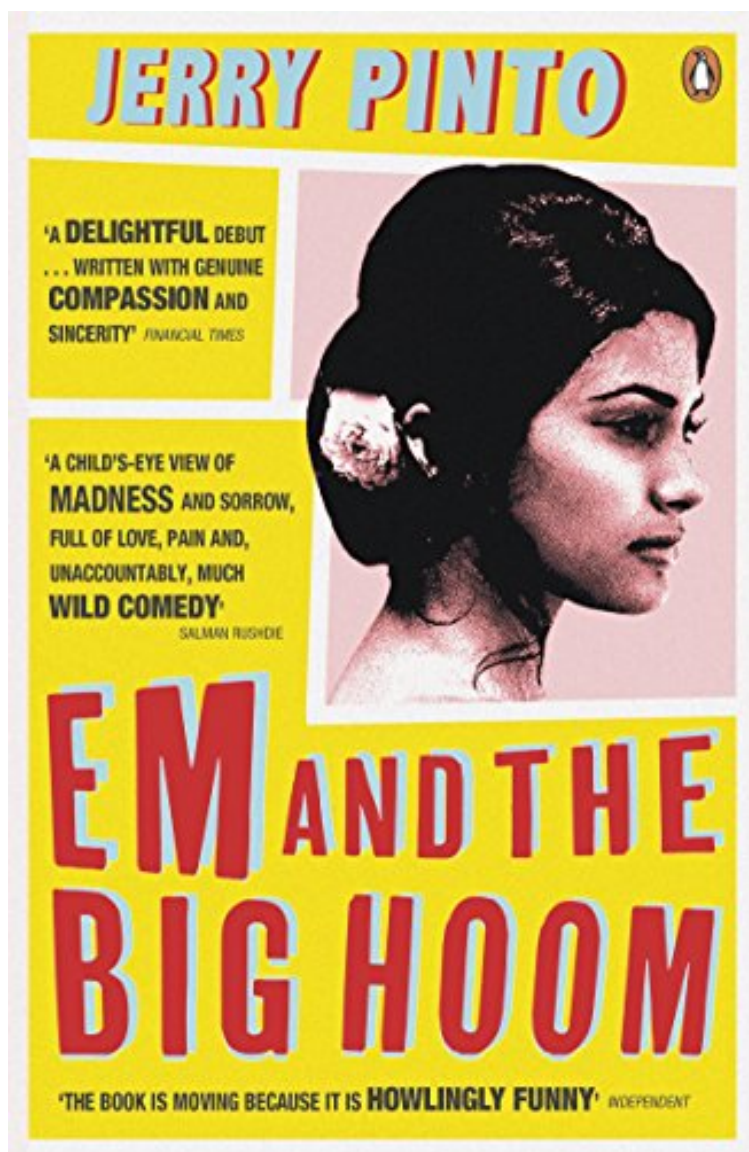


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Em and the Big Hoom



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBrilliantly comic and almost unbearably moving, Jerry Pinto's Em and the Big Hoom is one of the most powerful and original fiction debuts of recent years.She was always Em to us. There may have been a time when we called her something ordinary like Mummy, or Ma, but I don't remember. She was Em, and our father, sometimes, was the Big Hoom.In a tiny flat in Bombay Imelda Mendes - Em to her children - holds her family in thrall with her flamboyance, her manic affection and her cruel candour. Her husband - to whom she was once 'Buttercup' - and her two children must bear her 'microweathers', her swings from laugh-out-loud joy to dark malevolence. In Em and the Big Hoom, the son begins to unravel the story of his parents: the mother he loves and hates in the same moment and the unusual man who courted,

married and protected her - as much from herself as from the world. 'It is utterly persuasive and deeply affecting: stylistically adventurous it is never self-indulgent; although suffused with pain it shows no trace of self-pity. Parts of it are extremely funny, and its pages are filled with endearing and eccentric characters' Amitav Ghosh

Pinto chases the elusive portrait of a mother who simply said of herself that she was mad. As I read this novel, that also portrays a very tender marriage and the life of a Goan family in Bombay, it drowned me. I mean that in the best way. It plunged me into a world so vivid and capricious, that when I finished, I found something had shifted and changed within myself. This is a world of magnified and dark emotion. The anger is a primal force, the sadness wild and raw. Against this, the jokes are hilarious, reckless, free falling This is a rare, brilliant book, one that is wonderfully different from any other that I have read coming out of India' Kiran Desai

A child's-eye view of madness and sorrow, full of love, pain, and, unaccountably, much wild comedy. ne of the very best books to come out of India in a long, long time' Salman Rushdie

Jerry Pinto has been a mathematics tutor, school librarian and journalist and is now associated with MelJol, an NGO that works in the sphere of child rights. He has edited several anthologies including, most recently, an anthology on his native city, Mumbai.

Extrait 1. Someone turned on a tap

Dear Angel Ears, Outside the window, a Marathi man is asking mournfully if anyone would like to buy salt. Or at least that's what I think. Mee-ee-et, he wails, Me-eeetwallah, mee-eet. Other sounds: Mae mumbling about morning Mass; an impertinent sparrow demanding the last bit of my toast. I miss you terribly. But if you are going to send me a postcard, I shall abstain. I think postcards are for acquaintances and now that we are friends, you should find some nice stationery and write me a proper letter. These scribbles will not do, they are meant for the common masses. A butterfly is banging on the windowpane in the corridor and I must now rise to let it out. If your next letter is not to hand with heartwarming promptness, I shall declare you unfit for human consumption and throw you to the lions. Love. IPS: The sparrow wins. Imelda: nil, Sparrow: one. In her letters to him, she called him Angel Ears. Why Angel Ears? I asked her, in Ward 33 (Psychiatric), Sir J. J. Hospital. She turned her cool green eyes on me and smiled. For a while, her fingers stopped playing with the worn-out sheet that was covering her. Haven't you noticed? His ears are the sweetest thing about him. They look like bits of bacon curled up from too much frying. I had never thought of my father's ears. But later that evening, as he stood in the kitchen and cooked for me and my sister, scraping at a fry-up of potatoes, I saw that his ears were indeed unusual. When was the first time that she noticed his ears? Was it part of her falling in love with him, or did it happen in the hypersensitive moments that follow? And when she called him by that name the first time, did he respond immediately? He probably did, without asking why. They could be like that together. It intrigues me, love. Especially theirs, which seems to have been full of codes and rituals, almost all of them devised by her. She also called him Mambo, and Augie March, but almost never by his given name, Augustine. He called her Imelda, which was her name, and, sometimes, Beloved. She had another name for him: Limb of Satan. LOS. I asked her about that late one night, when the two of us were smoking together on the balcony of our small flat in a city of small flats. Behind us the one-bedroom-hall-kitchen, all 450 square feet of it, was quiet. In front of us, the side of a tenement rose like a cliff-face. Two trees were framed in between the buildings and in the foliage of one, a streetlight flickered erratically. She started laughing, a harsh scrape of sound that might belong in a brothel. Because he was always tempting me to sin, she said. Who was? Susan, my sister, was awake. She fitted herself into the balcony, waving a hand at the cloud of smoke we were producing. Your father. Its not a sin if youre married, is it? Its always a sin according to the Wholly Roaming Cat Licks. That cant be true. Can it not? I think youre only supposed to do it if you want babies. I wanted four but Hizzonner said, Then you pay for the other two. That, as they say, was that. And I had to give the twenty-six others away. What! Susan and I looked at each other. Were there hordes of siblings we knew nothing about? I gave them straight out of my womb, she explained. I could always tell when it had happened. Id hear a click and I would know I was pregnant again, and Id pray to Our Lady to take the poor wee thing and give it to someone else who wanted a child. Maybe one of those women who buy wax babies to offer the said Lady at Mahim. So you'd have . . . I ventured. Abortions? No, what do you take me for? Id just climb down five stairs and jump six. Jump down the stairs? Six steps and land with a thump, six times, to shake those little mites from their moorings. She turned to Susan. But if you get knocked up, you come and tell me and Ill come with you to the doctor. Well get you Dd and Cd before you can say Dick with a Thing and a Tongue. What is deed and seed? Dilation and curettage. I dont know what exactly it is but it sounds like they open you up and put a young priest in there. Anyway, only doctors do it. So when youre knocked up, youll get a proper doctor to fiddle with your middle, you hear? No back-street abortions for you. What about adoption? Susan asked. What about it? Mother Teresa came to college and She came to

your college? Yes. You didnt tell me. I didnt? No. No one tells me anything. What did she say? She said that if we got pregnant we should carry the child to term and give it to her. She said that? Gosh. She frowned and was silent for a moment, considering this. I suppose it comes from not having lived in the world for hundreds of years. Shes lived in a convent, its not her fault. But still. Suppose I got pregnant today. Suppose I got nice and big and everyone asked, When is it due? and My, youre carrying in the front, it must be a boy, and What do you want? Pink or blue? and after all that, theres no baby at my breast. What do you think theyd think?

What would I say? Oh, I carried the baby to term and then I sent him off to Mother T because I couldnt afford him and I didnt want to have an abortion . . . ? Maybe youre supposed to hide, I said. Oh yes, go away for a vacation for six or seven months. Where? Goa? Goa! she said theatrically. Thats worse than having it in Bombay. You might as well take an advert out in O Heraldo Fallen woman available for gawking and comments behind hankies. Holy Family parish church, Sunday Mass. For personal appointments and the full story, contact Father so and so. She shook her head. Thats what comes of all this celibacy business. We confess to men whove never had to worry about a family. Naturally, its a huge sin to them, this abortion business. What do they know? They probably think its fun and games. Let them try it. I remember poor Gertie. Once, she was sure that it had happened. An abortion? No, stupid, a pregnancy she was late, and she was never late, so she knew. She took me out after work and we stood on the street near Chowpatty beach and she ate three platefuls of papaya. I thought she was constipated. But then we went to Bombellis and she had three gins as if they were cough syrup. That was when she told me what she was trying to do. Bake the poor thing out of there, she said. It gets too hot inside, the bag squeezes and the baby pops out. I hope. She came to the office the next day and she looked like death warmed over. Apparently, it had worked. Baby, if something like that happens to you, you go and get it Dd and Cd. Its not worth it, she said to me. And now I say unto you, Sue, and to you too . . . she said, looking at me. Me? Yes, you. Not that youre going to get pregnant any which way you turn out. But if you do put a loaf in some poor girls oven, you will take her to a government place, you will announce that you are Mr and Mrs DSouza Why DSouza? I dont know. Some name. Any name. Not hers. And after its done you will take her somewhere to rest and relax and weep and you will stay with her until she can go home. You mean Im not to tell her to jump down six stairs and give the baby to Our Lady? You are a wicked young man to laugh at an old ladys guilt, said Em. But she was smiling too. She was always Em to us. There may have been a time when we called her something ordinary like Mummy, or Ma, but I dont remember. She was Em, and our father, sometimes, was The Big Hoom. Neither Susan nor I, the only persons who might ever care to investigate the matter, can decide how those names came about, though weve tried (Em must mean M for Mother and Maybe its because he made hoom sounds when we asked him something). On certain days we called her Doogles, or The Horse, or other such names that sprang from some subterranean source and vanished equally quickly. Otherwise, she was Em, and most of the time she was Em with an exclamation mark. Once, by mistake, I called her Mater. I got it out of a Richie Rich comic. The very rich, very snobby Mayda Munny used the word to address her mother. I should have known that I would not get away with something so precious, but I was nine or ten years old and did not know what precious meant. Em peered at me for a moment, pulling deeply on her beedi. (She smoked beedis because they were cheap, she said, and because once youd started down the beedi road, you could never find your way back to the mild taste of cigarettes. The Big Hoom rarely came home from work in the evenings with sweets for us when we were children, but he never forgot the two bundles of Ganesh Chhaap Beedi.) Mater, she said, and her eyes shone behind the curls of smoke. Yes, I suppose I am. I did do it, didnt I? And here you stand, living proof. I think I blushed. She roared, a happy manic laugh. I thought you boys knew everything about the cock and cunt business! We do, I said, lamely, terrified of where the conversation was going. So what did you think, both of you were products of the Immaculate Conception? Gosh, you couldnt keep us out of bed in those first years. Em! What? Are you feeling all Oedipal-Shmeedipal then? Whats Oedipal? Em loved a good story. She was off. Ick, I said when Oedipus wandered off, his eyes bleeding and his future uncertain, escorted by his daughter who was also his sister. Well you may say Ick, said Em. But thats what Freud says every boy wants to do to his mother. Ick, I say to Mr Freud. He must have been odd, even for an Austrian. Not that Im racist, but why would they have a navy when theyre landlocked? Mr Freud was in the navy? I asked, confused. No, silly, Im talking about The Sound of Music. The Big Hoom came into the bedroom. Youre telling the boy about? The psychoanalytic movement, said Em, her voice slightly defiant. Have you got past the id, the ego and the superego? he asked pleasantly. I should have started at that end, shouldnt I? At what end did you start? Oh, I was telling him about the Oedipus Complex. The Big Hoom said nothing. He did nothing. He looked at her. She went into a tizzy. Its

knowledge, knowledge is good, it will help, knowledge always helps, she said. She was attempting logic. But she was miserable. It was only later that I came to understand why she never used her condition as a refuge: it would have violated her sense of fair play. The Big Hoom let her stew for a bit and then he nodded. He opened The Hamlyn Childrens Encyclopaedia, a book that I refused to read because it had been given to Susan as a birthday present, and slowly led me through the facts of life. This might have been enough, but my mind was already locked on to what Em had told me. Why do boys want to do that with their mothers? I asked. A lesser man might have run shrieking from the question, or told his son to shut up. The Big Hoom taught me the word hypothesis, instead, and explained a little bit about Freud and tried to clear things up. Finally, he set me to making words out of hypothesis and promised me ten paise for every word after the twentieth. I loved the word hypothesis. It sounded adult and beautifully alien. I had never heard anything like it before. I wanted more words like it. I felt, instinctively, that when you had enough words like hypothesis, you would be able to deal with the world. I wasnt sure I would ever be able to deal with the world. It seemed too big and demanding and there wasnt a fixed syllabus. I didnt know how to deal with what we were as a family, either. I didnt really know what we were as a family. I only knew that something was wrong with all of us and that it had something to do with my mother and her nerves. What are nerves? I had asked The Big Hoom once. I didnt really want to know but a question was a good way to get him to pay attention to me. He put down his newspaper and took me into the gallery. Outside, wires snaked and writhed between the buildings of our housing colony. He pointed to them. What are those? I hated these moments. I wanted to be told, I did not want to be asked. Wires, I said. What do wires do? Electricity? Yes, they carry electric current, he said. Nerves do that inside the body. Thoughts, like electric currents, and inside my mothers head they ran uncontrolled flashing and sizzling. I carried that image with me through my childhood for what ailed my mother and took her to hospital, sometimes every few months. Then she gave me another. She was in Ward 33 again, lying in bed, a bed with a dark green sheet and a view of the outside. We could both see a man and a woman getting out of a taxi. They were young and stood for a while, as if hesitating, in front of the hospital. Then the man took the womans hand in his and they walked into the hospital and we lost them. Thats why Indian women fall ill, Em said. So that their husbands will hold their hands. Is that why youre here? I wanted to bite my tongue. I wanted to whiz around the world, my red cape flying, and turn time back so that I could choose not to make that remark. But Em, being Em, was already replying. I dont know, Baba, I dont know why. Its a tap somewhere. It opened when you were born. I was repaid in pain, a sharp thing. I loved you. And before you I loved Susan, the warmth of her and the smiles and the tiny toes and the miracle of her fingernails and the way her scrapes would fade within the day as she healed and grew. I loved the way her face lit up when she saw me and the way she nursed. But after you came along . . . She turned to the window again. An ambulance turned in, lazily, in the way of the citys ambulances. Inured to traffic, unconcerned by mortality, unimpressed by anyones urgency, the ambulance driver stopped to light a beedi before jumping out of the cab. We watched together as someone inside opened the doors and two young men leapt out and tried to wrest a stretcher from within. Was it like that? she asked. She had forgotten how she got to the hospital. No, I said. You came in a taxi. What was I wearing? The green dress with the pockets. She looked puzzled. I rooted about in the locker by the bed, a locker marked Patient Belonging, and opened it. I pulled the dress out. Oh that one, she said. Bring it here. She stroked it as if to rediscover a little more about it. The tap? I said. Sorry. I must be going mad. We both smiled at this, but only a little. It was a tradition: the joke, the smile. After you were born, someone turned on a tap. At first it was only a drip, a black drip, and I felt it as sadness. I had felt sad before . . . who hasnt? I knew what it was like. But I didnt know that it would come like that, for no reason. I lived with it for weeks. Was there a drain? No. There was no drain. There isnt one even now. She was quiet for a bit. Its like oil. Like molasses, slow at first. Then one morning I woke up and it was flowing free and fast. I thought I would drown in it. I thought it would drown little you, and Susan. So I got up and got dressed and went out onto the road and tried to jump in front of a bus. I thought it would be a final thing, quick, like a bang. Only, it wasnt. Her hands twitched at the sheet. I know. Yes, the scars still there. We were silent. I didnt want to hear this. I wanted to hear it. The bus stopped and the conductor had to take me to a hospital in a taxi. He sat in the front, lotus pose. Lotus? My blood was flowing across the floor of the taxi. There was no drain there either. I remember it all, as if rain had fallen. Have you ever noticed how rain clears the air? Everything stands out but it also looks a little thinner, as if the dust had been keeping things together. I felt as if . . . Her hands twitched at the sheet again. It slipped off her foot and both of us looked at the scar that ran from under the big toe to her ankle, a ridge of scar tissue. It had to be dressed every day for months. Dr Saha came and

did the honours. Dont wander, I said. Where was I? In the taxi. With the world outside clear. She looked a little confused. You said the world was clear. Oh, not the world. Inside my head. Each time she had tried to kill herself she had opened her body and let her blood flow out. Was that the drain, then, I wondered, was that how it worked? And this time? I asked her. Is it clear now? This time I heard a small voice inside my head, just as I was beginning to slip away. I heard it say, Please save me. That was you. No, I heard it. It was you, I said again. It must have been, no? I heard it as if it were someone else. And then you came. And Susan. I didnt want it that way. I didnt want the two of you to see anything like that in your lives. We had gone out together that afternoon, Susan and I, even though The Big Hoom was at work. It was a time of plenty. The stock market had worked in The Big Hooms favour and he had sold some shares. A nurse had been hired and Em was, for once, someone elses responsibility. We were teens on an adventure, watching Coolie, the biggest Amitabh Bachchan hit of 1983. The Big Hoom wouldnt have approved, and Em would have mocked, but they would never find out. We had laughed a lot, happy that we could go out and laugh, like all the others we knew who were our age. And it was a warm afternoon, the kind made for laughing. When the show was over and we came home, the nurse was asleep. She had no idea where Em was this, in a house with a single bedroom, one living room, one small kitchen, two narrow corridors, one four-by-two balcony. Susan knew. She headed straight for the bathroom. There was no reply. She called, Em, Em, panic streaking her voice. I knocked and called too. Finally, we heard something wet and slithery inside, and the door opened. I tried it again, Em said. She was drenched in blood. It was in her hair. It was on her hands. It was dripping from her clothes. I pulled out the immersion rod to warm some water. Susan went for the nurse, but she, wily lady, had taken one look over our shoulders and vanished into the still-warm afternoon. Susan called The Big Hoom. I heard her in some other way, not the normal way you hear things. It was thin and distant but it was also clear. I can still hear it if I try. I dont. Em was leaning against the wall next to the bathroom door and shivering. I guided her to the low metal stool and she sat down. Her arms dangled between her knees. I picked up one of her arms and turned it over to look. The cut was a single line, dark red. It said nothing. Em tried to kill herself, I heard Susan say. Then she was back. What did he say? I asked. What do you think? she was impatient as she tested the water with her finger. He says hes coming. I poured warm water over Em, from her head downwards. The water ran red. Susan reached down in front of Em and began to raise her dress and petticoat. I excused myself. My mother was going to be stripped naked. I went out and made the next call. To Granny, Ems mother, solid woman, cloth and sawdust solid. Coming, said Granny. Take a taxi, I said. Taking, said Granny. I stood in the balcony for a while. The traffic flowed outside. A sparrow dropped onto the balcony. A crow followed. The sparrow fluttered away. The crow preened cockily. A chickoo seller announced that his wares came from Gholvad. Then I went to make tea with lots of sugar. I had read somewhere that sugar helps with shock. Who was shocked? When Em and Susan came out, I brought them tea. Susan sat Em down and held the tea cup to her lips. I went into the bathroom and turned on all the taps. I let the water flood out onto the floor. The stick broom, which had a tendency to fall on its side after it was used, was saturated in blood. There were clots that looked like hairballs I still dont know what they were and they kept clogging the drain. I gathered them with my foot in one corner where they could not impede the flow of the water, the draining of the blood. I smelt the odour that trains leave on your fingers: iron. In some odd part of my brain, something about the link between iron and anaemia and haemoglobin and blood clicked into place. I went down and bought a bottle of iron tonic. When I returned, Granny and The Big Hoom had arrived. He was already in the bathroom, cleaning up. Granny was in the bedroom, talking to Em and drinking tea. I dont remember what we did that evening. I dont remember going to sleep or waking up the next morning. I only remember the moment Dr Saha, the family GP, came. He clicked his tongue and bandaged Em her wrists this time. The Big Hoom was not a fan of bandages; he believed that sunlight and air did more good if you kept things clean, but he didnt object. Should she go to the hospital? he asked. See how she sleeps, Dr Saha said. We slept that night, so Granny and The Big Hoom must have kept watch over Em. And something must have changed in the night because she was not there the next morning. We began our hospital visits: one day Susan, one day me, every day The Big Hoom. On one of these visits, she told me about the tap that opened at my birth and the black drip filling her up and it tore a hole in my heart. If that was what she could manage with a single sentence, what did thirty years of marriage do to The Big Hoom? Hello, buttercup Imelda saw Augustine in the office. Her diary reads: I finally located the source of the booming voice. I asked Andrade, who is the registered office flirt, about the noise and he said, Oh, thats AGM. I looked a bit puzzled and he looked a bit puzzled. I dont know his name. We all call him AGM. His initials, I think. Dont you like him? I asked. Oh, hes a great guy. Youll see. And you dont know his name? I do.

Its AGM, he said. Now what do you say to that? I think I might like it here, as long as they don't give me too many numbers to type . . . We had carte blanche to read Ems diaries and letters. Sometimes she read them out to us, her spectacles perched high on her nose, the black frame hiding her thick eyebrows. I never saw her tear up anything; every scrap and note written to her went into a series of cheerful cloth bags. On certain days, she would rummage around in the bags and pull out a note, a fragment, a whole letter. She would glance at some, read some in full, and dream. While Ems letters were public documents in the family, neither Susan nor I read her diaries during her lifetime (Susan still won't). Perhaps we had understood very early that they would give us no clues to her illness, or ways to reach her on her worst days. Or and this may be closer to the truth we were afraid of what we might find there, and afraid of having to deal with it. Even now, I look in Ems notebooks not for my mother but for Augustines Beloved. It didn't take Augustine, aka AGM, long to spot the new girl in the office of ASL Ampersand Smith Limited the engineering goods company at which Imelda was the new stenotypist and he was the junior manager, sales. Two days later, he spoke to her: Booming Voice spoke to me. What nerve. He bounces past my desk, flashes his blue peepers at me and says, Hello buttercup, and ricochets off the opposite wall to do something else. I find it difficult to picture my father in these entries. To me, he seemed built for endurance, not speed. The thought of him ricocheting off walls is odd. I have tried reconstructing him in my head, dressing him in what up-and-coming young men wore to the office at the time: white shirt, black trousers, black shoes and socks. Like all such men, he probably also kept another couple of shirts with him, and a tin of talcum powder, so that he could change when the humidity leached his shirt of its starch. He was a man who liked women. When he won The Illustrated Weekly of India's crossword contest, he bought every woman in his office a yellow rose with a little fern wrapped in white tissue and tied with a yellow satin ribbon. For that day, so Gertrude told Imelda, the office had felt like a garden. And for weeks the perfume of the roses had lingered, if not in reality, then at least in the imaginations of the young women of ASL. Gertrude had opened her bag and showed Imelda that the satin ribbon still lay at the bottom. To remind me that all men aren't the same, dear, she had said. Gertrude was a veteran of the love wars. She had been carrying on with a married man for so many years, she had lost count. And to add insult to injury, dear, he's Muzzlim. Imelda was too young to understand that love could be an injury. She was too young to understand why Motasim's religion was an added insult. She was also too young to respond to Hello buttercup. So she hadn't. Why didn't you? Gertrude was surprised. I didn't know what to say. You could have said Hello? But in all the films Imelda had seen, the suave young man would say Hello buttercup and the heroine would answer such impudence with the kind of remark that would stop his airy advance through fields of irises and daisies and pansies. Such a crisp response marked her as someone different from the rest, a fitting sparring partner, someone to love. Revue de presse The anger is a primal force, the sadness wild and raw. Against this, the jokes are hilarious, reckless, free falling ... This is a rare, brilliant book, one that is wonderfully different from any other that I have read coming out of India (Kiran Desai) Extremely funny, and its pages are filled with endearing and eccentric characters. Em and The Big Hoom is a profoundly moving book (Amitav Ghosh) A delightful debut . . . Written with genuine compassion and sincerity, while a sprinkling of black humour ensures it is never overly sentimental (Financial Times) A near-perfect account of a psychologically troubled mother and the shockwaves felt by her family. Rich and beguiling . . . Within sentences of this touching, funny and calmly shocking narrative, their son makes it clear that he knows about the things that really matter (Irish Times) Jerry Pinto's prose is lively and incisive . . . moments of great humour here as well as moments of tenderness and poignancy (Herald) Pinto's written a novel that perhaps uniquely breaks free from India's historic, cacophonous clamour (Metro) The book is moving because it is howlingly funny - Em has a kind of enchanted loquaciousness - and wholly unsentimental in its handling of the "phenomenal expense of empathy". It's a memorable chamber work, with wide appeal (Independent)