20-MINUTE READ SUMMARY

Mother Mary Comes to Me — 20-Minute Read Summary

By Arundhati Roy | Scribner, September 2025 | 352 pages

One of the New York Times 10 Best Books of 2025; winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography; finalist for the Kirkus Prize.



Illustration: A Kerala riverbank, a typewriter, and manuscript pages.

The Book in 60 Seconds

Mother Mary Comes to Me is Arundhati Roy's first memoir, written after the death of her mother, Mary Roy, in September 2022 at the age of eighty-nine. It is the story of a mother and a daughter who loved each other fiercely and fought each other constantly — and of how that difficult, extraordinary woman made one of the most famous writers alive.

Mary Roy was a force of nature in Kerala, in the south of India. In the 1960s she founded a school, Pallikoodam, in Kottayam. In 1986 she won a landmark case in the Supreme Court of India that gave Syrian Christian women equal inheritance rights — a ruling that changed the law for hundreds of thousands of women. At home she was just as formidable: a mother who could be cruel, funny, generous, and terrifying, sometimes in the same sentence.

Roy refuses the two easy versions of this story. She does not write a tribute that turns her mother into a saint, and she does not write a revenge memoir. Instead she holds both truths at once: her mother wounded her, and her mother made her — and the wound and the making are the same thing. The book moves between childhood in Kerala, the Booker Prize in 1997, the Narmada dam protests, and her mother's last years, in the looping, non-linear way that memory actually works. It is funny, furious, lyrical, and unsentimental — and it explains, finally, where Roy's voice came from.

The Story

Arundhati Roy was born in Shillong, in north-east India, in 1961, and grew up in Aymanam, a village in Kerala, in her grandparents' house. Her parents separated when she was very small. Her father was a Bengali Hindu tea planter; her mother was a Syrian Christian. The marriage did not survive, and Mary raised Arundhati and her brother Lalith largely on her own, with very little money.

The memoir begins and ends with Mary's death. In between, Roy circles through the life they shared: the house in Aymanam, the school Mary ran, the court case that made her famous in Kerala, the daughter's escape to Delhi as a teenager, architecture school, years of living rough, a screenplay that won a National Film Award, and then, in 1997, the publication of *The God of Small Things* and the Booker Prize that made Roy world-famous overnight.

The book's emotional centre is the relationship itself. Mary was, in the phrase that recurs through the reviews and the book, both shelter and storm — the person who protected her children and the person they needed protection from. Roy writes plainly about a mother who hit her children, who used words as weapons, and who also gave her daughter everything that mattered: her eye for absurdity, her ear for language, her refusal to bow to authority.

The distance between them was not only emotional. Roy left Kerala and did not go back to live there. But they stayed in each other's orbit for decades, Mary following her daughter's fame with pride and resentment in equal measure, Arundhati following her mother's battles in court and at the school with the same mixture. They were two women who could not live together and could not quite live apart.

The Story, continued

The book's circular structure — opening with death, closing with death — is deliberate. Roy is saying that death is not the end of a relationship but a new phase of it. Her mother is still coming to her, still speaking, still arguing, and the memoir is the record of a daughter learning to listen differently: not for permission, not for approval, but for understanding. What she finds, in the end, is not a verdict on her mother. It is a portrait — drawn with love, with honesty, and with the full knowledge that the sitter would have argued with every line of it.

There is Roy's brother, Lalith, too, who shared that childhood and remembers it differently, as siblings always do — a reminder that a family story is never a single story, and that the memoir is one person's truth about a shared past. And there is her father, a distant, almost mythical figure, whose absence shaped the household as surely as her mother's presence did. Roy writes about him with curiosity and anger in equal measure, and about the strangeness of being the child of two people from two different worlds — a Hindu father and a Syrian Christian mother — in a society that wants everyone to fit neatly into one box.

The memoir also gives a full portrait of Mary's own life before Arundhati was born — a young woman in a conservative community who refused the life laid out for her, who married outside the rules, who was cast out and came back fighting. Roy writes about her mother's beauty, her wit, her love of language, and her rage at a world that tried to make her small. She writes, too, about the cost of that fight: the isolation, the gossip, the way a community closes ranks against a woman who will not behave. And she writes about what it meant for a daughter to watch it all — to be proud and embarrassed and frightened, sometimes in the same afternoon.

The Story, continued

Then there are the Delhi years, which the book treats with real energy. Roy left Kerala as a teenager, went to Delhi to study architecture, and lived, by her own account, rough — selling empty bottles, living in a slum, working on films. She wrote the screenplay for *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*, which won a National Film Award. She was, by any measure, a young woman making her own way with very little. The book wants you to see that the independence she is famous for was not an attitude. It was a survival skill, learned early, and it was learned from a mother who had survived the same way.

There is a chapter, late in the book, about the Booker Prize that deserves special mention. Roy describes the night she won — the phone calls, the cameras, the sudden transformation from unknown writer to literary celebrity — with a mixture of exhilaration and disbelief. She calls it a kind of vertigo. And she is unsparing about what fame did to her family: how it made her mother, already a formidable woman, into the mother of a famous daughter, a role Mary played with her own complicated mixture of pride, resentment, and proprietary interest. The book is very funny about literary London, about prize ceremonies, about the absurd machinery of sudden success. It is also clear-eyed about the price: the way fame freezes a person in the public mind, and the way it distorts the private relationships underneath.

The Key Ideas

1. A difficult parent can be both wound and gift

This is the book's central idea, and its bravest one. Most memoirs about difficult mothers end with either forgiveness or condemnation. Roy refuses both. She argues, by showing rather than telling, that the cruelty and the courage in her mother came from the same place — a refusal to accept the world as it was handed to her. That refusal hurt her children. It also made them who they are. Roy's political voice, her eye for injustice, her willingness to take on governments and corporations: all of it was learned at home, from a woman who took on the church, the law, and her own community, and won.

The point is not that suffering is good for you. It is that a person can be two things at once, and that loving someone does not require pretending otherwise. That is a harder and more honest position than either worship or revenge, and it is what makes the book feel trustworthy.

2. The small things become the big things

Readers of *The God of Small Things* will recognise the phrase, and the memoir shows where it came from. Roy's great subject, in the novel and here, is how the intimate details of a life — a childhood, a mother, a house by a river — grow into history. Mary's fight for her share of her father's property became a Supreme Court judgment that changed the law for hundreds of thousands of women. A girl's childhood in a Kerala village became a novel that won the Booker Prize. A mother's temper became a daughter's voice.

The memoir makes this transformation visible. The novel's village, Ayemenem, is Aymanam with a letter changed. The novel's mother, Ammu, is Mary — Roy says so plainly. Reading the two books together is like seeing a photograph and then the painting made from it: the memoir tells you what was real, and the novel tells you what Roy made from it.

3. Inheritance, in every sense of the word

The title of this section could be the title of the book. Inheritance runs through it on every level. There is the literal inheritance: the property Mary fought for, the law she changed, the school she built and left behind. There is the cultural inheritance: the Syrian Christian community of Kerala, with its rules about marriage, caste, and who belongs. And there is the personal inheritance: the anger, the eye, the voice that Mary passed to her daughter, and the question every child of a difficult parent has to answer — what do I keep, and what do I let go?

The book's title, borrowed from the Beatles' "Let It Be" — "Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom" — captures the last of these. Mary is still coming to Roy, still speaking, still arguing. The relationship did not end with death; it changed. That is why the book is in the present tense even when it is about the past.

4. The personal is political — as biography, not slogan

Roy has spent decades as a political writer: the Narmada dam protests, the nuclear tests of 1998, essays against war and empire. This memoir shows that she did not become political later in life. She was raised by a political woman, in a political house. Mary's inheritance case was personal, legal, and political all at once. Her school was an act of institution-building in a society that gave women little power. Roy's own activism is the same fight, scaled up.

The memoir follows her into that world — the Emergency of the 1970s, when civil liberties were suspended; the villagers facing displacement by dams; the nuclear tests — but it does so as lived experience, not as a lecture. You see how a girl raised by a woman who fought the church and the courts grew into a writer who fights governments and corporations. The through-line is unmistakable.

5. Memory is not linear, and neither is grief

The book's structure is deliberate. It opens with Mary's death and closes with Mary's death. In between, Roy jumps through time — a childhood scene next to the Booker Prize, next to her mother in old age — in the way memory actually works. Grief, too, is not linear: it circles, repeats, doubles back. The repetition that some reviewers criticised is, in this light, part of the point. A daughter does not remember her mother once, in order. She remembers her again and again, from different angles, and the picture changes each time.

6. Building things that outlast you

Mary Roy built a school and changed a law. Both are still there. The school, Pallikoodam, still educates children in Kottayam. The 1986 judgment is still the law in Kerala. Whatever the arguments at home, Mary left solid things in the world. Roy asks us to see her mother whole — not just as a parent, but as a person who acted in the world and left it different. That is a much harder kind of portrait, because it means admitting that the woman who hurt you also did extraordinary things, and that the two facts do not cancel each other out. They sit side by side, and the book's achievement is to let them.

7. A writer is made at home, not in a classroom

Roy's voice — the wordplay, the rhythm, the eye for absurdity, the refusal to accept the official story — did not come from a writing programme. It came from a house in Kerala, from a mother who talked the way she did, argued the way she did, and saw the world the way she did. The memoir is, among other things, an account of a literary education: not the books Roy read, but the person who taught her to look. For anyone who writes, or wants to, that is the book's quietest and most useful lesson. Voice is not a technique. It is an inheritance.

8. Place is a character

Kerala is not a backdrop in this book; it is a presence. The monsoon, the river, the coconut palms, the backwaters, the heat — Roy writes about the physical world with the same intensity she brings to people. Aymanam is a real village, and the novel's Ayemenem is its fictional twin, but the memoir's Kerala is stranger and more specific than any fiction: a Syrian Christian community with elaborate rules about marriage and inheritance, a landscape of extraordinary beauty, a society in which a woman like Mary could be both revered and ostracised. If you have never been to Kerala, this book will make you want to go — and it will also make you understand why a writer who left that place could never really leave it. It stayed inside her, and it came out in everything she wrote.

Mary Roy's Case, in Detail

The legal story deserves a fuller telling, because it is one of the most consequential parts of the book — and because it is easy to underestimate how much courage it took.

The law Mary challenged was the Travancore Christian Succession Act of 1916, which governed inheritance for Syrian Christians in the former princely state of Travancore, in what is now Kerala. Under that Act, a daughter's share of her father's property was a fraction of a son's, and it was treated, in practice, as a dowry payment rather than a real inheritance. A woman could be given a small sum at marriage and shut out of the family property altogether.

Mary sued for her share — against her own brother — and took the case to the Supreme Court of India. In 1986, the Court ruled in her favour, striking down the discriminatory provisions. From then on, Syrian Christian women in Kerala inherited equally with their sons. The judgment is still studied in law schools, and it is still the law.

What the memoir adds to the bare legal facts is the human cost. The church opposed her. Her community opposed her. She was, in Roy's telling, isolated and gossiped about, and she paid a social price that a man bringing the same case would never have paid. She did it anyway, and she did it without the language of feminism or activism that we would use today. She did it because it was unfair, and because she was the kind of person who could not let an unfair thing stand. Her daughter, watching, learned the lesson. It is not a coincidence that the girl raised in that household grew up to write essays against dams, against nuclear weapons, against war. The courtroom was the first classroom.

How to Approach It

Read it in one or two sittings if you can. At three hundred and fifty pages, the book rewards momentum. The non-linear structure works best when the threads are fresh in your mind — when a scene from childhood is still echoing as you meet its counterpart from twenty years later. A slow, interrupted read will still work, but the book's emotional logic — the way one memory answers another — lands hardest when you stay inside it.

Read it alongside *The God of Small Things*. If you have read the novel, this book will change how you see it. If you have not, this is a wonderful place to start with Roy, because it explains where her voice came from — and the novel will then read as the fictional half of the same story.

Don't expect a primer on India. Roy assumes a fair amount of knowledge: what the Emergency was, what the Syrian Christian community is, why a dam in central India matters. She does not stop to explain everything. Look things up as you go, or simply let the unfamiliar details wash over you; her sentences carry you through.

Pay attention to the humour. The book is often very funny — about fame, about family argument, about the absurdity of literary life — and the humour is not decoration. It is how Roy survives her material, and how she signals that this is not a book of complaint. The jokes sit next to the tragedies without apology, and that is the point: in this family, they always did.

Expect to think about your own family. This is a book that invites comparison, sometimes uncomfortably. Roy does not offer lessons, but readers will find themselves measuring their own parents against Mary — the shelter, the storm, the inheritance. That is not a flaw. It is the reason the book travelled so far beyond its first readers.

Consider the audiobook. Roy narrates it herself, and it runs about eleven and a half hours. For a book about a mother's voice and a daughter's voice, hearing it read aloud by the author feels right.

Memorable Lines

Roy's prose is full of lines that stop you. A few, in her spirit, that capture the book's temper:

- On her mother, she writes of being "heart-smashed" by the loss — a word that is not standard English and is exactly right.
- On Mary herself, the book returns again and again to the image of a woman who was both shelter and storm: protection and danger in the same person.
- On fame, she describes the "dizzying vertigo" of the Booker Prize — one day unknown, the next day on every front page, with a mother who had opinions about all of it.
- The title itself is the book's most memorable line, borrowed from the Beatles' "Let It Be": Mother Mary comes to me. Present tense. She is still here.
- On the book's method, reviewers have noted its refusal of both hagiography and indictment — admiration, resentment, and tenderness held in the same sentence, which is the book's whole ethic in miniature.

Short attributed quotations like these are the flavour of the book; the full force of it is in the accumulation — the scenes, the arguments, the jokes, the tenderness arriving without warning.

Fair Criticisms

Repetition. Roy circles back to the same scenes and the same arguments more than once. Some readers will find this frustrating; others will read it as the honest shape of memory. Either way, it is the book's most common complaint.

Self-dramatisation. Roy knows she is a famous writer writing about herself, and sometimes the book feels a little too aware of its own performance. The line between honesty and theatre is thin, and she crosses it occasionally.

Overload. The sheer amount of material — the family, the court case, the school, the novels, the politics — can feel like too much for one book. Not every thread gets the space it deserves, and some readers will wish she had gone deeper on one story instead of touching so many.

Privacy and perspective. A memoir about a family is never only the author's story, and some readers will wonder about the other people in it — above all her brother, who shared the childhood and remembers it differently, as siblings always do. Roy tells the story from her own point of view, and she does not pretend otherwise, but the book is, inevitably, one-sided. That is the nature of memoir, and Roy is honest about it, but it is worth remembering while reading: this is a daughter's portrait, not a family history, and the other sitters did not get to choose their poses.

Why It's on the List

The *New York Times* named *Mother Mary Comes to Me* one of the ten best books of 2025. It won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography, was a finalist for the Kirkus Prize, and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Non-Fiction. The *Guardian* called it "brave and absorbing." The *Financial Times* praised its lyricism and its antic family humour, and noted that there is "not an ounce of self-pity in it."

But the deeper reason it belongs on a list of the year's best books is the response it drew from readers. After publication, women — mostly daughters — began writing publicly about their own mothers, about their own complicated inheritances. A book that gives people language for something they have been carrying privately is doing something no prize can measure. This memoir does that. It tells the truth about a difficult parent without cruelty and without sentimentality, and in doing so it tells the truth about a great many families.

It also belongs on the list because of what it does for Roy's own body of work. For nearly thirty years, readers have wondered how much of *The God of Small Things* was autobiography. Now we know: a great deal. The memoir reframes the novel, and the novel reframes the memoir, and together they form one of the most interesting acts of self-revelation in contemporary literature — a writer who told her story in fiction first, and only found the courage to tell it directly after her mother was gone.

Why It's on the List, continued

Finally, the book belongs on the list because it is, quite simply, beautifully written. Roy's sentences — long, rolling, suddenly breaking into fragments, full of wordplay and rhythm — are among the most distinctive in English today. In the novels they are sometimes criticised as ornament. Here, stripped of fiction's artifice, they are revealed as what they always were: the sound of a mind thinking, remembering, arguing, and grieving, all at once.

What to Read Next

- **Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997).** The Booker Prize-winning novel, now readable as the fictional half of this memoir. Ammu is Mary; Aymanam is Ayemenem.
- **Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017).** Her second novel, twenty years later — bigger, messier, more political. The memoir is the bridge between the two.
- **Arundhati Roy, *The End of Imagination* (1998).** The starting point for her essays, including her opposition to India's nuclear tests.
- **Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005).** The great book about grief, and a natural companion to Roy's account of losing her mother.
- **Tara Westover, *Educated* (2018).** A daughter breaking away from a family that would not let her go — the same difficult inheritance, a different country.
- **The judgment in *Mary Roy v. State of Kerala* (1986).** Short, readable, and a reminder of how much can change because one person refused an unfair law.
- **Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014).** A short, fierce collection of her political essays — the clearest expression of the public voice the memoir traces back to her mother.
- **Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (2003).** A different India, a different family, but the same questions about inheritance, belonging, and the distance between parents and children.

Mother Mary Comes to Me by Arundhati Roy. Scribner, September 2025. 352 pages. Daily Book, Episode 56.