



# NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2018 DISCUSSION GUIDE

**AMNESTY**  
INTERNATIONAL   
**BOOK CLUB**  
**DISCUSSION**  
**GUIDE**

SHORTLISTED FOR THE BOOKER PRIZE

**AMNESTY**  
INTERNATIONAL   
**BOOK CLUB**  
2018 READER'S  
CHOICE

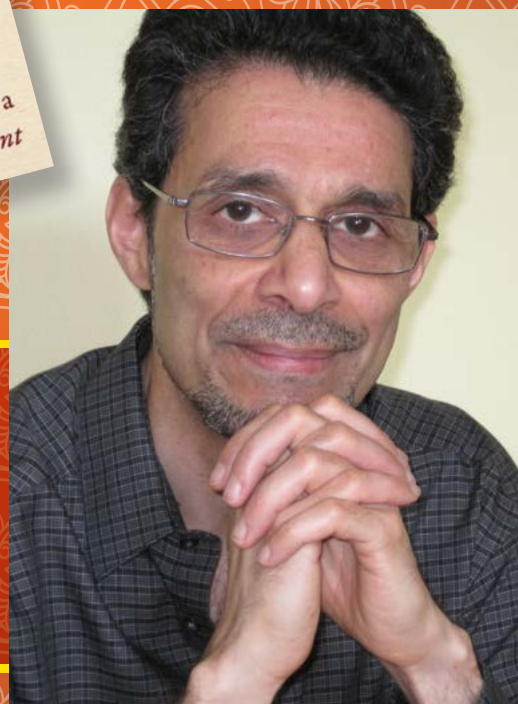
ROHINTON  
**MISTRY**  
A FINE  
BALANCE

'A towering masterpiece by a  
writer of genius.' *Independent*

*Reader's  
Choice*  
**2018**



**A FINE BALANCE**  
BY ROHINTON MISTRY



# WELCOME

## Amnesty Book Club members

The Amnesty International Book Club is pleased to announce our Readers' Choice winner for 2018, *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry.

With a compassionate realism and narrative sweep that recall the work of Charles Dickens, this magnificent novel captures the themes of cruelty and corruption, dignity and heroism, in India.

The time is 1975. The place is an unnamed city by the sea. The government has just declared a State of Emergency, in whose upheavals four strangers—a spirited widow, a young student uprooted from his idyllic hill station, and two tailors who have fled the caste violence of their native village—will be thrust together, forced to share one cramped apartment and an uncertain future.

As the characters move from distrust to friendship and from friendship to love, *A Fine Balance* creates an enduring panorama of the human spirit in an inhuman state.

This guide will examine the problems of housing, healthcare, and education that are still prominent in communities around the world, and how the novel illustrates these themes.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

### About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit [www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca) or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

## About this month's author, **Rohinton Mistry**

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, on July 3, 1952. A member of the Parsi religious community in India, he completed an undergraduate degree in mathematics and economics at the University of Bombay. In 1975 he moved to Canada, where he lived in Toronto and worked for a bank. Mistry eventually returned to university, finishing a degree in English and philosophy in 1984 at the University of Toronto. It was while he was a university student in Canada that he began to write and publish fiction. His first two published short stories won the Hart House Literary Prize (1983 and 1984), and another story won the Canadian Fiction Magazine contributor's prize in 1985. Those three stories, with eight others, became his first book, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987). This collection of linked short stories concerns the inhabitants of an apartment compound in Bombay. One of the stories, "Squatter," consists of tall tales told by the compound's local storyteller; one tale concerns Savukshaw, a heroic cricket player and tiger hunter, and the other concerns Sarosh, a Parsi who immigrates to Canada but returns to India when he cannot learn how to use a Western toilet. In another story, "Swimming Lessons," a young man connects the residents of his Canadian apartment to the family and residents in the Bombay apartment he has left behind.

Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), brought him national and international recognition. The book concerns an ordinary man who becomes involved in the politics surrounding the Bangladesh separatist movement in India and Pakistan. In Canada the book won the Governor General's Award for Fiction and the W.H. Smith Books in Canada First Novel Award. It also won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book and was a finalist for Britain's Booker Prize. In 1998 *Such a Long Journey* was made into a feature film by Sooni Taraporevala (screenplay) and Sturla Gunnarsson (director).

Mistry's subsequent novels have achieved the same level of recognition as his first. His second novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995), concerns four people from Bombay who struggle with family and work against the backdrop of the political unrest in India during the mid-1970s. The book won Canada's Giller Prize, the Commonwealth Writers Award, and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. It was

nominated for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and was a finalist for the Booker Prize.

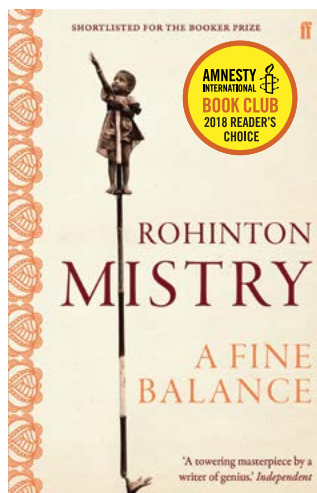
*Family Matters* (2002) won the Kiriama Pacific Rim Book Prize for Fiction, the Canadian Authors Association's MOSAID Technologies Inc. Award for Fiction, and the regional Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book; it was nominated for the Booker Prize and shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. *Family Matters* describes the members of a blended family who are trying to cope with the failing health of their father. In the meantime, the father relives his past, a past beset by thwarted love and crushing social strictures.

Mistry's fiction deploys a precise writing style and a sensitivity to the humour and horror of life to communicate deep compassion for human beings. His writing concerns people who try to find self-worth while dealing with painful family dynamics and difficult social and political constraints. His work also addresses immigration, especially immigration to Canada, and the difficulty immigrants face in a society that recognizes their cultural differences and yet cannot embrace those differences as being part of itself. (Vivian Zenari)



© F. Mistry

## About Readers' Choice 2018



This month's Reader's Choice selection was made possible by you, our book club members. With several hundred votes for 2018's Readers' Choice, *A Fine Balance* was the favourite pick from our readers. Thank you to all of you who suggested books and/or voted for your favourite ones! Read on to learn more.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON *A FINE BALANCE*

1. What did you think of *A Fine Balance*? Which aspects did you appreciate, and which aspects were most challenging?
2. Is Nusswan presented entirely as a villain, or does he have redeeming features? What are his real feelings toward Dina?
3. How does Dina's position within her family reflect the position of women in her culture and social class? Is the status of Om's sisters the same as Dina's, or different? What sorts of inferences can you make about the roles and functions of women as represented in this novel?
4. Most people seem indifferent or hostile to the Prime Minister and her Emergency policies, but a few characters, like Mrs. Gupta and Nusswan, support her. What does the endorsement of such people indicate about the Prime Minister? Can you compare the Prime Minister and her supporters with other political leaders and parties in today's world?
5. Why does Avinash's chess set become so important to Maneck, who comes to see chess as the game of life? "The rules should always allow someone to win," says Om, while Maneck replies, "Sometimes, no one wins" [p. 410]. How do the events of the novel resemble the various moves and positions in chess?
6. When Beggarmaster draws Shankar, Shankar's mother, and himself, he represents himself as a freak just like the other two. What does this vision he has of himself tell us about him?
7. Why do Ishvar, Om, and Dina survive, in their diminished ways, while Maneck finally gives up? Is it due to something in their pasts, their childhoods, their families, their characters?
8. What effect is achieved by the novel's mildly comic ending, with Om and Ishvar clowning around at Dina's door?

## BACKGROUND



Members of Amnesty International carry a hot air balloon with text which reads 'Housing is a Human right' through the Kibera slum in Nairobi on March 24, 2012.

### Human rights for human dignity

The novel *A Fine Balance* focused on sudden sweeping changes and their chaotic effect on India. The characters, from diverse backgrounds, are brought together by economic forces changing India. It might be hard to imagine the real life situations that are similar to the ones described in the book, but in the midst of plenty, many people still go hungry, live in poor housing without basic services such as water and toilets and grow up without education.

**Living in poverty means being denied access to all the resources, services, skills, choices, security and power that we all need to realize our human rights. It means marginalization and discrimination. Poverty is not an accident, nor is it the fault of those who have to live it every day, but yet people living in poverty are more likely to suffer human rights violations than those who are not.**

### The problem

People living in poverty are often trapped because they are excluded from the rest of society, denied a say, and threatened with violence and insecurity.

Rights are the key for people to break out of the poverty trap. Put simply, respect for human rights demands inclusion, demands that everyone gets a say, demands that those in power protect people from threats to their security.

### Housing

We all have the right to housing, yet over 10% of people worldwide live in a slum or informal settlement. Living conditions are often dire with overcrowding, little or no access to clean water, toilets or healthcare. Many people living in slums or informal settlements are not protected from harassment such as forced evictions because their right to live there is not legally recognized.

Forced evictions are when people are removed from their homes and lands without advance notice, consultation and compensation. They are illegal and violate the right to housing. Often forced evictions are violent, destroy livelihoods and make people homeless.

## Health

The things that help keep us healthy – safe water, nutritious food, housing and information, such as sexual health education – are often absent or limited for people living in slums and informal settlements. And when people do get ill, they rarely have access to adequate health care.

We all have the right to be as healthy as we can possibly be – both mentally and physically. This doesn't mean we have the right to be healthy – no one can have perfect health all the time. It means that we should all be able to access health care and information

regardless of who we are, where we live or how well-off we are. And, importantly, it means we all have the right to make decisions about our own body and health.

## Education

Primary education should be free, and compulsory, everywhere. Children need to be able to get to school without walking for hours, or through minefields. They should be able to learn and enjoy school life. Yet time and again, children from poor and marginalized communities are denied an education or experience discrimination in accessing it.



Children play in a rubbish dump in Hanuabada village, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. There is no running water or proper toilets in people's homes.

# THE ISSUE IN DETAIL

## Justice

Many of the issues around poverty are known as “economic, social and cultural” (ESC) rights. Social and economic rights are concerned with basic human needs—for food, shelter, water and for the means to provide those things for oneself. We recognize that a person who is starving, who is homeless, who does not have the means to provide for their own basic needs, cannot realize other human rights.

They include:

- Rights at work, such as fair conditions of employment.
- Right to education, including free and compulsory primary education.
- Cultural rights of minorities and Indigenous Peoples.
- Right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, such as access to quality health services.
- Right to adequate housing, including protection from forced eviction.
- Right to food, including being able to obtain nutritious food.

- Right to water, including affordable clean water.
- Right to sanitation, including access to a safe toilet.

For years it seemed almost impossible to challenge the government if you were denied these rights. Who do you complain to? Who will listen?

Amnesty International is working to ensure that everyone has access to safe and adequate housing, regardless of who they are or where they live. Our members have mobilized globally to stop governments from evicting people from their housing, without notice and without providing any alternative shelter. Amnesty is also calling on governments everywhere to recognize water as a fundamental human right.

In May 2013, the Optional Protocol to the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights came into force. As of the end of 2014, 17 countries – from Gabon and Argentina to Spain and Mongolia – had fully accepted this new mechanism that gives people the ability to seek justice from the United Nations, if their own country won’t listen.

These ‘protocols’ may sound legalistic and irrelevant, but they can have real teeth. The more we use them, the more powerful they will be.

## KEY FACTS

**842M**

**842 million people are undernourished.**

**889M**

**The number of people expected to live in slums by 2020.**

**61M**

**61 million children (mainly girls) have no access to education.**

**8.1M**

**8.1 million children died before reaching their fifth birthday in 2009.  
Mostly from preventable causes**

# TAKE ACTION



Polluted water in a sister community to Ogale.

## Nigeria: A community is drinking polluted water

There is an urgent need for the government and multinational oil company Shell to ensure a regular supply of safe water to people in the oil-producing Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Their right to water continues to be violated as they are forced to drink dangerously polluted water or buy water at unaffordable prices.

You can take action by sending a letter.  
(Postage is \$2.50.)

- Urge the Rivers State government and the Federal Ministry of Water Resources to take necessary steps to expedite the repair of the Eleme Regional Water Supply Project. Until this is done, they must immediately provide sufficient and safe water to affected communities who currently lack it, including by trucking it in if necessary.
- Call on them to urgently carry out a health assessment of the Ogale community and others who have been forced to continue to drink polluted water.
- Ask Shell to disclose the steps it is taking to ensure that communities, which continue to be affected by oil contamination from its pipelines, have access to safe water for personal and domestic uses.

### Here is the contact information you need:

Governor Nyesom Wike  
Office of the Governor  
Governor's House, Rivers State  
Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Salutation: Your Excellency

Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria  
P.O Box 263, Shell Industrial Area  
Rumuobiakani  
Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Salutation: To whom it may concern

### Please send a copy to:

His Excellency Adeyinka Olatokunbo Asekun  
High Commissioner for Nigeria  
295 Metcalfe Street  
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 1R9

Fax: (613) 236-0529

Phone: (613) 236-0521 or (613) 236-0523

Email: [chancery@nigeriahcottawa.ca](mailto:chancery@nigeriahcottawa.ca)

Via website: [www.nigeriahcottawa.ca/feedback](http://www.nigeriahcottawa.ca/feedback)

Mallam Ibrahim Usman Jubril  
Federal Minister of Environment  
Block C, Mabushi  
Abuja, Nigeria  
Email: [info@environment.gov.ng](mailto:info@environment.gov.ng)

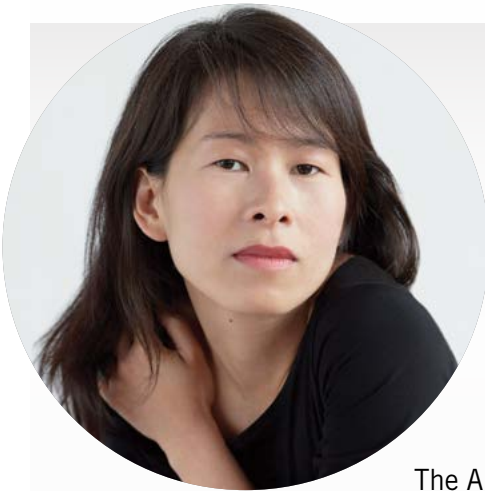
## MORE ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Read about the *Optional Protocol to the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/OPCESCR.aspx>)

Share the Amnesty International Book Club online



- Check us out on Facebook at **Amnesty International Book Club**, Twitter at **@AmnestyReads**, Instagram at **@AmnestyBookClub** and join our discussion group on **Goodreads.com**



## COMING UP IN JANUARY 2019

### *Vi* by Kim Thúy

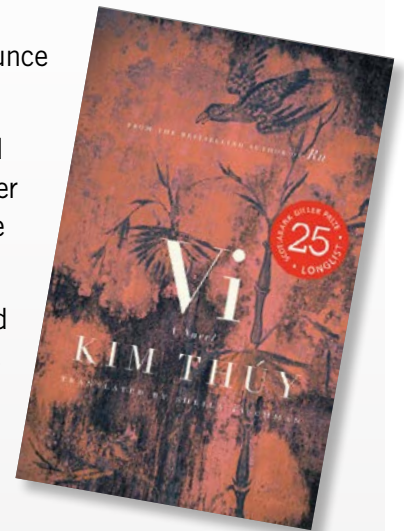
Recommended by Omar El Akkad

The Amnesty International Book Club is thrilled to announce that our January/February book is going to be *Vi* by Kim Thúy.

The daughter of an enterprising mother and a wealthy, spoiled father who never had to grow up, Vi was the youngest of their four children and the only girl. They gave her a name that meant “precious, tiny one,” destined to be cosseted and protected, the family’s little treasure.

But the Vietnam War destroys life as they’ve known it. Vi, along with her mother and brothers, manages to escape—but her father stays behind, leaving a painful void as the rest of the family must make a new life for themselves in Canada.

While her family puts down roots, life has different plans for Vi. Taken under the wing of Hà, a worldly family friend, and her diplomat lover, Vi tests personal boundaries and crosses international ones, letting the winds of life buffet her. From Saigon to Montreal, from Suzhou to Boston to the fall of the Berlin Wall, she is witness to the immensity of geography, the intricate fabric of humanity, the complexity of love, the infinite possibilities before her. Ever the quiet observer, somehow Vi must find a way to finally take her place in the world.



**The discussion guide will be sent out January 2019.**

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).