

★ **How to Make Your Mother Cry: Fictions**

Sejal Shah

West Virginia University Press (May 1, 2024)

Softcover \$24.99 (192pp)

978-1-959000-13-6

Sejal Shah's intrepid short story collection *How to Make Your Mother Cry* is a polysemous encounter connecting auditory and visual modes. Interspersed with ephemera—memory-photographs, childlike drawings, Indian dance notations, a playlist of songs and liner notes—its hybrid forms include poetry and prose-poetic turns.

While their plot coordinates are murky, these linked stories are scintillating, distilled glimpses of life shuttled among disparate American geographies, including Iowa and New York. They negotiate ethnicity and straddle Gujarati Indian and American cultures. They are led by girlish V. across three sections encompassing her childhood (“a girl walks into the forest”), adolescence (“a girl is lost in the woods”), and adulthood (“a girl claws her way out”).

Rendered in lush and intimate prose, the stories speak to V.'s coming of age, attended by a sense of loneliness even though she's surrounded by siblings, childhood friends, and boyfriends. They speak of heartbreak, loss when lovers leave, and surviving with one's sense of self intact: “You were a girl, you were worth saving.” They address intergenerational cultural alienation too, which is observed within the intimate connections between a mother and child.

V. addresses letters to her beloved English teacher, Mr. Bird, who never replies. Trauma is accounted for in a deadpan tone, with V. recalling staving off depression after the loss of her sister. Luminous moments are sculpted with exquisite poetics: as Tibetan monks make sand paintings; as V. looks up save in a dictionary while young; as V. holds a rock in her hand, steals it, and thinks about how a girl becomes rock.

How to Make Your Mother Cry is a groundbreaking literary collection that transcends limits to heighten meaning and emotional power.

ELAINE CHIEW (May / June 2024)

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