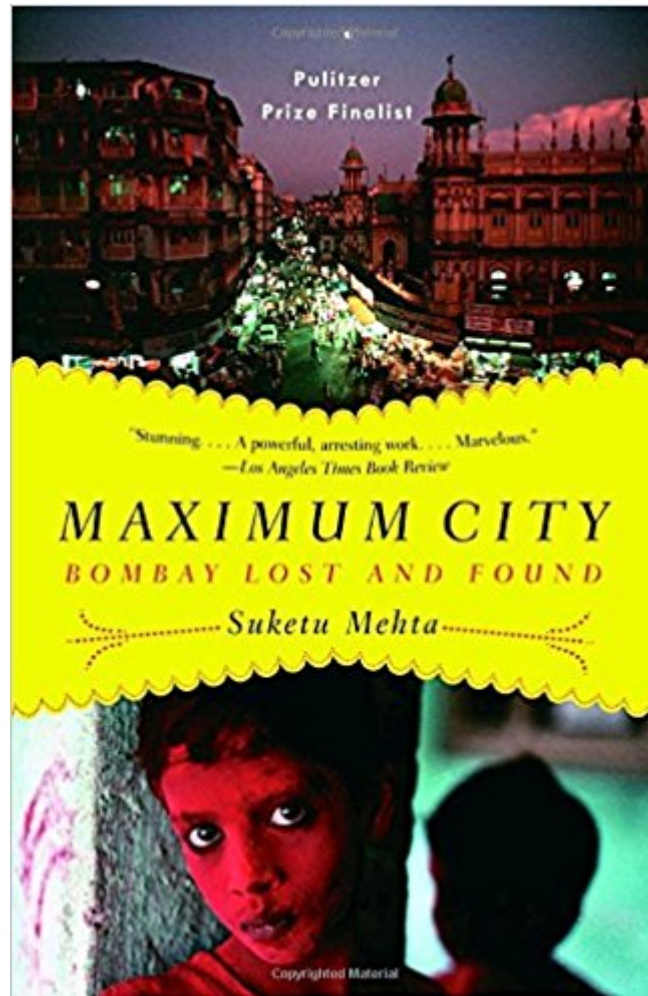




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# Maximum City: Bombay Lost And Found



## Synopsis

A native of Bombay, Suketu Mehta gives us an insider's view of this stunning metropolis. He approaches the city from unexpected angles, taking us into the criminal underworld of rival Muslim and Hindu gangs, following the life of a bar dancer raised amid poverty and abuse, opening the door into the inner sanctums of Bollywood, and delving into the stories of the countless villagers who come in search of a better life and end up living on the sidewalks. As each individual story unfolds, Mehta also recounts his own efforts to make a home in Bombay after more than twenty years abroad. Candid, impassioned, funny, and heartrending, *Maximum City* is a revelation of an ancient and ever-changing world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Bombay native Mehta fills his kaleidoscopic portrait of "the biggest, fastest, richest city in India" with captivating moments of danger and dismay. Returning to Bombay (now known as Mumbai) from New York after a 21-year absence, Mehta is depressed by his beloved city's transformation, now swelled to 18 million and choked by pollution. Investigating the city's bloody 1992-1993 riots, he meets Hindus who massacred Muslims, and their leader, the notorious Godfather-like founder of the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena party, Bal Thackeray, "the one man most directly responsible for ruining the city I grew up in." Daring to explore further the violent world of warring Hindu and Muslim gangs, Mehta travels into the city's labyrinthine criminal underworld with tough top cop Ajay Lal, developing an uneasy familiarity with hit men who display no remorse for their crimes. Mehta likewise deploys a gritty documentary style when he investigates Bombay's sex industry, profiling an alluring, doomed dancing girl and a cross-dressing male dancer who leads a strange double life. Mehta includes

so-called "Bollywood" in his sweeping account of Bombay's subcultures: he hilariously recounts, in diary style, day-to-day life on the set among the aging male stars of the action movie Mission Kashmir. Mehta, winner of a Whiting Award and an O. Henry Prize, is a gifted stylist. His sophisticated voice conveys postmodern Bombay with a carefully calibrated balance of wit and outrage, harking back to such great Victorian urban chroniclers as Dickens and Mayhew while introducing the reader to much that is truly new and strange. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Modern Bombay is home to fourteen million people, two-thirds of them packed into neighborhoods where the population density reaches one million per square mile. Its official name is now Mumbai, but, as the author points out, the city has always had "multiple aliases, as do gangsters and whores." Mehta, who lived there as a child, has a penchant for the city's most "morally compromised" inhabitants: the young Hindu mafiosi who calmly recollect burning Muslims alive during riots twelve years ago; the crooked policeman who stages "encounter killings" of hoods whose usefulness has expired; the bar girl, adorned with garlands of rupees, whose arms are scarred from suicide attempts. Mehta's brutal portrait of urban life derives its power from intimacy with his subjects. After clandestine meetings with some of Bombay's most wanted assassins, he notes, "I know their real names, what they like to eat, how they love, what their precise relationship is with God." Copyright © 2005 The New Yorker --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

I bought this book in anticipation of visiting Bombay/Mumbai. I ended up going to Cambodia and Singapore. If ONLY I could have gone to Mumbai. If ONLY I could have experienced a sliver of an iota of a whisp of what the author experienced. I am so attached to this book that I am loathe to finish it. The last 1/3 sits on my desk, I indulge in 2 pages per day, I don't want to finish it because how else will I \*know\* about Bombay??

This book is aptly titled because everything about Bombay/Mumbai does indeed sound "maximum." Twenty-three million people in a space that should accommodate more like 10 million. People living in extreme poverty, sleeping on the city's footpaths and bathing near an open sewer. Police shooting suspected criminals on sight, in what are euphemistically called "encounters." Commuters falling off the morning train because they are, literally, hanging onto the outside of the car by their

fingers and toes. Bollywood film stars consorting with criminal gang members and throwing lavish parties where just the hors d'oeuvres would feed a poor man for a month. And then, on the other hand, a Jain diamond merchant and his family giving up all their possessions to wander the countryside seeking "moksha." A cross-dressing bar dancer who leads a painful, double life in order to support his extended family. A talented boy from the hinterlands who is happy to sleep in the street and starve so he can follow his bliss writing poetry. These are people living on the edge, right to the max of whatever situation they find themselves in. As I read I was both thrilled and horrified. Suketu Mehta is a native of Bombay who is now living in New York City. He went back to write about his home town in a perhaps unconscious attempt to find some way to integrate his old world and new world selves. And to acquaint his children with their paternal heritage. The place was very different, and yet oddly the same. Knowing nothing about Bombay the place at first seemed utterly foreign to me. But as I read I began to see that in some ways it is not unlike my own New York City. A bit more "maximum" perhaps, but don't the police shoot to kill here in New York? Don't the rich throw obscenely wasteful parties (or didn't they before the recent economic meltdown)? Don't we see extremes of wealth and poverty, side by side, every day in Midtown? We too live in a city of stark contrasts, and yet we have one great asset going for us: a government that is, on the whole, not corrupt and a civil society that enforces the law in a more or less consistent manner. For sure it's not perfect, but if you doubt the importance of citizens being able to rely on the rule of law, try living in Bombay/Mumbai, or half of the other cities in the world for that matter. (Disclaimer: I haven't lived outside of the US, so my views are informed by what I read rather than first-hand experience.) Good government, it seems to me, is the required bedrock of a great city. It is both precious and elusive. See what Mehta writes about the takeover of Maharashtra state by the Hindu-nationalist Shiv Sena political party in 1995: "The government took a look at the awesome urban problems plaguing the city, the infestation of corruption at all levels of the bureaucracy and the government, the abysmal state of Hindu-Muslim relations, and took decisive action. They changed the name of the capital city to Mumbai." Do people get the government they deserve? Given what I know of Indians (admittedly not a lot), I don't think so. This great civilization and its people certainly deserve a better, fairer and more functional government than what they appear to have now. As India becomes an economic power in this century, perhaps that country will generate the wealth required to lift Mumbai's 23 million (and growing) out of poverty. The question in my mind is, how can we help them, and will we?

Written with love. Mumbai was always on my list of destinations - now even more. Brilliant character

portraits and lifelines. Plenty of lessons in how to adapt to seeming chaos. Fantastic how all the characters portrayed all meld into their respective places in the maximum of cities. Wish I could read it for a first time again. Wish I could write like that. The author is also a mate of Vikhram Chandra, who wrote "Sacred Games" (among others). One of the best fiction books I've ever read. A real page turner - all 800 of them, and all the research backed up in real life by Maximum City. One of the characters of which was just recently executed after being found guilty for his role in the Mumbai bombings - something also forensically dissected in the book. Buy it, read it. Guaranteed you won't regret it. (Same applies to Sacred Games.)

Very well written- if somewhat long winded- account of life in modern Mumbai. It's also likely a terrible foreshadow of what life will be like in cities around the world as tax bases fail to keep up with the needs and demands of an ever poorer urban population. I can imagine New York or Chicago or Los Angeles 20-30 years in the future with sprawling Mumbai-like slums. My main... complaint is similar that of others: the book is too long, and could easily have been trimmed by 1/3. The last chapter on the Jains was interesting but tedious. Just a thought- I wonder how they (Jains) deal with the fact that their immune system is killing millions of organisms daily?

Oddly, a compelling page turner. I had to keep reminding myself that this was NOT a work of fiction. Good stuff !!!

Returning to the city of his childhood after 21 years abroad, Mehta descends into the megapolis much the same way Dante descended into Hell and reveals to us a frenetic world from the eyes of its most celebrated inhabitants, a cast of characters that encompasses gangsters and Bollywood stars, whores and holy men, politicians and police, diamond merchants and slum dwellers. The stories he tells range from the darkly comic to the thought provoking, as he searches for reason in the sea of chaos that is modern Mumbai.

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