

MINUTES  
of the Meeting of  
The Novel Club of Cleveland  
Date: November 4, 2014

Hosts: David Novak and Ted Sande

Novel: *The Space Between Us*, by Thrity Umrigar

Papers:

Biographical: Toby Siegel

Critical: Tom Slavin

Members and friends of The Novel Club of Cleveland members gathered on Tuesday, November 4, 2014 at the home of Bob Jackson to discuss *The Space Between Us* by Thrity Umrigar, with the special treat of having the author (a member of the Case Western Reserve University English Department) present at our meeting.

After the usual preliminary period of conversation over refreshments and the surrounding art works, the meeting was called to order by Vice President Jay Siegel. Several guests were introduced. Announcements included the publication of *Hope Expired, Life Persists* by Art Stupay (a holocaust biography including history of Poland at the time). Also, the Program Committee will be meeting later in November; Leigh Fabens solicited suggestions from members and said there are extra program copies available if anyone needs them. Since electronic distribution of minutes has as yet not been done, Jay Siegel read an abridged version of minutes from the October meeting. Minutes were approved as read. Next, brief biographical and critical papers about Thrity Umrigar and her novel *The Space Between Us* were delivered by Toby Siegel and Tom Slavin respectively.

The club's usual procedure of having discussion questions provided by writers of the papers was for this meeting replaced by offering club members the opportunity to pose questions to the author. Remaining minutes will employ a Q/A format, with summarized/paraphrased questions in bold and responses in regular print. **Tom began with a question about the inclusion of Indian words without a glossary such as Ms Umrigar included in *Bombay Days*.**

Ms Umrigar replied that a similar question had come up in her class discussions of other books. She said writers of color these days seem to have a tendency to avoid glossaries, and recalled that for example, Hemingway didn't include glossary of his foreign-language words. She noted that writers have a way of including words in ways that they reveal their words by context—and if there is a long phrase, then she would translate it in very next sentence. Contemporary critics, however, generally do not comment on this issue.

**The next question raised was about reception in India of her books' treatment of caste.** I had been worried about this because I “sort of aired a lot of dirty linen in this book.” Caste and class relations are just such an accepted fact of life amongst middle class people in India that I had been afraid of reactions—but to my pleasant surprise, no serious critic made any comment about this issue, but rather judged the book on its literary merits. In actual fact there is a tendency of middle class Indians to get defensive about class/slum depiction [e.g. objections to the recent movie *Slum Dog Millionaire*]  
—whereas what they should be doing, if slums embarrass them, is to fix the slums.

**What about reader/critic reactions to bad behavior of the male characters ?** Indian reviews didn't even raise that issue, and critics don't bring it up, although audiences of readers often do. My reply is, "this is a single book, and in this one most of the bad characters happen to be men." This is not true in all my books—but this one is an exploration of power and how different people wield power against each other. Here, various characters wield power against others and/or have it wielded against them. I am more interested in analyzing power differentials rather than attributing the misbehavior to one class or another.

**What made you change your career path from journalism to fiction?** --When I was a child, creative writing, mostly poetry and later fiction, was my first love—so journalism was the detour, rather than the other way around. My family was an aspirational household, a family of business people, so to aspire to creative writing was just not in my frame of reference. My father hoped I would take over the family business, though I never wanted that—so journalism was a good compromise—I could make a living, but also write...

**You said you liked the complexity of names—do you collect things like that in a commonplace book of sorts?** I think I used to ... and probably was doing so during this writing—but then some of them just stick when you hear them...

**Can you imagine another ending of the novel where Serai would actually rise to the defense of Bema?** Could be, but that would be an outlier and not what I was looking for. I daresay it would be an outlier in any culture—the stakes are so high—for Serai to have sided with Bema would end her daughter's marriage, and so her daughter would give birth without a husband. It would take exceptional courage for her to make such a decision. Serai is a good person, but not that outspoken. She was raised to keep secrets, for example about her own abuse at the hands of her husband—so to expose this issue would be really out of character for her.

**Do you hope to affect social change via your writing (as journalists typically do...)?** I'm too old to harbor those hopes—younger folk do... [At this point, Ms Umrigar referred to a story told to her by a young Indian woman in a reading—who was heading back to India—"I found out my housekeeper was stealing milk; I fired her on the spot. And then I read *The Space Between Us*—and now I promise you when I go back I will buy extra milk for whatever servant I have, because now I know if someone steals they need it."]---This is a thing about literature—it may transform us, or remind us of a possibility of being better—but this is most likely to happen on a one-person basis, not on a "change the world" scale.

**Why did you write this book? It's tough, unpleasant, a kind of world that we don't always come across—**

I wrote it because it was a book I wanted to read, and I wasn't finding it...it's a story of the big Indian middle class—because they all have servants—and all the books I found were **not** writing about this. It was a story begging to be written—I had grown up with this kind of pattern, with an older servant, and it bothered me that Bema could not eat with us. I never realized how uncomfortable that must have made her feel [for me to push against expectations]. This odd dance of relationships, making it seem one-sided, would be easy to caricature, but it's really complex, with a lot of trust going both ways.

**Did you write the end first?** I wrote a lot of it first, thought of the ending, then lost it via computer malfunction—then had to sit down and write it again!

[At this point was inserted a strong recommendation from Tom and Toby of *First Darling of the Morning*, Umrigar's autobiography... on which the comment was made, "not all of it was delightful...there were tough things to overcome"—but who doesn't have that?]

Ms. Umrigar noted that a power-exploration story could be written about any culture where servant classes are typical—such as the American South—and that *The Help* did this in a way.

**Any thoughts of a film?** There was a movie option on *The Space Between Us*, but the recession caused it not to be developed. Another option is pending, but there is a lot of uncertainty in that process.

**Having made a start in journalism, did that help you get published in fiction?** No...but I did not have such a hard time finding an agent. That happened during my year at Harvard—at a reading, I asked a question (in my opinion a very ordinary question), and later an agent approached me...I had started one book at that point, and it went on from there.

**What are you teaching now?** Toni Morrison, plus an Advanced Fiction workshop.

**Having not lived in Mumbai for a while, do you think culture there has changed since you lived there?** No, I think it's about the same—I wish I could say I think it's changed, but I doubt it. And I think in any society with class differences like that, the relationships would be the same...

[*The Story Hour*, Umrigar's most recent book, has turned out to be a sequel to *The Space Between Us*, though she thought she never would write such a sequel.]

**How does the Parsi community buy into caste?** It does not...so this is NOT about caste, per se, it's rather about class...which is a different issue.

**How is the Parsi community so succesful, as isolationist as it is?** Well, it's not **entirely** insular; they have taken on some Hindu culture—but in general the history of India is a history of absorption of other cultures; the caste system is a black mark—but on the flip side, the country has absorbed, tolerantly, other cultures and created a hybrid. Also, Parsi numbers have always been so small they have not been a threat to anyone [in number, beneath contempt; in influence, beyond compare—said Ghandi]. Fortunes were built through collaboration with the British [e.g. in opium trade], so it's complicated. The Parsi kind of fly under the radar. The culture is proud of itself, but then every culture is.

Meeting closed around 9:30, at request of Ms Umrigar who was recovering from an illness and preparing for teaching duties ahead. Members expressed their appreciation for her joining us.