BOOKS & THE ARTS

London Kills Me

DIANA ABU-JABER

BRICK LANE.
By Monica Ali.
Simon & Schuster. 369 pp. $25.

Monica Ali was recently named one of *Granta*'s Best of Young British Novelists—an A-list of red-hot literary youth writing some of the most promising books on the contemporary scene. This was particularly interesting at the time because Ali's first novel had not actually been published yet. She was selected on the strength of the manuscript for *Brick Lane*; it remained to be seen if her reviewers and readers would agree with the fanfare.

Happily, *Brick Lane* fulfills that early promise and establishes Ali as a writer of real literary depth and dimension. There is an elegance and a steadfast, patient, careful construction of observed detail to this prose, a meticulous layering of character and social observation that endows *Brick Lane* with a sophistication and maturity that might surprise readers who've come to expect flash and dash in modern fiction.

Ali mines much of the same territory as other young writers like Zadie Smith and Jhumpa Lahiri, whose work highlights cultural fusions, leaps between traditionalism and modernity. Their writing features sharp-eyed immigrants and their children, who make their way through alien Western landscapes, assailed by the independence and isolation of individualism, and who respond by concocting their own amalgams of lives lived in between worlds. But there's also a certain solemn dignity to Ali's prose that distinguishes her from many other modern writers, a stateliness more reminiscent of Thomas Hardy's gradual accumulation of detail than Smith's flurries of wit and allusion.

Brick Lane orbits around the experiences of Nazneen, a girl from the Muslim country of Bangladesh. At her birth, the ancient midwife pronounces her stillborn, and she is very nearly left for dead. Her sudden return to life marks her as a survivor. Her mother, who is "famous for crying," instructs Nazneen that it is a woman's role to accept her suffering with indifference: "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life." While Nazneen accepts this legacy of passive stoicism, however, she still has within her an inviolable sense of determination and resolve that will take years to come to full fruition.

After her younger sister Hasina runs away with her lover, Nazneen's angry father marries her to Chanu, a childish and pretentious older man. Chanu promptly brings Nazneen to England and treats her like an indentured servant. In England, away from her family and friends, Nazneen must face up to the immigrant's long struggle to endure, to adapt, to re-create herself and to forge a new life. She becomes a great observer, taking in the daily comings and goings of her neighborhood. A tattooed lady sits in her window across the way, as passive as Nazneen, her strangeness manifest in her skin, in her unorthodox choices. In certain ways she is a physical totem for Nazneen's own internalized mark of difference.

Monica Ali has been compared to Zadie Smith and Jhumpa Lahiri, but her stately prose is more reminiscent of Thomas Hardy.

Nazneen's life is defined by her female Bangladeshi neighbors—her close friend, the jokey Razia, and the snooping Mrs. Islam. Their lives and their perceptions of the world are spun through deep channels of gossip and rumor. When Nazneen tries to resist the tyranny of this gossip-mongering, Mrs. Islam corrects her sharply, pointing out that the gossip, intrusions and general "nosiness" of their cultural community provide a real sort of security and unity and actually are symptoms of social differences between the East and the West:

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IN OUR ORBIT

The Believers

A HUNDRED LITTLE HITLERS: The Death of a Black Man, the Trial of a White Racist, and the Rise of the Neo-Nazi Movement in America.
By Elinor Langer.
Metropolitan. 398 pp. $26.

In 1990, *The Nation* ran a dispatch from Portland, Oregon, by editorial board member Elinor Langer titled "The American Neo-Nazi Movement Today." The piece, which took up almost an entire issue of the magazine, was provoked by an event that had taken place two years earlier: Three skinheads in Portland had beaten an Ethiopian man to death with a baseball bat during a street brawl. Langer had originally planned to write about their trials for the magazine. But when the defendants pleaded guilty, she switched tack and embarked on an ambitious effort to examine a burgeoning faction bent on igniting a race war. She took an incident that rocked a community and turned her comprehensive report into a sociological study, one of the first of its kind on the subject.

Thirteen years later, Langer has expanded on her research and published *A Hundred Little Hitlers*. Unlike her original article, which focused on the murder to draw out the history and sociology of the skinhead movement, Langer's narrative here is centered on the civil trial that aimed to hold a California-based white power group—the White Aryan Resistance (WAR)—and its leader responsible for the death of the Portland man. The suit was brought by the controversial Southern Poverty Law Center, famously led by Morris Dees—a man whose effective fundraising tactics increased annual contributions to the SPLC from $2.5 million to $11.4 million between 1982 and 1992. Tom Metzger—WAR's infamous leader—was the defendant, along with his son, WAR itself and two of the skinheads who had pleaded guilty to the killing (Dees excluded one skinhead from the lawsuit, hoping to win his cooperation). Although Metzger is undeniably an ambitious racist—he ran a talk show, recorded regular racist bulletins on an answering machine known as the "Aryan Update," worked with David Duke, ran for the Senate, participated in most of the major outgrowths and offshoots of the skinhead movement and was considered by many to be a leader of the next generation—Langer puzzles over why he was tried for the crime, and a considerable portion of the book is a complicated and not always critical portrait of the man.

In her *Nation* piece, Langer predicted of Metzger: "As long as he is alive and talking, he is likely to have a forum. He will not be easy to stop." And she was right: Although Metzger lost the trial and, with it, most of his assets, in the end a Faustian bargain was struck to settle the messy matter of Metzger's continuing to profit financially from racism. Langer reveals for the first time that, as part of Metzger's punishment, all money sent to him for racist propaganda is, to this day, divided in a two-thirds, one-third split. (Unsurprisingly, neither Metzger nor the SPLC has ever been eager to highlight this tidbit of information.) Ten of every thirty dollars donated to WAR goes to the SPLC, while twenty still finds its way into Metzger's coffers. Still, it's not just this unseemly result that strikes Langer as a failure of the trial; she sees the SPLC's victory as one of "historical emptiness."

In the book's epilogue, Langer muses on the "ifs" of the episode, pausing to contemplate what could have come of the killing and its aftermath if the three skinheads who pleaded guilty to the murder "had gone to trial in the first place and the people of Portland had been forced to face the emergence of their youthful white supremacist movement with more candor and less panic." Langer's reasoned analysis prods readers to do just that, and in transcending the hype and showmanship that came to define her subjects, she reveals the shades of gray that permeate a cult that insists on seeing the world in black and white.

EMILY BIUSO

"The white people," she said, "they all do what they want. It's nobody's business.

"If a child is screaming because it is being beaten, they just close the door and the windows. They might make a complaint about noise. But the child is not their business, even if it is being beaten to death.

"They do what they want. It is a private matter. Everything is a private matter. That is how the white people live."

Throughout this narrative runs a loud, angry reaction against the traditional woman's imperative to endure passively whatever suffering is handed to her, to "wait" and "weep," in the words of Nazneen's female relatives. Contrasted with Nazneen's immigrant struggles are the much sharper, more tangible hardships that her sister Hasina faces back in Dhaka. A physically beautiful girl who rejected the traditional type of marriage that Nazneen submitted to, Hasina seems determined to create her own fate.

Hasina's Western-style attempt at romantic freedom, however, runs up against the traditional strictures of Bangladeshi society. Her story comes in a series of heartbreaking letters, in which she reports her tragic turns of fate in an eternally stoic voice. And Ali's unsentimental, frequently comedic tone manages to keep this section from descending into melodrama. Both sisters are equally confined by their circumstances, by the traditions that silence women and constrict them within an oppressive system of honor and shame.

Certainly, in many ways this is a dark story, even a somber one, but the mood of the novel is redeemed by Nazneen's ability to observe and to question events and people around her. She is under few illusions about the sort of man she married, gradually realizing that Chanu is essentially a self-absorbed pedant, a very sorry variety of loser in any language. In England, he suffers a classic sort of immigrant comedown, a shattering of great expectations, as he is incapable of the sort of stony-eyed pragmatism that his wife is trained in.

But Nazneen is living a different sort of story than her mother and aunts did. When she herself gives birth to daughters, there is the sense that now things will be different. While one of her daughters is meek and pliable, her older daughter, Shahana, is impressively fierce and independent-minded, full of her own will. She embodies the classic Westernized rebellious youth and she engages in a potent tug-of-

war with her overbearing father. Chanu invents minute, torturous power games to assert his pre-eminence and subjugate his family—insisting that his daughters act as "page turners," when he opens a book to read (they are required to intuit when the page must be turned). He lectures them pompously about the past grandeurs of Bangladesh, India and Muslims, but Shahana resists the dictates of the past, moving into her own as a daughter of both East and West.

Despite the deep currents of tragedy and sadness in the novel, there are lovely, articulate bursts of description and surprising scenes of magical insight as Nazneen transforms and develops. There are no easy or automatic breakthroughs; rather, the novel follows the subtle intricacies of emotional free play, the internal currency of what it is to be a human in any part of the world. The moments of revelation are quiet, yet no less stirring for that, as in a brief, lighthearted scene in which Nazneen tries on a pair of pants for the first time or in a delicate, exquisite description of a baby's charm:

> The baby was astonishing. He had little cloth ears, floppy as cats. The warmth of his round stomach could heat the world. His head smelled like a sacred flower. And his fists held mysterious, tiny balls of fluff from which he could not bear to be parted.

Oddly enough, it is just when Nazneen embarks on her truest and deepest personal rebellion that a lull arises in the narrative. The story becomes more discursive, abstract and less intimate, as Nazneen becomes entangled with a new man and his Islamic organization, the Bengal Tigers, a group that is trying to define itself both religiously and culturally, struggling to respond to local anti-Muslim sentiment as well as to world events like the attacks of September 11.

This is sensitive and important material, and Ali's book makes some refreshing statements about the nature of racism, bigotry and contemporary religious chauvinism. But while the insertions of political and topical social critique are for the most part deftly handled, at times the narrative can seem agenda-heavy, larded with a few too many pronouncements and overly explicit speeches, information that feels only partially interwoven with the fabric of the story. A character's statement, "And the government—it's more scared of Islam than heroin," strikes one as both thought-provoking and yet too heavy-handed for the fluidity of this story. Smaller, personal description gets diffuse; the characters' ages and the passage of time seem neglected and elusive. Big Issues are drawn into the story in a way that threatens to overshadow the delicate interplay of characters and their private realities.

In the end, Nazneen's story is brought to a dramatic crisis point, in which she must finally stop looking to her friends and family for direction and make her own way. And, while it's a bit neat, the conclusion is also invigorating and affirming, a strong, final flourish that puts Nazneen in her proper place—as a woman making her way in the world, at the center of her own world.

Of course, I can't help asking myself: What is wrong with having a so-called agenda? Isn't there something impressive and mind-opening when an artistic work is able to convey real information about the actual world? As with many fine writers, Ali's writing is marked with the urgency of an author speaking in critical times, a novelist who has something that she absolutely must tell us, that we absolutely need to hear. Her story is deepened and intensified by this urgency; the characters are marked by it. In this respect, it is very much a novel for our times, a voice emerging directly

out of contemporary world experience.

That is not to distract from the considerable imagination and creativity of *Brick Lane*, but only to say that the two—information and artistry—don't have to be mutually exclusive or incompatible. You may notice that some of these characters are angry or agitated about things that are happening right now in the world around us. Ali isn't being terribly self-conscious, ironic or deeply self-referential about this material, and I have the feeling that ultimately this is because these issues really matter to this writer.

Brick Lane is a serious work in the best sense of the term. It has weight, purpose and passion. Exciting and timely, this novel gives us a slice of the world, contained within the sinuous contours of the particular, and in so doing, helps us find quietly private insights into noisy public affairs. ■

Justice Talking

SCOTT L. MALCOMSON

TAKING LIBERTIES: Four Decades in the Struggle for Rights.
By Aryeh Neier. PublicAffairs. 406 pp. $30.

In his memoir, *Taking Liberties*, Aryeh Neier emerges, almost despite himself, as a fascinating man. The story of his achievements is itself interesting and takes up the bulk of his pages. And I do mean the bulk. It is to the introduction that Neier relegates his childhood (born Berlin 1937) as a refugee in England (for a time he was confined to a hostel, "where, I am told, I stopped speaking"). We have a page on the Midlands towns where he grew up and what it was like to be a Jew there (odd at matins, otherwise not bad), then across the seas to Stuyvesant High in New York City, where he "opposed McCarthyism to the limited extent possible for a high-school student." Neier devoured the works of the midcentury antifascist and (mostly) anti-Communist writers, Orwell-Camus-Koestler-Silone, and hurried on to Cornell. There he agitated for free speech and cottoned to Norman Thomas. Naturally he was drawn to the League for Industrial Democracy (LID). In what would become a pattern, he rocketed from newcomer to director (age 21).

This new job accounts for his never attending law school. Neier is appealingly modest on this score: Considering the profound effects he would have on American and international law, he has bragging rights for having succeeded without a law degree, but he chooses not to exercise them. This lack of professionalist hauteur (or of insecurity) is remarkable in the field of human rights, which is full of people who are not really lawyers (though many have the degree) trying to convince themselves and others that they're not really politicians. Neier very cleverly and exactly splits all these differences. He argues the law and he fights like a politician, as seen in his able demolition of Ernest Lefever as Reagan's nominee to be assistant secretary of state for human rights.

Neier's opposition to Lefever and much else in the Reagan Administration was not ideological in any standard sense of the term. What he thinks of as human rights are really the basic civil and political rights of American law. Much of his advocacy, in the American context, consisted in expanding the reach of these rights into, for example, reproductive freedom, fair treatment in jails, free speech even when it is hateful and respect from the state even when you are mentally ill. Neier's advocacy was not about elaborating the theory or expanding the number of rights. This remained true when he moved onto the international stage in the 1970s. What he took abroad was American rights, and to a considerable extent he, like many others, sees American power as the leading defender of those rights—if not always in reality, then in principle.

His perspective seems to have been consistent since his student years on the center-left. As director of the LID, Neier thought to invigorate its student branch, which he renamed Students for a Democratic Society in 1959. He writes that he hired, then fired, Tom Hayden: "It was too late. He had established his leadership of SDS." At this

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