



The Handsworth Times

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Mukesh Agarwal sits alone in the Black Eagle pub, unaware that a riot is brewing or that Billy, his youngest son, is still out on his bike ...A mile away in the family home in Church Street, Anila, one of the three Agarwal girls, is reading Smash Hits and listening to Radio One as she sprawls across the bottom bunk, oblivious to the monumental tragedy that is about to hit her family ...

It is 1981 and Handsworth is teetering on the brink of collapse. Factories are closing, unemployment is high, the National Front are marching and the neglected inner cities are ablaze as riots breakout across Thatcher's fractured Britain. The Agarwals are facing their own nightmares but family, pop music, protest, unexpected friendships and a community that refuses to disappear all contribute to easing their personal pain, and that of Handsworth itself.

THE HANDSWORTH TIMES is a story of loss and transition, and pulling together because ultimately, there is such a thing as society.

The Handsworth Times Details

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From Reader Review The Handsworth Times for online ebook

Jo says

The Handsworth Times is a raw and emotional read that draws you in from the very first page. Set in the early 80's, we are taken back in time to when there were no smartphones, internet and when people relied upon their local community and newspapers to find out the local gossip and news stories of the day. I loved this book for its nostalgia, lyrical storytelling but ultimately because at its heart was the story of a family learning to live with loss and prejudice.

The story opens with the father and head of the household, Mukesh Agarwal, sitting alone in a pub in the Handsworth area of Birmingham. He appears to be a lonely man, sat alone with just his thoughts and as the story progressed, my sorrow for him grew. It is while he is sat in the Black Eagle pub, that the riot begins and which ultimately leads to a tragedy within the family.

Although set in the 80's, this book could very well be set in modern day Britain. The issues that surround migrants, post Brexit and how we are now a nation that both embraces and fights against ethnic diversity, could be transferred so easily into this book. The problems within society have not changed, they have just been given different labels.

So the Agarwal family live in the Handsworth area of Birmingham that is home to many different cultures and belief systems, and it is because of the tragedy that the family endures, that these different cultures come together, in a way that would not have been possible before. This is a book about community, about how a community can divide itself because of its different belief systems, race, culture etc., but that at the end of the day, when a tragedy occurs and that particular community is on the brink of collapse, the only way to fight and to stand up for what you believe in is to stand together.

This book is full of wonderfully captured characters. The mother, who keeps the home together is a strong and independent woman who finds her inner strength when those around her lose their focus and love of life. She was by far my favourite character. However, I also thought that all of the children in the book had their own distinct voice and story to tell. Together through all of the various different storylines that run throughout the book, we get a glimpse into a life that was dominated by prejudice, social insecurity and poverty. On paper, you would think that this would mean that the book was somehow despondent and a tale of how life used to be for those who were less well off - living hand to mouth, but this is not the case.

Handsworth Times is an uplifting book about the importance of family, friendships and community. Above all else, this book makes you think about what you value most in life - and the answer should always be that of family.

Michael Jarvie says

All in all, this is a very interesting and authentic account of a working class Asian family living in inner city Birmingham in the early 1980s. Some strong female roles are evident throughout - namely the mother Usha with her obsessive house cleaning that has a Lady Macbeth quality to it, namely in terms of her trying to blot out a family tragedy. She is later shown becoming empowered as she helps to organise a residents' group seeking to transform a derelict area into a communal amenity. One of the daughters is also involved in an anti-Fascist group.

Structurally, "The Handsworth Times" is a loose assemblage, in the manner of say Pat Barker's "Union Street", where the subject of each chapter shifts as we progress throughout the novel. The paterfamilias Mukesh is shown to be a feckless character who is suffering from feelings of guilt engendered by two deaths which he feels were his responsibility. One of the daughters experiences an "Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit" moment which I felt could have been explored in much more detail. The villain of the piece - Kash - is somewhat one-dimensional in nature, as is his foil - the love interest, and all round good guy Marcus. One episode featuring Mukesh hanging from his bedroom window in his underwear has a whiff of a "Carry On" film about it!

The area of Lozells and its environs is well evoked. Having written about the same location myself the only thing I would mention is that one of the pub names is incorrect - it is called the Bartons Arms not the Barton Arms.

To conclude, then, a book worth investigating.

Snoakes says

The Handsworth Times is the highly evocative story of an Indian family in Handsworth, Birmingham in the early eighties. At the time the factories were closing, unemployment was high and civil unrest was brewing. Racism was institutional - the sus law meant that nearly every other black and Asian youth had been stopped and searched for no reason. The National Front were marching and riots were inevitable. This is the backdrop to the Agarwal's life.

If that all sounds a bit bleak and depressing, think again. There is still humour to be had in this tale of working class life. Yes, it's about grief and conflict, but it's also about family and friendship - and a strong multicultural sense of community.

The characters are well-drawn and thoroughly believable - particularly the three sisters. I imagine that much of their dialogue is drawn from real life. The differences between the generations are especially realistic. A totally enjoyable and interesting read from a talented new author.

K.J. Charles says

Slice of life in Thatcher's Britain. An Indian family deals with tragedy big and small, unemployment, assimilation, racism, and a lot of other stuff, to the backdrop of the 80s anti fascist riots and the misery of those years in deprived communities. Sounds gloomy, kind of is--a lot of bad stuff happens--and there isn't a big overarching plot with meaning or fulfilling character arcs. It is very much just a depiction of people getting on with living, and as such it's thoroughly compelling in a fly on the wall way. And, I thought, ultimately uplifting in that the sisters and mother refuse to be crushed in the end: they get knocked down but, sooner or later, with the help of family or community, they get up again.

What is depressing is how much it reminds you how unspeakable the Thatcher govt was. Shudder. Unusual read, glad I picked this up.

Irene Brew says

The relationships entwined within this gem of a book are so delicately beautiful that *The Handsworth Times* becomes a truly sublime read. First there are the obvious relationships between the family members, but in a way the genuinely lovely bond that Usha and her neighbour Brenda share throughout the book is probably what shines through for me.

Set eponymously in Handsworth in 1981, the unrest of the country as a whole is juxtaposed with the chaos that descends in the Agarwal household. The results of the riot are brought into the Agarwal home and the devastation it creates is achingly poignant. The way the family learns to cope and deal with this is of course different for each person, but then each coping mechanism has its own knock-on effect.

I don't want to gloss over the history running through the book, but neither can I claim to be any sort of expert in the political history of Britain. The knowledge I do possess I'm sure has all been learnt as I've gotten (rapidly!) older, considering I wasn't quite into double figures yet, and I was probably more concerned with how many sweets I could buy with my 10p pocket money and playing outside on my bike. As a result I found the whole social history aspect really interesting to read, and I loved the musical references scattered throughout.

However it was, as I initially touched upon, the relationships that made this book for me. It's not the differences between the community of Handsworth that stand out, instead it's the similarities that unite them all. It's hard to say too much without spoiling the plot, but the inner battles each of the Agarwal's faces are realistic and at times heartbreaking. This isn't a book of sadness though, there are very painful moments yes, but there is also a heap of happiness and laughter too.

I so enjoyed reading this book, the writing is as joyous as the story itself. Totally recommended.

Carole Morris says

Pretty boring, characters not particularly sympathetic. Very biased, suggests that only the black community suffered at that time. I am from Coventry and all of my uncles, then in their 50's were all made redundant after working in the car factories all of their lives, and were unable to get new jobs. Would not bother to read one of her books again

Vicky "phenkos" says

This book is Brighton 'City Reads' choice for 2017 (City Reads is an annual citywide book festival). I think this was a pretty good idea what with xenophobia and racist attacks being on the rise after the Brexit referendum (though probably less in Brighton than in other places in the UK as Brighton has always had this cosmopolitan edge). The book centres around the Agarwals, a family of Punjabi immigrants and their children in 1980s Handsworth in Birmingham at a time of joblessness and raised racial tensions, but also a time when second-generation immigrants from India, Pakistan, Jamaica and other former Commonwealth countries were starting to feel that UK was their home and that they had to defend themselves from racist attacks.

The book was slow getting in to, even at around the 50% mark I was somewhat lukewarm. However, once it got focused on one or two of the main characters, (rather than all the six members of the family), I became more and more drawn. Usha and Anila (the mother and one of her daughters) gradually evolve into

believable and relatable characters, some of the other family members less so. I also found the author's writing a bit too descriptive. At some point we get a whole paragraph on Mukesh, the father, taking a wrong turn and having to reverse out of a cul-de-sac. Did the author really think such level of detail was necessary?

For me it's really the second half of the book that shines. It stayed with me for days after I'd finished it. I just think it's a bit of a shame that the beginning was less engaging. If it was not 'city reads' choice I might have abandoned it.

Vcmc says

The theme of the novel is extremely interesting and relevant now. I appreciated the author's intention to shine a light on life in Birmingham in the early 80s and to witness the successes, troubles and tensions of an Asian family.

Andrea says

This book is based in the 1980's during Thatchers Britain, there are riots and the National Front is marching, communities are having hard times. The family in this book is faced with a massive tragedy and each member struggles to come to terms with their grief in different ways. They feel marginalised by society because of their race and have no real expectations of a future, yet what shines through is how, in the story, as the society come together a better future seems to be on the horizon. Although the main theme of the book is quite sad, the story has funny moments and finishes on a positive note. I enjoyed reading this very much.

Many thanks to @theasianwriter for my copy of the book.

Laura Alderson says

Follows the lives of an Indian- British family who live in Birmingham in the seventies when there are riots going on. There is a family tragedy. We follow the siblings and parents through their lives for about a year. I was ultimately disappointed, as not much happened.

Chiara says

The book follows the story of an Indian family in the early 80s in Handsworth, Birmingham, through riots, unemployment, general dissatisfaction and lack of prospects... The first half of the book was quite slow to read, I had to make an effort to go on. However, things start to improve in the second half, for the main characters, but also in the style... many scenes are written like a theatre play, with Usha cleaning the kitchen and the various family members entering the room and having a short conversation with her. This scheme repeats itself several times, with slight differences that follow the evolution of their mood and lead to the resolution of the story. I really liked this idea. Overall an interesting read, and interesting topic nowadays.

Kate Page says

Enjoyable read about an Indian family in the 70s in Handsworth, struggling with a family tragedy in the context of Thatchers Britain, and the NF marching through Birmingham. It has a good sense of time and place, and engaging characters. I found the writing a little clunky at points, and felt that too many things happened to this one family - but perhaps that isn't unrealistic. I wanted it to continue, and know more about how everyone's lives developed - which is always a good sign.

Alan says

A vital and necessary account of one family's disintegration and recovery after one of them, Billy, is killed during the Handsworth 'riot' of 1981. Mukesh, the father slips into alcoholism and depression; Usha, the mother, becomes involved in the local community and is instrumental in progressing youth projects, including transforming a wasteland into a play area. Meanwhile one of the daughters gets involved in the more political Handsworth Youth Movement and goes on marches etc., while another suffers at college because of her sexuality. I got very involved in the various plots and movement towards resolution, particularly as I moved to Birmingham (UK) in 1982, and lived nearby and know many of the streets and areas depicted. The era - the music, newspapers, TV shows - is also very well evoked. I think though there was too much telling and not enough showing, and much repetition/redundancy: I think there was a much slimmer, fitter novel trying to get out.

Shawn Mooney says

I was really rooting for this one, but at the 35% mark it just wasn't holding my interest enough to continue. Neither the characterization nor the writing was quite good enough to keep me going.

Kate Mitchell says

Brilliant. Beautifully written. Powerful narrative tale of a family of Indian extraction trying to make a success of life in Handsworth against the political and social challenges of the 1980s. A must-read.
