. (Thanks Kaion!) And I even made a Suitable Playlist on Spotify! It contains many of the songs mentioned in the book. The "Rise traveler, the sky is bright" song is "Uth, Jaag, Musafir."

That's a lot of stuff, and this is a lot of book. It'll fully immerse you in Indian culture, which is neat. It's not

difficult; it's still a soap opera, with lots of gossip and plot, and Seth writes cleanly. I found it hard to put down when I was reading it, but sometimes hard to pick up again when I wasn't. It didn't really grab me in an "I can't wait to keep reading" way until around 75%. But I really liked it. Nothing wrong with an Indian Dynasty.

Megan Baxter says

I was never entirely sure who belonged to what family in this book, but it never really bothered me. I mean, after we switched back to a different group of characters, I was able to reconstruct who they were related to fairly easily, but I never could hold the genealogies in my mind.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

Danielle Franco-Malone says

This is one of my five all time favorite books (along with the Handmaid's Tale, On Beauty, the Red Tent, & Corelli's Mandolin). It is a patch work story of many characters' lives; by the end of the story, you see how they all intersect.

This was one of those books where when I finished the book I was completely invested in each of the character's life. The story is set in post-independence India and explores a number of social/political issues of the time (i.e. land reform, muslim-hindu relations, women's rights, arranged marriage, the caste system), but the political commentary doesn't hit you over the head, and the characters really drive the story.

Despite my enthusiastic recommendations, I've had a hard time finding anyone to read this book! At 1379 pages it is apparently the longest book to be printed in English in one volume. However I found it to be a total page turner. Just resign yourself to the fact that you'll be reading this book for a couple of months and give it a try.

Paul Bryant says

After about page 200 I realised this was like eating Turkish Delight morning noon and night and my spiritual teeth were beginning to dissolve under a tide of sickliness which didn't ever let up. All these characters are so unbearably cute, even the less-nice ones. If post-independent India was crossed with Bambi, it would be Vikram Seth's endless gurgling prose.

So I stopped reading and drove several three inch nails into my head, and I've been all right since then.

Sue says

A Suitable Boy takes place over the course of a year in an India which is adjusting not only to independence but to partition. Through the stories of some of the major families of Brahmipur, we observe and participate in not only the day to day activities of individuals but the workings of government, developing industry--some quite primitive, the existence of caste--though outlawed, religious hatred, and the search for love and marriage. There are beauty and violence, squalor and humor, festivals and riots. It is a very full year.

At the center is Lata, searching for that "suitable" boy, the man she will marry. That quest is not finalized until the end of the novel and is worth reading about but so much more is happening. I came to this book with a smattering of knowledge about India and Indian beliefs and customs and come away with a feeling that I have learned enough to want to know more. This is a country both rich and poor: rich in tradition, rich in religious beliefs, rich in an amazing ability to pick itself up from disaster but poor in ability to distribute its wealth and to eliminate its history of castes (I do recognize that this novel is set in the 1950s), poor in eliminating government graft, and poor in eliminating inter-religious strife. All are on display here and have not been eliminated today. (I will not hesitate to say that the country I live in, and most others have many of the same problems to one degree or another.)

But family is at the center of this novel and Lata at the center of one family.

[Lata] wondered what one could do to be born happy, to achieve happiness, or to have it thrust on one. The baby, she thought, had arranged to be born happy; she was placid, and had as good a chance as anyone of happiness in this world...Pran and Savita, different though their backgrounds were, were a happy couple. They recognized limits and possibilities; their yearnings did not stretch beyond their reach. They loved each other---or, rather, had come to do so. They both assumed, without ever needing to state it---or perhaps without even thinking explicitly about it---that marriage and children were a great good.
(pp 951-952)

This is one of the examples for Lata to observe. Of course there are other, some decidedly less functional.

This book does require a major investment of time and attention but for those who give it, there is a great return. Personally I find well written historical fiction a wonderful road to explore another culture.

Highly recommended!

Sim says

Spoiler alert

I finally finished reading *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth. For some reason, I used to avoid picking it up and kept putting it off. I suppose it was mainly the size (it's one thick book - approximately 1500 pages!) but I also think it had to do with this misconception I had that it would be a tough read, that Seth's writing would be pompous and saturated with flowery descriptions of rivers winding through the green and yellow village of GraamNagar. Imagine my surprise when I find that the language is smooth, his tone light and his narrative interesting. The fact that Seth managed to keep the threads of the numerous plots and subplots clear in his head is an accomplishment in itself, but even more impressive is how each character of his story is real; they are people we recognize, with mannerisms we've noticed in ourselves and others, and dialogues we've heard, thought or spoken.

The title might suggest that it's the story of finding the perfect marriage candidate for the central character but that would be belittling the grand work that is *A Suitable Boy*. It is the story of the Mehra's, the Kapoors, the Khans, the Chatterjis and a myriad of other characters, such as Saeeda Bai and Kakoli, many of whom are fleshed out substantially, even when their appearance is minimal. The beauty of the story arises from their interactions with each other, their thoughts and their ups and downs. Little details that create vivid images of a decaying courtesan's world, a cosmopolitan Calcutta, the shoemakers' rank (as in rancid) neighbourhoods and so on. The story covers about a year of the characters' lives, detailing the day to day mundanity. Little decisions — a smile here, a letter there, a glass of nimbu pani (lemon-water) every now and then - are what makes the story. Yet these little decisions, these microsteps that are taken, culminate in huge changes that are noticed only in hindsight.

I'm probably not giving away any surprises when I say that I was thoroughly pissed off at Lata Mehra's decision to marry Haresh Khanna. I shouldn't have been surprised because Lata does say in the first few pages, "I always obey my mother" and so the ending wasn't so much a surprise as it was a disappointment. I did understand why she did it, but I couldn't help my acute disappointment in her all the same. I was genuinely frustrated at her pigheadedness, her thought process that led her to this decision. I was angry because I am afraid that her reasoning resonated with the coward in everyone, especially south asian girls who have had to, or will have to, at least discuss the concept of arranged marriage at some point in their lives.

Ironically, her mother later suffered a number of qualms herself about whether Haresh would be the right boy for her daughter. Had Lata decided against the marriage, Mrs. Mehra would have been perfectly amenable, especially since Lata's yuppie brother Arun did not condone the marriage either. So why did Lata decide to snub both Kabir, the Muslim she fell in love with, or Amit, the Bengali poet she could fall in love with easily? Her reasoning in the last few pages was scary because it reminded me of how we would rather our lives be a smooth ride of mediocrity than a roller coaster of brilliance that plummets from time to time. We choose to be mediocre-ly happy - the utilitarian idea that the "aim of action should be the largest possible balance of pleasure over pain or the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (<http://www.m-w.com>).

She says, "I'm not myself when I'm with him [Kabir]. I ask myself, who is this - this jealous, obsessed woman....I don't want to [passionately love him], I don't know want to. If that's what passion means, I don't want it."

Once Lata makes her decision, we know that she will lead her life contently enough. It upset me because I saw Lata in a number of people I know in real life, including myself. Mind you, I am not advocating against arranged marriage as a whole because I know they can work. Lata's sister Savita, who marries Pran after meeting him only once in front of her elders, does genuinely fall in love with him and go on to lead a happy life. So it's not that arranged marriages are wrong. I just felt that Lata was wrong in her decision to marry Haresh. Even if he was considered fair and good looking, confident and ambitious. Ironically, from Haresh's

side, it's not exactly a traditional arranged marriage. He arranges his nuptials himself because he doesn't like the parents getting involved in this matter; his parents already know that he will run away (metaphorically speaking) if they try to set him up. So to Haresh, this is a decision he's making by himself for his own benefit. Haresh had already been in love with someone else before, had neatly folded away his Devdas romanticism for that girl and was ready now to live a contented life with someone else (it just happened to be Lata). He is oh so bloody honest about his feelings for this girl, and that he knows it won't ever happen and so must move on... Lata wanted his practicality, his forceful ability to get things done, his willingness to help out her family members. What angered me was the underlying assumption that Kabir/Amit couldn't be all those things, that they would be selfish beings simply because they would also love her, and she would have to him (either him) back.

My favourite characters in the book are Amit Chatterji and Pran Kapoor. I know Vikram Seth denies fashioning Amit after him, but to be honest, for some reason while I was reading about Amit's tendencies for the necessary inactivity that comes with being a writer, I thought of Seth. What I liked about Amit was that he was the uber intellectual: his tone was oft-sardonic, his amusement frequent, his observations of people accepting and piercing. He talked a lot and said very little. He was cryptic in his cynicism. I loved him. Lata rejects him on the basis of his being "high-maintenance" type - someone who needs his meals laid out for him, who wouldn't have time for her if he was working on a novel, and whose moodswings are as frequent as her own. I don't buy that completely. He did make the time for her, he knew how to be charming and behave in society (he wasn't an absent-minded intellectual), he knew what he wanted and he knew how to get what he wants. Lata was right in that he wouldn't fall apart at her rejection, but I think it's not his insensitivity that would allow him to be friends with her after her marriage, but his excessive civility, his sophistication and his writer's acceptance of life.

My other favourite character, Pran Kapoor - a thin, dark quiet professor - is a sweetheart. The kind of nice guy who doesn't begrudge his mother-in-law's long vacations with them, who plays April Fools Day jokes on people because "those who aren't conscious of the date must take the consequences". He is the ultimate good son, who quietly accepts his arranged marriage and falls in love with his wife. His was the real arranged marriage, in the true sense of the word, and yet you cannot dislike him or his wife Savita because they are both so lovable people, that you just know that they were destined to be together, no matter how they got together.

For those of you who haven't read it, do. Trust me, I can't begin to describe the many shades there are to each character and how nothing I say will completely do justice to them. I got mad at one character's one decision, not at the book. Seth is amazing. His voice is unintrusive and style very graceful. That's the word: graceful. Despite its size, you get a soft feeling reading it. True it is a tad tedious at times. Some of the political parts and some of the characters could have been done without. But in the end, you can't get angry at someone who gives you the whole cake when all you asked for was a slice.

Edward says

A Suitable Boy describes a year in the life of the fledgling Indian democracy, indirectly told through the experiences of four connected families and a litany of supporting characters, who, due to the diversity of their occupations and social positions, are able to explore various facets – political, legal, social, cultural, religious, artistic – of the India of this period, and the clash of its opposing cultural forces: traditional versus

modern values, religion versus secularism, Hinduism versus Islam, Eastern versus Western culture, and democracy versus serfdom, to name a few.

The titular story concerning Mrs Mehra's search for a husband for her daughter, Lata, though just one of many stories that the novel weaves together, stands out due to what it reveals about the norms and cultural prejudices of the time. We see in Lata an intelligent young woman who has received a modern education, but is pressured by family and cultural expectations to take on a traditional female role (While her plight is no means as bleak, I was reminded of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, in terms of the dissociation between education and eventual societal role). In Lata's story there is a contemplation of what it means to seek happiness, an evaluation of the importance of love, of the fine balance between passion and security, of the necessary compromise of values that is thrust on an individual by their cultural context, where to either fight or relent to pressure requires in one way or another a sacrifice or self.

As an outsider, I was struck by the stratification of the society, where one must be utterly obsequious to one's superiors, and trample upon those below, in order to reinforce one's status. The caste system locks people into the positions they are assigned at birth, preventing social mobility. In this culture status and position are everything. There is a casual, internalised racism, a sensitivity to the degree of darkness of one's skin, that manifests in all sorts of interactions, from choosing a mate, to business relationships, to deciding with whom to associate. There is an enormous disparity in fortunes between the wealthy and powerful, who occupy great mansions and large estates, and who are all but unreachable by the law, and the majority of the lower castes, who are forced into subservient roles, living on a pittance in utterly squalid conditions, without any hope of improving their lot. To the list of Hitchens' Religions That Poison Everything, let us not omit the otherwise fairly innocuous Hinduism, whose dogma of karmic rebirth provides religious justification for this horrible system of oppression. There is evidence in this book of a gradual abandonment of these attitudes, which I hope has been precipitated by the last 70 years of democracy.

Striking also is the extent of social and political disunity, which I'm sure is in no small part due to the "divide and conquer" policy of the British. (It's amazing the extent that the British were able to transform the country in their own image in such a short time, and the degree to which many of the characters would define themselves as, or aspire to be, English. The closer one dresses, speaks and acts as an Englishman, the more refined he is. Conversely, the more "Indian" he appears by his accent or demeanour, the lower his standing and his desirability. Though there are surely lingering benefits of British colonialism, this kind of internalised oppression seems to me to be fairly odious.) The India of this period is depicted as a heterogeneous multicultural society, where the religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and ideological differences constantly threaten to disrupt stability. One gets a real sense of the fragility of the young Indian democracy, where there was a real possibility of failure and collapse. Partition was a tragedy that affects the world to this day, but overall the enduring survival of Indian democracy through these times of turmoil has been a wonderfully fortunate benefit to the world. It is easy to imagine a world where things had turned out differently.

In terms of the prose, I did not enjoy Seth's bland and relentless Realism. In nearly 1,500 pages, there is not a single sentence worth underlining, not a single interesting metaphor, and rarely anything resembling a profound authorial insight. Instead, the story is told in a flat style of alternating description and dialogue, with the omniscient narrator jumping freely between the thoughts of the different characters. This style has caused the book to be compared to some of the great works of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century, of which it is reminiscent. Many people seem to like this kind of writing, but it's not my cup of tea.

I'm rating this book more generously than its literary merits would seem to warrant. This is a very long novel, and though it is arguable whether many sections were essential to include, on the whole it paints a

thoughtful, detailed and complex picture of post-independence India, with all the wonderful, as well as the disagreeable aspects of its culture. Indeed, the India of Seth's novel is a land of contradictions, of inequality, of oppression, and yet of hope through the experiment of democracy. If nothing else, I will miss his characters, who, though they are a little saccharine (I don't disagree with Paul Bryant's assessment), are delightful companions with whom to undertake such a long journey.
