

I HEAR HANIF KUREISHI BEFORE I SEE him. The voice down the hall is sharp, even harsh. I wonder whether this is the voice he grew up with, way down in the southern suburbs of London before he moved to the centre, aged 18, almost 30 years ago. The accent sounds acquired, earned even, a little defiant, pugnacious.

I am waiting for him in the foyer of his Notting Hill literary agent. Down the corridor he is discussing the book jacket for the reissue of his controversial novella *Intimacy* (1998), now to be an equally controversial film. There is a dispute, but it is clear that Kureishi's view will win out. On his way up the hall, he's waylaid again: by an admiring visiting delegation from a Japanese publisher.

He arrives in a determined rush, nods, then after a hurried consultation we stride around the corner to the "local caf". His appearance can only be described as natty – with sharp trousers and a tweedy jacket over a compact body, he looks rather like a prosperous bookmaker. He wears his hair short these days, layered away from his face as if blown back by the wind to reveal sharp rectangular sideburns that look to have been shaded in by hand.

At the cafe he shows no interest in food: it turns out he has just come from breakfast with Stephen Frears, who back in 1985 directed Kureishi's first screenplay, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the film that made both their names. Instead, he has a tomato juice.

The writer, who recently launched his fourth novel, *Gabriel's Gift*, has no reason to relish being interviewed. He fell from grace in 1998 when he published *Intimacy*. In this work he finally crossed a line he had walked successfully for some time. His work had always been provocatively personal, but here, according to a storm of criticism, he went too far.

to him in bed and save him from leaving her. *When I leave I want her to vanish too. There may be little love, but jealousy remains. I want to live my life but I don't want her to live hers.*

Intimacy is the best thing Kureishi has ever written, yet most of the reviews descended into homilies or abuse. "A repugnant little book," thundered one, "inviting a collusion which no reader could want a part of." Kureishi, Britain's *Observer* newspaper concluded, was "an apologist for the morally lax". Of course, the London critics knew that two years before the book came out Kureishi had, like the protagonist in *Intimacy*, left his partner and their two young boys. And they didn't hesitate to out him: "Let us believe this is a work of fiction," counselled *The Guardian*, then "we won't have to worry about the effect this rancorous tale might have on the family he has recently left."

Kureishi has never played it safe, but back in the '80s and for most of the '90s he could do no wrong. *My Beautiful Laundrette* is remembered for its portrayal of the anarchic multicultural face of Britain, not to mention its gay love scene which curled the toes of Margaret Thatcher's entire cabinet. It made a star of Daniel Day-Lewis, who played a homosexual skinhead with his old Pakistani school friend for a lover. It won Kureishi an Oscar nomination and the admiration of a generation of readers and critics. After that film, as Kureishi puts it, "people couldn't say you can't write films about Asians any more". His next screenplay, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, while not as successful critically or commercially, confirmed him as the leading chronicler of alternative England, the one peopled by those who didn't buy the Thatcher dream.

As political dissent mounted through the 1980s, Kureishi was always happy to applaud.

His cheating heart

His first screenplay won him an Oscar nod and fame, but when Hanif Kureishi's brutal novel *Intimacy* mirrored his own infidelity, the critics tore him to shreds. So did going too far come at too high a price?

Intimacy was an intensely intimate record of what goes on in the mind of a man on the night before he leaves his wife and two infant sons for another woman. It is a breath-by-breath account, an excruciatingly raw work. His character Jay masturbates into his wife's underwear (assisted by the lubrication of her anti-ageing cream) while fantasising about his lover's face. He looks down at his sons playing in the bath and considers how his desertion will scar them forever. He longs for his wife to turn

He infamously declared the 1990 Trafalgar Square poll tax riot to be "terrific", and denounced Thatcher's England as an "authoritarian rat hole". Yet he didn't leave for Hollywood when the offer came. Instead, he used the money from his screenplays to write his first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). It won the Whitbread Award for best first novel and confirmed Kureishi in a career as a novelist. The book portrayed the landscape of his

suburban youth, and envisaged a father – like his own, a Pakistani immigrant; but unlike his own, a hedonist – who leaves his family for another woman. The BBC miniseries of the novel brought Anglo-Asian urban culture to the small screen for the first time. His second novel, *The Black Album* (1995), also explored a multi-ethnic landscape, and was followed by a book of short stories, *Love in a Blue Time* (1997), which began to work a more intimate seam of love, sex, marriage and infidelity.



Britain of Tony Blair, it must have been fun for him to have found a way to raise hackles again. "I'm still doing stuff that's controversial," he says. "I'm still doing stuff that's going to wake people up. They may not like it, it's going to make them furious, they are going to think, 'What the f... is this?'" He looks pleased at the thought.

For all his talk about politics, it's the visceral impact of *Intimacy* that lingers. It's a very hard book to read – and hard to write as well, according to Kureishi. "I had to push myself to keep the extreme stuff in, because when I went through the manuscript I thought, 'That's rough, that's a hard thing to say, that's a terrible thing to feel', and I could have just cut that out. People said to me, 'Make it more sympathetic, make him sweeter', and I thought, 'F... it! I'm not going to do that, make it rough.' Because it feels rough. People hate one another when they split up. And I wanted to put that in, otherwise there would have been no point in writing the book."

Having forced himself to write a thoroughly unsympathetic book, he was surprised not to get more credit. "I wrote it in the style of a confession. And they just thought Hanif wrote down what had happened to him and published it."

Kureishi has always insisted that *Intimacy* is not autobiographical. But his ex-partner, Tracey Scoffield, for one, did not believe him. "He says it's a novel," she told *The Observer*, "but that's an absolute abdication of responsibility. It's total hypocrisy. You may as well call it a fish. Nobody believes that it is pure fiction." Scoffield believes she had the right to be warned about the book, if not by Kureishi then at least by the publisher, Faber, where she had herself worked for many years. And it is true that however much one supports Kureishi's right of self-expression, particularly when the result was such a remarkable book, it is hard not to feel empathy for a woman who, reading a book by the father of her two children, finds the line: *There are some f...s for which a person would have their partner and children drown in a freezing sea.*

You wonder, too, how she will feel when the film based on *Intimacy* opens in cinemas later this year. It has already won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and a Best Actress award for New Zealand's Kerry Fox. With its explicit sexuality, including a much publicised fellatio scene, it is likely to stir censorship debates in Australia and elsewhere.

Kureishi is clearly uncomfortable about Scoffield's reaction. He tries to insist that the character in the book is not her: "I mean, all characters in all books are usually a mixture of people, you never really... In my experience you never take one person and just stick them in a book." His voice trails off even as he makes the argument. "It's always a fusion."

Has he ever felt the need to apologise for anything he has written? He considers the idea "idiotic". "You don't write something and

Despite the critical drubbing he received for *Intimacy*, Kureishi remains unchastened. He tells me he wrote it "partly to figure out what had happened to me, but also to all my generation. I mean we were all very political and now we are all getting divorced. What is the relationship between those things? Has what you believed really panned out in your relationship? A man leaving a woman is banal. How do you give it meaning?" That it was a subject he should have avoided because of

its resonance with his own life strikes him as absurd. "It's easier to be controversial about racism, the lines are pretty clear, most people are against it and there's no ambiguity there. Whereas the cruelties and violence in relationships is something that everyone feels guilty about. They think, 'What about me? How did I behave?' It's closer to home."

He says that the critics' hostility surprised him, though you wonder whether he didn't rather enjoy the controversy. In the blander

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then say later on, 'Oh, sorry, I didn't mean that.' You've got to claim responsibility for what you've said," he says, oddly echoing the sentiments of his ex. For him, though, accepting responsibility means standing by the work: "That's the book I wanted to write, it wasn't like later on I noticed it was cruel, it was when I was writing, it was a very conscious thing." Kureishi appeals to Graham Greene's famous comment that writers must have a "splinter of ice" in their soul.

What about Scofield's comment that he must take responsibility for the reaction of his children when they eventually read the book? On this point he has no hesitation. "I have never written anything that I wouldn't be able to explain to my children. They might not like this, they might not like that. They might not like me, but I'm happy to justify myself. Anyway, all kids hate their parents."

Although Kureishi recognises the power of

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Love and other catastrophes: Kerry Fox and Mark Rylance star as Claire and Jay in the film version of *Intimacy*, based on the novel that led some critics to dub Kureishi "an apologist for the morally lax".

the writer, he is unapologetic about exercising his: "Everybody has a version, but mine's the published version." Likewise, he dismisses his sister Jasmine's criticism of the use he has made of his and his family's life in his work: "It's interesting that she doesn't come to me to talk about it – she goes to the newspapers. My sister wants to be a novelist and used to send me her books to try to get me to get them published. She can't understand how you can grow up in the same house in the same family and one is a talented successful novelist and the other is a failure."

Was *Intimacy* therapeutic to write? "Of course," he says immediately. "It's not only that, though," he adds quickly, "otherwise

I wouldn't have published it. I'd just write, 'I hate you, f... off', and throw it away."

After the *Intimacy* furore it is a shock to pick up his latest novel, *Gabriel's Gift* (published in Australia earlier this month). Although it deals with a boy coping with the break-up of his parents' relationship, it's in no way a sequel to *Intimacy*. It is an optimistic tale about "people saving their own lives", as Kureishi puts it. It even has a happy ending, with Gabriel's parents not only reconciling but actually getting married. He admits that it started out as a work

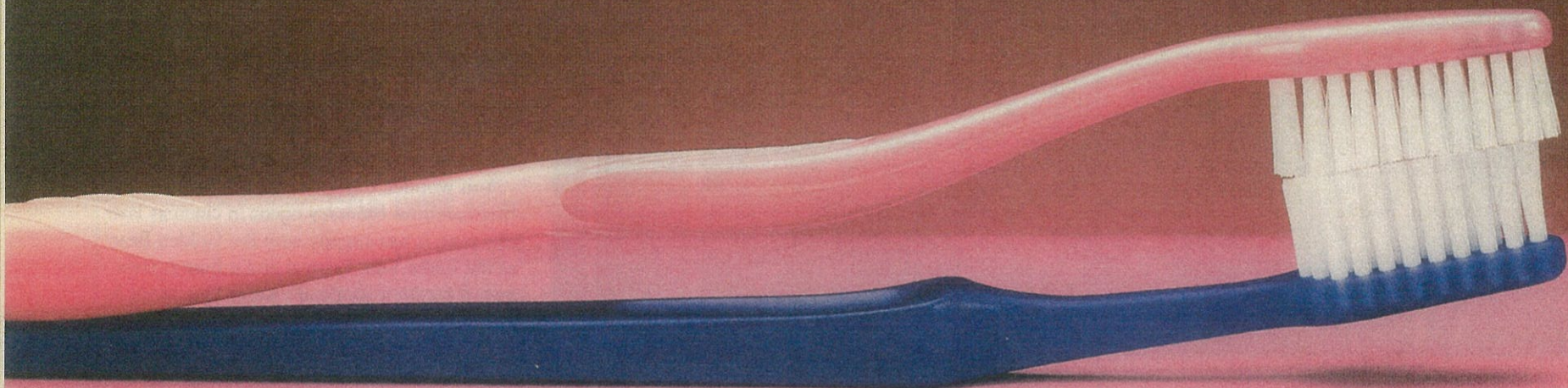
for children: "But I didn't want to publish it and say it was for 15-year-olds because nobody would have read it." He denies that he may have written it to prove he wasn't such a bad guy after all. He says he wrote it because "I'd cheered up, I've really cheered up. There's nothing more cheering than leaving." More kindly, he puts his present happiness down to the pleasure he is taking in his sons – he now has three, having had a third with his new partner.

Despite the lighter tone of *Gabriel's Gift*, it is clear that we won't be seeing much more of it. He has "a couple of books I want to do that are quite heavy that I'm lining up". The first will be an exploration of "the body – the body as an expression of ideas, fantasies, the notion of perfect bodies, ageing bodies, decaying bodies, plastic surgery, what happens to the body – I haven't got far with it – you can burn bodies, you can crucify bodies, you can f... bodies and all of that takes place in a political context. Some bodies are hated, some are wanted – so I'm figuring that out."

Has anyone ever avoided being involved with him for fear of ending up in one of his books? He laughs. "No, nobody's ever said that, actually. People get very offended if you don't put them in. As long as you say they're attractive they don't mind."

Looking at his watch yet again he finally gets up. "I really must go now and pick up my kids," he says. "The missus is going out this evening." I stop him for one last question: "Are you actually married? I mean, have you ever been married?" He laughs. "No, I've never actually been married," he says, and then swiftly he disappears down the street. ■

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