

“The real measure of a person isn't the challenges but how you respond to them”

The DESIblitz Literature Festival celebrates south Asian literature and culture: find out lots more at <https://www.desiblitz.com/arts/events/> The festival gave RE students from Bedfordshire the chance to interview genius ‘young adult fiction’ author Bali Rai. Famous for books like [Un]arranged Marriage, Now or Never and Killing Honour, Rai, born in Leicester in 1971, is admired for his ability to create compelling fiction for young people from the rich and raw experience of life. Students from Queensbury Academy in Bedfordshire interviewed him about his work and life.

- **How does your culture and religion influence your writing?** I tend to consider various aspects of British Punjabi culture in my writing. Most of my early teenage novels were inspired by issues that affect south Asian communities. Religion isn't as much of an influence, as I'm not religious. However, the basic messages of Sikhism do colour my writing too, particularly regarding equality, poverty and the commonality of human experience.

- **How important was RE to you as a subject in school?** I loved RE at school. I was surrounded by friends of many different faiths, so learning about their religions was very welcome and gave me a great insight into the way other human beings lived their lives.

- **Have you ever faced prejudice?** Yes, I've faced racial prejudice throughout my life. It's not as common now, and usually much politer when it does happen. But, as a child, racist abuse was a regular occurrence. From the journey to school, to playing football, and just wandering around Leicester city centre. Racist abuse was part of everyday life back then.

- **What challenges do you face as an ethnic minority writer?** The challenges are huge. Firstly, I have to prove that I am just as good and capable as any other writer, and my background often means I'm underrated. I have to work twice as hard as my white counterparts to get to the same level. That's not just my experience. Every ethnic minority writer I know would say something similar. Then, there's the pressure to "represent" other people that look like me. As though we all think and live the same way. That just isn't true and I refuse to be called a writer who represents only people that are like me. There's also what I write. If I write a gritty urban diverse story, it's accepted and welcomed. But if I write fantasy, or a ghost story, that's often looked at as weird. As though writers like me wouldn't know how to write that stuff. It's all very frustrating, but things are improving a little.



Left to right front row: Jessica Hudson, Victoria Umiska and Georgia Goss. Standing left to right: Emmanuel Morton and Theo Ezo.



- **What influenced you to write the book *Now or Never*?** *Now or Never* was influenced by the huge role Indians played in World War Two, and by my own annoyance at how many Indian stories about WW2 were unheard or simply missing. The role of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps at Dunkirk needed to be written - those voices needed to be heard.

- **What inspired you to become an author?** The two biggest inspirations were other books - the stuff I read as a child, and an author called Sue Townsend, who was from Leicester like me, and wrote about my home city. She was my biggest role model and made me want to write stories about regular everyday people from Leicester.

- **How does religion reflect in your writing?** Religious ideals such as peace and equality (from whichever) religion are often reflected in my work. In *Now or Never*, Fazal Khan is a Muslim and his worldview, and view of his fellow human beings and animals, is formed by his religious beliefs. The same is true of books where my protagonist is Sikh, especially *Mohinder's War* - certain aspects of Sikh teachings are reflected in the way my protagonists live their lives and the way they treat other humans. I also look at the difference between religious ideals and real life in my older books, such as *City of Ghosts* and *(un)arranged marriage*.
- **What are your views about relationships and families?** I don't have any strong views about either. I believe that all humans have the right to decide their own destinies. I believe in strong family ties but not when those ties are forced upon people. Relationships are the responsibility of individual humans. I have no right, and no desire, to tell people how they should practice their relationships. As long as people are kind and thoughtful, and genuine, that's all that matters.
- **What inspired you to write the book *(un) arranged marriage*?** This novel was inspired by the idea of forced marriages. Most of my own generation, in my family, married because they were told to, not because they chose to. And I wanted to explore how and why that happens. I also wanted to write about Leicester and the diverse people who live in the city. I wanted to write about their real voices and lives.
- **What advice would you give to a young person facing challenges in life?** I would say that challenges will exist throughout your life, and the real measure of a person isn't the challenges but how they respond to them. Modern life is hard, but there is always a better version out there. The key for me, when I was a child and facing serious challenges, was to remember my goals and think about the future I wanted to build for myself. It wasn't easy, and it isn't easy now, but hard perseverance and pushing yourself to be the best you can be, will both help.
- **Are you going to write a book on Covid 19 or post covid 19 era?** I'm not sure. The answer is probably no, as I don't have a particular idea to write. However, any modern British stories I write from now on will probably allude to the Covid lockdowns etc... You can't write a modern story and not mention aspects of what happened regarding Covid. That would be weird. But a specific book

about Covid - maybe something about how the lockdowns affected the mental health of young people might work. If that idea turns into an actual story plot, I might write it!

- **Why do you think it's important to have events like the DESIblitz Literature Festival?** It's hugely important that the South Asian community in Britain sees itself as an audience for literature, too. Often, those of south Asian origin don't get involved with lit festivals, and often don't feel welcome or represented. DESIblitz and others are trying to change that, and to prove that literature and festivals are for everyone. They also focus on writers and other talents who are not given publicity often enough. So, they highlight talents that are ignored by the mainstream festivals or treated differently. I think that is massively important and I welcome and support it.