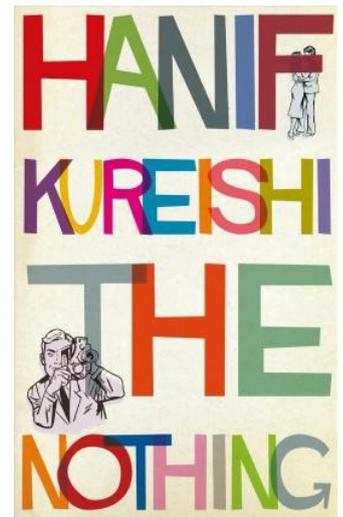


# *The Nothing*

Hanif Kureishi

**A claustrophobic portrait of domestic disharmony, and of the fading of life, of sexual power and creative and social energy.**



## Contents:

Introduction	1
Brief Author Biography	2
The Books that made Hanif Kureishi	3
<b><i>The Nothing</i></b> by Hanif Kureishi review - sex and the soapbox	<b>4-5</b>
Hanif Kureishi: "Britain's middle class is more racist than ever"	<b>6-8</b>
Notes	9

## Brief Author Biography



Born December 5, 1954 in Bromley, England, to an Indian father and an English mother, Hanif Kureishi grew up experiencing first-hand the racial and cultural clashes that he addresses in most of his work. The inspiration for his work has been drawn from his own life's trials and tribulations as a culturally hybrid individual of two different races and cultures. Kureishi decided that he wanted to be a writer from a young age, and began writing novels that were considered for publication while he was still a teenager.

He studied philosophy at King's College, University of London, and then supported himself by writing pornography under the pseudonym Antonia French. After a humble beginning as an usher for the Royal Theater, Kureishi later became the theater's writer in residence. His first play, *Soaking Up the Heat*, was produced in 1976 at London's Theater Upstairs. His second play, *The Mother Country*, won the Thames Television Playwright Award in 1980. His breakthrough came

with his first play for the Royal Court Theater, *Borderline*, about immigrants living in London. This led him to have his work, *Outskirts*, performed by London's Royal Shakespeare Company.

Kureishi's first efforts with film were successful and gained him a larger audience, especially in America. His screenplay for *My Beautiful Laundrette* was written in 1985, and tells the story of a young Pakistani immigrant who opens a laundromat with his gay, white lover. Critics from both sides of the Atlantic praised Kureishi. One reviewer, Ian Jack, said, "Here at last is a story about immigrants which shows them neither as victims nor tradition-bound aliens. They're comprehensible, modern people with an eye to the main chance, no better or worse than the rest of us." Despite the rave reviews, some Pakistani organizations felt that they were being portrayed in a negative manner as homosexuals and drug dealers. To them, a character of Pakistani origin represented the entire Pakistani community, and should display a positive stereotype to American and British audiences. Kureishi rejects the politics of representation; he does not assume this role as an ambassador representing a minority, preferring to depict the harsher realities of racism and class divisions.

After *My Beautiful Laundrette* won several awards, including the Best Screenplay award from the New

York Film Critics Circle, Kureishi scripted his next film with the controversial title *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. Exploring the world of a racially mixed couple living in London during the race riots, it received less critical acclaim than his previous film. Kureishi made a triumphant return in 1990 with his first semi-autobiographical novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*. It is about the life of a young bisexual man, who is half-Indian and half-English, growing up in London.

In 1991, Kureishi made his directorial debut with *London Kills Me*, which he also wrote. In this film, he expanded on his interest in street life by focusing on the world of drugs and gangs. He also returns to one of his recurring themes by addressing homelessness. As the son of an immigrant, Kureishi has written a great deal on the concept of home, describing the complexities involved in finding a place to belong. In another novel, *The Black Album*, he delves into the painful, lonely, and confused world of a young man of Pakistani origin, who finds himself having to choose between his white lover and his Muslim friends. The novel makes many references to pop culture, especially music and drugs, which feature in a great deal of Kureishi's work.

[<https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/11/kureishi-hanif/>]

## The Books that made Hanif Kureishi

### **The book I am currently reading**

*The Age of Anger* by Pankaj Mishra. He uses Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* to help understand why everyone is so pissed off these days. He has a good theory, the Nietzschean idea of resentment – the fury of people who are excluded – and uses this to talk about radical Islam and Brexit. You could also apply it to Trump.

### **The book that changed my life**

James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. As a teenager from a mixed race background, I struggled with issues of race and identity and Baldwin had related all this to the race politics of his day. It gave me ideas of what I might write.

### **The book I wish I'd written**

Frederick Seidel's collected poems – they always make me laugh and they always move me. As I get older I read more and more poetry.

### **The book that influenced my writing**

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. When I was a teenager and read it in my bedroom in Bromley, I thought this was a book for now – leaving the inheritance of the postwar settlement and making a new world. It inspired me.

### **The book that is most underrated**

I recently found a wonderful book by Georges Simenon in a secondhand bookshop. It's

called *The Train*, and is about a man cut off from his family in Belgium at the outbreak of the war who begins a relationship with a woman he meets on a train. It's about the fracturing of war and the possibility of love. Because of Maigret, people write Simenon off as a formulaic writer. To me he's as good as Camus.

### **The book that changed my mind**

*The Philosophical Investigations* of Wittgenstein. I began to understand that language isn't so much a picture of the world as a system in itself. This theory really possessed me.

### **The last book that made me cry**

*A Death in the Family* by Karl Ove Knausgaard. The author and his brother clear out the filth in their father's house – it's a very beautiful and affecting description of what it is to have to mourn someone you didn't like very much and who wasn't very nice to you.

### **The last book that made me laugh**

You'll often find me in the afternoons lying in bed reading PG Wodehouse and laughing my head off.

### **The book I'm most ashamed not to have read**

I haven't read anything by Jane Austen. My shame is big. I can't explain it. I've always had the impression they were books for girls, though of course she's

admired by many people of all genders. I dare say I'll have to one day, and then I'll have to eat my words.

### **My comfort read**

Jean Rhys. Though her books are dark and disturbing, I've always admired her prose style. I like those evocative stories and novels of a down-at-heel girl walking around the cafes of Paris making conversation with strangers.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/23/hanif-kureishi-books-made-me-jane-austen>]

## ***The Nothing* by Hanif Kureishi review - sex and the soapbox**

The narrator of Hanif Kureishi's short novel is feeling his age. "One night, when I am old, sick, right out of semen, and don't need things to get any worse, I hear the noises again," says Waldo, in an arresting first sentence. Our man is a film-maker, though these days feature-length pictures are beyond him and he sticks to making shorts. In fact, a lot of things are beyond him: "almost paralysed and dead", he can no longer get about on his own, and he hasn't had sex with his ravishing and 22-years-younger wife Zenab (or indeed with anyone else) for some years.

But his creativity has not wholly deserted him, and nor has his libido. From his bedroom, he eavesdrops on Zenab (Zee for short) and their dubious friend Eddie, a film industry hanger-on supposedly working on a retrospective of Waldo's work. And from what he hears, Waldo crafts a narrative of adultery. "Working with sound and my imagination, I envisage the angles and cuts, making the only substantial movies I can manage these days, mind movies." Like Jimmy Stewart in *Rear Window*, his fixed perspective and total boredom allow paranoia and fantasy to thrive; but is it possible that, like Stewart in Hitchcock's movie, his invention has cracked the case open?

For a while, the novel thrives on this lubricious ambiguity. Waldo

is an unappealing man, whose awareness of his own grossness does nothing to mitigate it – or, indeed, to heighten his sympathy for Zee, who might, understandably, want more from her middle age than nursing a vain sadomasochist into his grave. "I don't want her to be happy. I just want her to be with me. Is that too much to ask," he says – and it's clatteringly obvious both that this is too much to ask of his femme fatale, and that excessiveness has never been a source of shame for Waldo. Too much is what it takes to satisfy him.

He has found a way to extract enjoyment from his situation, turning betrayal into a rich fantasy of cuckolding: "Isn't the erotic an ever-increasing hunger that gets off on itself?" he wonders. "As their pleasure multiplies, they will be less discreet. Aren't we all looking forward to it? Suffering loses its horror if the victim finds a way to enjoy it."

Like Ian McEwan in *Nutshell*, Kureishi is revisiting *Hamlet* here, blending the prince and the patriarch into one figure who torments himself luxuriously with imaginings of the unfaithful lovers, and wonders when they are going to dethrone him.

But while Waldo is having his fun, the story falls by the way. Any intriguing uncertainty is

resolved abruptly, and the story turns instead to Waldo's pursuit of revenge. Kureishi never allows an allusion to simply allude. When Waldo announces that he has "Jimmy Stewart's patience", all those Hitchcockian motifs crumble into obviousness. When he says: "Too much thinking turns you into that fool Hamlet," I began to regret having given any thought at all to a book that seems determined to make everything dispiritingly explicit.

And *The Nothing* really does like to make things explicit. That title might suggest the vacuum from which Waldo summons his "mind movies", but more pertinently, it's a Shakespearean euphemism for vagina. "I think nothing, my lord," replies Ophelia when Hamlet is teasing her about "country matters". "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs," he replies. Waldo cannot stop thinking about what lies between maids' legs; or, rather, he can't stop thinking about places he might lodge his penis. Of his friend Anita: "not a woman a man can look at for long without wanting to put his penis in her mouth". Of his wife: "Her ass is still firm. When I could still rim her little hole, or halo, as I call it, and push inside, she'd almost slice the tip of my tongue off."

Which makes it hard to take Waldo seriously when Kureishi commandeers him for state-of-

---

the-nation soapboxing. “We took it for granted that the good things – equality, feminism, anti-racism, freedom for sexual minorities – would be extended,” says Waldo. “We believed we were enlightened. The good things would be good for everyone. But people didn’t want them. We were elitists, that’s all.” Is this a sincere cry for the death of liberal Britain? If it is, what’s it doing in the mouth of a character whose only interest is objectifying and owning one woman? Is it even worth wondering when elsewhere the writing involves such nadirs of laziness as the image “whizzing about like Ironside on acid”? Probably not: there are no hidden depths to *The Nothing*. It is exactly what it sounds like.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/04/the-nothing-by-hanif-kureishi-review>]

## Hanif Kureishi: “Britain’s middle class is more racist than ever”

*The My Beautiful Laundrette writer on Brexit Britain, collaborating with his sons and seeing his seventh novel as a B movie*

The afternoon I meet Hanif Kureishi seems fittingly ominous, with dark skies and swirling wind a reflection of the political weather. Over in Westminster, Theresa May is busy triggering Article 50, and fulfilling the will of the British people (little did we know, of course, what further turbulence was to come, with the election called this week).

Meanwhile, Kureishi and I set up shop in a jolly brasserie in Shepherd’s Bush, west London, with polished wood and a chequerboard floor; he sips a glass of red, I chug an espresso and, despite the day, there is something cheerfully European about the whole scene.

There’s also something about Kureishi that chimes with the mood of the times: laconic and deadpan in manner, he alternates between intense seriousness and comical flippancy; there’s a sort of throwaway, geezer donnishness to him. Here we are, he points out with relish, “the hated metropolitan elite”, as if it is chiefly a matter of naughtiness, of occupying the countercultural margins. But at the close of our conversation, when I ask him if there’s anything he would like to expand on, he becomes focused and exact: race, he says, is the thing he thinks and worries

about the most. He refers to the Britain of his youth and early adulthood (he is now 62), which he memorably charted in early work such as *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and *The Buddha of Suburbia*; the waning of the racism of early multiculturalism and of the emergence of London, “a new idea”.

“And then,” he continues, “the turn against it from, apparently, the rest of the country.” He invokes his father, Rafiushan, who came to this country from India, via Pakistan, in his 20s, married an English woman called Audrey and with her brought up two children in Bromley, south London; Kureishi commemorated their relationship in his 2004 memoir, *My Ear at His Heart*. “The idea of the immigrant coming here to take your benefits, take your women, laze around, watch telly, all of that...” he says now. “Immigrants are the hardest working people. My father used to say to me, and I say to my kids every day, we haven’t come here to sit around on our arse, we’ve come here to make a living, serve this country, work. That has been very shocking and disappointing, and upsets me.”

Not just disappointed: angry at the lack of acknowledgement of the role postcolonial immigrant communities have played, “that Britain’s wealth came out of the empire, and we all came here, to Bradford, to the NHS, to the transport system, and how the Commonwealth and the ex-empire created the wealth of this country. And I feel very bitter about the hatred that is directed against us on a racial basis, when in fact we have served this country. My father was a British subject; my father hated the idea that people would say he was an immigrant. He wasn’t someone from elsewhere, he was from India, which was part of the British empire. The lack of gratitude, or sense of history, that the wealth of this great city, one of the greatest in the world, comes out of Britain’s relations with the rest of the world – that is so horrific to me.”

The country he thought of as a place of tolerance has now, he fears, provided a space for an “utterly misconceived and misplaced and vile” form of racism, the demonisation of the Other, the positioning of Muslims as “backward, misogynistic, racist, anti-gay”, the like of which he says we haven’t

seen since the 30s. But, he insists: "I don't think it's the working class. People say it's the working class, finally they have risen up, had enough, been deprived, and finally said, 'Well it's the Poles and the Pakis,' etcetera. I don't think so. I think it's a large section of the middle class who are really losing their place. They are more racist than they have ever been."

Grimly urgent though this subject is, we talk of much else besides: writing for and watching television; his 23-year-old twin sons, Carlo and Sachin, with whom he is working on small-screen projects; the ever-changing nature of sexuality, so evident just now; the long legacy of the 60s. In fact, though, our central purpose in meeting is *The Nothing*, Kureishi's seventh novel – there are also three collections of short stories, and plays, screenplays and non-fiction. *The Nothing*, a punchy, disturbing fable, tells of an elderly film-maker, Waldo, confined to his flat by physical disintegration and approaching death, and the lengths he takes to head off his younger wife's affair with a charming wastrel.

"Go on," says Kureishi, when I turn to the book. "Thrash me!"

But I enjoyed it, I reply. "Did you? Good." He envisaged it as a B movie, he explains; he'd been watching a lot of noir – "gangsters, con men, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Rita Hayworth, all those movies" – and reading Simenon, whom he loves.

Layered on to that cultural form is the long tradition of the cuckold, complete with references filmic and literary to the idea of the watching man, both voyeur and victim, plotting his revenge. Of its brevity, Kureishi adds, "It's short but it's the most I can manage these days."

It's a claustrophobic portrait of domestic disharmony, and of the fading of life, of sexual power and creative and social energy. "As you get older, and your friends get older and more infirm, you get this sense of leaving, and one feels it oneself, this leaving the world," Kureishi says. Despite his not feeling up to writing 1,000-page bildungsromans, there seems little evidence of this. There is also, in the novel's depiction of cuckoo in the nest Eddie, a thoroughly recognisable type: the chancer, half-contemptible, half-pitiable; always, as Waldo points out, first at the party to hop on to someone else's drinks tab.

But for Kureishi, Eddie was more than a bon viveur sponger. He was also drawn from the writer's real-life experience of being swindled by his accountant, captured in Kureishi's 2014 essay, "A Theft: My Con Man". "Naturally," he wrote then, "I identified with the con man and his omnipotence over the other, and not with his victims. But in this case I was the

victim; I was the seduced, taken one. Jeff Chandler [the name Kureishi gave his accountant in the essay] had helped himself to my money, and he had robbed me of more than that: of an orientating and useful connection with reality, which, once it had slipped away, left me feeling bereft, abject, dizzy and out of control. He had done me over, and done me in."

Alongside the bare-bones detail of the fraud, "A Theft" homes in on the idea of criminal seduction, of the confusion of reality and artifice; likening their upbringings in the postwar London suburbs. Now, he still ponders on how "ashamed you feel, how powerless. You think, 'How could somebody like me, a reasonably smart person, get so fucked over by another?'"

Did Chandler, "a man who is even now as we speak behind bars", ever read his victim's essay? "I don't know. I thought you weren't allowed to read books in prison any more." It's a deflection, although a witty one. "I remember it going on – they weren't allowed to read, and you think, what are they supposed to do all day, when they are not sewing mailbags?"

I point out to him that his recent work – *The Last Word*, for example, his 2014 novel about an ageing, monstrous novelist, his wives and his ghostwriter – has tended towards the enclosed, the domestic; he also cites his screen

work, such as his collaboration with Roger Michell on the marital awayday drama, *Le Week-End*. But now, he says, “I’m writing a kid thing”, referring to a six-part TV series he’s working on with Sachin, which centres on a young Syrian refugee who comes to work as a driver for a rock star in Notting Hill. “He’s doing most of the work,” he says of his son.

Sachin’s brother, Carlo (the twins are the children of Kureishi’s marriage to Tracey Scoffield; he also has a son, Kier, with his partner Monique Proudlove) is also collaborating with his father on a TV project. “I said, ‘Listen, mate, you’re getting so much attention. You should be so lucky, you wouldn’t get this at university.’” Kureishi sees the process as a gift to both his sons, a liberation from the current vicissitudes of the employment market: “They worked as interns like everybody does, making tea, then they worked in bars for six quid an hour, then they were sitting at home doing nothing, so I said let’s write a movie.”

Clearly – although he would probably steer clear of such soppy language – it’s enriching him, too. “I never had a sort of third age relationship with my parents. When I left home at 17 or 18, and came to London, I never looked back. Obviously I saw them, rang them up, all of that, but we never worked together in this kind of way, we never collaborated together in a

new way. So it’s an experiment, as it were, to see what’s it like to be friends with your own children.”

Harnessing his children’s energy is also a way for Kureishi to expand his already prolific work for the screen; he hasn’t enough oomph to write six hours of TV on his own, he insists. And yet he sees the medium – particularly US TV, and ground-breaking shows such as *Transparent* – as a magnet for innovation and imagination. And for audiences: “Everybody watches television – you go round anybody’s house for a drink or for dinner, they are all saying we’re watching this, we’re watching that, they can’t wait for you to go home so they can carry on watching *The Americans*.” We discuss whether novels ever commanded this sort of cultural space, and Kureishi riffs on the days when everyone read Calvino, Kundera, García Márquez. “If you didn’t know who Jean-Paul Sartre was, you couldn’t go to a party.” Has that disappeared? “I don’t know if it occupies the same place. It would be a shame.”

Kureishi describes his own early years of work – the Royal Court at 18, the Riverside, the BBC – as characterised by “a lot of breaks”, and by the attention and kindness of others. One of the things he is keenest to impart to his sons is that, while there are a thousand things you need to

know about writing, perhaps the most important is to be able to deal with the frustration and boredom of it – especially in the rewrite-obsessed world of TV. Sachin, he says, asked him if it was always like that, having to do things over and over again. “I said yeah, and that’s why I write novels, because when you write novels, no one fucks you about. You write it, and they publish it.”

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/21/hanif-kureishi-interview-britain-middle-class-more-racist>]

