

Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

Mother Mary Comes to Me

By Arundhati Roy

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

Author Bio

[Arundhati Roy](#) is the author of *The God of Small Things*, which won the Booker Prize in 1997 and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* which has been translated into more than forty languages and was longlisted for the Booker Prize. Roy has also published several works of nonfiction, including *Azadi*, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Listening to Grasshoppers*, and *Broken Republic*. In 2023, she was awarded the prestigious European Essay Prize for lifetime achievement, and in 2024, the PEN Pinter Prize for telling “urgent stories of injustice with wit and beauty.” She lives in Delhi.¹

Summary

Mother Mary Comes to Me is a memoir by novelist and activist Arundhati Roy that traces the life, influence and contradictions of her mother, Mary Roy—an educator

¹ “Mother May Comes to Me by Arundhati Roy,” Simon & Schuster, accessed Feb. 18, 2026, <https://www.simonandschuster.ca/books/Mother-Mary-Comes-to-Me/Arundhati-Roy/9781668095058>.

and legal reformer whose landmark challenge to discriminatory inheritance laws reshaped women’s property rights in India. Blending personal memory with political reflection, Roy examines the public courage and private complexity of a woman who refused to submit to patriarchal and religious constraints, even when doing so carried profound personal cost.

Roy reflects on growing up amid instability, illness, anger and defiance—shaped by a mother who was at once a fierce advocate for women’s equality and a demanding, often volatile presence at home. Through stories of legal battles, educational reform, family fracture and cultural expectation, Roy explores how resistance to injustice can transform institutions—and the families and communities involved.

Roy situates her mother within broader struggles for gender justice in India, while also confronting the complicated emotional terrain of being the daughter of a woman who was both “shelter and storm”. At its core, *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is a meditation on inheritance, Mary’s legal battles and that which we inherit from our parents but cannot measure: courage, conviction, hurt and harm.

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Equality before the law is a foundational human rights principle. In *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, Arundhati Roy recounts the life of her mother, Mary Roy, whose landmark legal challenge to discriminatory inheritance laws in India affirmed that constitutional guarantees of equality must prevail over unequal religious personal law. The equality rights of people in B.C. are protected under section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Canadian Human Rights Act and B.C.’s Human Rights Code. Debates about how to reconcile freedom of religion, cultural tradition and gender equality continue in Canada today.

The memoir also engages with gender-based violence, coercion and the normalization of harm within private life. Canadian law recognizes the right to life, liberty and security of the person under section 7 of the Charter, and provincial and federal legislation address domestic violence, sexual exploitation and family protection. Roy’s reflections on abuse, silence, shame and social stigma echo broader patterns that human rights frameworks seek to address. The book reminds readers that inequality is not only structural or institutional; it is also reproduced within homes, relationships and communities, often in ways that are difficult to name.

Finally, the memoir raises questions about **children’s rights and intergenerational responsibility.** Arundhati Roy describes navigating adult conflict, emotional burden and instability at a young age. Internationally, **the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms children’s rights to protection, dignity and development.** The



experiences described in the book invite reflection on how children are affected when systems of inequality and violence go unchallenged—and how legal reform does not automatically transform family dynamics.

Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. Equality, tradition and the law

Mary Roy’s legal challenge to discriminatory inheritance laws reshaped property rights for women in her community, placing constitutional equality above longstanding religious personal law. Have you encountered situations where long-held norms or expectations were defended because they are “tradition,” even when they limited someone’s autonomy or opportunity? How do you think the balance between human rights like freedom of religion and gender equality should be struck?

- Equality under the law is foundational to human rights frameworks. At the same time, cultural and religious traditions carry meaning and identity for many communities. Where cultural or religious traditions conflict with principles of gender equality, Roy’s memoir invites reflection on how societies navigate this tension—and how progress often requires individuals willing to confront deeply embedded systems, at great personal cost. In our own contexts, this can prompt us to consider where we benefit from existing norms, and when we might have opportunities to question them.

2. Children as caretakers

Roy describes being drawn into adult conflicts, managing a parent’s illness and absorbing emotional responsibilities beyond her years. What happens when children become caretakers for adults—emotionally and practically? How might this shape a child’s sense of self, safety or responsibility? In what ways can children be affected by systems of inequality or instability that they did not create?

- Children’s rights frameworks emphasize protection, development and dignity. While many families navigate hardship with resilience, Roy’s reflections prompt consideration of how adult struggles—legal, financial, relational—are often experienced most intensely by those with the least power to change them.
- When children take on increasing responsibility within a household, they may learn about loyalty, duty and care. At the same time, children can be asked to take on too much responsibility and care, at a time when they ought to be dependent on adults and trusted people in their lives.



3. An imperfect feminist

Mary Roy was a fierce advocate for women's equality in public life, while Roy reflects on moments of volatility, redirected anger and harm within the home. Have you encountered leaders, mentors or movement figures whose personal behaviour complicated your view of their work? How do we sit with the tension of admiring someone's impact, while also acknowledging the ways they may have caused harm? What is your response to 'imperfect' activists?

- Social movements, and the people within them, are often built in response to structural injustice. But individuals shaped by oppression may carry its patterns into intimate spaces. Roy's memoir challenges readers to consider whether transformation at the institutional level must also include reflection and accountability at the personal level. Throughout the book, Roy extends a striking degree of grace toward her mother, holding the fullness of her life without reducing her to either hero or perpetrator. In doing so, Roy resists the expectation that those who fight for justice must also be flawless.

4. Memoir, storytelling and truth

Roy reflects on the blurred boundaries between memory and imagination, noting that we may not be the "best arbiters of which is which." However, stories serve a fundamental purpose: they shape what we understand to be true, credible and legitimate. How are dominant narratives about families, communities or nations formed? What happens when long-held versions of events are challenged? Have you ever revisited a memory and found that others recall it differently?

- Storytelling is a form of expression and, at times, resistance. Within families, communities and societies, certain narratives are reinforced, while others remain unspoken. Silence can smooth over conflict, but it can also obscure harm. Public inquiries and commissions play a critical role in holding institutions to account and recognizing experiences that have been minimized or denied.
- In acknowledging multiple perspectives, we may also become more conscious to whose voices have historically been privileged or minimized. Reclaiming personal and collective narratives can be both disruptive and necessary in advancing human rights.



5. Violence, silence and survival

The memoir recounts experiences of domestic abuse, the sexualization of young girls and the silence that often surrounds harm within families and communities. What forms of silence or minimization around violence have you observed—personally, culturally or institutionally? Why can it be so difficult to name harm, especially when the person responsible holds social power or familiarity?

- Rights related to bodily autonomy, safety and dignity are central to human rights protections. Yet harm often occurs in private spaces, where power is unbalanced, accountability is complex and human rights law (which is usually aimed at putting checks on state power) may not apply. This is especially true for children and women. The book invites readers to consider how communities can better create environments where violence is neither normalized nor hidden. In practice, this might mean ensuring that schools, workplaces and faith communities have confidential pathways for reporting harm; creating environments where children have trusted adults outside the home to speak with safely; training staff and volunteers to recognize signs of abuse; or having the courage, as friends or extended family members, to check in when something feels wrong.

