The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny — 20-Minute Read Summary

By Kiran Desai (2025) · Daily Book, Episode 26 · Source: New York Times 10 Best Books of 2025

The Book in 60 Seconds

Sonia and Sunny glimpse each other on an overnight train in India and are instantly attracted — and instantly embarrassed, because their grandparents once tried to arrange a match between them. That embarrassment drives them apart before love can begin. Sonia, an aspiring novelist just back in Allahabad after studying in snowy Vermont, is recovering from an exploitative relationship with an older, married artist who used her face, her devotion, and her life in his work. Sunny, a struggling journalist in New York, is trying just as hard to stay away from India — or at least from his imperious mother Babita and a feuding, sometimes violent Delhi clan. Over years and across India, America, Mexico, and Venice, the two meet, part, pine, and meet again, held apart by family, ambition, class, country, and their own unfinished selves. Kiran Desai, who won the Booker Prize for *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006, worked on this nearly 700-page novel for almost twenty years. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2025 and named one of the New York Times' ten best books of the year. It is a love story, a family saga, and above all a study of loneliness — not as one mood, but as a dozen distinct conditions that love alone cannot cure.

The Author and the Long Making of the Book

Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971 and grew up between India and the West — a divided upbringing that has been the engine of all her fiction. Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), was a comic, exuberant fable. Her second, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), set between the Himalayan foothills and the immigrant kitchens of Queens, won the Booker Prize and made her, at the time, its youngest woman winner.

Then came a long public silence. Desai has described working on *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* morning, afternoon, and evening for nearly two decades. At one point she realised she had written some 5,000 pages without yet settling the major plot points. She built the themes and the intricate web of characters first, and converted them into plot only later — a method you can feel in the finished book's richness and, at times, its sprawl. She compared herself during those years to an ant, an earthworm, a bee: something small and patient, working whether or not anyone was watching.

That patience is thematically apt. Desai has said that fiction begins with one person on their own, with their human shame and their human fear. Sonia and Sunny each begin exactly there — alone, ashamed of something, afraid of something — and the novel asks whether two such people can truly meet, rather than merely use each other to feel less alone for an evening.

When the book finally appeared in September 2025, at just under 700 pages (about 670 in most editions), the response was extraordinary. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, was a finalist for the Kirkus Prize, became a bestseller, and was named a book of the year by an unusual sweep of publications — among them the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, the BBC, and the *Observer*. Ann Patchett said she wanted to "pack a little suitcase and stay inside this book forever." The *New York Times Book Review* called it "a transcendent triumph… not so much a novel as a marvel."

The Story

A chart at the front of the book lists several dozen characters — friends, relatives, former partners, and servants across at least three generations. Do not be daunted by it; every great family saga needs a map, and this one is designed to be used.

Sonia. An aspiring novelist, Sonia has completed her studies in Vermont and returned to her family in Allahabad (now also known as Prayagraj). She has not come home triumphant. In America she fell into the orbit of Ilan, an older artist she turned to for intimacy and inspiration. He was married; he demanded endless reassurance of his own greatness; and he used her beauty and likeness in his art. Sonia comes to fear she is haunted by that relationship — a fear the novel attaches to an amulet and to images, including a demonic dog, that seem to step out of Ilan's work. Whether the haunting is supernatural or psychological is a question Desai deliberately leaves open. What is not in doubt is the damage: Sonia must reclaim her own story from the man who converted it into his material, and learn to write without doing to her own family what he did to her.

Of the two protagonists, Sonia is the one who *notices*. Critics have observed that she perceives the immediate reality of things — a face, a room, a meal, a quality of light — while Sunny reaches first for theory. The novel quietly sides with her way of seeing.

Sunny. A struggling journalist resettled in New York, Sunny is fleeing two things: his mother and his clan. Babita, his mother, is one of the formidable mothers of recent fiction — imperious, status-conscious, needy, funny and appalling in roughly equal measure, with a grip on her son he is desperate to loosen. Behind her stands a wider Delhi clan, feuding over money, property, and standing, at times violently. Sunny is relieved to be an ocean away, and guilty about his relief, in about equal proportions. His restlessness takes him through American way stations including Kansas, and eventually to a sparse, almost monastic sojourn in Mexico, where — belonging to neither of his two countries — he begins to distil a self that is actually his.

The pattern. For long stretches, Desai holds the two apart, geographically and emotionally. When they are in the same place, their ease and recognition are undeniable — two chapters in Venice, nicknamed *La Serenissima*, "the most serene," show them at their most passionate and most confused, in a city that refuses to calm them down. Then ambition, pride, family claims, and bad timing part them again. Neither will shrink a life to fit the other's: Sonia will not abandon her writing for Sunny's restlessness; Sunny will not move back into Babita's orbit to be nearer Sonia's world. They are star-crossed not by two feuding families in one city, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, but by two countries, two careers, two families, and two unfinished selves.

The families. The grandparents' generation tried the matchmaking, and represents an older India in which a person was placed — known, witnessed, assigned a role from birth. That world had its cruelties, and Desai does not sentimentalise it, but it had a built-in answer to loneliness. The parents' generation is caught between that world and the new one of money, migration, and self-invention: Babita performs status with a kitschy Delhi sheen; Sonia's bookish mother sustains a finer inner life than her marriage quite makes room for, in a union that continues formally while the people inside it grow lonely in different directions. And beneath every household are the servants — cooks, drivers, maids, watchmen — whose own loneliness, far from their own villages, subsidises the comfort of the families they serve. Desai never lets the reader forget who eats first, who eats what is left, who gets a room, and who cannot leave a bad employer.

The period. The action runs mainly from the 1990s to just after September 11, 2001. India in those years is being remade by the economic liberalisation begun in 1991: foreign goods, television, money, and a widening gap between those who ride the change and those who serve them. America is still the confident, pre-financial-crisis destination where an ambitious young Indian might remake a self — until 9/11 changes the tone of the welcome, especially at airports and borders. Desai makes no speeches about any of this. History enters through visas, newsrooms, jobs, weddings, funerals, and family phone calls, which is how history is actually lived.

The Key Ideas, Explained Plainly

1. Loneliness is not one thing. The novel distinguishes the loneliness of the immigrant in a cold Vermont dormitory; the loneliness of the *returned* immigrant, who finds home has moved on and she has changed in ways her family calls affected or American; the loneliness of parents whose children have left; the loneliness inside a continuing marriage; the loneliness after a love affair that used you; the loneliness of servants living in other people's houses; and the loneliness of the writer alone with a page — which Desai knows from the inside. The characters' recurring mistake, and the reader's temptation, is to assume that fixing one loneliness — usually the romantic one — will dissolve the rest. The book says, gently and at length, that it does not work that way.

2. The good-immigrant performance isolates everyone. For a child abroad, success is often a family project: sacrifices were made, money was found, prayers were said. Admitting loneliness then feels like betrayal or ingratitude — you have the degree, the apartment, the New York job; how dare you be sad? So Sonia and Sunny perform okayness on the phone home. The family, reassured, stops asking real questions; the child, convinced they could never understand, stops answering honestly. Two lonelinesses reinforce each other across an ocean, inside a family that loves each other. It is one of the most painfully accurate dynamics in the book.

3. Love is real, but it is not a cure. This is a deeply romantic novel in places — attraction, tenderness, and the joy of intellectual recognition are written with real warmth. But connection does not, by itself, dispel alienation. Each protagonist has work only they can do: Sonia's reckoning with Ilan, Sunny's reckoning with Babita and with his own flight reflex. You can be with the right person and still have to grow up alone. The novel treats that not as bleakness but as honesty.

4. Art eats life — and artists owe a debt. Ilan is the clearest villain of the book: he takes Sonia's youth, face, and devotion and converts them into work that certifies his genius. He even dictates "rules" of storytelling to her — rules that define whose experience counts as universal and whose counts as ethnic, feminine, or minor. Sonia's long recovery is therefore literary as well as emotional: she must reject his rules and find a form of her own. Desai enacts that rebellion in the novel itself, deploying and then subverting the tropes of the exotic Indian novel — the arranged match, the lush landscape, a touch of magical realism — while asking, through her characters, whether, if life is leeched of substance for art, anything is left simply to be lived. It is the rare blockbuster that interrogates its own appetite for other people's lives.

5. Attention beats theory. Sunny the journalist explains the world — globalisation, diaspora, identity — sometimes as a way of not feeling what is in front of him. Sonia the novelist notices it. Desai, who is plainly alive to every big narrative shaping her characters, nonetheless trusts the noticed detail more: a kitchen, a train compartment at night, a mother on the telephone. Read as an argument, the book proposes that close, patient, unglamorous attention to actual people in actual places is the closest thing on offer to an antidote to loneliness. Theories fail in real kitchens. People remain.

6. Class travels. In India, class is the household: servants, rooms, leftovers, English fluency, caste and colour inside the family itself. In America, Sonia and Sunny discover race and immigration status laid over the old system as a new sorting mechanism — and learn which parts of their Indianness read as charming in a New York room, which as foreign, and which to perform or hide. Neither country is the simple opposite of the other, which is precisely the point.

The Places, and Why They Matter

Few recent novels use geography as argument the way this one does. Each place asks Sonia and Sunny a different question.

Allahabad, Sonia's home ground, asks: *can you come back?* It is a city of family houses, servants who have known her since childhood, riverside ritual, and a literary, bureaucratic old India that is visibly fading. Returning there as a Vermont-educated would-be novelist, Sonia is simultaneously insider and foreigner — corrected on her manners, watched for signs of American affectation, and expected to resume a daughter's place she has half outgrown. Her loneliness at home is the book's most quietly devastating variety, because home is where loneliness is not supposed to happen.

Delhi asks Sunny: *can you escape your family by escaping its city?* Delhi in the novel is the clan, the property disputes, the dinner parties where every guest and every dish is a status move, and Babita in her element — performing, inspecting, keeping score across decades. It is also the new India of money and confidence unleashed by liberalisation, brash and funny and exhausting. Sunny's New York exile makes sense the moment the reader has spent fifty pages in Delhi drawing rooms; so does his guilt.

Vermont asks Sonia: *what did America give you, and what did it take?* The snow, the seminar rooms, the freedom to reinvent herself — and the cold, literal and social, of being a brown young woman alone in a white, rural, literary world where an older artist could present himself as her doorway into art itself. Vermont is where she was formed and where she was used, and the novel refuses to separate those two facts.

New York and Queens ask both of them: *which version of yourself will you perform today?* Queens, with its immigrant kitchens and cramped apartments, rhymes deliberately with the New York of *The Inheritance of Loss*. Here class is re-sorted by race and visa status; here Sunny files his stories and learns the newsroom's hierarchies; here the good-immigrant performance is rehearsed nightly on phone calls home.

Goa is the escape hatch inside India itself — beaches, old Portuguese houses, loosened rules — and Desai's honesty consists in showing the same money, the same servants, and the same loneliness arriving in Goa by the next train. **Kansas** offers Sunny the opposite experience: American anonymity in its purest form, a place where nobody knows his clan, his mother, or his story, and where that freedom first feels like relief and then like erasure. **Mexico** strips things further still: belonging to neither country, understood by no family narrative, Sunny begins the slow distillation of a self that the novel treats as his real coming of age. And **Venice**, the most serene city, gives the lovers two hectic chapters in which beauty itself becomes a backdrop for confusion — proof that they carry their weather with them.

The point of the itinerary is cumulative. Loneliness in this novel is not cured by the right city, the right country, or the right continent. It is renegotiated in each place, on new terms.

Three Generations, Three Answers to Loneliness

It helps to read the saga generationally, because each generation embodies a different settlement with solitude.

The **grandparents** were placed by arrangement — marriages, professions, and neighbourhoods substantially assigned. Their settlement was belonging: a life witnessed from birth, with loneliness answered by structure. The cost, which Desai does not hide, was constraint, especially for women, and a limited permission to want anything else.

The **parents** — Babita grasping for status, Sonia's mother cultivating an interior, bookish life inside a thinning marriage — were the first to want more: more money, more mobility, more recognition. Their settlement was aspiration, and its characteristic loneliness is the loneliness *inside* families that are still intact: spouses growing in different directions, mothers whose love arrives as inspection and control, fathers receding into work or silence.

Sonia and Sunny's generation got what their parents aspired to — foreign degrees, foreign jobs, chosen lovers — and discovered the bill: a self that must be invented, defended, and performed, in two countries at once, with no assigned witnesses. Their loneliness is the loneliness of freedom. The novel's deepest sympathy is that it refuses to rank these three settlements. The grandparents were not simply trapped, the parents are not simply vulgar, and the young are not simply ungrateful. Each generation solved the problem the previous one handed them, and created a new problem in the solving.

That is also why the matchmaking plot matters so much. When the grandparents try to pair Sonia and Sunny, the oldest settlement reaches forward to arrange the youngest generation's happiness. The young people's embarrassment — their insistence on choosing — is the whole modern story in miniature. And the novel's long, looping joke is that the grandparents may simply have been *right* about the affinity, even if being right was exactly what made it impossible to accept at first.

The Writing: Sentences, Comedy, and Food

Desai's prose is the reason most often given by reviewers who rank this book above its rivals. She writes weather, traffic, clothing, and above all food with a precision that makes place physical: how a household eats is how it loves, ranks, and remembers. A Delhi dinner, a Vermont winter, a Queens kitchen — each is rendered through what is cooked, who cooks it, who serves it, and who waits.

Her comedy deserves emphasis, because descriptions of a "novel about loneliness" can make the book sound grey. It is not. Babita's campaigns, the relatives' score-keeping, the absurdities of the art world and of expatriate self-fashioning are genuinely funny, often in the same paragraph as grief. Again and again a character is ridiculous for two lines, and then one further line reveals the fear underneath the performance, and the laughter turns into something more complicated without ever being cancelled.

Structurally, the novel alternates its leads and widens, at intervals, into the lives of parents, grandparents, servants, and former lovers — including the women and men Sonia and Sunny loved before each other, who are treated not as obstacles but as people whose own stories explain what the protagonists learned, and failed to learn, about intimacy. The effect is of a society, not a plot: you finish the book remembering a grandmother, a driver, a mother on the telephone, the way you remember people from a place you once lived.

How to Approach Reading It

Use the chart. For the first hundred pages, check the character chart at the front without embarrassment. Families branch, intermarry, and employ people who matter later. It is how the book is designed to be read.

Read in long sittings. Twenty snatched pages at a time will make the sprawl feel worse, because you will keep losing threads. An hour at a stretch lets the families accumulate into a society; most readers find that after roughly 150 pages the chart becomes unnecessary, because the people have become people.

Do not skip the "detours." A long sequence about a parent, a servant, or the Delhi clan is not a departure from the love story. It is the novel's explanation of what each lover carries into the room when they finally meet again.

Expect discomfort in the Ilan chapters. They are meant to be uncomfortable. Sonia's extrication from that relationship — and from his rules for her art — is the engine of her half of the book.

Let the middle be slow. This is a novel to live inside for a week or two, not to finish by Friday. Readers who adjust to its pace early tend to be the ones who end up loving it most.

A note for readers close to the material. Readers who grew up between countries, or who are raising children between them, consistently report that this book names something their families treated as ungratefulness: the sadness of the successful migrant. Desai treats that sadness as information instead — about what migration costs even when it works. Conversely, readers with no connection to India or the diaspora may get the most from it precisely as newcomers: it delivers a whole generation's experience of globalisation from inside trains, kitchens, and newsrooms, rather than as an essay about globalisation.

Memorable Lines

Short, attributed praise and phrases associated with the book:

- Ann Patchett: "I wanted to pack a little suitcase and stay inside this book forever."
- *The New York Times Book Review*: "A transcendent triumph… not so much a novel as a marvel."
- *The Boston Globe*: "Lavish, funny, smart, and wise, this is a novel that will last."
- *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review): "A masterpiece."
- Khaled Hosseini: "Devastating, lyrical, and deeply romantic."
- Venice's nickname, turned ironic in the novel's Venice chapters: *La Serenissima* — "the most serene."

Fair Criticisms

Length and sprawl. At about 670 pages with several dozen characters, the novel digresses into financial crime, family violence, illness, art-world scandal, and long ancestral histories. Some readers — including admirers of the prose — feel the central love story occupies only a fraction of the book, and that strands pursued brilliantly for thirty pages are set down for a hundred. If you loved *The Inheritance of Loss* for its compression, this book asks for a different patience.

The supernatural strand. The amulet, the feared curse, and the dog that seems to emerge from Ilan's art strike some readers as a moving embodiment of Sonia's fear, and others as random, or as a leftover from a very long gestation. Desai is knowingly playing with magical-realist expectations of Indian fiction; not every reader will agree the gambit lands.

The ending. Without spoiling its details: the lovers do find their way back, in a closing movement some readers find tender and earned, and others find surprisingly quick or neat after so much chaos — as if the resolution matters less to the author than the separation did.

The "Western lens" question. Desai has faced, since *The Inheritance of Loss*, the charge that her India is partly composed for Western literary taste. Her defenders reply that she criticises Western hegemony and internal Indian hierarchies — caste, class, colour, English — simultaneously, and that standing between cultures is not a market pose but where she actually lives. The debate is live, and the novel, through Sunny's theorising and Sonia's resistance to it, seems aware of it.

Against all of this stands the scale of the acclaim: Booker shortlist, Kirkus Prize finalist, and book-of-the-year selections across the British and American press. The dominant critical verdict is that the capaciousness is not a flaw to be excused but the achievement itself.

Why It's on the List

The New York Times named it one of the ten best books of 2025. Its critic A.O. Scott, writing on the novel, noted that a writer praised for a sense of place usually means *one* place, lovingly rendered — whereas Desai has a sense of *places*: Allahabad, Delhi, and Goa; Queens, Vermont, and Kansas; Mexico City and Venice, each rendered with equal conviction. The Times' reviewers praised a novel that holds a love story, a family saga, and a novel of ideas in one capacious frame, written at the highest sentence-by-sentence level, about the defining modern experience of living between worlds. In a year of strong fiction, it was the book major critics on both sides of the Atlantic converged on.

What to Read Next

- ***The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai (2006).** Her Booker winner: the Himalayas and Queens, judges and cooks, the same material in distilled form. The natural companion — or the perfect shorter introduction before attempting this one.
- ***The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri (2003).** The classical, focused version of the Indian-American family story. Lahiri compresses where Desai expands; reading them together is an education in what a novel can do.
- ***Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai (1998).** Her exuberant debut, for readers who want Desai's comedy without the epic scale.
- ***A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry (1995).** Another capacious, humane Indian epic that finds whole worlds inside households, servants, and tailors' shops.

Summary prepared for Daily Book, Episode 26. All discussion is in original words; quotations are short, attributed lines from published reviews and endorsements.