

# Monica Ali: 'My children say I'm the worst storyteller ever'

[Kate Kellaway](#)



Monica Ali: 'Without comedy, the capacity for self-delusion is endless.' Photograph: Yolande De Vries

Monica Ali, 54, is the author of four novels but best known for her first, *Brick Lane* (2003), which catapulted her to fame even before it was published, earning her a place on Granta's best young British novelists list. *Love Marriage* is her first book for 10 years and a publishing event in its own right: a serious, subtle, hugely entertaining exploration of relationships. At its centre is Yasmin, a doctor from an Indian family (Ali is of Bangladeshi and English heritage) and her fiancé, Joe, a

fellow doctor and son of a liberal, middle-class firebrand of a mother. She lives in London with her husband and their two grown-up children.

### **Why has it taken so long to get this novel written?**

I went through a time of deciding I wasn't going to write. I had a total loss of confidence. A healthy dose of self-doubt is good for any writer, but you also have to have self-belief. A total loss of confidence is catastrophic. I found I was depressed when I wasn't writing and the depression fed into not being able to write – it was a downward spiral.

### **What got you out of it?**

I thought maybe I could write TV drama. I sank my teeth into learning to write scripts. Everybody said it was a tough thing to get into and that I'd feel beaten up by the process. I never found that, although, when the first thing I pitched was accepted by the BBC, I thought: "Easy!" [she laughs] and then... it never got made.

### **Do you think *Brick Lane's* success was too much too soon?**

Looking back, I was kidding myself. When asked about writing with a baby, a toddler and with little childcare, I'd merrily say: "It was fine, I wrote when they were napping." I wish I'd been able to enjoy the publication process more. It took me away from home more than I wanted and I struggled with that. It had an impact I didn't acknowledge because I thought I ought to be able to

cope with everything, that it would be unbecoming to moan.

## **When did you first realise you had a gift for storytelling?**

It's funny because my children say I'm the worst storyteller ever. "Arrrgh... Mum's starting a story again..." They're not talking about my books, but if I'm telling a story at the dinner table, they immediately start rolling their eyes. I'd like to think it says nothing about me and a lot about the parent/child relationship.

Friends ask what the book is about. I say: love and marriage. But actually, it hinges on sex

**In *Love Marriage*, you send everyone up... is there absurdity in all of us and is it important to recognise that?**

It is how I see the world. Humour is a serious business because without comedy, the capacity for self-delusion is limitless. Comedy keeps us intellectually honest and enables us to embrace our human folly and strive with good-heartedness. It's a prescription against falling into pessimism.

## **If you were sending yourself up, what would you home in on?**

Ridiculous amounts of overanxiety, perfectionism and fears with which I torture myself... I laugh about it but I'm a great catastrophiser. I can see something happening to someone else, even across the world, and start imagining it happening to me.

## **What is a love marriage and don't all marriages end up to some extent arranged?**

Friends and acquaintances ask what the book is about. I say: love and marriage. But actually, it hinges on sex. Infidelity, revenge sex, sexual addiction...

## **I must confess (without spoilers) I have a crush on middle-aged, single Dr Pepperdine.**

There's a Pepperdine fan club at Virago, they've all got the hots for him!

## **Harriet, Joe's mother, is less irresistible: she believes herself tactful but is entitled and invasive – Jane Austen could not have done a better job characterising her. Do you know any Harriets?**

I have known Harriets and continue to meet them. Yasmin is pissed off when assumptions are made on the basis of her ethnicity. There can be a reflex attitude that [as a person of colour] you must, at all times, be a flag-bearer or an oracle and this can override complexity.

## **Your characterisation of Joe's therapist is spot-on. I gather your mother was a therapist?**

I've been in therapy for some years and been able to draw on that. I've done research, too, reading people like Gabor Maté. I'm deeply interested in the psychology of relationships, peeling back layers. If I were to change, a therapist is the career I'd be drawn to.

## **What did your father do?**

He started as a civil engineer in Dhaka and worked in a factory when he came here and could not get any other job. He then went back to university and started teaching Open University courses.



Tannishtha Chatterjee in the 2007 film adaptation of *Brick Lane*, directed by Sarah Gavron. Photograph: c Sony Pics/Everett/Rex Featur

## **You grew up in Bolton and studied politics, philosophy and economics at Oxford?**

I had a fantastic time at Oxford – I felt like a fish out of water but quickly found a group of friends.

## **So much of your novel is about parental influence. Is there any parental advice you still follow?**

The advice my father most frequently gives is: "Take it easy." But I don't take it easy. And besides, I don't think he *really* means it.

## **What is the most important thing to remember as the**

**parent of grown-up children?** Mine are 20 and 22. The main thing to remember is it only gets more complicated. What I can do now is to listen to them and not impose my view.

**You show deep understanding of loneliness in old age. Is this something you fear?**

I've had discussions with friends about how we're going to start a commune together. The thought of doing things completely in isolation – even though, as a writer, I spend a lot of time on my own – is not good.

**Will we have to wait another 10 years for your next novel?**

I'm adapting *Love Marriage* for TV. This novel poured out of me – 240,000 words, which I cut down. But television is very story-hungry and there are scenes I can resurrect. For now, Yasmin and Joe continue – they are still a thing in my life.

*Love Marriage* by Monica Ali is published by Virago (£16.99). To support the *Guardian* and *Observer* order your copy at [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com). Delivery charges may apply