



on the governors.

It would be unfair to criticise a book for what it never sets out to be, although the people and the detail tend to crowd out some of the policy. There is also perhaps an understandable bias of interest in the past, with two-thirds of the book devoted to the first half of the BBC's existence, inevitably leading to later compression.

The chairmanship of George Howard, for example, is reduced to noting that he was a Tory land-owning Whig who wanted to entertain lavishly at the expense of licence payers and required young women to be produced on foreign trips. And apart from the Real Lives row, which under-



## Hendy details rows with government from the General Strike to the Falklands and Iraq wars, and Margaret Thatcher's visceral, ideological hatred of the BBC. Frozen licence fees are nothing new either

Kingdom, was mainly about the details of policymaking. Hendy is more interested in the people who actually created the institution through its programmes, often made by anarchic, creative individuals finding free space despite the bureaucracy above them.

Their voices are all here because Hendy had access to what he believes is one of the corporation's most underused treasures: several hundred candid oral interviews with former staff. They include former director generals but also receptionists and lift attendants. The result is a treasure trove of marvellous detail and some revelations.

We hear, for instance, that British national treasure David Attenborough was rejected as presenter for the intellectual quiz show *Animal, Vegetable or Mineral?* because it was judged that his teeth were too big for television. Attenborough was, however, allowed to choose the objects and organise the boozy lunches that enlivened the subsequent broadcasts, before moving on to greater things.

After the first edition of the groundbreaking *That Was the Week That Was*, which ushered in the age of satire, the cast jumped into taxis to go to a Kings Road restaurant to dine on beef and mango while waiting for the early editions of the Sunday papers and rave reviews.

More significantly, the reason given for closing down *TWTWTW* – that you couldn't run such a programme in 1964, an election year – was, of course, nonsense. The real reason was government pressure

mined then director general Alasdair Milne, his chairman at the time, Stuart Young, manages only a couple of paragraphs.

A People's History has carved out its own domain and is a valuable contribution to understanding how the very concept of broadcasting had to be created from a blank page and repeatedly reinvented in the face of changing technology and, now, rapidly changing public taste.

Hendy lovingly recreates just how remarkable that achievement was and still is, and how the danger is that it might be underestimated because of the series of internal crises and inquiries, many self-inflicted, including the Hutton inquiry into Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, the death of David Kelly, the Jimmy Savile scandal, and Martin Bashir's Princess Diana interview.

Alas, the old nostrum proves true that when the UK is divided, and it is now, the BBC "is always on the rack". For Hendy, the BBC has never been about payment for a commodity for oneself – it is about contributing to a reservoir of shared knowledge or collective experience. And like retired nurse Greenway long ago: "we sometimes never know how much we need or want something until it's gone".

The book is essential reading for Nadine Dorries before she starts tweeting again on the BBC and its licence fee.

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# The brutal beauty of family dynamics

Helen Cullen

Love Marriage  
By Monica Ali

Virago, 512pp, £18.99

**M**onica Ali, the English-Bangladeshi author of the Booker shortlisted *Brick Lane*, has returned to publishing after a 10-year hiatus. In 2003, that debut novel so masterfully chronicled Britain's multicultural landscape that it launched Ali into the literary stratosphere with phenomenal critical acclaim and international success. Her three subsequent novels demonstrated an ambition to keep exploring new terrains, surprising critics and fans alike with each new offering, though often to mixed reviews. Ali is back with aplomb, and *Love Marriage* has been worth the wait.

The novel begins as a social comedy with the finely tuned cultural observations only found in the very best works of the East meets West literary tradition. Two junior doctors, Yasmin Ghorami and Joe Sansger, are to be wed, fusing the bride's conservative Indian family with the groom's white, middle-class, bourgeois, feminist mother.

There is no overt prejudice on either side. In fact, as Joe tells Yasmin, his "mother is a bit disappointed you're not more Indian. Your parents are authentic enough to give her an orgasm". Ali's wit is warm, her insights acute, with comedic timing sliced just close enough to the bone to hit its mark.

Before long, however, Ali makes devastating work of digging into the subterranean layers of these families' lives. This great archaeological dig to uncover what is at the heart of contemporary humanity truly delivers on the promise of what *Brick Lane* suggested might come next from Ali. In a world where, increasingly, any nuance in debate, philosophy or opinion is condemned, battle lines have never been more severely drawn.

### Good versus evil

The eternal struggle of good versus evil is more polarised than perhaps ever before, as what constitutes right and wrong is rigidly defined. It can be perilous to introduce complexity for fear of misinterpretation or condemnation, and yet Ali offers a heroic antidote to this societal malaise. Fearless in her disavowal of black and white answers, the world of *Love Marriage* is depicted in myriad shades of grey that cumulatively create a blinding silver light of illumination.

The novel begins: "In the Ghorami household sex was never mentioned. If the television was on and a kissing-

with-tongues scene threatened the chaste and cardamom-scented home, it was swiftly terminated by a flick of a black box." Many of us growing up in traditional Irish families will recognise that same panicked lurch for the remote. Some are still scarred by the Miley/Fidelma scandal in RTÉ's *Glenroe* way back in the 1990s, so we can readily recognise ourselves in the Ghorami family who treat sex as the ultimate taboo.

What we are also far too familiar with as a society is the painful reality of the dark secrets that often lay undiscovered beneath cultural silences such as these. Ali's delicate unravelling of the secret burning threads that tie families in knots for generations is exquisite.

### Receiving and delivering hurts

The beating heart of this novel is the author's uncompromising scrutiny of the messy, heart-breaking, head-wrecking, brutal beauty of family dynamics. All the characters are flawed, capable of receiving and delivering hurts, and a bundle of contradictions. This may be true of us all but, when the full gamut of potential human behaviour is captured with grit and grace on the page, it truly elevates the literature to become a lens of enlightenment through which we can finally see ourselves. Heroes and anti-heroes fuse to create multidimensional characters who each evoke huge empathy.

Ali's rendering of sibling-parent relationships – father and daughter, mother and daughter, mother and son – is a masterclass in family psychology played out with subtlety, intellect and great humour. All of our initial impressions of these characters are subverted by the end, as they each become more clear-sighted about their family members, and begin to see each other as individuals, the protagonists in their own stories. We too, like Yasmin, so often make "all sorts of misjudgements and assumptions". Again, like so many of us, "she'd taken Ma for granted, thought of her as just Ma, and not a person".

By the conclusion of *Love Marriage*, we find peace in reconciliation of the complicated truth that "life is not simple".

If *Brick Lane* was the novel readers needed in 2003 to help them understand the society they were mired in, *Love Marriage* could be the novel we all desperately need to read in 2022. Rich, insightful, soulful, with a cast of characters not easily forgotten, this is a traditional novel in the best sense of the word. It offers the sort of immersive reading experience that may remind you why you first fell in love with reading.

Do I take this novel into my heart forever? I do.