

Writing about the real world

An interview with
Daljit Nagra



Daljit Nagra by Sarah Lee.

The words of Daljit Nagra illuminate his emotional perception, and demonstrate how he interacts with the world through poetry. "Poetry was a meeting of mind and heart, I felt at one with poetry itself. I like the concentrated language, the play with form, and the way you can muck around with words in a way that you can't in a novel. Poetry allows you to be intense, because to some degree people expect it." Daljit's debut collection, *Look We Have Coming To Dover!* (2007), has created a wonderful world of vivid characters and monologues derived from his experience and observations as a second-generation, British-born Indian. The events that Daljit charts in *Look We Have Coming To Dover!* range from the mundane activities of running a family shop, albeit continuously under siege, in *Parade's End* to an unexpected death in *Sajid Naqvi*. *Look*

We Have Coming To Dover! won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection in 2007 and previously the title poem had won the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem in 2004.

Daljit's parents came to Britain from India in the 1960s and he was born in London. Daljit's poetry is evocative and full of observations of everyday life and the reality of being in two cultures. "When I was growing up, the first thing I was really into was Bombay music and I later got into social realism and punk music; like The Jam and The Clash, Elvis Costello and then I discovered The Kinks, The Beatles and Bob Dylan. I think they all demonstrate the social realism that I want to write about. I don't want to write about a fantasy world, I want to write about the real world and things that really happen and I think you have to take influence from wherever you can. To me *Waterloo Sunset* is as good a poem as those written by the great English

poets, just in a slightly different form."

Growing up during the 1970s and 1980s Daljit witnessed first hand racism with the rise of the National Front, and the dawning of a new political era with the election of Margaret Thatcher. Daljit also moved from West London to Sheffield. This influenced his writing in many ways, he says, "I think I experienced different cultural landscapes. In West London we lived in a very white working class area, which was starting to become more affluent in the early 1980s. We moved to Sheffield during the period when Thatcher was shutting things down, moving from factories to the service sector; there were lots of cafes and sports centres opening up. We bought a shop in Sheffield in a really poor area and it meant it was the shock of these scenes of wealth and poverty between North and South and witnessing that and living through those two different worlds."

Daljit's characters include a boy caught between his Indian heritage and British life in the poem *In a White Town*, he would '...pluck all the gold-top milk from its crate / in case the mickey-takers would later disclose it, / never confessing my parents' weird names / or the code of our address when I was licked by Skinheads (by a toilet seat) / desperate to flush out the enemy within.' Daljit explains, "*In a White Town* was a more autobiographical poem, my relatives and I were growing up in almost all-white areas and you had to have a double identity to survive; Indian at home and English outside of home. So that felt like a natural story to tell and I wanted to document that period of that very specific second-generation experience in Britain." Daljit continues, "I wanted to create a lot of antagonistic situations where, for example, one person might be mocking arranged marriages and another person might be really endorsing them and through those characters allow certain details and attitudes to come across about important themes about life. So rather than hammering home one point, I wanted to let the characters speak for themselves. I think different situations allow you to explore different aspects of identity and social politics." For the *Wealth of India* demonstrates one of

Nagra's character's female voices on a trip to "our ancestral homeland", India. "The Indian girl in *For The Wealth of India* doesn't really relate to India and came from watching other relatives, like cousins. I always felt like I was writing about people I know very well and about the way they function and their attitudes to society. I also wanted to pitch those poems into the bigger picture, so with *For The Wealth of India* I was thinking about colonial departures and that plundering of India and about how Indians go back and buy up loads of things, but there is this gross inequality in India still, so the money never seems to trickle down and yet the Indians go over there and act all haughty and arrogant."

Daljit's distinctive mixing of English and Punjabi words is prevalent throughout *Look We Have Coming To Dover!* and adds to the social realist element that Daljit strives for, he says, "I was very familiar with the English tradition and for me to write I felt that the moment I put a word on the page was a real commitment. It felt like a commitment of identity and I didn't want to commit myself entirely to one language. So, instinctively it felt right to absorb two mindsets and two languages into one and have them work against each other, so sometimes syntax is all over the place to replicate, or gesture an

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Indian voice."

Look We Have Coming To Dover! is an excellent and insightful collection of poetry, which has received critical acclaim throughout the literary world, but is also accessible for everyone to read and most importantly to enjoy. This debut signifies that Daljit Nagra and his work will be a continued success. On the future, Daljit says, "I'm working on a second collection at the moment, so hopefully I will publish that over the next couple of years. I want to continue exploring the same themes and language to see what I can do when I pull it out of shape. I want to look at the possibilities of playing with language for the foreseeable future and carry on with poetry, as it is my favourite form."

Look We Have Coming To Dover! is available now and published by Faber and Faber.

Shona Fairweather



Newcastle University School of English

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Abigail Docherty is a dramatist who teaches scriptwriting for stage, radio and screen. Recent work includes the play *Molly and John* and the film *Filles se Promenant*.



W.N. Herbert is a poet who teaches creative writing. His books include *Bad Shaman Blues* and *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, both published by Bloodaxe.



Jackie Kay is an award-winning poet, playwright and novelist. Her selected poems, *Darling*, appeared this year from Bloodaxe. Her novels *Trumpet* and *Strawgirl* were recently performed at the Royal Exchange, Manchester.



Jack Mapanje was poet in residence at The Wordsworth Trust before joining the School of English. His latest collection is *The Beasts of Nalunga* (Bloodaxe, 2007).



Margaret Wilkinson is a prose writer and dramatist. She is currently writing a five part drama for BBC Radio 4's major new series 'Writing the Century', using letters and diaries contributed by listeners.