

***The Girl in the Garden* by Kamala Nair  
2011, Grand Central Publishing 305 pages**

Rakhee Singh seems to have it all. She's just a few weeks away from graduating with a master's from Yale School of Architecture. She already has a great job lined up. She's engaged to a wonderful man. Yet she is haunted by the events of her eleventh summer, when a trip to her mother's hometown in India drastically changed her life.

An unexpected letter from India brings the past crashing into the present. As hard as she has worked to put that long-ago summer behind her, Rakhee realizes that the skeletons in her closet are restless. In order to truly be happy, she will have to confront them. She slips away in the night, leaving behind her engagement ring and a sheaf of papers explaining where she's going and why.

The summer that she turned eleven, Rakhee's beautiful and troubled mother took her to visit their ancestral home in India. For months, Rakhee had been aware of an underlying unhappiness that permeated her parents' relationship. As her mother became increasingly unstable, the distance between her parents seemed to grow ever wider.

Rakhee tells herself that the upcoming trip to India will give her parents the time and space that they need to sort things out and remember that they love each other. She boards the plane with her mother ready for adventure and confident that all will be well by the time school starts in the fall.

Ashoka, The Varma family estate, is a crumbling shadow of its former glory with secrets lurking in every corner. The family is still respected in the village, but their fortune is gone and the hospital they've operated for years is in danger of closing. Rakhee's Uncle Vijay has turned administration of the hospital over to Dev, a man from the village with a hidden agenda of his own.

Rakhee and her cousins, Krishna and Meenu, are forbidden to leave the boundaries of the estate. Aunt Sadhana warns the children of a Rakshasi, a demon who eats children, that lives in the jungle just beyond the estate walls.

Less superstitious than her cousins, Rakhee ventures into the jungle one morning and finds a beautiful, walled garden. The garden's lone inhabitant is a girl who has never seen the outside world. Rakhee's discovery slowly unravels the flimsy fabric of more than a decade's worth of sorrow and deception.

*The Girl in the Garden* is a luminous look at the effect of long-kept secrets on the heart of a family. It is both an engrossing family saga and a heartbreakingly personal coming-of-age story. As the story unfolds, readers grow to understand why the adult Rakhee won't marry without first facing the ghosts of her past.

Author Kamala Nair has crafted a beautiful, enchanting debut. I had a hard time putting this book down. The lovely imagery and gothic storyline weave a spell for readers that isn't easily broken, even with the last page read.

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