The Space Between Us
by Thrity Umrigar
Published in 2007
Paperback version available online for less than $11;
available for Amazon’s Kindle for less than $10.

Proposed by: Donna Rongione, Coordinator, Speech Communication, Essex

The Space Between Us is the powerful story of two women from different social classes in India who form an unusual, tenuous friendship. Bhima, an aging slum-dwelling woman, has spent years as a servant to Sera, a privileged upper middle-class widow. The relationship between the two women is rife with dichotomies. They feel sincere affection for each other, yet their relative ranks in society keeps them separate through tradition and inbred prejudice. Additionally, both have secrets that tear at their lives.

Sera hides her husband’s physical and emotional abuse as well as her mother-in-law’s disruption to her married life. Bhima suffers from the desertion of her husband and the loss of her son and daughter; her social status and illiteracy doom her to an impoverished life. When she is forced to deal with the shame of her granddaughter’s illegitimate pregnancy, she arrives at a breaking point.

In the end, the bond between the women is shattered by someone who uses the pressures of class and gender against both of them. Loyalties and families ties are stressed and tested in this engaging, eye-opening novel.

Blurbs and Endorsements

“Poignant, evocative, and unforgettable, The Space Between Us is an intimate portrait of a distant yet familiar world. Set in modern-day India, it is the story of two compelling and achingly real women: Sera Dubash, an upper-middle-class Parsi housewife whose opulent surroundings hide the shame and disappointment of her abusive marriage, and Bhima, a stoic illiterate hardened by a life of despair and loss, who has worked in the Dubash household for more than twenty years. A powerful and perceptive literary masterwork, author Thrity Umrigar’s extraordinary novel demonstrates how the lives of the rich and poor are intrinsically connected yet vastly removed from each other, and how the strong bonds of womanhood are eternally opposed by the divisions of class and culture.” (Book Jacket)

"Heartbreaking.... A subtle, elegant analysis of class and power... that quietly roars against tyranny." Kirkus Reviews

“This is a story intimately and compassionately told against the sensuous background of everyday life in Bombay.” Washington Post

“Provocative and disturbing.” Boston Globe

"With humanity and suspense, novelist Thrity Umrigar tackles love, loyalty, injustice - and survival." -- Marie Claire

What Makes this a Good CBC Book?
1. Describe how it contains multiple themes that lend themselves to use by various departments and functions throughout the college.

This compelling novel offers a wealth of themes and pedagogical angles. It can be used in lessons about: cultural norms, gender and power, world poverty, self-concept, racism and prejudice, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, alcoholism, the value of education, class differences, illiteracy, friendship, abortion, delivery of health care, AIDS, the position of women in society, and many more.

This rich, multi-dimensional novel could enhance classes in English, ESOL, Reading, Statistics, Women’s Studies, Health & Wellness, Sociology, Global Education, Psychology, Speech & Communication, Philosophy, Diversity, and so many more.

2. Is it at an accessible level for our students?

The novel is well-written in an easy flowing narrative, with chapters switching back and forth between Bhima’s and Sera’s first-person points of view. It’s a fairly easy and fast read, and very engaging.

3. Detail the way in which it is conducive to event planning.

See #6

4. Does it possibly have a related theatre or film piece?

My first-hand knowledge in these areas is limited, but I have done some research.

**Film**

_Slum Dog Millionaire_ comes immediately to mind. I did some quick online research and found that there are several movies about India that seem to have similar themes:

*English August*
*Mirch Masala*
*Hyderabad Blues*
*Mr & Mrs. Iyer*
*Salaam Bombay*
*Lagaan* (an entertaining Bollywood epic set during British colonialism with powerful social themes).

**Theatre**

I have read about several Indian playwrights who have addressed similar issues in their plays: Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, and Vijay Tendulkar.

5. Explain the ways that it is related to current social issues.

This book puts a human face on many social issues: class, poverty, domestic violence, globalism, and many more. It really convincingly demonstrates how important education is.

We live in a world of haves and have-nots—this book is wonderful in the way it opens our eyes to social and economic conditions in India. But these issues are quite real for our students too. Our community college students will be able to relate to the struggle of Bhima’s granddaughter as she faces obstacles in getting an education and getting ahead in life.
6. Describe how it is easily tied into existing CCBC events such as Ethics Week, Spotlight Speakers Series, Closing the Gap, Creative Writing Forum, etc.

- The author, Thrity Umrigar lives in Ohio and is available for college public speaking events. There is a link on her website for this purpose: www.umrigar.com.

- We could have a forum or panel discussion with Indian student participants. Serious discussion of issues could be supplemented with social aspects, such as exhibitions of traditional Indian dress, traditions, and/or food.

- The book addresses many ethical issues that could offer opportunities for Ethics Week: equality in the delivery of health care and government resources, gender expectations and treatment, and use of social power, to name a few.

- Any number of activities could be linked to the college’s global initiatives

- Office of Multi-cultural Affairs and Closing the Gap could sponsor any number of events that could link the issues raised in this book to the issues faced by our students.

- Indian Film Festival and Indian dance lessons (some fun activities!)

- Lectures, panels, and debates to raise awareness about Domestic Violence and Rape

- Events to raise awareness about the causes of global poverty.

- We could invite Indian comic Vijai Nathan who lives in DC to deliver some stand-up comedy.

- Book discussions that would include Indian food.

- Cultural events could include art and photography exhibits, Indian dance performances, Indian music performances, staged theatrical readings from the novel, student multi-genre exhibits.

7. Is it either relatively short; or does it have chapters that may be studied independently of the whole work?

The novel is approximately 350 pages long. Many of the chapters offer opportunities for stand-alone discussions about a variety of social issues, so it is very adaptable for those instructors who might not want to use the entire novel.

8. Has this text been used successfully in the classroom?

Unknown. But I can easily see it being adopted for classroom use very soon.

Summary:

This novel offers a number of exciting possibilities for lesson plans in multiple disciplines and tie-ins to a multitude of cultural and gender issues as well as issues of illiteracy, prejudice, and ethics.