



One Great Book: Volume IV, Episode 3  
*Before We Visit the Goddess* by Chitra Banerjee  
Divakaruni

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume IV, Book 3: *Before We Visit the Goddess*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

It's as true for writers as it is for any of us: sometimes you seek out the work you want, but sometimes the work you didn't know you wanted finds you. Like many of us, Chitra Divakaruni had always loved literature. She dreamed of making her longtime interest her profession, and so she left her native India to attend graduate school in the United States, intending to first *study* English literature, and then to *teach* it. But something startling happened.

The woman who had only ever wanted to *teach* literature suddenly felt a desire to *write* it. AND... She didn't want to write just anything, she felt specifically compelled to write the interesting stories she saw before her, and that was the immigrant story as she was seeing it and experiencing it in the United States; she wanted to capture these stories because as far as she could see, that wasn't being done not to a satisfactory degree. I'm reminded of something Toni Morrison once said: "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." And so Divakaruni began writing.



Now Divakaruni teaches in the creative writing program at the University of Houston, just as she'd always intended to do. But now this woman who didn't intend to be a writer is also now the author of 18 books, and the early theme that first compelled her to write has remained prominent throughout her career: she's returned again and again to intercultural experiences, particularly that of Indians living in America, and to American life itself. I am not an immigrant, and I'm so grateful that her writing invites me, the reader, to vicariously experience something I never will in my real life through the pages of her novels. Thanks to her graceful prose and dazzling descriptions it is so very easy to get swept up in her stories. My favorite of her books is *Before We Visit the Goddess*, a 2017 novel in stories about fraught relationships between mothers and daughters, the difficulty of making your way as a woman in the world, the secrets we keep from those we love, and sometimes from ourselves. The book reads almost like a highlight reel, a collection of vivid vignettes, each portraying an encounter that changes the course of a life. I've been recommending it nonstop since I first read it years ago, because *Before We Visit the Goddess* is One. Great. Book.

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I always love to hear how the idea for a novel begins to take shape, especially for seasoned writers who have done it again and again. For her seventeenth book, Divakaruni set herself a challenge related to the subject matter, as she'd done for all her books. She wanted to write a novel composed of short stories. She loved to read and write in short the genre; her first book was an award-winning collection of short stories titled *Arranged Marriage*.

But she didn't want to write a *collection*, she wanted a *novel*. She loves the story structure for the shorter pieces, but she knew in her next book she wanted to tell a larger story than the short story could hold. And so she sought to combine them, and get the best of both worlds.

She knew she wanted to tell a three-generational story in many voices, and from many different times. The female voices would be most prominent, but she also wanted to include the men who were important in their lives. And she knew she wanted to adhere to the Indian tradition of storytelling. The western story often goes straightforward, but the Indian story loops back and sideways. Divakaruni says she didn't herself really notice the difference between the two



storytelling traditions until she started teaching literature. For her own story, instead of starting with the grandmother and moving forward in time, she wanted to highlight moments that were emotionally resonant, following the structure of memory, which doesn't rely on chronological connections between events, but emotional ones.

While the Indian tradition of storytelling was crucial, Divakaruni also looked to two contemporary American novels for inspiration: Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, for the way it moves back and forth in time.

At the heart of this book are the relationships between mothers and daughters, a subject that fascinates Divakaruni. Why do they so often not understand each other's lives, each other's struggles, each other's challenges? Why is it sometimes so terribly painful—or downright impossible—to tell the most important things to the people we love? And, of course, in a book and a family that straddles India and America, that gap between parent and child is stretched further. So many of the events in *Goddess* echo Divakaruni's own life. The grandmother in this book is Sabitri (SAB-i-tree), a renowned sweet-maker who once owned her own sweet shop in Kolkata, but has now retired to the village of her youth. And then her daughter, Bela, who long ago left India for Houston, calls her mother in a panic: Bela's daughter Tara is dropping out of college, and Bela begs her mother to write to the girl—who she's never met—and tell her why she's making a huge mistake. Sabitri doesn't want to do it, but soon enough she's writing stories of the girl she once was, a poor man's daughter who dreamt of something more for her own life, but whose path did not unfold as she had dreamed.

Divakaruni chooses two quotes for her epigraph, to frame her story of the tension between generations, and continents, and ways of life. The first is a Hindu saying, written in Sanskrit: "Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased." This turns out to be both an idealistic hope and ironic social commentary, because something we see again and again in the pages is that women are not honored—and they have to work a lot harder than the men to be successful.

The second epigraph, from contemporary short story writer Jean Thompson, says, "Everybody lives two ways. The first is simple, the second less so." Divakaruni believes that we all have a



public self and a private self, one that even the people closest to us may not see. It's no surprise, then, that secrets feature prominently in this book, especially the ones we keep from those who know us best.

The title, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, comes from a chance encounter one of these women has with a stranger, which is fitting because my favorite parts of the story deal with the small moments that change the course of a person's life, and the unlikely friendships that do the same—and because Divakaruni has sought to move from one emotionally resonant moment to another, the book is PACKED with these tiny, life-changing moments.

In short, if you're looking for a book with the heft and sweep of a family saga that somehow comes in at a compact 225 pages, that gracefully portrays the hard-earned triumphs and cruel devastations of fierce women who fight both for and against each other, full of unexpected joys, tragic misunderstandings, and deep disappointments, all unfolding in descriptive, dazzling prose, *Before We Visit the Goddess* may be the next great book you're looking for.

[MUSIC]

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Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.