

SUCH
a GOOD
MOTHER

A NOVEL

HELEN MONKS TAKHAR



A READER'S GUIDE



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Each Monday morning at my high school, children who qualified for free school meals queued up outside a horribly conspicuous room to collect their strip of utilitarian-looking lunch coupons. My siblings and I were all, frankly, ashamed of our “dinner tickets.” Come lunchtime, we might whip them out of the cuff of our cardigans at the very last second, or I’m sorry to say, skip the meal.

My feelings of shame and inferiority from relative deprivations like this followed me all the way to university, into my journalism career, and made themselves known in moments of doubt, even after I’d realized a lifelong ambition of publishing a novel with my debut thriller. For the next book, I decided I wanted to write about the power and persistence of such negative emotions, create a protagonist dominated by them, and place her in a setting precision-engineered to bring out the extremities of her character.

What if her childhood wasn’t only characterized by having less money than her peers, but by trauma and rejection, and what if her neighborhood was moving on from the past, undergoing relentless gentrification, while she remained held back by her history? And what more fertile ground for her feeling less than the next woman than if I made her a working mum? This was how Rose emerged. By contrast, Jacq grew as not only the moral heart of the book, but the only person in its world living outside of any shame about who she is and what she had done, or not done, at the point in her life that we meet her.

Guilt, hopelessness, and that old-friend shame were very much part of my life when I had my daughters in quick succession and returned to my job at the time. I’d often arrive at the office with a broken heart, having left

my young children crying their eyes out at nursery for little in the way of financial gain. Why was such a routine life so hard, unhappy, and expensive? Why couldn’t I do any better for my children and myself? I know first-hand why working mothers might be vulnerable to anything promising a quality of family life that on a bad day feels like the stuff of fantasy. The notion of “The Circle” came into focus, something that looks like a golden ticket, but in reality preys on a desperation that, all things being equal, should not be there. But all things are, of course, far from equal.

I started writing this book well before the Covid-19 pandemic, but the economic and gender inequalities at play in my draft were only heightened by the crisis. In particular, the Covid-19 calamity seemed to make it abundantly clear that the person who truly leads on keeping children fed, educated, and mentally well is too often an exhausted working woman who feels she should still somehow be doing more and better.

For too many working mums, every day can feel like a game rigged for them to lose, the notion of a joyful family life a con, where contentedness is robbed by their too-heavy emotional, mental, and physical workloads and the daily drip-drip of guilt. Research published in 2019 by the universities of Manchester and Essex only confirmed what many women already know: working mothers are under considerable psychological strain.

But as so often happens when women face macro inequality, we personalize it; we make it about our apparent individual failures to cope with the demands of work and home. We may be tempted to soothe ourselves by criticizing women who seem to be doing an even worse job than us,

AUTHOR'S NOTE

perhaps feel darkly entitled to “punch down” at those poorer than ourselves, or women with less inclination to commit themselves to the sometimes abject drudgery involved in ensuring a child wrings every drop of potential from their existence.

A word about my Punjabi antagonist. Amala was born of my desire to create a powerful adversary for Rose, someone with poise, charisma, self-made success, and an untouchable splendor guaranteed to both enthrall and intimidate Rose. I started to see her as a glamorous Punjabi woman with a taste for the finer things in life, and a tendency to weaponize the magnetic ways the Punjabi Sikhs I know make you feel you are part of their family.

Punjabis have a rich vocabulary to describe every relation. For example, your father's sister's husband is your Fufar ji and your father's older brother might be known to you colloquially as Budda Daddy (Bigger Daddy). The collapsing of these labels when someone needs to know you are there for them simply as their sister or father, is also based on reality.

The same is true of the situational resistance to saying Thank you. It was my father-in-law-to-be who told me, with love, that I shouldn't say thank you so much when I was first introduced to my husband's family. Expressing gratitude for something, be it a meal or a lift to the station, suggests you didn't expect it would ever be given. In this way, Thank you becomes almost a slight on someone you should know is family and would do anything for you. I found this, and the many ways I've been made to feel at home in my husband's family from the off, comforting and sometimes fascinating. Being the kind of writer I am, however, I have ended up

subverting this goodness to, I hope, create a uniquely textured and dangerous character in Amala Kaur.

This book does not set out to make devils of poorer or middle-class mums, or women from any social class, ethnic background, or sexuality, but to entertain while exploring how a wide diversity of women are contributing more than their fair share to families. I believe no woman should be swindled out of the happiness, rewards, and mental wellbeing that, given their endless and sometimes thankless efforts, should be rightfully theirs.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial impression of Amala and the women of The Circle? Have you experienced a similar power dynamic, either in your personal life or in the world at large?
2. How are wealth and privilege portrayed in this novel? What attributes are the most prized social currency at The Woolf? How does this affect the characters?
3. What did you think of Amala and Rose's relationship? What were each of them getting out of it? How are they similar as characters, and how are they different?
4. The book takes place in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. How does this affect Rose and her family? Have you noticed any such changes where you live? If so, how have they affected your community?
5. What do you think Pete and Rose saw in each other? How has their relationship changed over the years, especially since having Charlie? Do you think their personalities complement each other well, or not?
6. How did you understand the book's title? Do you think it's ironic or aspirational (or both)? How does Helen Monks Takhar engage with the expectations around what makes a "good" mother?
7. Do you think Rose had any choice not to be like her father, or was it really "hard-wired into her," as she tells us? What influence did her upbringing have on her life as an adult, as a wife and mother?
8. What did you think of Rose's assertion that working motherhood is "one massive, long con designed to get women to chase an impossible Hurrah"? Did it ring true to you, either from your own experience or the way society treats motherhood in general?
9. How did Rose evolve throughout the novel, from her first meeting at The Woolf with all her insecurities on display, to her final showdown with Amala? What do you think caused this evolution? Or was she just revealing her true nature?
10. Monks Takhar says that she started writing this book before the COVID-19 pandemic, "but the gender and economic inequalities at play . . . were only heightened by the crisis." Did the way the book portrayed these inequalities resonate with you? How have things changed since 2020?

RECIPE

GLUTEN-FREE RED VELVET CUPCAKES

Want to try Amala's gluten-free "devil's food" red velvet cupcakes for yourself? Please find a recipe from [Gluten-Free Cupcakes](#) below. Enjoy!

INGREDIENTS

- ½ cup coconut flour
- 2 tbsp. unsweetened cocoa powder
- ¼ tsp. sea salt
- ¼ tsp. baking soda
- 4 large eggs
- 2 tbsp. grapeseed oil
- ½ cup agave nectar
- 1 tbsp. red food coloring, made from vegetable dye

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line 9 muffin cups with paper liners.
- In a large bowl, combine the coconut flour, cocoa powder, salt, and baking soda. In a medium bowl, whisk together the eggs, grapeseed oil, agave nectar, and food coloring. Blend the wet ingredients into the coconut flour mixture with a handheld mixer until thoroughly combined.
- Scoop ¼-cup of batter into each prepared muffin cup.
- Bake for 18 to 22 minutes, until a toothpick inserted into the center of a cupcake comes out with just a few moist crumbs attached. Let the cupcakes cool in the pan for 1 hour, then frost and serve.

GLUTEN-FREE CREAM CHEESE FROSTING

INGREDIENTS

- ¾ cup heavy cream
- 8 oz. cream cheese, at room temperature
- ¼ cup agave nectar

DIRECTIONS

- In a deep bowl, whip the cream with a handheld mixer until stiff peaks form. In a separate larger bowl, whip the cream cheese and agave nectar until well combined.
- Using a rubber spatula, gently fold the whipped cream into the cream cheese mixture. Use immediately or store in a glass Mason jar in the refrigerator for up to 2 days.