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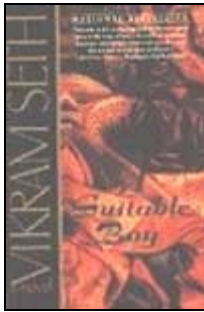
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**Book Review**  
**A Suitable Boy**  
A Novel  
by [Vikram Seth](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer  
Posted: March 7, 2007

On page 483 of this enormous and dazzling novel, a poet named Amit describes what it is like to work on his first novel, an epic account of a famine in Bangladesh.

"What is it like to write a novel?" asked Lata after a pause. "Don't you have to forget the 'I' or the 'one' —?"

"I don't know exactly," said Amit. "This is my first novel, and I'm in the process of finding out. At the moment it feels like a banyan tree."

"I see," said Lata, although she didn't.

"What I mean is," continued Amit, "it sprouts, and grows, and spreads, and drops down branches that become trunks or intertwine with other branches. Sometimes branches die. Sometimes the main trunk dies, and the structure is held up by the supporting trunks. When you go to the Botanical Garden you'll see what I mean. It has its own life — but so do the snakes and birds and bees and lizards and termites that live in it and on it and off it. But then it's also like the Ganges in its upper, middle, and lower courses — including its delta — of course."

"Of course," said Lata.

Like Amit, the author of *A Suitable Boy* is a poet, and like him — incredibly — this is his first work of prose fiction. (It's necessary to specify prose fiction, because seven years earlier he published [The Golden Gate](#), a comic novel set in San Francisco that is written entirely in sonnets.)

*A Suitable Boy* seems to have grown in the same branching, organic, unstoppable way as Amit's novel. The main trunk of the tale is about an intelligent and engaging young woman named Lata, and her family's efforts to see her "suitably" married. Three men are in the running for this honor. Kabir is a handsome Muslim student, a skillful cricket player, and a passionate, unsettling pursuer. Haresh is an ambitious, unpolished fellow determined to rise to the top of the shoe business. Amit, the poet turned novelist, is a family friend who is deeply fond of Lata but slow to see her as a potential wife.

Lata does not choose a husband until the end of the book — and even on the last page she and the reader cannot feel sure that it was the right decision. In the meantime we get to know and care about dozens of people, mostly members and connections of four families. There are child prodigies and pompous professors, adulterers and ne'er-do-wells, musicians and courtesans, rajas and Congress Party politicians.

Centered on the city of Brahmpur in the imaginary province of Purva Pradesh, the novel

moves fluidly from city to country and from princely palaces to red-light districts and rural villages. It takes place in 1951 and 1952, a few years after the independence of India and the terrible trauma of Partition, when Pakistan broke away from India amid large-scale slaughter of both Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi is dead, and the ruling Congress Party has become corrupt and complacent. A new law threatens to strip the rajas of their estates. Prime Minister Nehru, humane and well-meaning, has become disgusted with his own party and toys with the idea of leaving it to form an opposition.

Though the subjects are weighty enough, and the book includes some scenes of shocking violence, the author's tone is light, deft, and intimate. When the book is done, you may remember the mobs and fires of a religious riot, or you may remember the vein in a baby's ear, or the flowers of the harsingar that bloom for a single night.

*A Suitable Boy* is an extraordinary achievement. There are many books that we don't want to come to an end, but *A Suitable Boy* is so full of life that it feels as if it does go on, growing in all directions, even when the last page is finished.

#### About the Reviewer

*Geoff Wisner* is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at [www.geoffwisner.com](http://www.geoffwisner.com).



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—Mahatma Gandhi

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