



The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton

Sathnam Sanghera

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NOW A BBC DRAMA

The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton is a hilarious and heart-rending reinvention of the modern British memoir.

"It's 1979, I'm three years old, and like all breakfast times during my youth it begins with Mum combing my hair, a ritual for which I have to sit down on the second-hand, floral-patterned settee, and lean forward, like I'm presenting myself for execution."

For Sathnam Sanghera, growing up in Wolverhampton in the eighties was a confusing business. On the one hand, these were the heady days of George Michael mix-tapes, Dallas on TV and, if he was lucky, the occasional Bounty Bar. On the other, there was his wardrobe of tartan smocks, his 30p-an-hour job at the local sewing factory and the ongoing challenge of how to tie the perfect top-knot.

And then there was his family, whose strange and often difficult behaviour he took for granted until, at the age of twenty-four, Sathnam made a discovery that changed everything he ever thought he knew about them. Equipped with breathtaking courage and a glorious sense of humour, he embarks on a journey into their extraordinary past - from his father's harsh life in rural Punjab to the steps of the Wolverhampton Tourist Office - trying to make sense of a life lived among secrets.

The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton Details

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Author : Sathnam Sanghera

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From Reader Review The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton for online ebook

Laura Besley says

I think one of the main reasons I read is to be informed, not by reading dry non-fiction books, but by reading fiction. Most of the books I have loved are set in different places or different times.

However, Sanghera's book is non-fiction, but has the pace and grip of a novel. I found myself rooting for him as I would any other character and am in awe of his ability to write this way as well as his courage to be so honest.

A thoroughly enjoyable, and informative, read.

Petra CigareX says

This is a book about integration of the parts of a life into a whole. The first strand is his parents' traditional outlook and the author's upbringing as a Sikh in a Punjabi community in Wolverhampton. The Punjabis live in this modern city but are scarcely part of it, maintaining their own language, culture, food, religion and rules that are as strong as laws.

The second strand is the author's desire to be a modern man, Cambridge-educated, aspiring to the middle class from the poverty of his home with a love of fast fancy cars that are as far away from the ox-cars of the poor, Asian village his parents grew up in as the ISS is to us.

The third strand is the schizophrenia of his father and sister, Half a household, two thirds when he left home, are plagued by an illness characterised by not having a shared frame of reference with the un-mad world. No matter what other effects the disordered mind has on the sufferer, that is the barrier to communication of even an ordinary kind.

The fourth strand is the author's mother. She is a very devout and tradition-minded woman who cares for the sick and tries hard to lay aside her prejudices and religion-based attitudes to accept her much-beloved son, the author, and his life. They have a world of their own together, but all elements must combine for the mother and the author to fully participate in each other's lives. How the author does this is the story he writes.

El says

A mixed bag of a book. This had the potential to be excellent but didn't come up to the mark because of the author's self-idulgent writing; way too much about him and his middle-class aspirations and not enough analysis of the interesting situations he also covers. I'd not heard of Sanghera and must admit to being quite surprised that he is a journalist as the style and set-up of this work don't reflect this. I found it muddled and varied in tone as if this was several different works badly put together. The sections on the (secret) mental health issues of his father and sister were fascinating as was the description of his relationship with his mother but his often ineffectual research and interviewing techniques (for a journalist) mean that we don't get

the full picture. On the plus side I learned a great deal about the Punjabi community in Wolverhampton - though I struggled to accept that his mother understood no English, at all. Wouldn't he or his siblings have tried to teach her the rudiments?

Tom says

Superb. A revealing and inspiring insight into how unconditional love can dismantle otherwise insurmountable barriers of culture, religion, language, mental illness and poverty.

The wit, honesty and courage with which Sathnam approaches the intensely complex and personal themes of this book make it extraordinarily involving and rewarding to read. The conclusion is wonderful and defies any attempt to label this book as a 'misery memoir'; it is anything but. Highly recommended.

Hadi says

A mixed bag book of a book. The first few chapters were so self indulgent and trite that I would have stopped reading if it hadn't been highly recommended by my sister. Anyway I stuck it through to the end and realized there are three books here which evoked very different reactions.

The first is Sanghera's personal misery-memoir. The whole source of his misery seems to be his (perceived) misfortune in being born a brown sikh working class lad from Wolverhampton rather than white Church of England middleclass public school boy from Cheltenham. He equates being sikh with being working class poor in north England. Much of what he writes about - never being in restaurant or having a bath - has been written before by white working class writers. Sanghera has a degree in English Literature from Cambridge so he's probably more familiar with those authors than I am. The reminisces - his George Michael obsession, alloo-gobi paranthas in his lunch as opposed to white bread sandwiches, setting up a bank - are cute but a bit random, more suited to a conversation than a book; they evoked a "so what?" response. I think my negative reactions arose because I perceived a certain dishonesty in the writing; decrying his background while capitalizing on the Unique Selling Point of being a brown sikh in his circle of non-Punjabi, mostly white friends and girlfriends. Sanghera comes across as a supercilious self-satisfied snob. If this was all there was I would give this book one star ... BUT

The second 'book' is the story of his father and sister's schizophrenia and his investigation into his parents marriage. His descriptions of his parents marriage and their troubles, his dealings with the doctor etc are well written and honest with a nice touch of self-deprecating humour. Three stars for this story.

The third 'book' is about his relationship with his mother. This is wonderfully done; the anecdotes and stories are charming and speak volumes. She makes him two extra chappatis than he asks for because she knew he would always ask for fewer than he wanted; he asks for fewer than he wants because he knows she will always give an extra two. Her refusal to sit on the leather seats until he tells her it will cost money to change to a new rental car. How he misses important things she says because she slips them in long boring monologues about falling standards in supermarkets and such like. The love and respect he has are always present. I loved reading these sections. Four stars (I'd give it 5 except for that letter).

So putting it all together, three stars. I'm glad I read it through to the end. When he started trying to

understand his family instead of being ashamed/embarrassed by them I got over my bad reaction to the opening chapters, and I really liked him by end of the book. He seemed to have understood some very profound truths about families, not just his own but about families in general.

Karen says

An interesting (at times) insight into the life of the 1960s Indian immigrants into Britain. However, the two star rating is mainly because I couldn't warm to the authors character

Emily says

I found *The Boy with the Topknot* engrossing as a depiction of a family and an individual's experience of growing up in a Punjabi community in Wolverhampton in the 1980s. It left me thinking about how important talking openly is, but also how everybody has to process events or thoughts in their own way and their own time. I learnt a lot about schizophrenia (mainly how little I knew about it). The author could grate at times, but I didn't mind this - he was self-aware, and his foibles made his story more authentic. He did seem to idealise the middle class British culture he had moved into sometimes, for example anticipating his love life turning out like a romantic comedy (good luck with that!) But I was moved by the way he writes about his parents, and the process of uncovering their history.

Naciye says

This book triggered many memories for me. Although I'm from another culture and religion altogether, being a second generation immigrant child growing up in the U.K. I identified with so much of what he shared. The pressures he experienced growing up here, torn between two cultures and how this affected all his relationships as he struggled to be his own person and please his mum, are struggles many of us have experienced. We all have that one relative that was always angry, who we called 'mad' or possessed by the devil, who we made excuses for their outbursts, violence and odd behaviour. Reading about his dad and sister, has highlighted the ignorance surrounding mental health in immigrant communities, not to mention the taboo factor, back in the early days. It must have taken a lot of courage to not only write this book, but to write the letter to his mum. I really enjoyed reading this book, and I would have finished it much sooner, but I didn't want it to finish. For me this book also highlights the importance of our original culture and the struggles parents, especially first generation immigrant parents faced in a new country. My parents experienced similar struggles and suddenly I can see life from their point of view, and can understand why they were so strict. One of the best books I've read in a long time.

Raj says

Overall I enjoyed this book. I am also a 1st generation Brit with parents from Punjab. I identified with all the anguish, awkwardness and cultural clashes Satnam endured. He writes well and is very entertaining resulting in some laugh out louds late at night.

However I found it did not address or really go beyond just touching on the inherent sexism and misogyny in

Punjabi culture. He does mention the differences between how his life has worked out and how his eldest sister's has worked out but the difference is so stark it warranted more of a discussion. As a female I found it infuriating. Relationships between Punjabi daughters and their mothers do not generally end in a cute letter sent one way and virtually unconditional acceptance.

I was also shocked and disappointed that he did not call out his mother in any big way when she said he could marry a 'gori' but not a 'churi or chamari'. Is this not gross racism?

Also I'm not sure why all the anti-doctor sentiment peppered throughout the book?

Overall a funny and entertaining read, a lot of which I could identify with but I felt a daughter in the same family writing her story would result in a totally different book.

Nancy says

"Know where you come from...but don't let it stop you from becoming who you want to be..."

So many reviewers have provided a synopsis therefore I will refrain from doing the same. I will just share some thoughts.

Sathnam laid taboo subjects on the table with an eloquence donned through years of a first-rate education funded by the same culture his loving mother and so many like her shunned; it was an irony not lost on him. Well, I suppose those many pounds in tax were well spent if he continues to use his gifts to lift the curtain between Asian village and Western thinking. Minority communities will do well to bridge that chasm and redirect energies finding happiness in an integrated best-of-both cultures rather than spinning yarns, fear mongering about witchcraft, and gossiping on who was seen snogging whom. To start this effort, this book, and books like it need to be in Punjabi and neighboring languages to keep the those languages relevant.

In revealing the dichotomies between his father's love and rage, Sathnam dilutes the shame for all suffering from mental illness, first or second hand. Ultimately, he impressively renders his father a tender and appreciative person despite tendencies towards manic abuse. The compassionate relationship he held with his sibling Puli, gave depth to what otherwise reads mostly as a love and appreciation memoir to his mum. Puli's surprise additions, her intentional input to the book were as rich and pregnant with emotion as any. Yes, Puliji, you were heard. I hope you say more...in your way. In the footnotes, he touched on the impossible lives of subjugated daughter. "Sikh girls don't have personalities, they have post-traumatic stress disorder." Indeed, they must.

His mum is really the star in this piece. His mother's unbelievable tenacity and dedication to making a happy family would overwhelm any reader and Sathnam does remarkable work of explaining why marriage is the framework of society and how these bonds ultimately save those who would otherwise be lost and hopeless. Certainly only someone from within the community will be able to crush adherence to centuries old traditions of dodgy value such as not marrying within the village by dissecting custom from the original intent (presumably mixing bloodlines). And only someone from within can refocus the community on Guru Granth Sahib's founding principals of inclusion and acceptance from wildly dissimilar traditions.

Sathnam shared insights from thinking across cultures, such as translation issues with his mother tongue (pyar vs. love, but not that kind of love, friend/girlfriend, white girl/gori vs. girl who happens to have been born white). His mum mentioned to him, her neighbor's son must have a (g)friend, because he is thirty. But it wasn't a question, was it? When she finally told him after the letter cleared the air that it HAD BEEN a question, the poor Brit coconut must have been thinking, "Um, mum, that wasn't a question. That wasn't

even a rhetorical question. It was in fact, rumour-mongering, which I don't do. If you want to know if I have a (g)friend, you must respect me enough to pose a proper question, not imply I should be burdened with bringing up a difficult subject...which BTW you don't want me to do". Well, if that isn't insight to a challenge of mindsets and expectations, I don't know what is.

By disclosing such intimate details of his personal challenges with assimilation, he provides a topic of debate, associated lessons and heartfelt realities with which today's traditional families easily identify. He has shared a voice, a dialog, a language, not of one culture but of two, and isn't two better? A decade from now, mixed families will wonder what the fuss was all about.

In terms of style, the pacing, his anxieties, rollbacks in time, anticipating the letter and surprise discovery of pills were masterfully woven into the story, so as I did not feel manipulated by the foreboding. He made it fun. Unlike other reviewers, I did not find it self-centered or supercilious. Sathnam had to go from a being a boy to being a man, and he does it by asserting himself in a letter to his typical controlling and protective mum. He finally became respectABLE to others and most importantly, found SELF respect in the challenge of *not* achieving manhood through the production of a legitimate male heir with a suitable wife...but by just going a different way than mama/papa. In terms of his stressing his roots, Sathnam told it like it was, and it seemed that the atmosphere was very Coal Miner's Daughter ("we were poor but we had love"). The reality is that there is a great chasm between Birmingham, indeed, Wolverhampton and London, facts are facts, he humbly asserts he was quite lucky.

I much enjoyed the sense of discussion I felt in this memoir, like Sathnam was engaging in self-disclosure with a trusted confidant over a latte (ok, many lattes at a Wolver Starbucks with some Asian goths tucked in the corner). He didn't shy away from his ignorance of others' feelings, he didn't imply he hadn't hurt anyone. I think other reviewers appreciated this too as so many of them state they couldn't put the book down.

Tipping my hat to his skill as a writer, I could. Several times. When I was angry with him for denying the women who loved him, who, in his words respected his culture and appreciated his dedication to his family. As she lay sleeping, he denied "Laura" to his interfering auntie thus transporting her from his beloved to a shameful reminder of his cowardice. Reduced to a cliche, he should have just left her flat before the sun rose. He could not yet give up the role as robotic 20-something "good son" in favour of empowerment, self-direction. Years later upon delivering his letter of self-determination, it becomes clear he had underestimated his mother's ability to adjust. Didn't he see mum's pliability when he cut off his plait? In some respects, his mother *really* only sought his happiness and she needed to understand his happiness would be at a cost to her perception of "suitable". (One has to wonder if mum's flexibility wasn't effected by her 3 other children being suitably married with suitably brown grand babies...not really fair but a point to ponder).

Sathnam's remorse was only touched on later in his heart-wrenching letter to his mother, but just a touch. There were so many other important issues covered but what was sincerely missing was a return to the "Lauras" to provide a nod or some appreciation for their love and support in his journey to manhood. It started as a book about Sathnam, became a book about his mum's love, then needed to return to Sathnam. He could have included the "Lauras" in the dedication, or the acknowledgements. Though there may be a private reasons for this, publicly, it felt lacking, no closure. I do hope his mother finally felt free to reach out the "Lauras" and wish them well, now THAT would be something, THAT would be mutual respect.

If a person has not been touched by mental illness, emotional paralysis, emotional blackmail (*tamasha*), immigration/emigration PTSD, or even the double-edged sword of a close-knit family, you will find Sanghera still will enable you to relate. I recognized all the pop music notations because, well, DJ's the man we love the most. The integrated musical timeline lent a real accessibility to the whole story for those who enjoyed 80s pop, you'll catch every reference. Mick Hucknall and the Korgis positioned the reader to NOT

expect a cell phone to ring. If, through the use of descriptive phrases and a relevant playlist, Sathnam can place me in his crowded semi-detached, cockroach infested, spice infused home on a living room settee, I am happy to be there, listening to mum's ailments while munching parathas, I'll bring the penguin bars.

Vivienne says

I had expected this memoir to be focused entirely on Sanghera's experiences in reconciling his life in London with the culture and traditional values that he had grown up with and which are still held by his parents and extended family. His account of he and his siblings having to conceal their pop music and other Western items reminded me of Lane Kim from The Gilmore Girls. Certainly it was a moving, often funny account of his growing up in the 1980s.

However, the major theme of a family coping with severe mental illness and Sanghera's attempts to understand schizophrenia came as a real surprise. Even though secrets are mentioned on the back cover blurb as well as the subtitle; there was no outward clue that the memoir deals with mental health issues. In 2009 it was named MIND's Book of the Year; an accolade awarded to the best literary contributions to raising awareness around issues of mental distress. In accepting the award, the author said *"there are hardly any books about Asian communities' experiences of mental health problems, so I hope people read this book and it leads to more understanding."* I am sure that it will.

Overall, I found this a wonderful book. It was sad and shocking at times, though never became a misery memoir. It was also frank, moving and funny. It certainly gave me a greater understanding of another culture and religion that exists alongside my own. In addition, I found it an intelligent and compassionate account of this much misunderstood mental illnesses that can effect anyone no matter their cultural background.

I was very grateful to our local librarian for choosing it for our reading group. It generated a great deal of discussion.

Le says

My review comes 2 years too late but here we go anyways.

I was apparently discussing this title with a friend and slammed her recommendation (we are both Sikhs and non practicing).

6/12 months later bump into some random well-to-do couple whilst on holiday in Kerala. On learning I was both Indian and of Sikh heritage, again I was told I must read it by the Lady. Again I advise I could have written the book, Im not a writer clearly but I could not fathom why anyone would want to read a book that mirrors your own life?

The book became one of my Xmas gifts, so I started to read on Xmas day. I cried that day and a few times thereafter. I had to dig deep and apologise to my friend; shamelessly.

If you are Indian &/OR Sikh - do read. Perhaps relevant to many immigrant families from all over the world

that have come to the UK. Ever grown up and experienced mental health issues in your family :definitely read!

Tweedledum says

Satnam Sanghera has risen from the boy with no English in ordinary Wolverhampton school to a respected journalist on a national paper. Yet who of his school mates would know that each day he was going home to a family plagued by mental illness. This memoir must have taken a lot of courage to write not only on Satnam's part but on the part of the family who gave him permission to write. Others have said, and I agree that it was "unputdownable" and certainly had me glued to the page, but unusually for me I immediately gave my copy away as I thought it too important to stay on my shelves! A book that challenges ignorance both about our multi- faceted community and about mental illness.

Manpreet says

Oh what a book!! I absolutely loved it and am so glad to have read this one. This is my first book that I finished in only two days because I couldn't put it down. This has also been the first time I read a memoir and am so glad I did.

The boy with the topknot is a memoir of how mental illnesses affected an entire family due to their ignorance about it. Sathnam whilst belongs to a Sikh Punjabi family comes across as very critical of the many things related to the religion and the culture. Whilst I sometimes found it uncomfortable as someone who identifies herself as a Sikh and a Punjabi, it cannot be denied that this book truly made me question a lot about my understanding of the faith and cultural practices. The issues of superstitions, caste system, and women's right (or rather the lack of it) is well discussed in the book. Interestingly there are many answers I seem to have found to the questions I have had about my own life. Some quotes particularly affected me.

"Sikh girls don't have personalities, they have post-traumatic stress disorder. They have to fight so hard and so persistently for their independence that they become brutalized by the experience, and even when they have their freedom, they can't stop fighting." — This was in one of the footnotes and whilst some may disagree with the generalisation (even I do) but there undeniably is a struggle for many Sikh women to get their rights. I myself sometimes wonder how many of the things I do or refrain from doing because I want to and how many for the sake of duty or family's happiness.

Sanghera also mentions, several times, how it's easier to communicate through writing which enabled me to relate to the book and the author a little more because I would much rather write an email or letter than talk to someone if I have a case to put forward or something to explain.

Sathnam's questions and comments about the Punjabi culture, and the current generation's take on implementing Sikh practices into their lifestyle truly makes you think hard and long about the origin of your decisions and opinions and beliefs. He truly offers a different insight into things and his annoying questions are indeed truly worth thinking about.

This book was very funny and I absolutely loved all the jokes but it kept me on edge a little from the start. Perhaps because I had watched the BBC drama and therefore knew about what was to follow but I still am convinced that having watched the drama didn't deprive me of the fun and excitement of reading the book. There is a lot more I have learnt about mental health problems, and Puli's story particularly is something that I found was moving. This is because I truly love to study as well and often find external reasons kicking in to distract me during exam season especially problems in my personal life (although they are not as serious as a mental health problem) but there is always a desire to prove that I am not lazy or procrastinating. That I tried and tried hard but circumstances didn't allow.

Sathnam's (sometimes harsh) remarks scattered around the book answered a lot of the questions about my own life. This clarity however doesn't really change much about how life is going but I can now see the reason why I make certain decisions in my life. I really don't want to stop writing this review. It was a very moving book, and the events occurred very quickly as well. Sathnam's honesty is there present all the time and the ending was very sweet.

Oh, and another thing that Sathnam has got me thinking about is the meaning of duty and honour in the Punjabi community and the demanding expectations based on their definitions.

Dan Sihota says

I first heard of this book not long after its release and the first thing that caught my interest is that it is by someone, Sathnam Sanghera, who is from a similar background as myself, someone born to immigrant parents from Punjab, India, settled in the West Midlands area of the UK. Like many children of immigrants, there's a constant struggle between the traditional culture of the parents and adapting to the norms of the wider culture, and in this case, I was sure there would be many things I would find similar to my own experience of growing up in a similar environment. However, I was less keen on reading this book when I saw it was a memoir, a work of non-fiction. I have never really been keen on reading memoirs, the cynical part of me sees them as an excuse for the author to make a bit of extra money by telling a story of their life, something many famous people can be accused of, such as actors, politicians, sports people, celebrities, etc. So a memoir by a journalist of my own age range didn't have me immediately reaching for it.

Last year the BBC produced a drama based on this book, I could see certain aspects of the story had been altered for the dramatisation, this got me interested in the book again, so I recently got myself a copy to read it for myself.

There are two stories within this book: the first is the author struggling to balance his own lifestyle choices in contrast to the demands placed on him by his traditional Punjabi family; and the second is that of mental illness in his family, first affecting his father, and then his elder sister.

Talking about the latter story first: this is an excellent insight into traditional Punjabi culture, specifically, how you do not talk about problems, as if not talking about them means no problems exist, I'm sure such denial is shared with many other cultures. What makes things a little more difficult in this case is that the first generation of Punjabi immigrants to the UK was poorly educated if at all, spoke little or no English, and struggled to fit in the wider UK society. This resulted in these British Punjabis creating their own culture based on the traditional culture they had been used to in rural Punjab. One aspect of this traditional culture is the constant obsession people have with worrying what other members of their community will think of their actions. It's also interesting to note how, on one hand, Punjabis may hold strong religious beliefs which are

against drinking alcohol, as well as promoting equality and tolerance, yet on the other hand, Punjabis have a reputation for being big drinkers and will openly discriminate on the grounds of gender, social status, race, religion, etc. So, being raised in such an environment would explain why the author grew up, the youngest of four children, with little knowledge of many of the problems affecting the family, especially anything to do with mental illness. Mental illness is rarely openly discussed in Punjabi culture, few people are willing to admit to such problems, often fearing the reaction of other members of the community who may shun them, as if mental illness is a contagious disease which you can easily catch off someone. It's often far easier to explain mental illness as something caused by black magic, which means someone is to blame for casting this evil spell. The author has to use all of his skills as a journalist in order to learn about certain events in his family history, which is far from easy when many of the facts appear to be contradictory.

As for the other story in the book: the cynical side of me seems to be justified in its dislike of memoirs. I get the impression that the author feels a sense of guilt for some of his lifestyle choices over the years and is simply trying to justify to himself that his actions are wholly justified, despite what his traditional parents might think. People who inhabit in two cultures often find themselves having to choose between one or the other, such a decision may not be easy, balancing one's own happiness against the family's happiness. However, what I do find wrong is when someone decides to lead a double life, based on lying to people, which allows them to inhabit both worlds where the two lives never meet. A life based on lies is not something which should ever be encouraged as it will inevitably hurt many people involved. If we are more concerned with choosing a life which is based on pleasing others than we are with our happiness, then we can't complain if we are unhappy afterwards. If we choose a life based on pursuing our own happiness, then there is no reason to feel guilty if it upsets anyone close to us. It seems that the author wanted a life where everyone, including himself, was happy, but gradually realised this wasn't going to happen. So, he didn't choose to pursue a life based on his own happiness as he was already enjoying such a life, but he chose to stop trying to please others. Such a choice doesn't sound like an earth-shattering event. And all of the author's attempts to justify his decision seem like an attempt to justify to himself his years of lying.

Overall, this book is full of wit, and is well-written, making it an enjoyable read. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about what it was like to grow up in the UK as children of Punjabi immigrants.