Madhur Jaffrey, *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. xii + 297 pages.

In this charming book, actress-turned–cookbook author Madhur Jaffrey offers a first-person account of life in India during the 1930s and 1940s. Admittedly a "privileged product of British colonial India" (p. 201), she describes a comfortable life: a life filled with months-long summer retreats to

hill stations in the Himalayas, upper-class schooling, and sprawling manses and grounds populated by servants galore—cooks, gardeners, drivers, tailors, personal attendants, and more. The subtitle is accurate, as the work is more memoir than autobiography: Jaffrey is not strictly chronological in her presentation, and she occasionally brings the reader toward the present at the end of a vignette, offering what became of a particular cousin or how someone ultimately fared in his or her profession. She intertwines myth with memory and tells a compelling story of her family—an extended, multi-generational clan—and upbringing in Delhi and Kanpur. Many of the twenty-nine brief chapters, most fewer than ten pages, could effectively stand as essays on their own; some passages, in alternate form, had previously appeared in such venues as the *New Yorker*, *Gourmet*, and the *Financial Times*. Here, her chapters have descriptive titles that read like haiku as they illustrate what is to come: chapter 19, for example, is "Chicken Pox / Soup-Toast and Sewing / A Fancy-Dress Party" (p. 150); and chapter 17 is "Visiting the Old City / The Lane of Fried Breads / Monsoon Mushrooms" (p. 127). Jaffrey includes a brief prologue and epilogue; a family tree—on which she traces her father's line to Raja Raghunath Bahadur (1590–1665), finance minister to Emperor Aurangzeb (1618–1707); thirty-seven black-and-white family photographs, most well captioned; and, in an appendix, thirty-two "family recipes," each preceded by a contextualizing introduction.

Jaffrey was born on August 13, 1933, in her grandparents' "sprawling house" (p. 3) on the bank of the Yamuna River in Delhi.[1] Her family belonged to an upper subcaste of Hindus known as Mathur Kayasthas, who historically were scribes and administrators. She came from a "staid family of fully documented ancestors" (p. 159): "We were a conservative, buttoned-down Kayastha family but with forward-looking, intellectually liberal leanings" (p. 146). With two older brothers and two older sisters (and a younger sister to follow), she was "way beyond the heir and the spare" (p. 39), so her parents allowed her to be outspoken and independent: in short, everything her father, a factory manager, could not allow himself to be.

Like the esteemed British food writer Elizabeth David (1913–92), who also aspired to be an actress, Jaffrey had no reason to learn to cook as a child. In fact, she nearly failed her high school cooking exam—a component of her "lower mathematics" course that included both arithmetic and domestic science. (She ultimately learned to cook, after she moved abroad, through correspondence with her mother.) But, whenever near food, she must have kept her "antennae up and focused" (p. 212). Jaffrey displays a remarkable "taste memory" (p. 5) and is able to present detailed menus of family meals—both the exceptional and the routine, such as the summer luncheon with which she introduces chapter 2 (p. 17) or the breakfasts upon which she feasted with her family before she was old enough to attend

school (pp. 42–43). Once in school (a Catholic convent school in Kanpur, with instruction in English), her boxed lunches—packaged in tiffins, somewhat like Japanese *bentō* 弁当 containers—were delivered midday by the turbaned "bearer," who would prepare a table in the school's communal dining area by spreading out tablecloths and laying out crockery and cutlery. When class was dismissed and Jaffrey and her sisters arrived on the scene, the bearer would open the tiffin-carrier, spread out the containers of still-warm food, and place a serving spoon in each. Later, at Queen Mary's School in Delhi, she would share the contents of her tiffin-carrier (which she now brought to school herself) with Muslim, Jain, and Hindu friends (pp. 175–77):

> Tiffin-carriers were taken apart, tier after tier. What wonders did they contain today? [Muslim twins] Abida and Zahida could be relied upon to bring meats—and what meats they were! Goat cooked with spinach, browned onions, and cardamom, or goat with potatoes, cinnamon, and cloves. . . .
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> . . . Sudha's food was as Jain as Abida and Zahida's was Muslim. It was completely vegetarian, devoid of onion and garlic, as those bulbs were thought to arouse base passions; devoid of tomatoes and beets, as their color was reminiscent of blood; and contained no real root vegetables (though rhizomes were acceptable), as pulling out roots killed the entire plant. The preservation of life demanded by her religion did not stop her food . . . from being scrumptious in a haughty, austere way, nor did it stop her from sharing her food with us.

Understandably, Jaffrey has much to offer about the food of India; but she also has a personal story to tell—that of a family domineered by her father's father, of an uncle who shunned his wife and own children and bestowed favors on his nieces and nephews, of a beloved cousin who died from rabies, and of members of an extended family who led bifurcated lives: between Muslim and Hindu, Britain and India, English and Hindi (or Urdu). While a student at the Catholic convent school, for example, where she studied "two histories" (British and Indian, p. 19), "what happened at home and what happened at school were unconnected" (p. 56).

Politics in the book, however, are not limited to family squabbles. In relating her family background, Jaffrey explains that her ancestors were royalists during the failed 1857 Mutiny. Children might not be expected to be aware of the purported rationalizations for war, but Jaffrey does include memories of World War II. One such memory involves one of her father's cousins who was not shy about his Nazi sympathies: "My poor father was appalled," she explains (p. 69). Her memories of Partition—when the British Indian Empire was divided into the sovereign states of India and Pakistan in August 1947—and the confusion and fear that descended on Delhi after Independence are particularly poignant. In short, "Delhi as we knew it ceased to exist" (p. 183). Many of Delhi's Muslims (including a number of Jaffrey's school friends) fled to Pakistan and were replaced by refugees from the Punjab. Jaffrey and her mother attended one of Mahatma Gandhi's

massive prayer meetings a few days before his assassination on January 30, 1948; she viewed his funeral procession from the Kingsway (now Rajpath) near the India Gate—the same spot where she and her father had witnessed the unfurling of the new national flag by Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) and Lord Mountbatten (1900–1979) the previous August. Although national and world history are woven throughout Jaffrey's narrative, students studying modern Indian history might be especially interested in chapters 3, 9, and 22.

Delhi cuisine was subsequently affected by the Punjabi influx after Partition. The clay oven (tandoor) and numerous Punjabi specialties were introduced and quickly permeated the newly emergent restaurant scene. These foods—including tandoori chicken, naan (flatbread), and saag paneer (fresh cheese with spinach)—are what much of the world today identifies as "Indian food."

Traditional festivals are described in the book, too, including Diwali (the "Festival of Lights") observed by Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and some Buddhists at the Indian New Year; and the Hindu spring festival of Holi (the "Festival of Colors"). Indeed, the contrast between tradition and modernity is another undercurrent in the text. Regarding why certain traditions were followed or why places had certain names, Jaffrey offers the following: "Delhi was an ancient, idiosyncratic city. I never asked the questions, and my mother never explained" (p. 130). Elsewhere, Jaffrey's mother "never explained, we never asked, and in India you never know" (p. 41). And "in India, you rarely lose a tradition. You simply layer one on top of another" (p. 147). For example, matchmakers were often ceremonial barbers who consulted horoscopes to determine the suitability of marriage partners. Before one of Jaffrey's uncles married a woman out of love whose horoscope did not "match," "a disastrous marriage ending in the quick death of the bride" was predicted (p. 73). The prophesy was fulfilled when the bride died of typhoid six months after the wedding. Jaffrey does not editorialize further, but her implication is nevertheless that some traditions perhaps best remain unquestioned.

Jaffrey's story essentially ends with her grandfather's death in 1950 and her subsequent departure from India to study acting in London. (But the prefaces to her recipes in the appendix include additional personal stories and vignettes.) Now residing in New York City, Jaffrey was awarded an honorary Commander of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II in 2004 for her achievements in film, television, and cookery and for serving as a cultural ambassador for India in the United Kingdom and United States. This honor, and other facts about her later life—involving, for example, her acting career, her (second) marriage to an American violinist with the New York Philharmonic, and her fame as a cookbook author and television personality—are revealed in her book. These revelations are not braggadocios but are rather included as if to show how her formative

experiences as a child in India have played themselves out, sometimes with irony, but always with reason.[2] Memoirs, indeed, allow their authors the space to make sense of their lives. For Jaffrey, food and family were always primary concerns. When you read her book, make sure a kitchen is near at hand: You will surely be inspired to recreate some of the flavors and aromas that she masterfully describes in her tasty offering.

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Notes

[1]The Yamuna River is pictured on the cover of this volume of the *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*. (See inside back cover for a description of the cover image.)

[2]Writes former *New York Times* restaurant critic Mimi Sheraton about memoirs: "It is much easier to trace past events that determined present circumstances than to predict which current activities will inform our future." See her *Eating My Words: An Appetite for Life* (New York: William Morrow, 2004), 130.