



Anita and Me

Meera Syal

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Anita and Me, which has been compared to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, tells the story of Meena, the daughter of the only Punjabi family in the British village of Tollington. With great warmth and humor, Meera Syal brings to life a quirky, spirited 1960s mining town and creates in her protagonist what the *Washington Post* calls a “female Huck Finn.” The novel follows nine-year-old Meena through a year spiced with pilfered sweets and money, bad words, and compulsive, yet inventive, lies. *Anita and Me* offers a fresh, sassy look at a childhood caught between two cultures.

Anita and Me Details

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From Reader Review Anita and Me for online ebook

Dan Thompson says

Anita and Me by Meera Syal is actually one of those books where I found out it existed by seeing the film adaptation first. I am sometimes a little weary of reading books after I've already seen the film because film adaptations tend to alter somewhat from the novels themselves and I enjoyed the film thoroughly and didn't want to end up being disappointed with it once I had finished the book.

It has actually been sat on my bookshelf for about three years, never seemingly managing to get around to it; there always seemed to be books I wanted to read more. I'm not that ashamed I left it so long to read, not because the book is bad in any way but at the moment I had the time to actually sit and enjoy the book and take my time with it.

The story of Meena is a funny, sad, addictive page turner that sings of Indian culture all with a Brummie accent. She's a girl that longs for fish fingers and chips rather than chapattis. At the beginning of the novel we find Meena longing to shed her 'Indian' coloured skin and fit in with Anita, the blonde haired 'wench' from next door. As we read on however, it is so inspiring to see Meena grow into herself, accept her roots and actually learn to love and appreciate just how different she is. It's a teenager's novel at heart, set in the 60's where working class men are laid off and women are verbally announcing their sexuality to the world.

Syal writes with so much wit and humour that it's hard not to fall in love with Meena's voice. She has the exact attitude that makes young adults so funny and unique, but just as quickly; Syal can turn the story on its head and evoke emotion from the reader. It is one of those few novels that includes it all. Love, anger, racism, community, sex, culture, religion are to name but a few.

It can be hard to like central characters that at the beginning lie and steal unashamedly without guilt, but with Meena, you feel for her predicament, being stuck bang in the middle of a society in the midst of a social change, but also stuck in the body she was born with. It is a heart warming tale, one I urge all fans of YA to read. I haven't read many foreign culture stories before, not because I don't like them, but just because I am more of a fantasy fan, but it helps to learn more about the Indian culture, despite being set in Tollington via Birmingham.

David Proffitt says

I picked up "Anita and Me" from a local charity shop several weeks ago. Like many people I knew of Meera through her TV appearances, but I hadn't noticed that she had turned her hand to writing novels and screenplays. I saw the film version of the book several years ago and remember Meera playing a part, but had not noticed that she had actually written it.

Having seen the film I knew the basic premise of the story – a young Indian girl growing up in a small west midlands town in the early 1970s, trying to balance her heritage with her desire to be one of the gang.

The book follows a pivotal year in young Meena's life. Like all nine-year old girls, she longs to grow up and hates being different. Her budding friendship with Anita Rutter, the self-confessed queen of the streets, brings her into conflict with her parents and the seemingly endless stream of "aunties" and "uncles" she is

obliged to server and entertain at weekends.

Through Anita, Meena discovers that the grass is not always greener, and some friendships are not what they seem. But as Meena begins to see the darker side of her new found friend, and consequently the darker side of life in general, Anita finds herself drawn to her young friend for support.

Written with great insight and passion, this book is warm, funny and tragic, often all at the same time.

I look forward to reading more.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 Extra:

Meera Syal's story about a young girl growing up in the Black Country during the 1970s.

Leonie says

I started reading this book in Zanzibar while on holiday in early November. I had expected the book to be a lightly comic take on how Indian a young Punjabi immigrant felt alongside her glamorous white English neighbour however the book tricked me by being a much better story than that. It did follow a young girl turning into a woman growing up in a Northern village and feeling very much the outsider but if you ask me her Nationality or skin colour had very little to do with it.

A universal tale of differences, of growing up, of awkward families and acceptance. About finding your own voice and your own style as you make your way in the world. This book gave me more of an insight into Northern villages than it did about immigrant families and I liked it all the more for that.

A really interesting glimpse into a period of recent British history which I had initially thought was autobiographical but it was much classier than that. The humour within was less 'black and white minstrel' and more blackly wry, dark and gritty, just the way I like it. It turned the tables and often laughed with but sometimes at the protagonist but no matter who it was focussed on, it remained sharp and brittle.

Bhargavi Balachandran says

Oh,I loved this book!. The comparison to "To kill a mockingbird" is not misplaced,but the style of writing is different.Anita and Me is hilarious,irreverent,refreshing and poignant all at the same time. This semi-autobiographical book by Meera Syal is about a young immigrant girl growing up in a British mining village in the 60's. Meena (the protagonist) is torn between two cultures: her Punjabi roots and the need to fit into the mainstream Tollington culture. She prefers Fish and Chips to Chappatis and Christmas to Diwali. The narrative is slow ,but is spiced with exceptionally cheeky writing by Meera. Her take on her parent's friends-the uncles and aunties that visit them and her parent's relationship with one another is heart-warming and funny at the same time. The way she describes the neighborhood and her neighbors is chuckle-inducing.

Meena's life changes when Anita walks into her life. Anita is brassy and in-your-face and everything Meena is not. This is precisely what fascinates Meena and she desperately wants to be Anita's friend. Meera expertly paints the relationship between the two girls in not just blacks and whites but in shades of grey. Meena and Anita become the best of friends, despite several undercurrents that run between them and Meena finds herself doing uncharacteristic things like lying and stealing. She knows on some level that Anita is bad influence on her, but continues to toe Anita's line, listening to her whims and fancies. Haven't we all had some fiery friend that was a total opposite to us as our best friends in our lives as some point in time? Well, I've had and could totally relate to the novel. Though, I didn't grow up in Tollington in the 60's, there were so many things in the novel (especially about Indian immigrant behavior) that I was nodding my head vigorously to in agreement

Rest of the story is about what happens between the two girls and other members of their "gang". Meena learns hard lessons in life about love, friendship, bereavement and "grows" up in the process. The narrative is not fast-paced, but it felt like every word in that book was there for a purpose. You can find oodles of witticisms thrown liberally in the book. A must read for anyone who likes witty, coming of age stories. I am so glad I picked this book!. My last book was also a coming of age story (The secret life of bees), which I didn't like too much. This book is feisty and spirited, whereas I found secret life of bees needlessly meandering and (a little) boring.

Anyway, pick up this book- you won't be disappointed.

My rating : 4/5

Stephanie says

love it. its british, its about culture, and it has a darling protagonist. plus, there are tons of stories interwoven with the actual story. and its funny. why wouldn't you want to read this book?

Keith Bullock says

I have to say, I became interested in Meera's book after writing my novel 'Winning Ticket'. This is not the place for a plug for my book, save to say that at base, my novel is set in Dudley, in the Black Country and it is about a second generation Sikh and his wife from the Punjab. Eureka! I learned that Meera herself has Sikh Punjabi origins and also hails from a village near to Wolverhampton in the Black Country!

This, I believe, was Meera's first book and she draws generously upon her own experiences of growing up as an Indian girl in a Midland industrial environment. The humour in the book is from her astutely observed (and remembered!) experiences as a young kid, living between the traditional culture of her family and the urban do-as-you-please jungle of post-war Black Country society.

Meera has gone on to great and wonderful things of course, including further novels, TV and Film writing and her well known stage and screen personas. Much of her humour, both then (within this novel) and now, has I think, always been about pointing up the juxtapositions between traditional Indian and traditional British culture.

It's a very interesting read, in terms of understanding what Meera Syal is all about.

Iva says

A great read. It often feels like a memoir. Our protagonist is the only Indian family in a backwater English town in the 60's. We meet Meena, the feisty and smart ten year old, who falls under the sway of Anita, a tough piece of work to say the least. Meena goes hot and cold about Anita, but can't escape her bad influence. Threaded throughout are both the relatives (their influence, even those 5000 miles away is always present) and the characters in the village. They provide the picture of a changing England, as well as overt prejudice, selfishness and acts of kindness. Syal creates wonderful characters, particularly Meena, who is not quite mature enough to do the right thing. The book is humorous, and paints an honest portrait of growing up in a culture that never feels like one's own. A good YA choice as well.

James says

Funny, entertaining and compelling semi-autobiographical debut novel from Meera Syal (if a little over nostalgic at times).

Jacquelynn Luben says

I think I started to listen to Anita and Me as a Woman's Hour serial some years ago. I have a feeling that I didn't hear the whole story, but that early on, I got irritated by the personality of Meena and couldn't understand why she lied and stole things, and why she would want to be involved with the highly unsuitable Anita.

Of course, this time, I read the whole book, and having put aside those feelings, enjoyed it very much. It wasn't what I had originally thought - the story of two naughty girls, but the story of two separate cultures with glimpses into the relationship of India and England in the fight for Independence, and much about the Asian experience in a Midlands town and the humdrum lives of the English working class people of that town.

It took me a while to get used to the use of dialect. I think I would have preferred there to be more of a hint at the way the characters spoke, rather than the phonetically spelt attempt at accuracy. Sometimes this had the effect of slowing me down as I worked out what they were saying. There were also rather a lot of characters to get to know, and I found that I'd forgotten some of them when they made a more significant appearance later on. At first the anecdotes seemed to come so thick and fast, that I also lost sight of the story. But once under way, I became immersed and enjoyed seeing Meena's move towards maturity.

Meera Syal was careful to show that the closet and not so closet racists were balanced out by others who took the Kumar family to their bosom and tried, in their way, to make them feel at home. The Kumar family didn't altogether fit in though, and this was more to do with their aspirations than their race. As Sam eventually said, they were going to move on, leaving the others behind.

My only other source of confusion was Meena's age. Sometimes she seemed very innocent as befitted her age, originally stated as 9. I remember her having one birthday, and I'm not sure what age she was when she

sat the 11 plus, but even if she was 11, she seemed to by then have developed a great deal of knowledge, adult language and actually sophistication. Could she really have attracted Sam a much older teenager, when she must have seemed like a little girl?

Would she really think, 'Trust you to end up next to a dishy bloke when you're in your oldest nightie with no lip gloss ...' when she was in the hospital? This doesn't sound to me like an 11 year old. This is just a minor quibble, though. I suspect the author had to balance making her a bit younger than she seemed, in order to account for her immature misdemeanours, while giving the emotions of an older girl, for the story to work.

chucklethescot says

This was better than I was expecting it to be after reading another of her novels(Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee). This story is about growing up in Britain as about the only Asian family in the community. She is desperate to be accepted by Anita, the tough gang leader who seems happy enough to let the younger kids follow her. But our heroine soon realises that Anita is not as cool as she thought and then starts to feel the sting of racism from former friends.

Not a bad read. It was interesting that a family seen as so different were accepted immediately by the community, yet race relations now are at an all time low in Britain. A sad reflection on our society. It also deals with peer pressure and the pains of having your friends turn against you, which we can all relate to.

martin says

Enjoyable and fun to read. Meena is a flamboyant, colourful character. (No pun intended)

As a (white) child of about the same vintage, I loved the many clever comic touches and the way she brings that period to life. Skinheads, school closures, failed mining villages, comprehensives, the 11+, Enoch Powell, even the unthinking use of the N word to name a dog or describe a colour, it's all very familiar.

For me, the book did a good job of showing that whole experience from a minority viewpoint. We had minority kids in school and were friends with them, in fact it wasn't until much later as a young adult in London that I first realised how difficult it was for non-white families to settle in a society where some accepted you straightaway, some quietly treated you as "different", not British, and some were extremely, even violently, hostile.

My only slight criticism is that the Meena of the book is 10 but her story seems far more suited to a teenager. It's kind of hard to see an older teenage boy falling for a pre-pubescent girl so much younger - or is this just her imagination yet again?

Sharon says

This book is a moving portrayal of growing up in the 70s as a nine year old Indian girl. It touches on personal subjects such as racism, the usual subjects of insecurities, friendships etc and the environmental

changes in the day – a motorway being built through the middle of their village.

I like Meera's moving way with words – talking about her new baby brother - "I disliked him on first sight, a scrawny, yowling thing with a poached egg of a face, his long fingers clinging gekko-like to mama's nightgown front whilst she held him up to me for a first sister's kiss. I brushed his cheek sullenly with my mouth, it felt downy and damp, a strange smell of custard and roses made my nostrils twitch and for a second, he stopped crying and looked straight at me with wise old man eyes. The knowledge in them made me step back a moment. He had the face of a travel-weary prodigal, ancient dust and the maps of several continents lay on his brow, he had comet trails in his nappy and sea shells crushed between his toes. He was only a day old and I knew he had already seen places I would only ever dream of."

Also when she is describing listening to her friend "I would gasp for air and wait enthralled for the next revelation, each one tilting my small world slightly off its axis so I saw the familiar and mundane through new cynical eyes, Anita's eyes." She has a way to bring a moment to life.

I also like the way Meera creates the character of Meena from her being a sulky, spoiled little girl and how she grows through experience. A book anyone can relate to if they think back to their own childhood.

Girl with her Head in a Book says

I have adored Meera Syal for years wherever she has turned up, whether she is being an actress, comedienne, cultural commentator or even being Granny on *The Kumars at No. 42*. Strangely however, I had never read any of her books until now. Still, a combination of hearing that Anita and Me had made it on to the GCSE syllabus and receiving her new book *The House of Hidden Mothers* on Netgalley made me decide to find out more. I had always had the idea that this was a memoir but although it does fall into the fiction category, it is plain to see that it comes with a hefty dose of Syal's own personal experiences. The central character, the 'me' of the title, is ten year-old Meena and the reader ambles alongside her as she navigates life as a second-generation Punjabi immigrant in a 1970s mining village near Birmingham.

At first this seemed like a simple fish-out-of-water novel. Meena is the outsider within the village, looking up to her friend Anita and longing to be a 'Tollington wench'. On the other hand, she finds it difficult to live up to her parents' expectations of being the good daughter. Meera has no idea of who she wants to be - she is apparently 'too mouthy, clumsy and scabby' to be Indian but too Indian to be British. Over the course of the book, Meena chases about after Anita, causes mayhem, experiences heartbreaking betrayal and searches for her own sense of self.

There is so much to enjoy here - oddly for a book set in the 1970s, I was reminded of my own childhood. I grew up in the 1990s but have been struck ever since how I was part of the last generation to experience a pre-digital upbringing. During my time as a primary school teacher, I was shocked by how disconnected the children I taught were from the world around them. When I was Meena's age, I was living in a not-that-nice ex-council house with my mother and was never allowed to play out (suspicion lingers that one of the families in the local area burgled our house in 1992). While I cannot relate to the conflict between Meena's Punjabi heritage and her desire to conform with those around her, I do remember that feeling of being the outsider. Finding a place to 'be' is not easy.

The theme of 'home' runs through the book. Meena explains excitedly to her baffled British neighbours the difference between the 'Aunties' and 'Uncles' who visit the house and her true blood relatives back in India and we sense Syal herself poking affectionate fun at her own relatives here as she remarks on how they appear to find nothing strange in immediately inviting newly arrived immigrants home to stay and offering them a copy of 'Situations Vacant'. Yet still, the horror of the conflict which drove Meena's parents from their homeland comes as a shock to their daughter and is a further way in which her experience as the second-generation immigrant contrasts with theirs. However, the end of the novel reveals that a secret other immigrant has lurked in their midst for all this time - an interesting commentary on the evolving nature of multi-cultural Britain.

Meena feels her parents hopes and expectations, their determination that she will pass her Eleven Plus and reward their sacrifice. She knows that although she can shrug off her family's scoldings, to be told off by a white person disgraces the whole Indian nation. Yet still, Meena is seduced by the ersatz glamour of Anita - at least until her world flips and she comes to see the ugly underbelly to her community. The parallels with *To Kill A Mockingbird* are many and even referenced when Meena gives a copy of it to her friend Robert with the complaint that it was a far too heavy read. Syal herself submitted it to the Cultural Exchange, describing it as the book which first made her understand that racial hatred is more about those who exhibit it rather than those who are targeted by it. Meena's shock at hearing racial abuse in Tollington mirrors Scout Finch's devastation on witnessing Maycomb's dark core but this novel never goes anywhere quite as murky as *Mockingbird* did. From her grandmother, Meena learns Punjabi, connects with her heritage and finally embraces her roots - but what has truly turned her away from Anita is the glimpse of her former heroine's true viciousness.

In many ways, although race is of course a huge element of the novel, this is more a story about family ties. Meena is surprised to realise that Anita's mother has disappeared, that the mad Cara has been 'taken away', that Robert is gone from her - and so she holds the tighter to her family and to her own true self. The mark Meena leaves on Sam Lowbridge's memory, the truth that she tells to the police - as the novel closes, we have a sense of a girl becoming a young woman and leaving childish things behind. It was a strange thing to read of Meena's decisive forgetting of certain episodes, not because of any wish to airbrush her own history but rather because some events, some people, are not worth remembering. We set some things down and we erase them.

I adored this book - Syal has made a highly fallible but still very engaging heroine in Meena and for all her flaws, I found myself really rooting for her to do the right thing. There is a rueful quality to much of the humour but Syal writes with such self-deprecating wit that even the sadder moments of the novel finish on a happy note. When I worked in a secondary school, I remember helping students write essay plans for their GCSE coursework on *Of Mice and Men* and while that novel has its redeeming features, I found myself slightly jealous that now Anita and Me has made the syllabus in its stead. I made so many notes on this novel while I was reading it but more than anything, it felt like a book about growing up, about making choices based on one's own conscience and building a version of yourself that you can look at in the mirror without flinching. A novel that will definitely stick in my mind.

Shaheena says

This story is of a Desi girl growing up in England in a factory town. One line that made me laugh and identify was when she went to Anita's house and realized that the oven could be used for more than storage

of fry pans and such.
