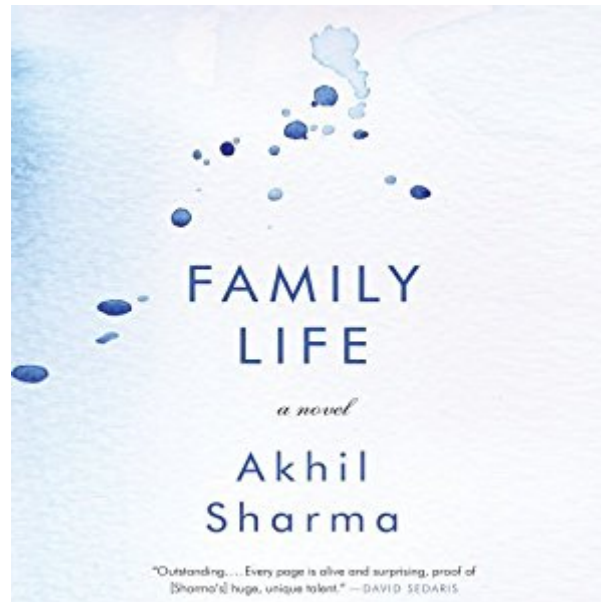


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Family Life: A Novel



Synopsis

Hailed as a "supreme storyteller" (Philadelphia Inquirer) for his "cunning, dismaying and beautifully conceived" fiction (New York Times), Akhil Sharma is possessed of a narrative voice "as hypnotic as those found in the pages of Dostoyevsky" (The Nation). In his highly anticipated second novel, *Family Life*, he delivers a story of astonishing intensity and emotional precision. We meet the Mishra family in Delhi in 1978, where eight-year-old Ajay and his older brother Birju play cricket in the streets, waiting for the day when their plane tickets will arrive and they and their mother can fly across the world and join their father in America. America to the Mishras is, indeed, everything they could have imagined and more: When automatic glass doors open before them, they feel that surely they must have been mistaken for somebody important. Pressing an elevator button and the elevator closing its doors and rising, they have a feeling of power at the fact that the elevator is obeying them. Life is extraordinary until tragedy strikes, leaving one brother severely brain-damaged and the other lost and virtually orphaned in a strange land. Ajay, the family's younger son, prays to a God he envisions as Superman, longing to find his place amid the ruins of his family's new life. Heart-wrenching and darkly funny, *Family Life* is a universal story of a boy torn between duty and his own survival.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ajay is one of those rare narrators: a person who can see himself without inflation, pathos, or self-consciousness. He has come to America from India and finds himself to be in the unenviable position of the lesser second child. Then his brother Birju has a catastrophic injury leaving him

severely brain damaged. His family must struggle with hope and despair while channeling most of their energies to complex nursing support. Ajay is a child when the tragedy occurs. In wry twists he admits his occasional resentment of the tragedy. Other times he reveals an unsavory hunger to be the celebrity brother of fate. Yet overall he cares deeply for his family. Sometimes he speaks with a God dressed in contemporary clothing. He finds no answers there, "Even if I told you something, I might change my mind." Cast adrift, Ajay discovers that a life devoted writing is possible, and the world changes for him. Ajay takes the reader with him, and the reader cannot but help feeling great affection for this young boy. His speech is darkly humorous at times. He can be selfish and he can be grandiose. But all of his thoughts carry the authenticity of a person being strictly honest with himself. The author achieves this without stooping to preciousness or drama. Somehow even in the everyday, the story holds us enmeshed with the reality of life after a fatal three minutes changes everything.

Family Life by Akhil Sharma is the story of growing up of an Indian boy in the US when his father decided to immigrate to the country of milk and honey. Written in first person the most striking feature of the book is the way it is told. I haven't read any fiction written in such simple words that at times makes you wonder if you are reading an essay written by a fourth grader. Having lived in the US for decades, one would expect Akhil Sharma to write an American novel, more so because it all happened in that country, but once you are past few pages you know it's essentially an Indian story told by a boy as if he was schooled in vernacular medium. The naivety, I think is intentional and this is why it punches straight. Sharma took more than 7000 pages and 12 years to write the story but finally when it was published it had some 250 pages. He said in one interview that it was a catharsis for him to write the book. When one considers what would be like living with an elder brother who had turned neurologically vegetable following an head injury since early childhood, it's not surprising to understand his plight. His elder brother lived for thirty years in this state and died only a couple of years before the book was published in 2014. In a sense it's a memoir, but Sharma declined to label it so. He admitted though the story indeed was his and his brain damaged elder brother, he preferred to write a fiction to take the liberty of laughing at himself. I yawned few times when the every mundane details of daily life was described, but apart from that the story was engaging though most of it was sad and dark with parents quarrelling, father turning alcoholic and miracle healers failing to cure the incurable brain-crippled boy one by one. Only the Meenakshi episode, though the author didn't give it the anticipated due, was like a breath of fresh air. I won't say it's one novel I will like to read again, but will definitely want people to read it once, not for the story but for

the ease of reading and become aware of that stories could be written without pretensions and showing people that you are so well read.

Tender and thoughtful, Mr. Sharma does several things very well in this novel. He portrays the confusing, often bittersweet love of siblings very well. Wrapped in tragedy, he delves into the darker side of what lies beneath the surface of sibling rivalry. Mr. Sharma also describes the horrors of living with an alcoholic parent and the social shame of this for a child (not unique to Indians, but in this case experienced as immigrants in America on a roller coaster of "fame" unwanted). Through the eyes and mind of a pre-teen and then high school aged boy, we travel alongside this family as they fight with each other, the world, their truth and against losing hope. A quick read and a good one.

I love Indian authors writing in English! Whether it be via the U.S., as with Sharma, Britain, or Canada, they have a rich and full literary tradition. In this moving story of a family, Sharma turns a sharp and insightful lens on the Indian American Immigrant experience. It's the story of what happens when that often told tale of the children of immigrants finding achievement and success in their new home goes tragically wrong. The older brother of our narrator Ajay is bound for such success, accepted into a prestigious High School and on track to be a doctor. He is the center of his family's world. Then tragedy strikes in the form of a diving accident that leaves him severely disabled physically and intellectually. Ajay finds that his brother is still the center of attention for very different reasons. How Ajay and his parents deal with this tragedy forms the heart of this book. They all lose and find themselves, then seem to lose themselves again. Life does not give this family all that they had wanted but it never gives them more than they can ultimately cope with.

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