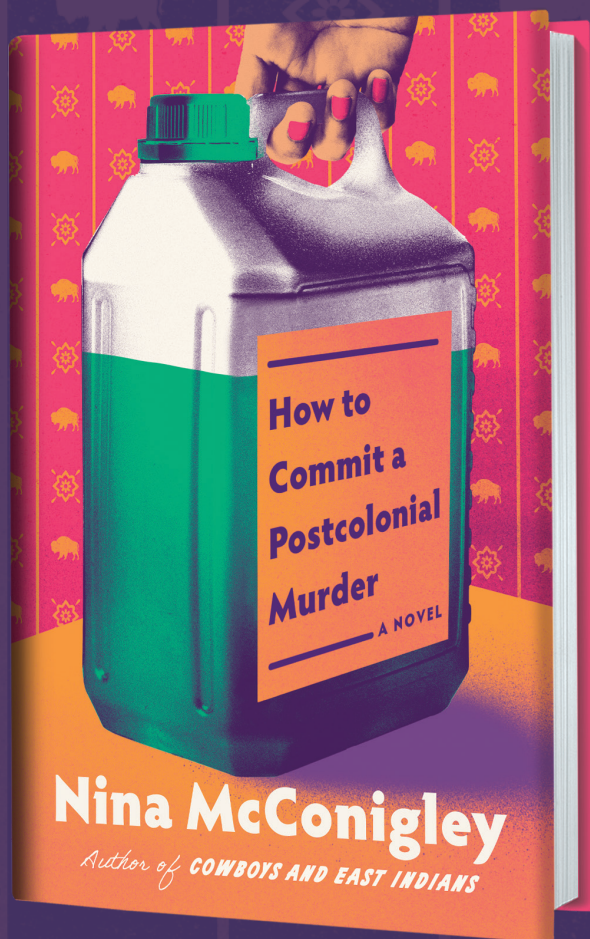


How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder

By **Nina McConigley**



PANTHEON



BOOK CLUB KIT

Sip and Discuss

Gather your book club, pour this cocktail and get ready to dive into Nina McConigley's bold, conversation-sparking debut. Inspired by the book's themes of memory and sisterhood, this drink is meant to be shared. Loosen the edges, savor both the story and the spirited company around you.

10 oz lime juice (10 limes)

20 oz gin

3.75 oz Midori

3.75 oz simple syrup

Umbrella for garnish

Serve on ice, approximately 10 servings



THE BLAME

My sister Agatha Krishna said it started when they came, and so that's where you could put the blame. But then she said we had to go farther back than that. So we blamed it on Reagan; everyone blamed him that summer, the summer the country went into a bust, the summer we watched an exodus empty our town. Then I blamed the Cold War, and Gorbachev—he had the stain on his head, and thus, I felt, couldn't be trusted. We blamed famine in Ethiopia after Amma posted a photo on the fridge of a child with a belly like a hot air balloon. We blamed AIDS, which we didn't really get, but thought you *could* get from the water fountain at the public library you stepped on with your foot. We blamed the Olympics, and hated Sam the Eagle, their feathered mascot, who dressed as an American flag, though secretly I had a button of him with his sly smile and torch. We blamed it on my parents for moving to Wyoming in the first place, for settling in Marley. Then we just generally blamed them for everything. We thought they shouldn't have married, that they shouldn't have mixed us up. Shouldn't have made us halfies. Agatha Krishna said we could blame it on my grandparents too, for having one child who went to school, and another who stayed at home. For letting Amma wear a crisp, white uniform and leaving Vinny Uncle to read Curly Wee comics.

But then she said—let's blame it on the British. Everything went back to the British. They did it first, Agatha Krishna said. They were colonists. They were the reason our Amma went to school and our uncle stayed home; they were the reason that we were quiet around most white people, the reason my mom drank tea when everyone else we knew, except the Mormons, drank coffee. It was the British that shaped Amma's world. That made her spell favor with a u, use a knife and fork, and bake fruitcake with sultanas and nuts. It was the British that taught us to keep our upper lips stiff at all times.



That year, we had an Indian summer twice. A frost had come and left the garden in disarray. Tomato stalks broke in two, my mother's peppers dangled like limp green earrings from the stem. But then the days warmed again and an infestation of millers descended. They threw themselves in swarms at the streetlights marking the intersections. They offered a kind of suttee to the light. Black dots against the Krishna-colored sky. My father, tired from coming off rigs, would fill a large stainless-

steel bowl with dish soap at night. Leaving it on his desk, he would shine a desk lamp into the soapy bowl. By morning, the bubbles would long have gone flat and the little bodies of the millers would be floating in the water, their wings soaked and black.

I always felt bad for them. Drawn to something beautiful, something almost ethereal, only to find themselves trapped. I didn't think it was a good way to die. But what is? And the only way you could justify it was when Amma held up saris eaten to lace, sweaters with holes the size of coins.

Years later, I would learn that miller moths don't eat clothes. They're actually great pollinators. We were wrong. Small clothes moths are the real pests. Clothes moths barely fly and don't like the light. But Appa didn't like the sound of the millers hitting the lights at night. Of them clogging the sills of our doors and windows with their downy scales.



It was in that second wave of warmth that they came to us. Not tired or wretched or tempest-tossed, but poor. We drove to Denver to pick them up. They did not come off the plane looking bewildered by this new land before them. If anything, they came at us like moths. Fast, a little frantic, and seemingly, as the months would show, drawn to all the wrong things.

Amma, who had not seen a member of her family since marrying my father almost fourteen years earlier, ran to her brother, Vinny Uncle, pressed a carton of Marlboro Reds in his pocket, then squeezed my cousin, Narayan, like a lemon, and filled his hands with chocolate. She gave my Auntie Devi a rhinestone necklace.

We piled into two cars to drive home. Narayan screamed when he saw his first antelope. Auntie Devi stuck her head out the window to catch the wind. Vinny Uncle just remarked on how fast the car went. That we didn't have to stop for animals in the road, or pause at scooters packed with bodies.

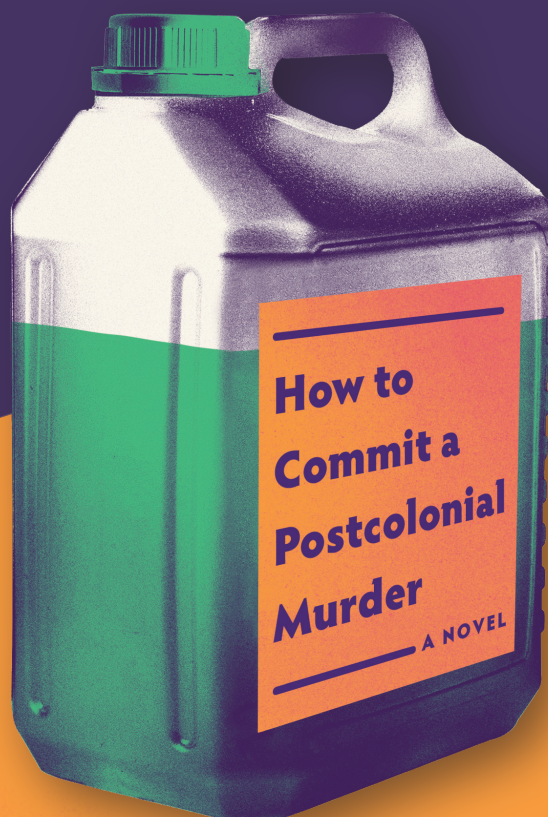
The Ayyars dipped into our lives like a teabag into the whiteness of a porcelain cup. They muddied the water and made our house feel small, having taken over Agatha Krishna's old bedroom. Now she slept with me. They left rings of talcum powder on the carpet; the bathroom floor was slick with water from their cup and bucket, and the house became smelly with the food my Aunt Devi cooked: dosas and sambar, prawn fries and molee. If she wasn't cooking, she stood on the lawn in a sari and cardigan, looking out at nothing. Feeling the air and the altitude with a kind of wonder. Or sometimes she sat in front of the television. She watched a lot of *Dynasty*. She no longer had her own house, she didn't drive. She had to ask Amma

to buy her everything, from underwear to airmail paper. To us, she said little, just cooked us food, then slipped back to the bedroom to watch TV late into the night. She was like Amma. Same long black hair. But not Amma. She was ghost-Amma. The Amma who didn't say anything. The Amma in the room who faded into the furniture. As if she had only half come to America.



When you really came down to it, we blamed my uncle. And no matter who started it, we were the ones who had to finish it. So at night, as we lay in bed, Agatha Krishna in a sleeping bag zipped tight to her head, and me under a blanket half-eaten by moths, we told ourselves that it wasn't our fault. She sang a mantra: *the British are to blame, the British are to blame, the British are to blame, and Vinny Uncle will pay*. And soon, I joined her. We would make him pay.

Looking back, though, I'm not sure if that's how it works. I'm not sure you can ever cancel out someone who has taken from you by taking more from someone else. But I think that was the only way we could do it, the only way we could have killed him. The only way we could take our uncle's life and not look back. Not be filled with any blame.



Author NINA McCONIGLEY

Questions & Answers



The book opens with Georgie declaring that “the British are to blame.” How did you land on that line as the framing of the novel—and what does “blame” mean to you in this story?

I think when you’re young, and your brain is not fully developed, it’s easy to blame others for things. I know I always dodged responsibility. As a child, I often heard from both my Irish and Indian sides a kind of anger at colonial rule. The British made economic systems built for extraction rather than development – and that stuck with me. And to me, as a writer, I became interested in the more micro way that can happen. When there are systems within a home, for example, built on taking away and erasure. Blame means saying that someone is responsible for something. And these girls can’t feel responsible for the murder, or for what happened to them. And blaming something outside the home is perhaps easier for them.

The novel explores the intersection of family, identity, and colonial history. How did you balance the domestic story of the Creels with the larger, postcolonial themes running through the book?

I think it’s hard to be Indian and not think about colonialism or partition. But I want to complicate and think about all the ways things are colonized, whether it be the body or a country. Colonialism influences my own family history deeply. And the way things are split and divided. I am interested in borders and where lines are drawn. Colonization does this in such an arbitrary way. In Wyoming, the way the lines for the Wind River Indian Reservation are feels so capricious to me. So, I had a little fun when writing, thinking about the ways people exert control. Colonialism is a system in which a country establishes control over another territory and the people living there. And I liked thinking about things beyond nations doing this. How do we do this to each other?

The chapter-end quizzes are such a bold narrative device. What inspired you to weave these magazine-style quizzes into a literary novel about trauma, sisterhood, and history?

I taught an Indian literature class for years at the University of Wyoming. And I always opened the class with reading folktales. Folktales are so interesting in that they are often instructive, like Aesop’s Fables. Folktales have a use. Many Western folktales end with a wedding, and Indian ones often begin with one. And much of the tale is teaching a young woman how to be in the world. So, I started thinking about where I learned instruction. And so much of it was from *Teen*, *Seventeen*, and *YM*. I used to take quizzes to know how to talk to a boy or make friends. I wanted my characters to look at the quizzes in the same way – for advice on how to be in the world.

Georgie’s narration feels intimate, confessional, and at times defiant. How did you decide when to shift into second person, and what did those moments allow you to reveal that first person couldn’t?

As a biracial author, I get asked things all the time that frustrate me. Often, people want stories from a certain place to ring with a certain exoticism. And that could be Wyoming just as much as India. So, I decided to have these second-person sections to address readers who are not like me. And ask what are your expectations of an “Indian” book, a “Western”, or a “Murder Mystery”, and I wanted to subvert all those expectations. This allowed me to make the reader literally walk in the shoes of the other. And ask the reader for something that Georgie won’t. I also just wanted to play with the idea of how we translate and perform culture.

How did you think about storytelling itself as a form of resistance or reclamation in this book?

I love language and playing with language and secrets. And again, I thought a lot about storytelling in my childhood. In the 1980's in particular. How stories are told through folktales, through cheerleading cheers, and fortune-telling games like MASH. How the pop culture of 1986, from the Royal wedding to the Challenger explosion, all tell stories. And I made the girls tell stories in the way they know how: Ouija boards, Say No to Drugs PSAs, pen pal letters, and camp stories. They take back language and tell us things in their own way. And with that, they have a kind of agency. I love the play on language with things like Esperanto and diagramming sentences. All the ways we look for meaning.

The novel moves between humor, horror, and tenderness. How did you approach writing a story that could hold so many emotional tones without diminishing its gravity?

Honestly, I think being a teenager is funny. And serious. And bittersweet. And hard. But there is a lot of joy in learning to be in the world. A lot of joy in discovering who you will be as a woman. One moment you are trying to conjure the dead, the next putting Noxzema on your face. And I wanted to capture all of it. The heart of what it's like to be a teen girl in all its complexities. Especially when you are enduring serious life-changing trauma, and they rely on each other. Georgie and Agatha Krishna compartmentalize what is happening to them. And that allows them to still go to the mall, listen to music, and see friends.

You often reference pop culture—*Out of Africa*, *Seventeen* magazine, even mall culture of the 1980s. Why was it important for you to root this story in that specific cultural moment?

Partly because I lived through it. And partly because what a year 1986 was! I suppose I am nostalgic for mall hangs and listening to tapes. But it was also the first time I saw a disaster on TV – the Challenger – and felt my innocence chip away. Things breaking apart is a big theme of the book, so it seemed apt to start in January 1986 with that disaster. I also struggled a lot with form and structure in a novel. My first book was a short story collection, and there are so many fewer threads in a story. And when I was really struggling with writing, I decided to break the book down into months. That seemed less daunting. And then I looked at every month of 1986 and tried to weave in these weird cultural moments. And then the book took off.

Both *Cowboys and East Indians* and *How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder* explore themes of belonging and displacement. How do you see these two books in conversation with each other?

They both are about the American West. They both try and reinterpret the idea of a Western. They both are about rural immigration. In my stories, you dip into the lives of the characters. But with the novel, the reader walks into Cottonwood Cross. They are asked to be in the kitchen, the bathroom, and the bedrooms. But as a writer, I am concerned with the same things in both books: the American West, race, colonialism, language, stories, independence, and the body. But since there was such a gap between my books, I felt the freedom to play in this novel. And the novel became a bit weirder. But they are both about being brown in the West.

Without giving too much away, what do you hope readers carry with them after turning the final page?

That sisterhood is forever. And repair is possible. And that history can't be erased. I wrote the last chapter thinking heavily about the show "*I May Destroy You*" – a show I am obsessed with. I think the writing and the way that sexual violence is talked about – especially in the end really slayed me. As I think by presenting several endings, Michaela Coel is saying there is no single "correct" way to heal from sexual violence, and that stayed with me. And my novel is doing the same. What happened to Georgie and Agatha Krishna happened. And I am not sure that murder takes away that trauma or pain. And by leaving the ending a little open, I hope readers see the complexity of trauma. There is no neat linear conclusion. That's not life. Sometimes things go on, but sometimes connection is possible again.

What's Your Literary Alibi?

Confession time. If you found yourself in the pages of *How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder*, would you be the The Schemer, The Survivor or The Historian? Take this quiz to find your literary alibi.

1. When you're asked to keep a family secret, you...
 - A. Immediately tell your best friend—it's too juicy.
 - B. Guard it like state intelligence.
 - C. Write a thinly veiled short story about it.

2. If you could erase one colonial relic from everyday life, it would be...
 - A. Tea served like it's sacred.
 - B. The Queen's English.
 - C. Stiff school uniforms.

3. Your weapon of choice in a postcolonial murder mystery is...
 - A. A diary with damning entries.
 - B. A broken teacup—ironic, isn't it?
 - C. Sisterly silence.

4. At a crime scene, you'd most likely be...
 - A. Giving an impassioned speech about justice.
 - B. Taking selfies with the evidence.
 - C. Hiding in plain sight—"Who, me?"

5. When someone insists on "moving on" without accountability, you...
 - A. Light the metaphorical match.
 - B. Compose a sharp op-ed.
 - C. Bake cookies and plot revenge while they cool.

Your Alibi Revealed!

3 personality outcomes (e.g., The Schemer, The Survivor, The Historian).

Mostly A: THE SCHEMER

Rules are meant to be bent, broken, or rewritten entirely. You're sharp, rebellious, and never afraid to take the match to the fuse if it means shaking up the story. Others might call you dangerous—you prefer visionary.

Mostly B: THE SURVIVOR

You know how to endure, adapt, and protect yourself when the odds are stacked against you. Whether it's holding onto power, saving face, or keeping the family together, you're built to withstand whatever history (or the present) throws at you.

Mostly C: THE HISTORIAN

Nothing escapes your memory—or your pen. You see the world through patterns, context, and connections, and you know that every act of violence has its archive. You're quiet but deadly: the one who ensures no story is forgotten.

Reading Group Guide

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions, discussion topics, and other material that follow are intended to enhance your group's conversation of Nina McConigley's debut novel, *How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder*—a provocative and redemptive story of two sisters who bravely confront generations of tradition, and the stereotypes of non-white Americans, to protect themselves and their family from a devastating secret.

1. What makes the murder of Vinny Uncle “postcolonial”? Discuss how Georgie orients the reader to her world of being an Indian American in Wyoming in the late 1980s, and the unique struggles of being the first generation in her interracial family born in America.
2. How does Georgie, and the book overall, suggest overlaps in the two meanings of “Indian” that are relevant to her hometown in the American West? In America, did the family leave the world of colonizers and colonialism?
3. How does Amma's marrying a white man change her relationship to India, and to her family? Does their settling down in America offer her any more freedom than what she would have had back home? Consider what Georgie asks in relation to her mother's obsession with the British: “How could someone be the ultimate white woman and the ultimate Indian daughter all at once?” (125).
4. Who is the “you” to who some of the chapters are addressed? When Georgie spoke to “you,” did it cause you, the reader, to feel more or less involved in the story itself?
5. How do Georgie and Agatha Krishna's names—homages to famous British writers—affect their connection to their Indian culture, the colonization of that culture, and the American culture into which they're born? Do you think that their names, and the way they have to balance so many selves in and out of their home, make them more or less “American”?
6. Consider how Georgie describes the American trope of the “pioneer”: “What do pioneers do? They colonize. They take things that aren't theirs. A pioneer is a person who claims they are the first to go. Claims they are the first to explore. First to settle” (135). What do the sisters do first? What are they (likely) not the first to experience?
7. Discuss the ways in which Vinny Uncle's abuse “splits” the girls. Besides this specific incident, what else about their circumstances contributes to a divided/disintegrated sense of self?
8. It's rare to read such a clear description of dissociation in the moment of experiencing a trauma, which is what George describes happening whenever Vinny Uncle takes her into the bathroom. What aspect of her personality allows her to return to herself solidly enough to take action with her sister? How does she convey the totality of the situation even without stating it explicitly?
9. How do you think AK Akka would have relayed her version of this story? Georgie shares how devastated she is when her sister pulls away from her after the death; do you think AK Akka felt the same way about losing Georgie?

10. Are there hints or glimmers of joy and true innocence among any of the children in the book? Besides the abuse, what factors in their lives require that they grow up early?
11. Great-grandfather Thomas supports the establishment of a universal language called Esperanto, which ultimately never takes off. How do the girls carry in this tradition of using language to both subvert authority and redeem a sense of truth and integrity? In the book overall, how does the ability to access language—versus being silenced—divide the generations, especially among women? Would a shared language really lead to unity among different groups and cultures, per the meaning of the word: “the one who hopes”? (37)
12. When the girls believe they successfully killed Vinny Uncle, is the aftermath all that they (and you, the reader) expected? Are they truly freed from his presence and influence? Discuss in particular how they later understand the effects on Narayan. What does the grief and loss he experiences suggest about the wide-reaching trauma within the family? How is his loss of a father different from the girls’ absent one?
13. Georgie shares that there were several times when she considered telling Amma about what was going on in the bathroom. What do you think Amma’s reaction would have been to hearing this truth? Consider what Georgie says about the story of the tree girl, whether she thinks she and her sister have escaped this fate, and how their actions affected their mother’s world: “It was a woman’s fate to stay quiet and hope everything worked out. In all the stories Amma would tell us, the girls never rose up. They accepted their fate, they married. They were dutiful and obeyed. They never killed a man” (178).
14. Why do you think Georgie’s story includes the teen-magazine-style quizzes? How do the questions (and answers) reveal her thoughts and aspects of her personality? Did you participate in the quizzes, and were you surprised by the “scores” you received?
15. Do you think, on the whole, that Georgie saw her life as “a good life in spite of. In spite of bad ancestors. In spite of your skin. In spite of colonialism. In spite of capitalism. In spite of nationalism. In spite of the internet. In spite of war. In spite of the patriarchy. In spite of lists of things you want. In spite of a man who came in the dark and did things that he shouldn’t. In spite. In spite”—or does she see her life as bad because of these things (198)?
16. Were you surprised to learn about Auntie Devi’s actions? Why do you think she chose to protect the girls (and perhaps her own son) over honoring her husband per tradition? At first, Georgie describes her aunt as a “ghost-Amma [. . .] as if she had only half come to America”—but do her actions suggest she more or less “American” than the others (7)?
17. When the girls bring their mother’s ashes to Kanyakumari at the end of the book, what are they seeking to cleanse themselves of by diving into the water themselves?
18. Have you ever had a secret in your family or community like the one in this story? Was it ever revealed, or kept under wraps? If you’re comfortable, discuss the complexities of the situation, and the layers hurt that come from both keeping and telling a secret about being hurt, on any level. Consider your narrative in the context of the blessing of the throats for St. Blaise: “Is it a blessing to be able to speak? Is it a blessing to tell the truth?” (46)

Suggested Further Reading

MARTYR! *by* Kaveh Akbar

THE SCHOOL FOR GOOD MOTHERS *by* Jessamine Chan

THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD *by* Agatha Christie

LONELINESS OF SONIA AND SUNNY *by* Kiran Desai

THE ROUND HOUSE *by* Louise Erdrich

THE LOWLAND *by* Jhumpa Lahiri

THE BOOK OF LOVE *by* Kelly Link

COWBOYS AND EAST INDIANS *by* Nina McConigley

LOLITA *by* Vladimir Nabokov

LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE *by* Celeste Ng

THERE THERE *by* Tommy Orange

THE ANTIDOTE *by* Karen Russell