

IN OTHER WORDS

JHUMPA LAHIRI

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE



It's madness, really. A major writer who has gained a worldwide audience for her novels and short stories written in English turns her back on the language. The risk is breathtaking, but what choice did Jhumpa Lahiri have, really? She always considered English her mother and Bengali (the language of her parents) her step-mother. And then she fell in love with Italian. Love is reckless and foolish and beguiling and Lahiri had it bad. This memoir tells her story: the dislocation she has felt all her life, never really at home in any language and culture. Lahiri is almost painfully aware this friction has been the wellspring of her art. Nonetheless Italian beckoned. She flirted, she dipped her toe in, she frolicked, she dallied...and then she leaped. Lahiri moved to Italy with her family, immersed herself in the language and found she could, would, indeed must write in Italian. "In Other Words," in fact, was written by Lahiri in Italian and translated into English by Ann Goldstein. It has an openness and simplicity, one likes to think, that it might not have had if Lahiri had written it in English. She talks of Italian lessons, daily life in Italy, her dreams, her fears and hopes. Other writers have of course written in a language other than their birth (Nabokov, Kafka), but it's rare for a writer to choose to handcuff themselves in this way, to turn as an adult to a new language they will always be mastering and never feel in their bones. Lahiri sees it as freeing, of course, not handcuffing. Two stories included in this brief, tender and raw work are telling -- they're far more elliptical and vague than her English work, while still satisfying. Apparently always wary of expectations or assumptions, Lahiri is worried she might turn back to English or never turn back to English or sometimes turn back to English in the future. Will this be a betrayal of her lover? If she simply can't stay in Italy (and it turns out she can't) won't this forced separation itself be a heartbreak? From the pain of a casual comment by a store clerk to the existential fears of a writer choosing a strange path, "In Other Words" is touching, sweet and clearly the first work by this artist that deservedly can be called autobiographical. -- Michael Giltz