

CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Includes an
interview with
**HANIF
KUREISHI**



HANIF KUREISHI

Edited by Susan Alice Fischer



B L O O M S B U R Y

Hanif Kureishi

**EDITED BY
SUSAN ALICE FISCHER**

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2015

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4725-1334-2

PB: 978-1-4725-0915-4

ePDF: 978-1-4725-1491-2

ePub: 978-1-4725-1168-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Series: Contemporary Critical Perspectives

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in India

Hanif Kureishi

CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Series Editors: Jeannette Baxter, Peter Childs,

Sebastian Groes, and Sean Matthews

Guides in the *Contemporary Critical Perspectives* series provide companions to reading and studying major contemporary authors. They include new critical essays combining textual readings, cultural analysis, and discussion of key critical and theoretical issues in a clear, accessible style. Each guide also includes a preface by a major contemporary writer, a new interview with the author, discussion of film and TV adaptation, and guidance on further reading.

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Foreword

Roger Michell

I was asked to direct *Buddha of Suburbia* by the BBC in 1991. I loved the book, and knew Hanif a little from our days together at the Royal Court in the late 70s when he was an usher/reader/young writer and I a fledgling director. When the scripts arrived I ripped open the parcel with glee. But they were awful. I spent a day with the screenwriter, a likeable young man who had written episodes of *Casualty*. I presumed he'd been offered the job because he was, like Hanif, Anglo-Asian. I thought he'd missed the book by a mile. This was at the very beginning of my TV career. I agonized. The BBC assured me that yes, of course, Hanif really liked the scripts.

Miserably, I turned the job down.

A week later the BBC called back. "Hanif says he'll adapt the book. As long as we give him an office. And a secretary. Oh, and as long as he does it with you."

I'd never adapted anything in my life.

We started from scratch. We had four weeks to generate four hours of material. They gave us a tiny office in an annex overlooking Shepherd's Bush. The lino was covered in cigarette burns. Along our corridor ranged *Middlemarch*, *Clarissa*, and *Mr Wroe's Virgins* ... a sort of BBC collegiate heaven long since stamped into extinction.

Hanif strode in on the first day sporting pale green shoes, a purple waistcoat, RayBans, and a rolled-up broly. Part dandy, part imp, part civil servant. He was puffed up with bravado. I could tell he'd been thinking about this project for the entire half-an-hour it had taken him to journey from Earl's Court. He paced the tiny room like a Hollywood tyro dictating to our utterly bewildered PA. He described a florid and fabulously expensive flashback with which he intended to begin the series. In it, from what I can remember, Haroon and his brother had the run of pre-partition Bombay. There were crowded streets, extended families, bazaars with elephants, and tramp steamers galore at the Gateway. Even David Lean would have blanched. I sat there, mouth agape, as this most famous of Anglo-Asians, this Oscar-nominated *enfant terrible* whom I hardly

knew, came eventually to the end of the most expensive and pointless stage direction in the history of television.

I gingerly indicated that I could see no useful, elegant, or meaningful way of cutting back to these Empire flashbacks anywhere else in the entire four hours of the subsequent narrative. And that, anyway, the novel had the most sensational, shocking, and filmic opening and that shouldn't we maybe at least start with that? He paused, he blinked, then he sat. "Yeah," he said, "Fuck. Yeah. Fuck. I think you're right."

I think we both grew to love that little office. For him it was an escape from a miserable and chronic back problem (quite often I'd wander in to find the PA walking up and down his spine as he quaffed priceless bottles of Nigerian Guinness gifted to me by my Production Designer): from the unhappiness of directing his first and last film (*London Kills Me*): and from the loss of his beloved father: or rather, into the arms of that loss as *Buddha* is so much about fathers and sons. I'd made a big chart of the book and we'd divvy up the scenes for adaption as if we were filleting mackerel, but Hanif would become easily bored by his own prose, which he could often hardly bring himself to reread. He'd end up writing "As In Book" as in, for example, "Scene 54: INT KARIM'S BEDROOM. DAY." Then a gap. Then "As In Book."

There was a heat wave. We drank pints of black tea in melting polystyrene cups from the steamy canteen on the first floor. The fat ladies wielding the kettles were the only black faces in the building. At noon we'd eat dal and roti in a caff on the Goldhawk Rd or we'd bring it back in leaking paper bags. (Karim's younger brother's line "Yuck! Dal on my slide-rule!" is evidence of this.) Often, bored, Hanif would prowl the corridors in search of diversion. He would try to irritate the producers by standing in their doorways softly mouthing the word "wanker" over and over again as they attempted to conclude important phone calls with far-off fat controllers. Afterward they would try and engage him in intellectual conversations about literature and he would collude in pretending to know what on earth they were talking about.

He was capricious, lazy, abusive, very irritating, funny, arrogant, always well dressed, thoughtful, never late, thin-skinned, curious, affectionate. To be honest he didn't have much interest in the work in hand. For him it was like an old affair, half-forgotten. Or pulling on wet swimming trunks perhaps: just not as much fun as the first time around.

But oddly I learned immeasurably from him. I took myself so seriously then and yet was fearful too. He taught me how to bring playfulness and even carelessness into the work. That to take it all so seriously was only possible if at the same time you didn't take it seriously at all.

Since then we've made three films together (*The Mother*, *Venus*, and *Le Week-End*): that's about one every seven years. Each of them marks turning points, progressions, and even deteriorations in our own lives. We're working on a fourth one now. We remain like a grumpy old couple, bickering and snapping at each other's heels in a marriage that lurches on and will do so, I hope, until the end.

July 2013

Series editors' preface

The readership for contemporary fiction has never been greater. The explosion of reading groups and literary blogs, of university courses and school curricula, and even the apparent rude health of the literary marketplace indicate an ever-growing appetite for new work, for writing which responds to the complex, changing, and challenging times in which we live. At the same time, readers seem ever more eager to engage in conversations about their reading, to devour the review pages, to pack the sessions at literary festivals and author events. Reading is an increasingly social activity, as we seek to share and refine our experience of the book, to clarify and extend our understanding.

It is this tremendous enthusiasm for contemporary fiction to which the *Contemporary Critical Perspectives* series responds. Our ambition is to offer readers of current fiction a comprehensive critical account of each author's work, presenting original, specially commissioned analyses of all aspects of their career, from a variety of different angles and approaches, as well as directions toward further reading and research.

Our brief to the contributors is to be scholarly, to draw on the latest thinking about narrative, or philosophy, or psychology, indeed whatever seemed to them most significant in drawing out the meanings and force of the texts in question, but also to focus closely on the words on the page, the stories and scenarios and forms which all of us meet first when we open a book. We insisted that these essays be accessible to that mythical beast, the Common Reader, who might just as readily be spotted at the Lowdham Book Festival as in a college seminar. In this way, we hope to have presented critical assessments of our writers in such a way as to contribute something to both of those environments, and also to have done something to bring together the most important qualities of each of them.

Jeannette Baxter, Peter Childs, Sebastian Groes,
and Sean Matthews

Acknowledgments

Above all, I am grateful to Hanif Kureishi for his extraordinary generosity during this project, which began with his appearance at a conference on his work that Sebastian Groes and I organized at Roehampton University in 2012. He not only participated in the conference, but also shared his notebooks and films. My gratitude goes to Stephen Frears and Roger Michell, who both took time out of their extremely busy lives to discuss their collaboration with the author. I also want to thank Sebastian Groes for his collegiality and support, Nick Lavery for transcribing the interview with the author, Julia Noyce for her assistance with organizing the conference, as well as all the conference participants who helped to make it such a lively event, and the contributors to this volume who continued the conversation.

David Avital and Mark Richardson at Bloomsbury offered their full support and encouragement, as did the Series Editors Jeannette Baxter, Peter Childs, Sebastian Groes, and Sean Matthews, for which I am truly grateful.

A special thanks goes to Susie Thomas, whose work on Hanif Kureishi has been inspirational, whose feedback is always insightful, and whose friendship continues to be invaluable. I also thank those who read an early draft of my chapter at the Center for Place, Culture and Politics of the CUNY Graduate Center, where I was a Faculty Fellow during the 2011–12 academic year. I am grateful to my students at Medgar Evers College with whom I discussed some of Kureishi's work.

I especially want to thank my friends: Gregory Woods, who first suggested we see *My Beautiful Laundrette* all those years ago, and Chantal Brotherton-Ratcliffe and Frances Tomlinson, who generously hosted me in London while I was working on this book. Most of all I am grateful to *all* my family, and especially to Michele Gregory whose love, laughter, and patience have sustained me during this project.

Contributors

Geoff Boucher is a senior lecturer in literary studies at Deakin University in Australia. He is the author of a number of books on culture and psychoanalysis, including *Žižek and Politics* (2010) and *The Charmed Circle of Ideology* (2008). His most recent works are *Understanding Marxism* (2012) and *Adorno Reframed* (2012).

Susan Alice Fischer is a professor of English at Medgar Evers College of The City University of New York, where she is the Cross-Cultural Literature Coordinator and teaches British literature, contemporary London literature, and literary theory. She is editor of *The Literary London Journal* (www.literarylondon.org) and co-editor of *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, both peer reviewed. She has written extensively about contemporary women's London narratives and other contemporary British fiction.

Stephen Frears is the director of Hanif Kureishi's screenplays *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). His many other titles include *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987) and *Philomena* (2013). He has been nominated for numerous awards, including a BAFTA nomination for *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) and Oscar and Golden Globe nominations for *The Queen* (2006). He won the 2004 BAFTA TV Award for Best Single Drama for *The Deal* (2003).

Peter Hitchcock is a professor of English at Baruch College and The Graduate Center of The City University of New York. His books include *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (Minnesota, 1993), *Oscillate Wildly* (Minnesota, 1999), *Imaginary States* (Illinois, 2003), and *The Long Space* (Stanford, 2010).

Deanna Kamiel is the director of documentary studies at The New School in New York and an assistant professor in the School of Media Studies at The New School for Public Engagement. A Canadian, she is a documentary filmmaker with a career in public broadcasting at the CBC in Toronto and at PBS in Minneapolis and New York. Recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship, she previously taught in the conservatory film program at Purchase College, State University of New York. Currently she is at work on a film about newsstands and the information future. In Manhattan, her film *Nuclear Outpost* screens as part of The Museum of Modern Art's permanent digital collection.

Roger Michell is the director of the BAFTA-nominated television version of *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993) and of Hanif Kureishi's screenplays *The Mother* (2003), *Venus* (2006), and *Le Week-End* (2013), in addition to many other titles, including the recent *Hyde Park on Hudson* (2012). Nominated for numerous awards, he won the 1996 BAFTA TV Award for Best Single Drama for *Persuasion* (1995), a Locarno International Film Festival Award for *Titanic Town* (1998) and the 2000 Empire, UK, Award for Best British Director for *Notting Hill* (1999).

Jago Morrison is a specialist in contemporary and postcolonial writing at Brunel University (UK). His publications include *Contemporary Fiction* (Routledge, 2003), *Scandalous Fictions: The Twentieth Century Novel in the Public Sphere* (with Susan Watkins, 2006), *The Fiction of Chinua Achebe* (Continuum, 2007), *The Post-War British Literature Handbook* (with Katharine Cockin, 2010), and *Chinua Achebe* (Manchester University Press, 2014). In association with the think tank Demos, he published the policy report *Coming of Age* with Philip Tew and Nick Hubble in 2011. A major new study, *Ageing in Contemporary Fiction*, is forthcoming from Routledge in 2015.

Michael Perfect is an assistant professor of English Literature at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. His main research and teaching interests are in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and culture. His book *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism: Diversity and the Millennial London Novel* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014. He has also published journal articles and book chapters on contemporary British literature and postcolonial studies, and has taught at the University of Cambridge—where he obtained his PhD in 2011—as well as in London.

Susie Thomas is the author of numerous essays on Hanif Kureishi as well as editor of *Hanif Kureishi: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). She is the book reviews editor for *The Literary London Journal* and Director of AHA London, an academic program of the University of Oregon. She has published articles on British authors from Aphra Behn to Martin Amis, and some of her articles appear on www.londonfictions.com.

Ryan Trimm is an associate professor of English and Film Media at the University of Rhode Island (USA), where he is chair of the English Department. His work focuses on uses of the past in contemporary Britain. He has published in journals such as *Critique*, *Cinema Journal*, *Novel*, and *Literature Interpretation Theory*, as well as in several well-received collections.

Hanif Kureishi:

A chronology

- 1954** Hanif Kureishi, born in Bromley, Kent, UK, on December 5
- 1970s** Studies philosophy at King's College London
- 1976** *Soaking the Heat*, Royal Court Theatre, London
- 1980** *The Mother Country* (performed at Riverside Studios; receives the Thames Television Playwright Award); *The King and Me* (premieres at Soho Poly Theatre); *You Can't Go Home* (BBC Radio)
- 1981** *Tomorrow Today!* (Soho Poly Theatre); *Outskirts* (premieres at The Royal Court Company's Warehouse Theatre, London; wins George Devine Award); *Borderline* performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London (after being performed by Joint Stock Theatre Group; Methuen publishes play); London Theatre Critics' Most Promising New Playwright of the Year for *Borderline* and *Outskirts*
- 1982** Writer in Residence, Royal Court Theatre
- 1983** *Birds of Passage* (first performed at Hampstead Theatre; published by Amber Lane Press); Calder publishes *Outskirts and other Plays*
- 1985** *My Beautiful Laundrette* (dir. Stephen Frears); receives Evening Standard Award for Best Film
- 1986** Faber and Faber publishes "The Rainbow Sign" with the screenplay of *My Beautiful Laundrette*

- 1987** *My Beautiful Laundrette* nominated for Oscar for Best Writing (Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen); wins National Society of Film Critics Award for Best Screenplay; *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (dir. Stephen Frears)
- 1988** *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid: The Script and the Diary* (Faber and Faber)
- 1990** *The Buddha of Suburbia* (Faber and Faber); receives the Whitbread First Novel Prize
- 1991** Writes and directs *London Kills Me*; screenplay published by Faber and Faber
- 1992** Faber and Faber publishes *Outskirts and Other Plays*
- 1993** *Buddha of Suburbia* (dir. Roger Michell) (BBC)
- 1994** *Buddha of Suburbia* nominated for BAFTA film award for Best Drama Serial
- 1995** *The Black Album* (Faber and Faber); author co-edits *The Faber Book of Pop* with John Savage
- 1996** *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings* (Faber and Faber)
- 1997** *Love in a Blue Time* (Faber and Faber); *My Son the Fanatic* (dir. Udayan Prasad), based on a short story of the same title published the same year
- 1998** *Intimacy: A Novel* (Faber and Faber); *My Son the Fanatic* nominated by British Independent Film Award for Best Original Screenplay by a British Writer of a Produced Independent Film; screenplay published by Faber and Faber
- 1999** *Sleep with Me* (premieres at the Royal National Theatre; published by Faber and Faber); *Midnight All Day* (Faber and Faber)
- 2001** *Intimacy* (dir. Patrice Chéreau); Berlin Film Festival prizes Blue Angel and Golden Berlin Bear awarded to director; *Gabriel's Gift* (Faber and Faber)

- 2002** *The Body and Seven Stories* (Faber and Faber); *Collected Screenplays: My Beautiful Laundrette, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, London Kills Me, My Son the Fanatic* (Faber and Faber); *Dreaming and Scheming: Collected Prose: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (Faber and Faber)
- 2003** *The Mother* (dir. Roger Michell); nominated for European Film Award for Best Screenwriter; screenplay published by Faber and Faber
- 2004** *My Ear at His Heart: Reading My Father* (Faber and Faber); *When Night Begins* (premieres at Hampstead Theatre; published by Faber and Faber)
- 2005** *The Word and the Bomb* (Faber and Faber)
- 2006** *Venus* (dir. Roger Michell); nominated for Best Independent Film Award for Best Screenplay; screenplay published by Faber and Faber
- 2007** *Venus* wins Humanities Prize in Feature Film Category; "Weddings and Beheadings" shortlisted for the National Short Story Competition; author awarded Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France
- 2008** Author awarded Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for services to literature; *Something to Tell You* (Faber and Faber)
- 2009** *The Black Album: Adapted for the stage* (premieres at the National Theatre, London; published by Faber and Faber)
- 2011** *Collected Essays* (Faber and Faber); *Collected Stories* (Faber and Faber)
- 2013** *Le Week-End* (dir. Roger Michell); screenplay published by Faber and Faber; appointed professor at Kingston University, London
- 2014** *The Last Word* (Faber and Faber)

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