



Hanif Kureishi

Author of *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Buddha of Suburbia*

"Arresting . . . compassionate and illuminating."
—K. Anthony Appiah, *The New York Times Book Review*



The Black Album

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The second novel from one of the most celebrated voices in British fiction and film, *The Black Album* is an exhilarating multicultural coming-of-age tale featuring Shalid, a sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll-loving Pakistani student torn between a love affair with a gorgeous, free-spirited college professor and his desire to please his conservative Muslim community.

The Black Album Details

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From Reader Review The Black Album for online ebook

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in October 1998.

Like Kureishi's earlier novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *The Black Album* deals with the issues surrounding growing up in London as a young man of Asian background. It is set just over a decade later, in the summer of 1989. It is a darker novel; the setting is rather more sordid (student digs in Kilburn rather than a rich house in West London), and the forces of racism against Sahid are now matched by the growing strength of Islamic fundamentalism, in the year that the fatwah was declared against Salman Rushdie.

The clash between Islam and Western liberal culture is one of the main themes of the novel. As a student, Sahid is being taught the value of the intellect, that censorship is a crime, and the vague Marxism common among British intellectuals. At the college, there is a group of Islamic fundamentalists; to begin with, Sahid values being part of their group, as it is putting him in touch with the religion and culture of his forbears (though, as his sister-in-law reminds him, the upper classes in Pakistan viewed Islam mainly as a way to keep the lower classes under control). The third force in his life is the drug culture which came out of the raves that made 1988 known as a second 'summer of love'.

The forces confusing Sahid are symbolised and concentrated in the three most important people in his life: his tutor and lover Deidre (Deedee) Osgood; Riaz, the guru of the Islamic group' and Chili, his brother. His conflicting loyalties come to a head over a demonstration by the students at which the *Satanic Verses* is to be burned; this arouses Sahid's unhappiness with some of the ideas of Riaz's group, as a book lover and an admirer of Rushdie's earlier *Midnight's Children*. The tensions this creates lead to the group discovering his relationship with Deedee and the drug taking, neither considered to be actions appropriate for a committed fundamentalist Muslim.

It is clear that Kureishi has little sympathy for the fundamentalists; this antipathy of a provocative author of fiction towards anyone who advocates book-burning is understandable. It is quite easy to provoke contempt for them in his readers - a scene where one of the other members of the group asks Sahid to tell him what value a book has, and responses to the reply that they make you think by questioning the value of thinking is one example. The novel generally is a convincing portrayal of the rootlessness probably felt by many British Asians.

The title comes from an album by Prince, itself a response to the Beatles' *White Album*, proclaiming his own racial identity.

Barnini says

Finished reading *The Black Album* about a second-generation South Asian man caught in the maelstrom of religious fanaticism a few days before the US election results. It almost portended the shape of things to come.

The book chronicles the bizarre, almost surreal, adventures of Shahid, the lost Prince-obsessed college student and protagonist. We follow him and his radical college professor/lover as they party hard in the

underbelly of London in the 80s, while Shahid finds himself drawn into the violent world of Islamic fundamentalism of second generation immigrants, and inadvertently drags the people around him into it. In Deedee Osgood I find my favourite character of the book. In this wildly intelligent, impossibly well-read, recreational drug-user with great taste in music, Kureishi creates one of his most memorable characters.

A critique of the struggles of immigrant minorities attempting to find and reclaim their identities in 'secular' Britain, this ambitious book is exhilaratingly fast-paced with grim and cutting humour. However, unfortunately, it remains just that - a slightly superficial, at times compassionate, and darkly funny glimpse into a compelling and tragic world of sex, drugs, rock and roll, and religious fanaticism. After the insightful and brilliant Buddha of Suburbia, this feels like a bit of a disappointment. But that is only because Kureishi sets such high standards for himself.

Tittirossa says

Scritto nel 1990, attuale come una fotografia di oggi. Il bello di questo libro è che fa provare simpatia per le stesse persone che trovi odiose quando leggi i giornali! Nel libro c'è tutto quello che è successo negli anni successivi: la rivolta degli islamici in occidente, il terrorismo, il perchè del ritorno del fondamentalismo. Persi senza la loro identità religiosa, affascinati dalla possibilità di vivere anche in un altro mo(n)do, disgustati dall'Occidente senza fede, rifiutati sia dai Paesi in cui emigrano, sia da quelli da cui provengono: i personaggi di Kureishi sono l'emblema delle mille realtà dell'Islam in Occidente.

Deb says

An evocative trip into Thatcher's London in the 80s. Interesting from the viewpoint of a post 9/11 world to read about the attractions of Muslim fundamentalism to second generation immigrants in the UK. I'd forgotten about the fatwa against Salman Rushdie and hadn't linked that in to later events.

But this novel is more than that. It's not just about the confused identify of the immigrant, especially one of a different colour and religion, its just as much about growing up, finding yourself and choosing the people you want to be with and more importantly the person you want to be.

I liked the central character, but couldn't bear Deedee Osgood the female love interest. She and her husband were painted beautifully as an anachronistic liberal couple who had lost their "religion", socialism.

Definitely worth a read. I'd give it 4 stars but I found the sex scenes with Deedee overdone.

Navidad Thélamour says

"Chili's basic understanding was that people were weak and lazy. He didn't think they were stupid; he wasn't going to make that mistake. He saw, though, that people resisted change, even if it would improve their lives; they were afraid, complacent, lacking courage. This gave the advantage to someone with initiative and will."

The Black Album, originally published in '95 then re-published by Scribner in 1996, is the tale of Shahid, a

Pakistani Muslim young man living in a contemporary British society. As he grapples with the line between fundamentalism and liberalism—his love of sex, drugs and rock-and-roll versus his traditional familial and community expectations—he finds himself coming of age and into his own in London after the death of his father, exploring and often crossing the line between the accepted and the taboo, his insight into the world around him growing ever more poignant as he does. Here you find two combating worlds that do not, by definition, co-exist well: the ideology of the liberal neo-thinker who is entranced by Prince, Baldwin and the idea of the Black Panther movement versus the radical fundamentalists, portrayed through Shahid's friend, Riaz, and his clique. And, in the middle is a cast of characters who are fully realized, led by an older brother who has followed drugs down their rabbit hole. The sequence of events and clash of cultures eventually lead to violence, fittingly in a controversy over *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie.

Hanif Kureishi has never been an author to write to placate the masses, and he didn't attempt so here either. This novel didn't please everyone—in fact, it might have offended some—but if you're looking for a single word to describe this pick, I've got one for you: *soul*. Pure soul on a page. Keep in mind that this novel was Kureishi's response to the fatwah intent on killing Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses* that was issued by Islamic fundamentalists. The grittiness and reality in this work left me breathless, and it was refreshing to find a work that so brilliantly mixed comedy, intellect and satire.

I first read this pick while doing my M.A. in London. I remember chatting about it with my diss. advisor, Bobby Nayyar, over some beverage in some mostly-empty coffee nook, then the conversation continuing as we strolled to the tube in typical London drizzly weather. *The Black Album* was insightful and dared to go inside of the crannies that make us uncomfortable, into the room where drugs are being done, into the bed of the professor sleeping with her student. This novel was LOUD, as it had to be to compete with all of the background noise of London and to find its place within it, both for the characters internally and for the novel itself.

Here you'll find insightful little nuggets like the one above, and you'll follow Shahid in his modern-day journey, in a journey that both Baby Boomers and Millennials alike can relate to, because this world described within the pages of *The Black Album* has always existed: this world of self-exploration, of rebellion, drugs, sex, of fundamentalists versus "new-age" thinkers, though it isn't often written about—that is, not so often as runaway chick lit bestsellers and formulaic thrillers. There was no formula to this one, only the free hand of a confident author not afraid to cross a few lines.

The industry needs more words—more books—from those who truly have something to say, and this one, this writer, does. As an agent, I fought for authors who had a true voice, passion, soul. But often they were turned down as too this or too that, while other writers, some of whom I have and likely will in the future review here, continued being offered contracts to write about...nothing. But reads like this let me know that some truly talented voices do still get through "the gatekeepers," and for that we should all be both encouraged and grateful. More please! 5 stars all day. *****

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A. Suiter Clarke says

First posted on asuiterclarke.com:

Studying a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing made me a critical reader. That was one of the many

benefits of doing that degree, besides the obvious insights and instruction for my own writing. But still, I really hate to be critical. I like to look for positive aspects of things and brush over the negative.

In book reviewing, however, I need to throw that habit out the window. Otherwise, I will beat around the bush and never really say what I want to say, which is this:

I did not like *The Black Album*. I wanted to—really, I did. Because it just so happens that I've met the author, and it's always harder to be harsh about someone's writing when you know him. However, as much as I tried throughout the reading of this book, I couldn't find anything to like. Hanif Kureishi is undoubtedly a good writer, well respected in the writing community, and a multi-award-winner. And there are obviously plenty of people who liked his second novel.

I'm just not one of them. I enjoy reading diverse writing, and I do think that there isn't enough of it in the mainstream these days. In that way, this was a refreshing read because I got to see inside the mind of someone very different from me: a young man, just starting uni in London, who grew up in a family from Pakistan.

There was a slight familiarity to his circumstances because I, too, have been a foreigner leaving home for the first time to attend university in London. I understand the uneasiness and excitement of arriving in London, being on my own, living among strangers and trying to make friends while I discover who I really am. Those things I understand, and for that reason I was able to empathize with Shahid, even if just in the smallest way.

Within weeks of arriving in London, Shahid meets his radical Muslim neighbors and falls for his married, liberal university professor. He is torn between his love of literature and hunger for knowledge, his sexual feelings for Deedee and the excitement of exploring the world of drugs and alcohol with her, and the passionate beliefs of his neighbor Riaz and his small band of followers.

There's a lot to work with here, but somehow, nothing much really happens. I found Shahid a weak character in every sense of the word. He seems incapable of making up his mind from one chapter to the next. At first, he's going to leave Deedee and commit wholeheartedly to following Riaz and fighting for the Islamic faith. Then, pages later, he's in bed with Deedee and ready to give up any interest in religion in order to be with her. And then, all of a sudden, he's in his room and wishing he could just be alone and read his books.

Now I suppose that's not entirely unrealistic. We all face tough decisions in life, especially when we're young and just starting out and don't know our place in the world. That part of it is real to me. This is a coming-of-age story, after all, and that often involves a great amount of indecision.

The issue I have is that even with all of the militant religion; the obscene sexual discussion; the imbibing of multiple illegal substances and alcohol; and the drama with Shahid's brother becoming a cocaine addict and losing all his money, his wife, and his child because of it—I still felt like nothing happened. No one changed, at least not in any satisfying way.

Kureishi's writing isn't bad. Some of the dialogue snaps on the page and his descriptions of London are certainly familiar to me, even though they were of London 20 years ago. There are moments of intensity when Riaz's band of followers decide to burn *Midnight's Children* on the university campus, or when they chase down Deedee and Shahid toward the end.

As a reader, though, I always want at least one character to love. Even if it's a person that I would never get along with in real life, I want to love him or her because I'm seeing the world through that character's eyes.

Unfortunately, I looked for 276 pages and that character, for me, was not to be found.

Leonie says

This book seemed like a prophecy of things to come for modern Britain. Set in the late 80s around the time of Salman Rushdie's fatwah, it investigates the relationship between young British muslims and the mainstream white culture. The central character is torn between being devout and sharing the virtues and values of his muslim brothers and launching into the rave culture and free wheeling morals of his fellow students.

It all comes to a head over the burning of Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses and the protagonist gets caught between two worlds, forcing him to choose which one he wants to live in.

Stefanny Irawan says

Now that I have finished reading this, I stand my ground that the contradiction the author put within the main character, some sort of caught-in-the-middle situation, is quite interesting. The portrayals of ethnicity, racism, and drug scene are quite potent and can reveal the other side of London. However, this book doesn't really touch me significantly. Therefore I only gave 2 stars.

PS: the picture of the book's cover displayed here is upside-down.

Brooks says

For lots of reasons this book took me months to finish. I'm not sure if it's this or something about the novel itself that left me relieved to have finished but not particularly satisfied? Lots of interesting characters, both religious and criminal, but didn't find many that convincing or compelling - apart from Shahid and Deedee. The ending was all wrapped up a bit too perfectly in a couple of chapters. Overall disappointing.

Ashish says

Somewhere around 3.5 stars.

Having recently discovered Kureishi, and this book in a book buying expedition (and thanks to favourable reviews from reader friends) I decided to give this one a go. This isn't the book that the author is most well known for, but the premise looked interesting. Much like the other book that I read by him, the book is based on the second generation South Asian immigrant experience in the UK.

The book follows the journey of the protagonist of South Asian roots, relatively privileged, a bit aloof and removed from his roots, trying to make his way through college as he is pulled from either side and conflicted when it comes to religion, liberalism, individuality, guilt, a desire to pave his own path while having a sense of belonging and a higher cause. He is an easily impressionable lad who thinks he has a cool head on his shoulders, however, he is also prone to influence from figureheads more headstrong than him.

He uses them as crutches to try and forge his path, his ideology wavers with the people around him, the needle of his moral compass is suspended in the range of powerful polar rhetoric from either side.

The book shows a realistic portrayal of the socio-religio-politico-economic landscape of the UK of the time, and a lot of it still echoes through time. Issues like religious segregation and assimilation, immigration, liberalism and how it deals with minority rights, racism and its relevance, and the will of society to tackle these things are prevalent in this story. It's teeming with characters of all hues and colour, literally and figuratively. It's funny in a circumstantial way as it has an underlying satirical diatribe of society as we know it. It raises pertinent questions, the answers to which are not easy.

Luca Sofie says

This was required reading for my English class and we finally finished studying it. My main problem with these books were the characters, that may be the case because we read the play not the novel, but they made no sense. They seemed very forced and were reduced to one single character trait (which was religion in most cases and that isn't even a character trait). I appreciate the themes the author commented on although I didn't get a lot of the references because I have no real cultural knowledge of London in the 1980s. Maybe it would have been better to read the novel to understand the context and the characters better.

Drgibson63 says

(Note, I wrote the review that follows for a magazine just after Sept. 11, 2001. The subsequent War on Terror has made The Black Album a very prescient book, a sort of embryonic look at such extremism.)

Hanif Kureishi excels in exposing the sour taste of tired overworked, spoiled radicalism. In *Buddha of Suburbia*, he conveyed the decay of the 60s idealism leading to the advent of Thatcherism. But he's no neo-conservative. Kureishi takes on political correctness with imagination as a weapon, rather than wanting to restrain thought.

The Black Album is Kureishi's response to the fatwah more than a decade ago issued by Islamic fundamentalists intent on killing Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*. As well as the novel exposes the foolishness of being "devoid of doubt," post Sept. 11 it can also be read as a precursor to the terrorism that killed more than 3,000. Kureishi's fanatical students who inhabit a third-rate London university, being deceived by a quiet madman, show a potential for violence as the novel concludes.

The protagonist is Shahid, a young student pulled in two opposing radical ideologies. He arrives at the college because he idolizes professor Dee Dee Osgood, who is in her late 30s. Her classes mix Prince with Baldwin, Cleaver, Angela Davis, Marvin Gaye and others. For Shahid, it's intellectual stimulation. He begins a friendship with Dee Dee that soon leads to a sexual relationship between the teacher and student. Kureishi pulls no punches in his description of the affair. There are explicit scenes of lovemaking, but the sex is not pornographic.

Pulling Shahid in the opposite direction is a clique of radical Islamic fundamentalists led by Riaz, a quiet, almost wimpy older student who can hold an audience in the palm of his hand while speaking. Shahid lacks a central of authority. His father is dead, his mother does not command authority, his sister in law is a

conservative bore and his flashy older brother Chili is succumbing to drugs. The meaning of life offered by his religious friends and their efforts to combat racism is attractive to Shahid, and much of the novel involves his tug of war between Dee Dee's influence and Riaz's. Eventually, the controversy over The Satanic Verses results in a book burning that forces Shahid to make a final choice. The consequences lead to violence.

Kureishi knows how to deliver humor and farce. And there are several instances: The radical clique worships a decayed eggplant that is rumored to contain holy verse; a communist professor develops a stutter that gets progressively worse as Eastern Europe become more democratic; and Riaz's clothes, while under Shahid's watch, are stolen from a coin laundrette.

The Black Album is populated by vivid, very creative characters. Besides Shahid, Dee Dee and Riaz, there's Chili, Shahid's brother who idolizes Al Pacino and Martin Scorsese but is discovering that crime and drugs in the real world suck. There's Dee Dee's estranged husband, the stuttering Communist professor Brownlow who lusts after Moslem girls in veils. Chad, a former drug dealer turned convert to Riaz's doctrines, is a compelling tragic figure. Adopted by a white couple, his discovery that he has no identity causes him to leap too far into fanaticism, with tragic results. The novel is also populated with drug dealers, foolish politicians, racist council inhabitants and scared Asian immigrant families.

A theme to The Black Album might be Imagination. It certainly combats religious rigidity. Late in the novel, Shahid tells a sympathetic member of the Moslem clique that he can't have any boundaries, even one set by God. That may offend some readers, but given the choice the young student faces, he's making a wise decision. Notes: Dee Dee Osgood's fate is mentioned in passing in Kureishi's later novel, Gabriel's Gift, where she's now a successful psychologist. The time frame is just after the millennium

Fiona says

This novel feels as relevant today as when it was written in 1995. In fact, if I'd read this in 1995 I think I would have been baffled by it, isolated as New Zealand was pre-9/11 from the cultural tension between Islam and the Western world. Unfortunately, I don't think its relevance comes from the way the book is written but from its subject matter. The writing seems a little pedestrian, like the ideas were more important than the art. And even then, the ideas are not particularly nuanced. This last observation may be from the benefit of hindsight, as well as the mountain of essays, novels, poetry and books analysing the relationship between Islam and the West. The central character, Shahid, is caught between two Islamic extremes: the capitalist rationalism of his sister-in-law and the pious extremism of the Muslim group he becomes involved in. The fact that he ultimately rejects both of these extremes in favour of Western liberalism seems overly simplistic. It made me wonder who the book was written for. Referencing the fatwa placed on Salman Rushdie for The Satanic Verses, it seems like a sop for Western readers, ultimately cheerleading Western ideas of free speech and rationalism without ever really challenging those readers' preconceptions of the Islamic World. I don't mean that it should have supported the fatwa but the depiction of the Muslim community seemed so two dimensional, without any real examination of the causes of cultural tension and disenfranchisement. With political novels like this one, I want to have my thinking challenged, for a conflict to be presented in a way that I've never considered. Unfortunately, The Black Album never came close to doing this.

Godzilla says

Hmmm - this was thought provoking in some ways, and was set against an interesting backdrop, but I felt the characters were poorly drawn and left me cold.

The story meanders, whilst making some good points, but ultimately led me down the path of disappointment.

Zaki says

The Black Album is an excellent little novel exploring the dichotomy of being a muslim in a non-muslim society. It's like a catch-22 situation sometimes.
