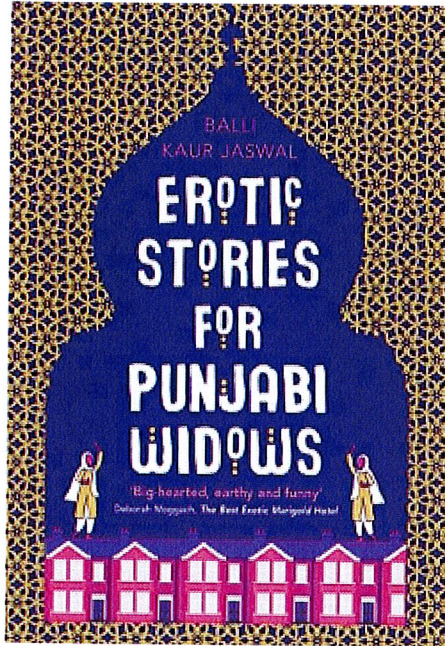


Friday, 14 July 2017

Q & A: Balli Kaur Jaswal



Balli Kaur Jaswal is a Singaporean novelist of Punjabi extraction. As a child, she lived all over the world, thanks to her roaming diplomat father. After studying for an undergraduate creative writing degree in the US she continued work on her first novel, *Inheritance*, during a year spent in the UK, where she was a recipient of the David TK Wong Fellowship at the University of East Anglia – an award made annually to a novelist whose work deals with some aspect of East Asia. She then moved to Australia to do a postgraduate teaching degree in Melbourne, where she met her partner. She ended up staying in Melbourne for 5 years. In 2014, *Inheritance* won the Sydney Morning Herald's Best Young Australian Novelist Award. She then moved back to Singapore, and in 2015 her second novel *Sugarbread* was a finalist for the city-state's richest literary prize, the

Epigram Books Fiction Prize. Her recently-published third novel, *Erotic Stories For Punjabi Widows*, was the subject of a hotly-contested auction won by HarperCollins, in London, for a six-figure GBP sum.

Erotic Stories For Punjabi Widows follows members of the Punjabi immigrant community in the UK as they struggle to negotiate between two cultures. It is set in London, in Southall, an area which is home to a large Punjabi population. Balli says her novel is about “a group of Punjabi widows who sign up for a literacy class, which quickly evolves into a space where they can speak freely about things that their community considers taboo. At first, their discussions are centred on erotic fantasies but as the trust builds, the women become empowered to break their silence about other injustices in the community.”

If an interviewer were allowed to ask you only 1 question about *Erotic Stories For Punjabi Widows*, what question would you recommend her to ask? Why? And what would be your answer?

Readers often want to ask if a story is based in reality. I'd like to propose a slight variation of that question: “Could a group of invisible women really start a feminist revolution in their conservative community?” To which I would reply: “Yes.” Everything that happens in this novel is possible, because when the right combination of women find each other and find a space to speak out, there's a lot that they can change.

Yours is a teasing title. How early on did you decide on the title? Were there other contenders? If so, what were they and why did you reject them?

This is the first time that a book title came to me so quickly and clearly. At the time that this novel started to take shape in my mind, I was in conversations with Sleepers Publishing, the original publishers in Australia for *Inheritance*, about changing the title – the original title was *When Amrit Returns* but they felt that the name *Amrit* would alienate readers, as names in titles often do. I actually agreed with them, because whenever I told people the title, I had to say it slowly – it didn't roll off the tongue very easily. So, when embarking on this next project, maybe I was thinking about making my title very clear, catchy and literary. The only internal debate I had was about whether it should be "for" Punjabi widows or "by" Punjabi widows since the latter is more accurate, but I decided that the stories were as much for serving the widow community as it was by them, so I stuck with that.

What did you think of *Fifty Shades of Grey*? As you were writing, did it ever worry you that erotic stories for women could be considered cringe-worthy wish-fulfilment fantasies?

I've never read *Fifty Shades of Grey*, although some press outlets have claimed that I was inspired by the novel. I'm not sure where they got that idea from, but I do remember that *Fifty Shades of Grey* was selling like hotcakes around the time that I started writing *Erotic Stories For Punjabi Widows* and I joked with people that I was going to write the Punjabi version. Erotica is not a genre I know much about, to be honest, and I had to do some research to figure out the language and tone of the women's stories. There's a whole range out there, from the very direct and crass to the more coy and suggestive. I decided that the widows wouldn't shy away from being a bit vulgar but their stories would also maintain some measure of decorum. Realistically, that's how they'd communicate with each other because they were opening up and discussing intimate details, but a sense of propriety had been instilled in them for too long to suddenly vanish.

You take on the disregard of older women, particularly of older women's sexuality, in the Punjabi community. Do you see the disregard of older women in the Punjabi community as being much different from the general disregard of older women worldwide, in any community?

I don't think it's very different, although women's sexuality, especially outside of marriage, is already quite taboo in the Punjabi community, so the idea of elderly Punjabi widows having sexual fantasies is an even bigger leap to take.

You also take on honour killings, and violence against women. Which is more important: for a woman to be able to talk openly about sex, or for a woman to be able to talk openly about honour killings in her community? Can the two be separated? Are they equally important?

In the novel, the women's frank discussions of sex give them the confidence and sense of empowerment to speak up about other injustices against females in the community. The shattering of one taboo leads to others. I can't see the two as separate because there's a domino effect in this context.

One of your widows, Tarampal, is damaged, but not redeemed. What did you yourself think of Tarampal? How did you expect readers to respond to her?

Perhaps you had no expectations?

She was a complex and challenging character to write, because she was so wounded and indoctrinated, but she's also very conniving – she benefits from the same community structures that oppressed her. I expected readers to pity her to some extent but also recognise that ultimately, she made the choice to use her power in an insidious way, and to continue to perpetuate the silencing of women. Some of the other widows have had traumatic pasts as well but they decided to unite, while Tarampal's interests were in dividing and conquering.

Traditionally-minded Kulwinder, who sets up the widows' literacy class, is a much more sympathetic character, as is your main protagonist, Nikki, the modern miss who Kulwinder appoints to teach the widows to read and write in English. What did you yourself think of Kulwinder and Nikki? How did you expect readers to respond to them? Perhaps you had no expectations?

Kulwinder and Nikki both grow so much in this novel, and while they sit on nearly opposite ends of a spectrum in the beginning, this journey brings them closer to meeting in the middle. Before the novel opens, Kulwinder's beloved only daughter, Maya, has died in horrible circumstances, and I really sympathised with her, even when she was being too stern with Nikki, because she had lost her daughter in the one place that she thought she'd be safe as a migrant in England. Kulwinder followed cultural expectations, albeit blindly sometimes, and paid such a hefty price for it with Maya's death. I expected readers to connect with her, to see that her prickliness has more to do with circumstance than personality, and to cheer her on when she decides to come through for Nikki in the end.

Your widows have to contend with a fundamentalist Sikh group, the Brothers. Are the Brothers based on a real network of men in the London Sikh community?

The Brothers are fictional, but there have been recent cases of fundamentalist Sikh men in smaller cities in England interrupting interfaith weddings and considering it their duty. I find it despicable that these people have taken it upon themselves to become the morality police – their actions aren't about morality, they're about insecurity and control.

Who has the greater need to read *Erotic Stories For Punjabi Widows*, Punjabi widows, or conservative Punjabi men inclined to join organisations similar to the Brothers?

Although I'd love to see those men read *Erotic Stories For Punjabi Widows*, I doubt it would do them much good unless they're educated first in a number of ways.

Have any less-bullying men in the Sikh community read your novel? If so, how have they reacted?

I haven't heard from many men in the Sikh community, but those who have reached out have been very positive and encouraging. A number of Sikh men from India and other parts of the world have gotten in touch to say how much they learned from the book, which is wonderful and unexpected.

Debarring "what other titles has Balli Kaur Jaswal written, where can I get hold of them, and how many copies should I buy for my friends?", what questions do you hope linger in readers' minds after they've finished *Erotic Stories For Punjabi Widows*?

I hope readers continue to seek out novels and stories that explore the complexities of managing expectations within cultures as well as across cultures. One question might be: how can I find out more about migrant communities in the West, and what can I do to gain a nuanced understanding of them? What are my impressions of people from these communities, and how might these impressions be flawed or one-dimensional? I think we all have a great deal to learn.

INTERVIEW: BALLI KAUR JASWAL, AUTHOR OF EROTIC STORIES FOR PUNJABI WIDOWS

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Balli Kaur Jaswal is the author of three novels. She won the Best Young Australian Novelist Award in 2014 for her first book *Inheritance*. Her second novel *Sugarbread* is a finalist for the 2018 Singapore Literature Prize. Her most recent book *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* was published in March 2017 by HarperCollins.

In *Erotic Stories*, Nikki is struggling to build her independent life in London after distancing herself from the Sikh Punjabi community of her immigrant parents. But when fate and circumstances bring Nikki back to the Sikh temple and community centre in Southall, she believes she has found her calling as she signs up to teach a creative writing class for Sikh women. Her class participants — Punjabi widows — have other plans.

Through the lively imagination of the widows and Nikki's persistence, Balli Kaur Jaswal crafts a story that is both compassionate about tradition and critical of the taboos surrounding sexuality in South Asian cultures. The book provides a rich account of the strength of its women characters and an insight into the patriarchal institutions that feel threatened by the women's expression.

We spoke with Balli Kaur Jaswal about the inspiration behind *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*, her worldview as a writer, and the characters she found most challenging to write.

Q. *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* has an incredibly impressive “What If”. At one point in the novel, Mindi tells Nikki, “Who would believe that a bunch of old bibis would be sitting around talking about sex?” Please tell us how you came up with the idea. How did your observations or experiences of the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora communities help in fleshing out the novel's premise?

Balli Kaur Jaswal (BKJ): It started with just that – a “what if” question. I had always been curious about how the women in my grandmother’s generation experienced sex and sexual desire, because it’s considered so taboo. I wondered especially about how the women would have come to know about sex; I hoped that they weren’t taken by surprise on their wedding nights, and that somebody informed and explained the logistics, at least. But then what about desire and pleasure?

“I also think that fiction is a great medium for giving a voice to the voiceless, because storytelling provokes empathy, curiosity, and a sense of solidarity between narrator and reader.” – Balli Kaur Jaswal

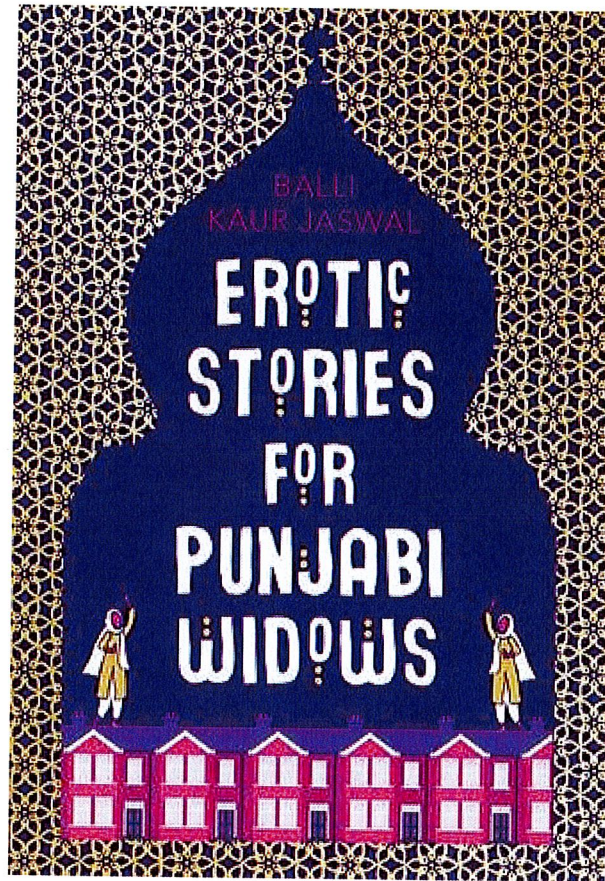
I spent a year in England between 2007-2008 on a fellowship at the University of East Anglia, working on my first novel, *Inheritance*. I spent some time in Southall during those forays into its rather insular Punjabi community, I realized that it was the perfect setting for a story about east-west clashes within communities.

The novel’s premise occurred to me only a few years later, and it was just one of those moments where all of my interests and questions about how traditional Punjabi women experienced sex, met at an intersection with my observations of the London Sikh community.

Q. The expressions of sex and desire have become taboo topics for Punjabi communities even though some of our most popular folk tales are love stories (albeit written by men) that speak unapologetically of love and desire. Instead our societies are experiencing ever-severe forms of conservatism based on religious and cultural codes where we are told it’s wrong to even think about desire. The widows also echo this sentiment when Nikki is taken aback by the first story they share with her. How do you think freedom to discuss sexuality and sexual identity can help Punjabi and South Asian societies?

BKJ: The freedom to discuss any so-called taboo becomes an equalizing force, which is exactly what conservatives don’t want. Freedom to discuss something as innate as desire is especially threatening to them because they fear losing their

power to define and restrict women's desire to their convenience. The discussions of sex in the novel may start out as being solely about desire, but the widows become emboldened to speak up about other injustices in their lives. I think this sort of domino effect would happen in South Asian societies, where women would become more empowered to question the status quo without fear of repercussions or being shamed. If women were free to talk about something as important and powerful as sexuality without backlash, imagine all the other inequalities we'd be able to tackle, like the favouring of boys over girls in Indian families, the pressure to marry, etc.



Erotic Stories for Punjabi Women
book cover. Courtesy
ballijaswal.com

Q. Your novels deal with contemporary social issues and this ties in with the belief that what makes fiction great is it helps readers make sense of their lives in the real world. So I'd like you to talk about your worldview as a writer and any social change that you consciously attempt to contribute towards through your novels.

BKJ: I think I write to make readers aware, but the story always comes first. When I'm writing, the awareness that I strive towards is as simple as: "here are these people, these are their lives." The social issues that make their way into my writing are consequences of my own lived experience, and that's probably no different from any other writer. That said, I do think that when you write characters who are marginalized by race or gender, it's important to consider their baggage and how their place in the margins defines them. I also think that fiction is a great medium for giving a voice to the voiceless, because storytelling provokes empathy, curiosity, and a sense of solidarity between narrator and reader.

Q. The widows' stories set up a chance to fight the "bigger injustice" of violence against women, especially the cover-ups of honour killings in the community. What compelled you to include this greater goal in the book?

BKJ: The silencing of women happens in many forms. When I lived in England, I came across a few narratives about honour killings and honour-based violence in the Punjabi community and they really haunted me. I included this thread in the story because I didn't feel I could write about the South Asian migrant experience without also exploring its dark side, especially since I was writing about women. For many South Asian women in traditional families, the fear of violence is very real. Unfortunately, our communities let us down when they choose to gloss over or diminish our concerns about violence.

**"I'd like to think that these moral policemen are all talk, and that their notion of morals is very shallow – that's why they feel the need to intimidate anybody who questions the status quo, and bully vulnerable people, usually women."
– Balli Kaur Jaswal**

It also goes back to what I was saying earlier about how the women's newfound freedom to discuss sex leads to questioning other injustices. I wanted to illustrate that the taboos around sex are symptomatic of wider issues in the community. It's

not just prudishness or tradition that keep people from discussing sex in this community; there are serious consequences for following your desires.

Q. The value conflict of the modern vs. the traditional is a recurring theme in your works. In *Erotic Stories*, we see many characters arrive at a favourable middle ground by the end of the book. How would you compare this ideal solution with real-life events? Do you think Maya's fate seems the more likely outcome in reality than Nikki's close encounter with violence, and how do you see those odds changing? I also got this sense of intersectionality from the book. How do you think the brand of feminism that could benefit Punjabi women is, or needs to be, different based on the multiple forms of repression they might face at home or abroad?

BKJ: Maya's fate is extreme, so it's not the most common outcome. It's deeply concerning that this sort of violence against women persists though, and that the perpetrators continue to think they can get away with it. I do think that more awareness-raising efforts about honour crimes in South Asian communities, particularly in the diaspora, are allowing women to speak up. It's especially heartening to see some traditional people from older generations denouncing violence against women, where previously it was just unspoken of.

Nikki's character was fascinating to write because she goes into this community so blinkered and convinced that she's there to liberate the women. Her journey is really about recognizing that we all start at different places, and that there isn't a single way to be a feminist, especially for women who discover their voices so late in life, after years of carrying out traditional roles.



Q. In the book, the Brothers represent the moral police we so often witness or hear and read about in South Asian cities and the Diaspora. The Brothers remain a threat in the background throughout the story, but they never appear to crackdown on the widows' stories circulating across London. Was this your way of saying that if women in South Asian communities unite – to borrow your words – to show the full force of their strength, such moral policing would go away?

BKJ: I'd like to think that these moral policemen are all talk, and that their notion of morals is very shallow – that's why they feel the need to intimidate anybody who questions the status quo, and bully vulnerable people, usually women. Ultimately, they're cowards who get away with appearing bold because nobody stands up to them; I think that if the widows fought back, the Brothers' bravado would easily deflate and they would retreat.

Q. As a reader, I found Tarampal's character to be extremely complex. She embodies the internalized patriarchy of Punjabi and South Asian societies where women often end up enforcing the honour code on behalf of their men. But she also seems conflicted by her own feelings of love. I felt sympathy for her and I'd like you to talk about how you created Tarampal's character. Do you think she deserved a chance to redeem herself?

BKJ: Tarampal required a lot of consideration and revision, mainly because her own experiences of oppression made her both a victim and, later in life, an oppressor herself. It seemed likely to me that somebody who suffered these injustices would take the opportunity to abuse any bit of power she had, but I still had to convince the reader of her choices, and her lack of self-reflection.

Although Tarampal wields power over vulnerable people in the community, I feel that she is still governed by the same stifling traditions and expectations from her earlier life as a child bride. In an earlier draft of the novel, I had Tarampal playing a more direct role in Maya's death, but during the edits, I began to see how wounded she was from her own experiences. I decided to rewrite her in a more sympathetic way because I wanted to explore the roots of her prejudices. I was interested in how a woman could be complicit in hurting other women if she wanted to justify the oppression she experienced in her life.

Q. I kept thinking how the plot might progress differently if the story was set in mainland Punjab instead of the Diaspora. How do you think the opportunities available to your women characters to resist oppression might be different if they were based in India or Pakistan? And would you want to write a story set in the Punjabi homeland?

BKJ: I don't think I could write a story set in Punjab unless I lived there and spent a lot of time researching. It's so culturally rich, and there are so many contradictions of life in modern Punjab particularly, that I would struggle to get the nuances right unless I experienced them myself. I wonder if the backlash against the widows would be as severe in Punjab? Diaspora communities in the West can be very traditional because their values are frozen in time; India has progressed a great deal in the meantime. Surprisingly, much of the praise I get for this novel comes from older Sikh men in Punjab who contact me to say, "Well done! Fly the flag!"

"Erotic Stories of Punjabi Widows is a masterpiece."

Books that offer a glimpse into immigrant communities in the U.S. and Europe are always in demand by readers. Often these immigrants are Asian or Hispanic. Few novels focus on the Sikh community perhaps because they are fewer in number. Balli Kaur Jaswal has changed all that with her exceptional novel *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*.

If one wishes to remove stereotypes of a certain group through storytelling, what better way than to write a story that is itself about shattering stereotypes? In *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*, the plot takes a back seat to the characters, and it is those widows who really make an impression on the readers' minds. The novel is set in Southall, an enclave near London full of Sikh immigrants. It is a haven for vegetable vendors and tea shops, stores selling saris and samosas, and most prominent, the Sikh temple, called the *gurdwara*.

Nikki, the main character, is first generation British Sikh, and she is what they call a "modern girl." She has disappointed her traditional parents by dropping out of law school, smoking cigarettes, wearing jeans, and working at a pub. She's moved out of her parents' house (which may bring shame to them) and has rejected the arranged marriage system as a useless and perhaps dangerous way of finding a mate (which may result in a breakdown of conventional Sikh values). She thinks sex is no big deal.

Nikki's initial descriptions of the Sikh community will be familiar to all first generation immigrant children.

"Through the windows of the connecting bus to the temple, the sight of the more bilingual signs on the shop fronts gave Nikki a slight headache and the sensation of being split into two parts: British, Indian. There has been family day trips here in her early childhood—a wedding at the temple, or a shopping trip dedicated to finding fresh curry spices. Nikki recalled the confused conversations of these trips as Mum and Dad seemed to both love and loathe being amongst their country folk: wouldn't it be nice to have Punjabi neighbors? But what was the point of moving to England then? Now a bhangra bass beat throbbed from the car in the next lane. In a textile merchant's window, a row of glittering sari-clad mannequins smiled demurely at passers-by. Vegetable markets spilled out onto the pavement and hot steam rose from a samosa vendor's cart on the street corner. Nothing had changed."

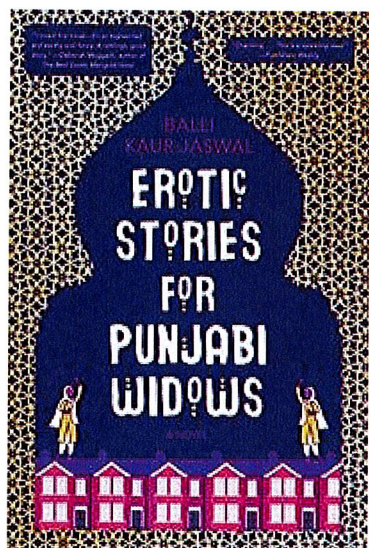
Unexpectedly, Nikki finds work as a creative writing instructor at the *gurdwara*, and it is one that changes her life. The women who join the class are widows, a section of Sikh society that is rejected and overlooked by everyone. Nobody realizes that the widows have stories to tell, and these stories are deliciously romantic, erotic, and scandalous. Nikki is shocked, but being a modern girl, she encourages and even enjoys the classes that ensue. She begins to see the widows as human beings, often more modern than they are given credit for.

Jaswal has painted an engaging and vibrant picture of the British Sikh community, not only the traditional parents and grandparents, but also the more modern younger generation that struggles to find its place. Nikki herself has rejected much of Sikh culture, but she finds herself craving a simple *daal roti* at the oddest times. Her sister Mindi is also modern, but she decides to find a husband the old fashioned way, through an arranged marriage. Jason, Nikki's boyfriend, feels all the pressures that come with being the first born son of a prominent Sikh family, but he is attracted to the simplicity of the *gurdwara* after his mother's bout with cancer. They are all searching for their identities, that place where they fit in between British culture and Sikh tradition.

The widows in Nikki's class are also struggling. They are not all old, some have been divorced or their husbands have died young. But they are denied the simple pleasures that come with deciding their own destinies. They wear the widow uniform of white clothes, paint grief stricken expressions on their faces, even bend down as they walk to give the air of much older and sicker people. Only in Nikki's class can they be free to express themselves, and the stories they weave are their sexual fantasies come to life.

Nikki is under pressure by the temple to confirm to their wishes and stop the classes. When the widows' stories start being shared outside of the classroom, there is fresh worry. Will the traditional, repressive and controlling aspects of the community accept these stories? There is drama, intrigue, even murder, as traditional values clash with modernity.

Erotic Stories of Punjabi Widows is a masterpiece. It entertains, it teaches, it shatters all preconceived ideas of what intra-community tensions look like. Readers understand that in immigrant groups, the struggles of the youth pale in comparison to the resistance they face from their own; where parents, family friends, even neighbors all police each other in order to ensure that their original traditional values don't fade away.



EROTIC STORIES FOR PUNJABI WIDOWS

by [Balli Kaur Jaswal](#)

Pub Date: June 13th, 2017

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Publisher: Morrow/HarperCollins

Appalled that her sister, Mindi, would even consider an arranged marriage, Nikki Grewal reluctantly pins Mindi's dating profile to their Sikh temple's marriage board. But Nikki may be the sister whose life changes.

Nikki has pretty much disgraced herself and her family—British, Punjabi, Sikh—several times over: in addition to dropping out of law school, she's moved out of the family home and into her own flat above O'Reilly's pub, where she tends bar. She's also taken several lovers, none of whom she ever intended to marry. So Mindi's desire for a traditional arranged marriage bewilders Nikki, particularly since Mindi has a successful career as a nurse and doesn't need anyone else to support her. While posting the profile, though, Nikki notices an advertisement for a writing instructor. Although disinclined to hire a young, modern woman, Kulwinder Kaur, Community Development Director of the Sikh Community Association, has had no other applicants. So Nikki begins teaching a group of Punjabi widows, who quickly hijack her lesson plans. Instead of teaching a creative writing course, or even an introductory English literacy course, Nikki finds herself facilitating an erotic storytelling workshop. The widows delight in telling titillating tales of illicit sexual encounters despite the danger of discovery by the Brothers, the self-appointed morality police. As Nikki deepens her relationships with the widows—and finds a new boyfriend along the way—she learns of the strange death of Kulwinder's daughter, Maya, who may have been accused of dishonorable behavior. But trying to discover what happened to Maya may land Nikki herself in trouble. With a keen ear for dialogue and humor, Jaswal (*Sugarbread*, 2016, etc.) deftly entwines these women's lives, creating a world in which women of multiple generations find common ground in the erotic fantasies that reveal both lived experiences and wistful dreams.

By turns erotic, romantic, and mysterious, this tale of women defying patriarchal strictures enchants.