



# “The Eyes” Have It

BOOK REVIEW BY  
SARAH DANIELS

**Only the Eyes Are Mine**  
By Usha Alexander

**Reviewer’s Valley Social Rating:**  
★★★★ Amazing: A Must Read!

**Release Date:** August 10, 2005  
**Length:** 240 Pages  
**Genre:** Fiction & Literature  
**Publisher:** Frog Books  
**Price:** \$15.00 (paperback)

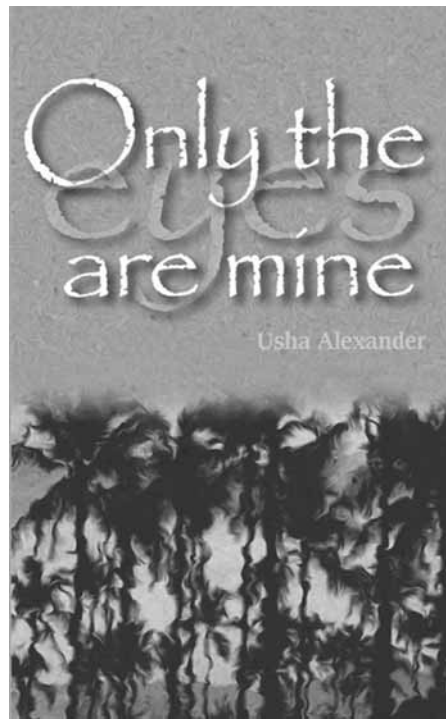
Quite simply, “Only the Eyes Are Mine” is the most lovely book I’ve read in a long time. Its sweet and engaging storyline pulled me through its 240 pages in a matter of days, calling to me from the bedside table every time I sat down. Author Usha Alexander has painted the unnervingly beautiful kind of picture that you can’t stop staring at.

The novel begins in 1940’s Southern India with Sita, whose stories span from those of a timid, virginal child bride to a self-possessed, talented young woman to

a miserable, broken wife to a sage, wizened old woman. In the twilight of her life, Sita wonders, “Whose face is this? Whose body? Whose skin is this, wrinkled and pale, stretched against these thin bones? Only the eyes are mine.”

Emigrating from India to the U.S. as an older woman, Sita helps her brother raise his first generation American children. As her niece, Meera, prepares to marry, Sita struggles to understand the young adults’ inability to embrace the status quo, realizing what a difference both culture and generation have made on her view of the world. Sita is a woman who has never before questioned whether individuality might be more important (and meaningful) than familial duty and tradition. Suddenly, she is not so sure anymore. It is not a judgment, but rather, a question. This generation’s tribulations are not any better or worse. They are simply different.

Full of a fascinating cast of characters (each of whom is as interesting, complex, and multi-faceted as the next), author Usha Alexander skillfully weaves their



lives together just as deftly as young Sita creates intricate designs at her loom. It is not until she feels her life coming to a close that Sita decides to reveal any of her stories to her niece and nephew. Likewise, it’s not until her health starts to fail that Meera and Ravi realize they know nothing about Sita’s past. How can someone they love so dearly be a com-

plete stranger after all these years?

Switching between the India of days past to the present day U.S., this isn’t just a tome full of feelings; there is a riveting story here. (Alexander has proven her merit as a master of plot, making neither the flashback nor flash-forward more important.) The dramatic tension is perfectly drawn as Sita’s surprising adventures unfold: tales of an unusual husband unable to love her, a jealous and callous mother-in-law, a forbidden passion impossible to contain, and the impulsive betrayal of those closest to her. Sita is no angel, but we can certainly relate.

As I neared the end of the book, tears would well up every few pages, and I would be forced to set the book aside. I’m not an emotional person, and this novel is not nostalgic or saccharin; I simply didn’t want to let Sita go.

It is very easy to get close to Alexander’s characters. They are unfalteringly real, and do not apologize for who they are. It’s the most wonderful kind of storytelling there is:

one in which fictional characters become your friends.

Like Amy Tan and Sue Monk Kidd, Usha Alexander leaves us eagerly awaiting our next encounter with her remarkable ladies. “Only the Eyes Are Mine” is an incredible debut work. I can’t wait to add Alexander’s second novel to next year’s holiday wish list.

# Remembering How Much I Loved “Interpreter of Maladies”

BOOK REVIEW BY  
MELISSA ABRAHAMS

**Interpreter of Maladies**  
By Jhumpa Lahiri

**Reviewer’s Valley Social Rating:**  
★★★★ Amazing: A Must Read!

**Release Date:** June 1, 1999  
**Length:** 161 Pages  
**Genre:** Fiction & Literature  
**Publisher:** Mariner Books  
**Price:** \$13.00 (paperback)

“Interpreter of Maladies” is a collection of stories by Jhumpa Lahiri, an author born in London, raised in Rhode Island, who lives in New York. It won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, but no one I know has read it. So, although it may not be hot off the press, it’s definitely worth reviewing!

I fell in love with “Interpreter of Maladies” in a doctor’s office waiting room. As I finished “A Temporary Matter,” the

first in this collection of nine short stories by Lahiri, tears streamed down my face. I cannot remember the last time an author evoked such an emotional response from me. The characters in “A Temporary Matter” are a young married couple living with the tragedy of a still-birth. Lahiri’s depiction of their distance from each other is poignant and subtle. As they share secrets over dinners lit only by candlelight, she illuminates their pain and humanity in beautiful, sad flickers of truth. The resolution of the story left me feeling sorry for the characters, and pondering the private tragedies of the strangers around me in the waiting room. (Admittedly, though, they probably wondered more about me and why I was crying in public.)

The situations in the other eight tales are equally compelling. Ms. Lahiri is truly gifted at writing many different points of view. The second story is set near Boston in the autumn of 1971. “When Mr.

Pirzada Came to Dine,” is a tale of war, loss and a country divided, told by a young girl named Lilia. Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani man worried about his family during Pakistan’s civil war, comes to have dinner at Lilia’s Indian home so that he can watch the news coverage on their television. Lilia needs her parents’ explanation that Pakistan is a separate country to see him as different. Lahiri captures the distinct feeling of alienation, and the universal ways that family and danger bring us all together. By having the story narrated by Lilia, who instructs Mr. Pirzada in American customs, the terror of the distant war is presented in a fresh way.

The title story tells of an American-born Indian family on a trip to India. The vast cultural differences between the American Das family and their tour guide, Mr. Kapasi, are shocking. In stories such as “The Third and Final Continent” and “Mrs. Sen’s,” Indians are the outsiders in America, but in “Interpreter of Maladies” the American family is seen as bold, brazen, and sad through the eyes of the tour guide. Mr. Kapasi is more than a guide; he is also an interpreter at



a medical office, which shames his wife, but intrigues Mrs. Das. It leads to one of the most interesting conversations I have ever read.

Overall, “Interpreter of Maladies” is a collection of heartfelt tales of outsiders. The characters are rich and vibrant, and although there is a message or moral in each story, they never seem preachy or pedantic. I cared about all of the characters and identified with many, even though I am neither

Indian nor an immigrant. Perhaps the best description of the book is found in its last lines. “Still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination.” The problems of the characters in Ms. Lahiri’s book do seem common, but they are revealed with a beauty and truth that is truly beyond imagining.

*Melissa Abrahams is a 6th and 7th grade teacher at a middle school in the San Fernando Valley.*