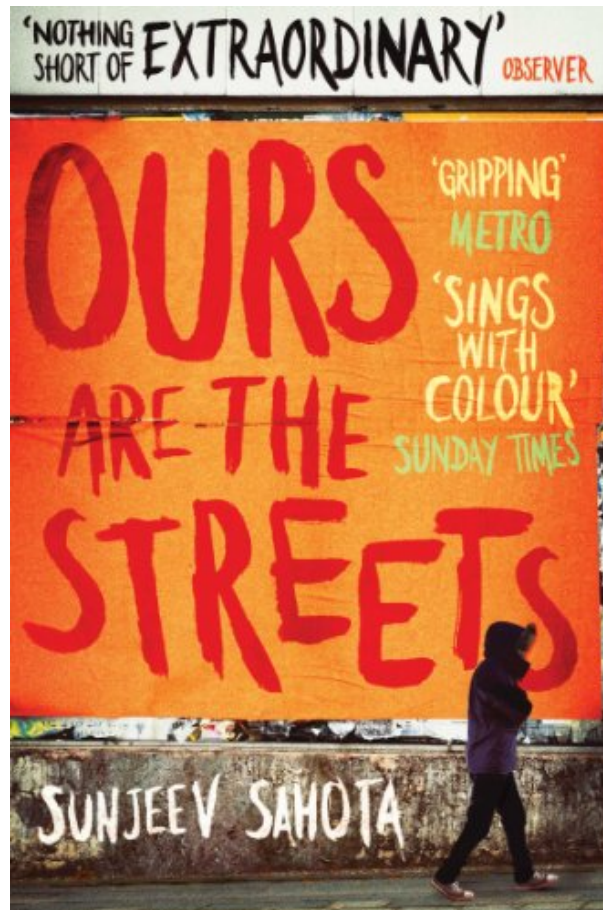
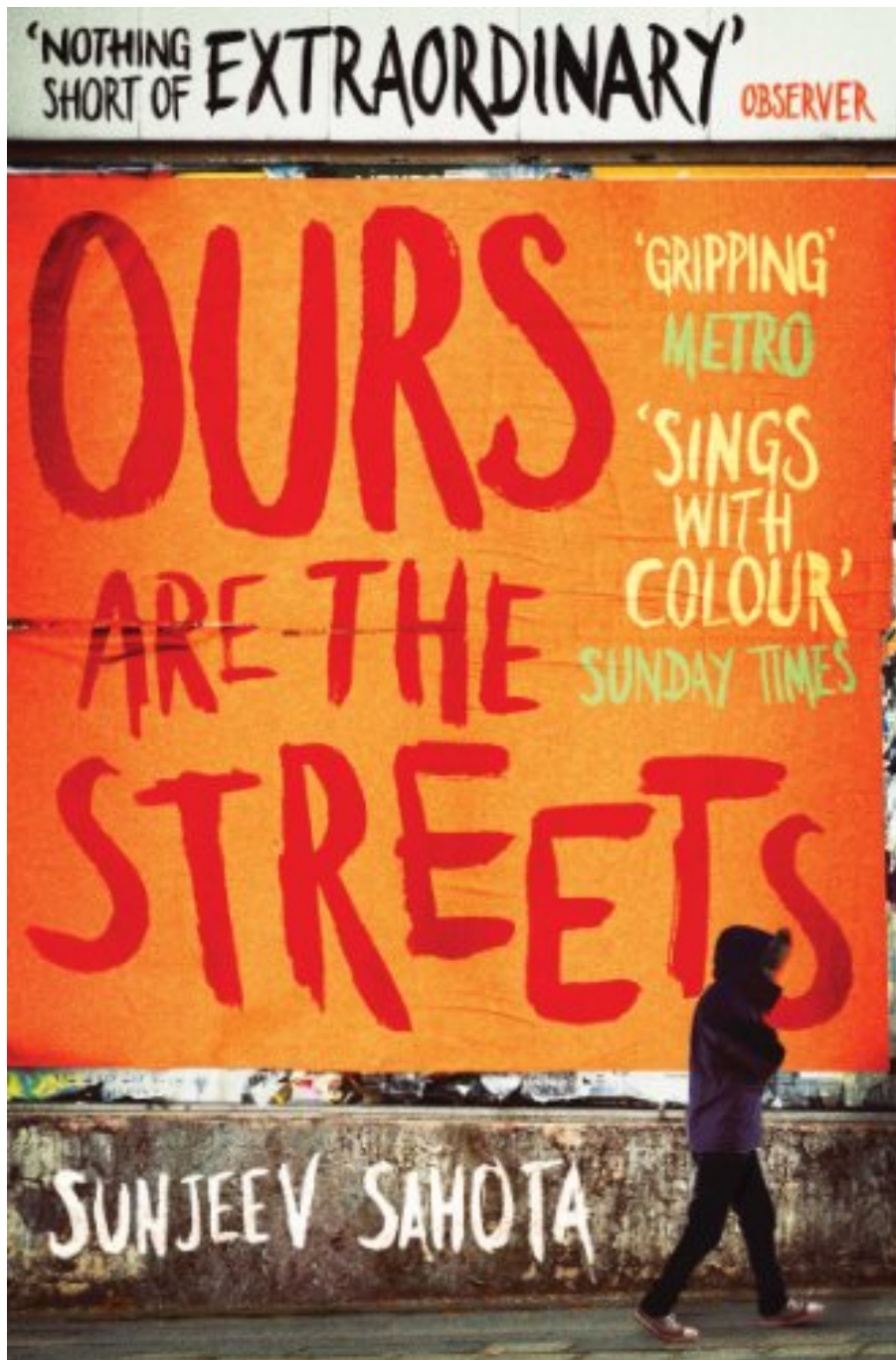


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Review

"A compelling tale of a young man's shift from ordinary British teenager to Muslim Radical." Bookseller"

About the Author

Sunjeev Sahota was born in 1981 in Derbyshire and continues to live in the area. *Ours are the Streets* is his first novel.

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When Imtiaz Raina leaves England for the first time, to bury his father on his family's land near Lahore, he exchanges his uncertain life in Sheffield for a road that leads to the mountains of Kashmir and Afghanistan. Once back in Yorkshire, he writes through the night to his young wife Becka and baby daughter Noor, and tries to explain, in a story full of affection and yearning, what has happened to him -- and why he has a devastating new sense of home. From the reviews: 'Genuine, poignant ...A moral work of real intelligence and power' John Burnside, The Times 'What Sahota creates is not an exploration of the psyche of a suicide bomber, but an exploration of a man' Yorkshire Post 'Startling. This book successfully humanizes one of the great demons of contemporary society, and for that, Sunjeev Sahota should be given a high five off the Queen or something' Dazed and Confused, 'Book of the Month' 'Imtiaz's journey to Pakistan, and his sense of belonging, gives the novel much of its eloquence. Great literary promise' Independent 'Excruciatingly well-written' Guardian 'The book's great force lies in its voice: that of a young man straining to express instincts, fears and emotional conflicts, lending his writing a distinctive vibrancy' Observer 'An acute debut. What is most chilling, and most successful, is that it all seems so familiar, so close and so easy' Sunday Times

- Sales Rank: #251917 in Books
- Published on: 2011-09-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.76" h x .79" w x 5.12" l, .66 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 256 pages

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Very fine work.

By RG

A sobering look at a religiously radicalized European. Very fine work.

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REASON IS THE TRAITOR

By DAVID BRYSON

Suicide bombers often leave valedictory/maledictory messages, but this is the first diary of a suicide bomber, albeit a fictional one, that I have read. The author is only turning 30 this year, but he knows the culture that breeds jihadists, he has the talent to tell us about it via a novel, it has helped my own understanding of the

issue and I can hardly be alone in looking for that.

How any reader reacts to this story is obviously going to depend on the reader's politics. I myself opposed the war in Iraq from the outset and I am increasingly unsure what 'we' are trying to achieve in Afghanistan. I can understand perfectly well the outrage caused by arrogant and patronising western attitudes, let alone the hatred that must be sown, like dragon's teeth waiting to send up a harvest of warriors, in the communities who are having to put up with not only casual brutality but also the self-righteousness that goes with it. However we react to this story and to the real-world events that it mirrors, we should at least not be surprised at suicide bombing. Struggles against foreign occupations are always violent, as the history of colonial uprisings, going all the way back to the foundation of the USA, demonstrates at a glance. Also, attacks on civilians are not new either nor restricted to any jihad. Any grandiose western advocate, such as Air Marshall Harris (of Dresden fame), of 'total war' is guilty of the same 'end justifies the means' thinking and practice. Simple rationality should tell us this, but simple rationality is often the last thing that people want to hear if they are in the grip of 'beliefs'.

One of the things I like best about this novel is that it does not sensationalise the atrocities but keeps its spotlight on the narrator, a very ordinary young Moslem living in Sheffield. Not only that, the book deals, briefly but adequately, with the whole nature of the 'belief' that leads someone to behave in such a way, a way so alien, one might think, to ordinary human values. You will find a short dialogue on pages 205 and 206 between the narrator Imtiaz and one Faisal who seems to have tipped Imtiaz finally into his irrevocable decision. At the rational level, what Faisal says is a string of non-sequiturs and misuses of words. When he talks about 'knowing' what he means is that he feels sure. Believing, however confidently, is entirely in the mind of the believer. Knowing is of facts that are the way they are even when nobody knows them. Facts cannot be created or stipulated by belief, however fervent. Faisal says quite clearly that his belief in God comes from his belief that without God a lot else would not make sense to him. I know this way of thinking very well indeed from a traditional Christian background, but it is not rationality - it is reasoning back to front and admitting that religious faith is make-believe. However, when a certain idea has caught on and provides inspiration and motivation, sense and rationality have to struggle and indeed are liable to be portrayed as treason.

I like the way the plot is worked, with its constant switches of time-frame and location as Imtiaz moves around between Sheffield Pakistan and Afghanistan. The only fully developed character is Imtiaz himself, but his wife and family are quite convincingly portrayed, or at least they convinced me. When all is said and done, this is a depiction of a Moslem community by an author who is, I have to suppose, a member of that community at least by descent although I would not like to guess his politics or his religious convictions, if any. I did not detect any overt preaching in the tale. Imtiaz himself finally buys into the suicide-club, but important though that might sound it does not come across as the dominant side to his personality, which is indeed a rather ordinary one in many ways, and certainly with no pretence to specially lofty moral standards.

Sheffield is not very far from where I live, but for all that I don't know it very well. Descriptions of the narrator's life there do not purport to paint any portrait of the city, and the general picture of life in a modest Moslem immigrant family is much as I would have supposed it to be in Manchester or, I suppose, anywhere else in England. The stay in Pakistan is more evocative as you might expect, and the shorter passages set in Afghanistan are what you might expect too, making it clear enough without any hype or hysteria why sections of the Moslem nation bear us in the west the kind of deep-seated grudge that fuels their drive for bloody vengeance.

The style is very readable but a bit faux-naif, mixing a perfectly literate style with a determination to use 'were' for 'was' on every occasion, which is not really what speakers of the local patois do, nor do they say

`sempit' anywhere near as frequently as Imtiaz does. One passage in particular may be giving Sunjeev Sahota away as a bit of a class tourist, when Aaqil says `They turn the land to dust and call this peace?' Plain Moslem folks don't, in my experience, commonly quote Tacitus, whose statement (in the Agricola) I shall therefore give in all its Latin pretentiousness `ubi solitudinem faciunt pacem appellant.'

This book is worth taking seriously, partly as a very interesting and promising debut effort from a talented writer. Just in its own right, whatever the author's talent and whatever he may produce in years to come, the book demands our attention for the light it sheds on a community we are going to have to understand better, whatever way that comes about.

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