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Brick Lane: A Novel

By Monica Ali

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“A book you won’t be able to put down. A Bangladeshi immigrant in London is torn between the kind, tedious older husband with whom she has an arranged marriage (and children) and the fiery political activist she lusts after. A novel that’s multi-continental, richly detailed and elegantly crafted.” —Curtis Sittenfeld, author of *Sisterland*

After an arranged marriage to Chanu, a man twenty years older, Nazneen is taken to London, leaving her home and heart in the Bangladeshi village where she was born. Her new world is full of mysteries. How can she cross the road without being hit by a car (an operation akin to dodging raindrops in the monsoon)? What is the secret of her bullying neighbor Mrs. Islam? What is a Hell's Angel? And how must she comfort the naïve and disillusioned Chanu?

As a good Muslim girl, Nazneen struggles to not question why things happen. She submits, as she must, to Fate and devotes herself to her husband and daughters. Yet to her amazement, she begins an affair with a handsome young radical, and her erotic awakening throws her old certainties into chaos.

Monica Ali’s splendid novel is about journeys both external and internal, where the marvelous and the terrifying spiral together.

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Brick Lane: A Novel By Monica Ali Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #68988 in Books
- Brand: Scribner
- Published on: 2004-06-02
- Released on: 2004-06-02
- Format: EveryBook
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x 1.00" w x 5.25" l, 3.00 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 432 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Wildly embraced by critics, readers, and contest judges (who put it on the short-list for the 2003 Man Booker Prize), *Brick Lane* is indeed a rare find: a book that lives up to its hype. Monica Ali's debut novel chronicles the life of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi girl so sickly at birth that the midwife at first declares her stillborn. At 18 her parents arrange a marriage to Chanu, a Bengali immigrant living in England. Although Chanu--who's twice Nazneen's age--turns out to be a foolish blowhard who "had a face like a frog," Nazneen accepts her fate, which seems to be the main life lesson taught by the women in her family. "If God wanted us to ask questions," her mother tells her, "he would have made us men." Over the next decade-and-a-half Nazneen grows into a strong, confident woman who doesn't defy fate so much as bend it to her will. The great delight to be had in *Brick Lane* lies with Ali's characters, from Chanu the kindly fool to Mrs. Islam the elderly loan shark to Karim the political rabblouser, all living in a hothouse of Bengali immigrants. *Brick Lane* combines the wide scope of a social novel about the struggles of Islamic immigrants in pre- and post-9/11 England with the intimate story of Nazneen, one of the more memorable heroines to come along in a long time. If Dickens or Trollope were loosed upon contemporary London, this is exactly the sort of novel they would cook up. --*Claire Dederer*

From Publishers Weekly

The immigrant world Ali chronicles in this penetrating, unsentimental debut has much in common with Zadie Smith's scrappy, multicultural London, though its sheltered protagonist rarely leaves her rundown East End apartment block where she is surrounded by fellow Bangladeshis. After a brief opening section set in East Pakistan--Nazneen's younger sister, the beautiful Hasina, elopes in a love marriage, and the quiet, plain Nazneen is married off to an older man--Ali begins a meticulous exploration of Nazneen's life in London, where her husband has taken her to live. Chanu fancies himself a frustrated intellectual and continually expounds upon the "tragedy of immigration" to his young wife (and anyone else who will listen), while letters from downtrodden Hasina provide a contrast to his idealized memories of Bangladesh. Nazneen, for her part, leads a relatively circumscribed life as a housewife and mother, and her experience of London in the 1980s and '90s is mostly indirect, through her children (rebellious Shahana and meek Bibi) and her variously assimilated neighbors. The realistic complexity of the characters is quietly stunning: Nazneen shrugs off her passivity at just the right moment, and the supporting cast--Chanu, the ineffectual patriarch; Nazneen's defiant and struggling neighbor, Razia (proud wearer of a Union Jack sweatshirt); and Karim, the foolish young Muslim radical with whom Nazneen eventually has an affair--are all richly drawn. By keeping the focus on their perceptions, Ali comments on larger issues of identity and assimilation without drawing undue attention to the fact, even gracefully working in September 11. Carefully observed and assured, the novel is free of pyrotechnics, its power residing in Ali's unsparing scrutiny of its hapless, hopeful protagonists. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From [The New Yorker](#)

Ali's sharp-witted tale explores the immigrant's dilemma of belonging. Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi woman, moves to London's Bangla Town (around the street of the title) in the mid-nineteen-eighties after an arranged marriage with an older man. Seen through Nazneen's eyes, England is at first utterly baffling, but over the seventeen years of the narrative (which takes us into the post-September 11th era), she gradually finds her way, bringing up two daughters and eventually starting an all-female tailoring business. Meanwhile, the more outwardly assertive characters—her comically pompous husband, her rebellious sister back in Bangladesh, and a young Muslim activist with whom Nazneen has an affair—lose their bearings in their various attempts to embrace or reject their heritage. In Ali's subtle narration, Nazneen's mixture of

traditionalism and adaptability, of acceptance and restlessness, emerges as a quiet strength.
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Teddy Hathorn:

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Alma Brady:

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