

A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit

Use this toolkit to plan book discussion groups or library programs.

Meet author and journalist Thrity Umrigar, who lives and writes in Cleveland.

Select from a range of discussion questions and extension activities to deepen the experience of reading and sharing *The Story Hour*.

Discover related resources and opportunities to explore topics and themes in depth.

The Story Hour

By Thrity Umrigar

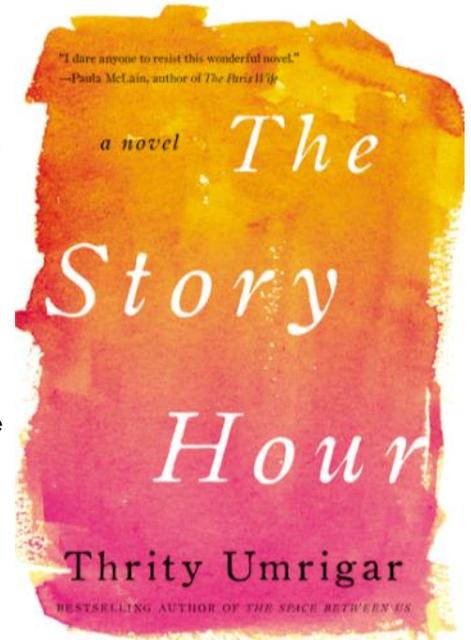


About the Book

An experienced psychologist, Maggie carefully maintains emotional distance from her patients. But when she meets a young Indian woman who tried to kill herself, her professional detachment disintegrates. Cut off from her family in India, Lakshmi is desperately lonely and trapped in a loveless marriage to a domineering man who limits her world to their small restaurant and grocery store.

Moved by her plight, Maggie treats Lakshmi in her home office for free, quickly realizing that the despondent woman doesn't need a shrink; she needs a friend. Determined to empower Lakshmi as a woman who feels valued in her own right, Maggie abandons protocol, and soon doctor and patient have become close friends.

But while their relationship is deeply affectionate, it is also warped by conflicting expectations. When Maggie and Lakshmi open up and share long-buried secrets, the revelations will jeopardize their close bond, shake their faith in each other, and force them to confront painful choices.



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Book Details

The Story Hour by Thrity Umrigar.
HarperCollins. 2014. ISBN 9780062259301. 336 pages.
harpercollins.com/9780062259301/the-story-hour

Available as an ebook and digital audiobook through the Ohio Digital Library:
ohiodigitallibrary.com

Available as a downloadable talking book through the State Library of Ohio Talking Book Program: klas.com/talkingbooks/ohio



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About Thrity Umrigar

Thrity Umrigar was born in India and immigrated to the U.S. in 1983 to attend The Ohio State University. She is the author of seven novels—***The World We Found***, ***The Weight of Heaven***, ***The Space Between Us***, ***If Today Be Sweet***, ***Bombay Time***, ***The Story Hour***, and ***Everybody's Son***—and the memoir ***First Darling of the Morning***. An award-winning journalist, she has been a contributor to the *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, and *Huffington Post*, among other publications. Among her latest projects is a 2017 picture book, ***When I Carried You in My Belly***, illustrated by Ziyue Chen.

Thrity Umrigar is the winner of the Nieman Fellowship to Harvard, the 2009 Cleveland Arts Prize, and the Seth Rosenberg Prize. The Armington Professor of English at Case Western Reserve University, she lives in Cleveland.

Author Resources

Thrity Umrigar's official website

umrigar.com

Author page on HarperCollins website

harpercollins.com/cr-102079/thrity-umrigar

NPR interview with Thrity Umrigar from *Weekend Edition Saturday* (with audio)

npr.org/2014/08/16/340669847

For speaking engagement inquiries:

Contact tumri1@yahoo.com or see the HarperCollins Speakers Bureau: harpercollinsspeakersbureau.com/speaker/thrity-umrigar

Talk About It

Topics to share when discussing ***The Story Hour***.

Spoiler warning! Some discussion questions refer to key elements in the book. Do not read if you do not want to find out what happens.

- What is the value of sharing stories with each other?
- The book alternates between chapters narrated by Lakshmi and chapters told in third person from Maggie's perspective. What do you think of the author's decision to frame the narrative in this way?
- How did Lakshmi's voice, her broken English, influence your experience of the story? Did you become more accustomed to her speech patterns as the book progressed?
- Chapter 27 is different from the rest; coming near the middle of the book, it is a long chapter told in third person but from Lakshmi's perspective. What is the significance of this chapter and why, do you think, is it presented differently?
- What do Lakshmi's flashbacks to her life in India add to our understanding of her?

***"I have try to be
the good person.
But now it is time to
save myself.***

***I walk toward the
waterfall. It sing as
it jump down the
rocks.***

I chose the life."

Talk About It (continued)

- Lakshmi loves to sit by the river, while Maggie finds peace floating and swimming in the community pool. Where else does water appear in the novel? Why is water literally and mythically powerful for us?
- What does Lakshmi's experience with Mithai the elephant add to the narrative?
- How do you view suicide? Is a person being selfish in taking their own life? Or is it understandable in some cases? Is this a black and white issue for you, or one with many shades of gray?
- Do you think Lakshmi's suicide attempt was justified? How would you feel if you were in her situation, stuck in a loveless marriage and alone in a country without family or friends?
- How would you get along if you lived in a foreign country, and did not feel proficient in the language? Would this be a welcome experience or a terrifying nightmare?
- Maggie decides on several occasions to cross the traditional boundaries of the therapeutic relationship. Why?
- Sudhir suggests to Maggie that Lakshmi doesn't need therapy but instead "a job. Independence. Money of her own." Why do you think he might say this? How do practical aspects of life affect your emotional and psychological well-being?
- Maggie is a black woman in a predominantly white workplace and community. Her appearance initially elicits fear and distrust in Lakshmi and Adit. How does Maggie navigate race and gender? In what other ways does the book explore race, economic class, gender, and power? Would you say that the book challenges stereotypes?
- Consider Maggie's painful and haunting relationship with Wallace, her father, and her destructive attraction to Peter. How are these relationships connected?
- How would you characterize Lakshmi's relationship with her younger sister, Shilpa? Do you think the sacrifices Lakshmi made were realistic? Is there a limit to the sacrifice you would make for your sibling?
- Despite her love for Shilpa, Lakshmi criticizes "young, stupid, childish girls who liked shiny objects, who believed in love rather than responsibility." What is a healthy balance of romance and reality?
- Maggie hesitates to take her own suffering seriously because that of her patients has been so much worse. Is suffering relative? Is all suffering equal? How should it be measured?
- Lakshmi is critical of herself and of others for being prideful. Which character or characters are most harmed by pride? How so?
- In many ways the novel is about self-sufficiency. What is an appropriate amount of it in one's life? When should one rely on or connect with others?
- Maggie has found that patients value their therapy more if they pay even a nominal fee. Lakshmi often gives food as a gift. What's the difference between a commodity and a gift? How does it affect the relationship of those involved?
- Consider the name Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, love and prosperity. How is this relevant to the novel?
- The novel ends with a powerful statement from Lakshmi: "I begins." What are the many things that might be beginning at this moment? What did you think of this ending? Is it what you expected?
- What do you think will come of Lakshmi's final story? Imagine what the next, unwritten, chapter of the book would hold for Maggie, Lakshmi, and Sudhir.

Go Further

*Ideas for extending the experience of reading **The Story Hour**.*

- Thrity Umrigar writes “one of my greatest fears is finding myself in a country where I do not speak the language... I believe that it is through language that we make our humanity known to each other.” (from “The Story Behind **The Story Hour**” in the appendix to the paperback edition). As the book opens, Lakshmi is desperately lonely, isolated from others by language, culture, situation, and attitude. Consider making a pact with your family or book group to practice everyday kindness. Or make a larger commitment and volunteer as an ESOL teacher, or in another capacity that assists individuals new to America. See the Aspire (formerly ABLE) website at ohiohighered.org/aspire to identify ESOL programs in your community. Find a list of local refugee resettlement agencies on the Ohio Refugee Services page: ifs.ohio.gov/refugee/ourPartners.stm.
- From lamb kebobs to laddoo (a sweet for festive times), food plays a significant role in the book. If you are unfamiliar with the cuisines of India, and have access to an Indian restaurant in your community, go out for a meal and try something new! Also browse the cookbook section of your local library for books on Indian cooking. For a list of Ohio public libraries, see Find A Library: oplin.org/fal.
- Still hungry—for another good book? 2015 & 2016 CTRO selection **The Abundance** by Amit Majmudar also features Indian cuisine and the immigrant experience. Download the toolkit here: library.ohio.gov/books/the-abundance.
- **The Story Hour** explores cultural differences and assumptions, and the intersection between psychotherapy and storytelling. Maggie, with her education and expertise, knows the methods and outcomes of talk therapy, but Lakshmi intuitively understands that sharing stories builds friendship. Seek out a person in your life whom you'd like to know better—perhaps someone whose personal or cultural history is very different from yours—and ask that person to share a story from his or her childhood. Reciprocate with a story of your own.

Explore More

*Additional ideas and resources to use with **The Story Hour**.*

TLC Book Tour: **The Story Hour**

momssmallvictories.com/story-hour-book-review-and-discussion-questions

This stop on a blog-based virtual book tour offers an in-depth review of **The Story Hour**, discussion questions (see “Talk About It” on previous page), and reflections on the themes of suicide and depression, the immigrant experience, and poverty.

Lonely Planet: India

lonelyplanet.com/india

India is a vast and remarkably diverse country. Introduce yourself to destinations and sights around India with the help of guidebook company Lonely Planet.

Pixar in a Box: The Art of Storytelling

khanacademy.org/partner-content/pixar/storytelling

It may be a jump from personal storytelling to the storytelling process at Pixar Animation Studios, but this partnership project between Pixar and Khan Academy can get you thinking about the stories you want to tell while learning about storytelling as art and process.

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio, the Ohioana Library Association, and the Ohio Center for the Book, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors, illustrators, and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits:
library.ohio.gov/ctro

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