



Bali Rai Authorgraph

By *AndreaMReece*

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Article Author:

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[197](#) [2]

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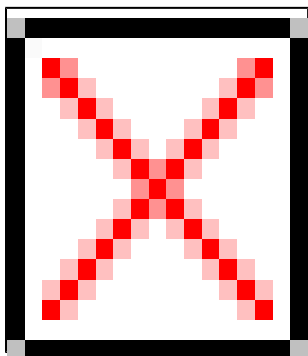
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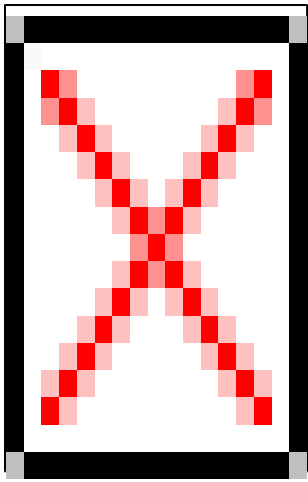
Bali Rai interviewed by **Caroline Sanderson**..

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It's insanely diverse. People have no idea. Even people who live there don't fully understand how diverse it is. Bali Rai is talking about his home town of Leicester, the location in various degrees of disguise - for almost all his work. It is an extraordinarily mixed community, encompassing people from India and Pakistan, along with East African Asian refugees from Idi Amin's Uganda.



In the Highfields and North Evington areas of the city, Bali Rai grew up to love reading, and from a young age, writing, though few of the books he read reflected his own experience of life. His first favourite author was Roald Dahl, whose books inspired him to write his own version of **James and the Giant Peach** at the age of seven. Dahl always seemed a distant figure however. It took a Leicester writer - perhaps the most famous Leicester writer of all - to convince Rai that writing was something he could do too. Her name is Sue Townsend. I didn't see authors as being like me or her, until she appeared. She was a working-class mum off a Leicester council estate who wrote a book and the book was huge. It opened my eyes to the fact that you didn't have to write absurdist fantasy. I realised I could write about my friends! Or I could write a story about school! Rai's head of year at the time cannily used a passage to awaken interest in the reluctant boy readers in his class. He mentioned the bit where Adrian Mole measures his willy with a ruler. They were gob-smacked. Then he put the book down on the desk and walked out of the room. And there was a massive scramble for it!



Bali Rai was born in 1971, the son of Punjabi Sikhs who moved to the UK in the late 1950s and early 60s and found jobs as unskilled factory workers. "My mum and dad were both the children of peasant farmers, and had no literacy skills to speak of. They were like the family in **(un)arranged marriage** but in my dad's case without the racist, violent bullying, because he wasn't like that. But he did push my sister and I to go to the public library because a friend of his who was an organiser for the Communist Party told him he needed to get us to read." His aspirational father's pushing worked. In search of more challenging reading than could be found in his school library, Rai was reading adult horror and crime fiction from his local public library by the time he was 11 or 12. "I remember talking with the librarians there about a book I'd read - I think it was a Clive Barker or a Stephen King - and telling them, "I wouldn't have written the ending like that." And the librarian said, "Ah, a literary critic!"

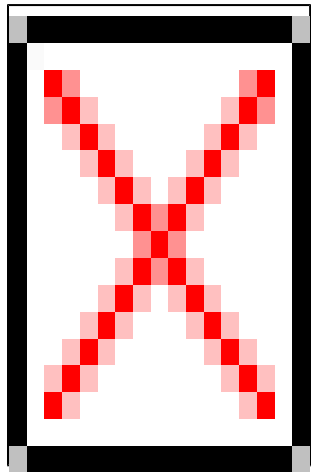
Rai's was also quite a politicised upbringing. "I was eight when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. Some people think children are ignorant of the world around them at that age but they're not. I saw my parents, and my friends' parents suffer because their jobs started to disappear, and they were struggling to make ends meet. Like many cities, Leicester ended up being this urban, decaying mess, and the level of crime increased as the recession started to bite. At the same time you also had the anti-apartheid movement - Mandela was still in prison - and you had the miners' strike. Consequently, I've always been political. I'm an old-fashioned leftie, and proud of it." Rai's views on the current state of education and the public library service are well-informed and incisive: he's clearly a man who cares deeply about the state of our country and is still passionate about the idea of the "social contract".

Appropriately, Rai did a degree in Politics at London's South Bank University with the thought that he might study journalism. But a severe shortage of money, and then the serious illness of his sister led him to move back to Leicester. Looking back, he feels it was the best thing that could have happened. "I don't think I'd be writing professionally if I'd stayed in London. Moving back to Leicester gave me space and more disposable income, and therefore more time to write. Being away also re-focused my view of my home city, and I started to think about Leicester as a potential urban setting for my stories."

From the beginning, Rai wanted his writing to reflect the experiences of people he knew. "There are two ways of writing about multi-cultural Britain, particularly if you do it from the Asian angle. There's the kind of "saris and samosas" thing where everything's perfectly happy at the end; like **Bhaji on the Beach** and **Bend it Like Beckham**. Good films but pretty much fairy tales. And then you have the reality." A grave situation in his own family, coupled with an awareness of the number of forced marriages that were taking place, and the number of people being rescued by the Foreign Office from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh led to Rai to write his first novel, **(un) arranged marriage**. It was a much-acclaimed debut which also brought him a clutch of awards. "It was the first part of what ended up being a quartet of novels (the others being **Rani and Sukh**; **The Last Taboo** and **Killing Honour**) based around issues of British Asian concepts of family honour. But I didn't know that at the time. I just wanted to write about Leicester and about a cousin of mine who was forced to get married."

The hard-hitting books - including those in the quartet - which Rai refers to as his "modern, urban" novels draw heavily on the people he knows. "They are all about members of my family, and people in the wider British Punjabi and Sikh communities in Leicester. All the characters are based on real people. The characters in **The Crew** for example are all friends of mine, and the narrator is me with an added twist and a different family background." Rai memorably

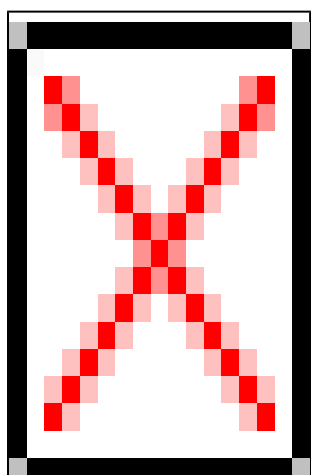
describes **The Crew** ? a pacey crime thriller ? as ?an inner-city Famous Five?. ?Those kids were so posh and rich. I thought, why can't you write a Famous Five type story about kids growing up on the streets of Leicester, or Manchester, or Birmingham? So that's what I tried to do.?



The success of **(un)arranged marriage** also led to a now long-standing career strand, writing books for reluctant readers. ?I came up with a story for Barrington Stoke that I called ?That Takeaway Thingy? because I had no other title for it. They sent it to my old school, who ran some sort of competition around it, and it came back called **Dream On**. Which is the perfect title for that book. The consultancy process with young people is what makes working with Barrington Stoke the pleasure it is.? His latest book for that publisher comes out in January and is a ghost story called **Shivers**. ?I wanted to take some urban kids and stick them into a ghost story. And then I started thinking about this girl, and the sort of violent crime that could befall someone in an inner city. I'd love to say it was really hard to write but I loved it because I'm a big fan of psychological crime thrillers. I love dark twisted stories. It's Roald Dahl's fault.?

More than a decade of working with young people in schools and elsewhere has convinced Rai that the gritty and arresting aspects of a story are often those which pull the most uninterested readers in. ?Most reluctant readers are not reluctant because they have a learning difficulty or a problem with their reading level. It's to do with the fact that they think books are boring. Or that they don't have a culture of reading in their family or their social world. A lot of the working-class young people I meet think books are for posh people. So I intended books like **Shivers**, **Them and Us**, and **The Gun** to be quite hard-hitting for that reason. So that kids would go ?Wow, that's about us?.

His conversations with young people, along with his own remembered experiences of being a teenage reader, have also convinced Rai that nothing should be off-limits in books for this age-group. ?I learned very quickly that teenagers don't like boundaries. I knew that anyway, because when I was 13, if someone had told me what I could and couldn't read, I would have felt completely insulted. Once you put 13+ or Teen on a book, that's it. If you're writing about two 15-year-old lads growing up in Highfields, and one of them punches the other in the head, they're not going to be polite to each other. In **The Last Taboo** and **Killing Honour**, there's some really nasty racist language but it's realistic. It's what people would actually say.? Rai praises authors like Alan Gibbons, Phil Earle and John Lucas for the authenticity of their writing in this area. ?But I still think we could do with more gritty urban realism.?



Having said that, this author with an established reputation for contemporary urban realism,

has turned to a different kind of writing of late. I'd just written **Killing Honour** which is a very angry book. It took a lot out of me because it was based on an incident in my family which I've been angry about since I was 15. Finishing it was a kind of catharsis. It felt like a natural full stop, he says. Rai was also keen to return to the kind of fantasy writing he had aspired to as a child. The result is **Fire City**, a dark and gripping dystopian fantasy as page-turning as **The Hunger Games**, but which also takes a hard look at some of the issues of our own times. If you take away the demons in **Fire City**, what you've got is a small percentage of incredibly rich people making lots of money and staying rich, and then everybody else living a hand-to-mouth existence as wage slaves until they die. That isn't fantasy. Essentially, we're already there. **Fire City** is also, he says, an exploration of the dark side of the human psyche. I've always been interested in that.

Fire City may be a fantasy novel, but yes, you've guessed it; it's set in Leicester. Or actually, Leicester with bells on. I put Leicester through a Gotham City/Batman/Art Asylum/ PS3 game filter and the setting for **Fire City** came out. In writing the novel, Rai was heavily influenced by computer games but is quick to point out the elements that make a book a more demanding experience. Whereas the story lines in games are often weak or badly structured, in a novel you can add layers of detail and understanding, and explore the background much better. Reading creates a unique world inside the head of a reader, something that only they see and can influence. Rai plans to start working on a sequel to **Fire City** in early 2012, with perhaps more books to follow after that. We'll see where it goes.

Whatever Rai writes in future, one thing's for sure. The characters will be urban kids of diverse colours and cultural backgrounds, who hail from a town like Leicester. It's a conscious decision. There's nothing wrong with writing about middle-class specky kids who want to be wizards. But I'm never going to write about someone like Harry Potter because the people I know, the people I socialise with, the people I grew up with, are people who are not being depicted often enough, and well enough, in British teen literature.

The Books

Published by Corgi:

(un)arranged marriage (978-0552547345) £6.99 pbk

Rani and Sukh (978-0552548908) £6.99 pbk

The Last Taboo (978-0552553018) £6.99

Killing Honour (978-0552562119) £6.99 pbk

The Crew (978-0552547390) £5.99

Fire City (978-0552556026) £6.99

Published by Barrington Stoke:

Dream On (978-1842991954) £6.99

Shivers (978-1781121900) £6.99

Them and Us (978-1842996973) OP

The Gun (978-1842998588) £6.99

Caroline Sanderson is a freelance writer, reviewer and editor.

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