



The Last Word

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Mamoon is an eminent Indian-born writer who has made a career in England - but now, in his early 70s, his reputation is fading, sales have dried up, and his new wife has expensive taste.

Harry, a young writer, is commissioned to write a biography to revitalise both Mamoon's career and his bank balance. Harry greatly admires Mamoon's work and wants to uncover the truth of the artist's life. Harry's publisher seeks a more naked truth, a salacious tale of sex and scandal that will generate headlines. Meanwhile Mamoon himself is mining a different vein of truth altogether.

Harry and Mamoon find themselves in a battle of wills, but which of them will have the last word?

The ensuing struggle for dominance raises issues of love and desire, loyalty and betrayal, and the frailties of age versus the recklessness of youth.

Hanif Kureishi has created a tale brimming with youthful exuberance, as hilarious as it is touching, where words have the power to forge a world.

The Last Word Details

Date : Published March 10th 2015 by Scribner (first published October 21st 2013)

ISBN : 9781476779201

Author : Hanif Kureishi

Format : Hardcover 304 pages

Genre : Fiction, Contemporary, European Literature, British Literature, Novels, Literary Fiction

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From Reader Review The Last Word for online ebook

Esil says

Thank you to Scribner and Netgalley for an opportunity to read The Last Word. Before I started reading this book, I was a bit apprehensive given all of the negative reviews on Goodreads. But I was determined to read it with a positive and open mind. After all, Kureishi wrote My Beautiful Launderette, I thought. My Pollyanna attitude worked well for the first third of The Last Word, but I must admit that as I got further into the book, my enthusiasm began to wane. The story started feeling aimless and disorganized, and two particular aspects of the book started to grate on me. First, both the protagonist and the famous author he writes about are not particularly nice to the women in their lives, and yet these women fawn over them (I realize this happens in real life, but it's still irritating). And secondly, and this is not Kureishi's fault, I have recently read a book with a very similar plot -- Meeting the English by Kate Clanchy -- that I enjoyed far more. So why 3 stars and not 2 or even 1? Regardless of the flaws in the story, Kureishi's writing is good, and The Last Word remains very readable with the odd flash of real brilliant writing. And, thankfully, in the end the story comes together quite cleverly -- the title is The Last Word for a reason.

Helen Stanton says

Great start, great ending, dull as ditch water in between

Paulina (aspiringliterati) says

I'm not quite sure:

a) how to rate it (like, at ALL?!)

b) if I liked it

c) 3 stars are a go because it was shockingly brash and pervert and I never read a book quite like it; not one that would be somewhat critically acclaimed, that is.

d) wow; and I did not like one single character, they were all either lunatics (not likeable ones though) or utter arseholes so me finding this book weirdly readable and fascinating is a novelty in itself because I always have to relate to the character, even if just one, to like the story.

Mike says

Many reviewers have said what I wanted to say, so here's a paraphrase of comments that express my reaction:

One of the least satisfying novels I've read in ages... tried to like it, but it got tiring rather quickly. Some parts were initially intriguing, but it grew stale, dull, tedious and uninteresting. It desperately lacks plot, seems aimless and the characters are forgettable. I kept reading because I couldn't believe there wouldn't be some kind of pay-off.

To this I'd add two things. I found it hard to care about any of the characters except poor scrubber Julia and – to a lesser extent – her mother, who are used up by the main male characters, Harry and Mamood, a pair of

unlikeable egotists.

Also, everyone spoke in the same voice, regardless of class, ethnicity, region or intellect. England is rich in language markers that can evoke these qualities and Kureishi has lived there all his life, so there's no excuse for this deficiency.

To round off, another paraphrase: What a good book this could have been but, despite the odd flash of brilliance, it simply doesn't deliver.

Simon Fay says

I'm not one who's afraid to abandon a story. I'm very much of the Dorris Lessing school of thought: If a book is boring you, throw it across the room.

I had to abandon *The Last Word* by Hanif Kureishi after about 200 pages.

It wasn't offensively bad, just incredibly bland.

The characters were made up of a stock selection that you're already familiar with, even if you haven't dipped into this genre before. There's a brash, drunken publisher. There's a fading literary powerhouse who's at once both intimidating and pathetic. And of course, there's a naive young up and comer who will have to develop a spine in order to achieve his goals.

Hanif Kureishi seems to be very aware that his cast is made up of a gallery of flat cartoon characters, but he fails to push their characteristics to an interesting extreme. Page after page is dedicated to their mundane back stories. The interactions between them seem to only exist in order to lead up to the one-liners that Kureishi must have jotted down on the back of dinner party napkins. There are some good jokes in here, but they're overwhelmed by the sheer number that just don't land.

All in all, *The Last Word* gives the impression of an accomplished writer going through the motions. If there's one redeeming characteristic I found, it was that Hanif Kureishi at least had some interesting thoughts to express on life, writing and relationships. But at no point did it feel like the thoughts were coming from the people in the book, and, worse still, the ideas expressed never got close to being profound.

Sara says

I like Hanif Kureishi, he is witty and funny and clever and sexy. I like almost everything by him, I normally enjoy his short stories and I really enjoyed "something to tell you".

I also liked the premise in this. But this was a let down and such a waste of a good idea.

After 100 pages or so I felt like he liked the premise himself but he was bored to do something better with it so he kept on writing (mostly about insufferable characters and ridiculous situations) just to end it as soon as possible and hand it to his publisher. Dommage.

Maciek says

Harry Johnson is a young and aspiring writer who is offered the chance of a lifetime - to make his name as the biographer of Mamoon Azam, a giant of British literature. But now Mamoon is in his 70's, his novels aren't selling like they used to, and he's slowly being forgotten - a biography is the last opportunity to generate interest, and for Harry the only chance to meet and work with a writer whom he greatly admires. What could go wrong?

When it was first published, *The Last Word* attracted much attention (including mine) because of its subject matter - critics and readers alike saw it as a lampoon of a real author/biographer relationship: that of V.S. Naipaul and Patrick French, whose biography - authorized by Naipaul - became famous for presenting the writer candidly as "bigoted, arrogant, vicious, racist, a woman-beating misogynist and sado-masochist".

Those seeking a battle of wills as promised by the blurbs are bound to find themselves disappointed with *The Last Word*, as it simply doesn't deliver. Hanif Kureishi could have used the premise to ask interesting questions. What is the real nature of an artist? Do artists who have created great works need to be great people? Can we truly ever separate an artist from their art?

Not much of it is touched upon in *The Last Word*. Although the book clearly aimed to observe the disintegration and downfall of a once great and acclaimed artist, I couldn't help but to see a downfall of Mr. Kureishi himself - despite its short length the novel is tedious and desperately lacks a plot to move it forward; characters are one-dimensional and forgettable, the prose is dull, observations about life in modern Britain bland and uninteresting. This coming from a writer who was named by *The Times* as one of the 50 greatest British writers since 1945 is particularly disappointing, and especially so as I chose this book to be my introduction to his work - which I wouldn't recommend anyone to do. There's no "youthful exuberance" here, as promised by the back cover - but it might be somewhere in his previous novels.

Carina says

Eh... I tried to like it but it got tiring rather quickly. Some parts were initially clever and intriguing, but it grew stale, like a child who's told one clever joke and wants to continue it all night. Painfully determined to be Freudian, the one dimensional characters rotate between telling us how awfully intellectual they are, bonking, philosophizing about bonking, and being upset their relationships are a mess. Potential themes are abandoned in favor of more bonking or bonking philosophy. I half expected the Benny Hill theme to start playing (although of course, in a meaningful and ironic way). There will be some who love this book - the writing is well styled, there is wit, some great lines, dramatic characters, and much bonking.

William Koon says

Right off the (cricketer's) bat recognize this. *The Last Word* is an unveiled satire on the life of V.S. Naipaul. Kureishi's assault is sometimes snarky and always brutal. What saves the work is that there is no single

character admirable or even the least likeable except for the scaggy sometimes Glastonbury girl friend. The plot is that a scurrilous young man is hired to write a biography of the great man who is in his dotage and is badly in need of reputation repair. In America the author asked a black writer, "Surely being black isn't an entire career these days?" which ended his stay at the politically correct university. Like Naipaul, his fictional character Mamoon does not suffer minorities as minorities. Several other barb fly at random throughout the book.

The young writer is unscrupulous in his search for any dirt on the ancient one, going over diaries of a suicide driven ex wife and interviewing a withering ex-lover. In between Harry presents a text book history of a womanizer, and I don't think I have ever used the word before. He is unfaithful to the shallow fashionista-big spender who will become his wife and mother of his twins, although she abandons them for her pursuit of shoes and her own dalliance with the writer in decline.

The setting also amplifies with sweet and sour woodland idyl set amidst the economic exigencies of contemporary Britain.

I don't think *The Last Word* is a good novel. In fact, it is far from a good novel. But Kureishi's since of words, his sentences, his biting sarcasm makes for a good read. Sometimes you want to repeat the Carver line, "Won't you please be quiet, please" until some silence falls over the page.

But he never bores. And if you throw away the critical response to *The World Is What It Is: The Authorised Biography of VS Naipaul* by Patrick French, you can have a glorious wallow in the pig sty of contemporary literary gossip.

I don't think Kureishi ever gets to the heart of his writer, what has made him who he is. But he can certainly make us forget that important aspect of his fiction.

Susan says

Theoretically, this should have been a novel I loved. The subject matter sounded very appealing, it is set in the literary world, which appeals to readers, and it started well. However, somehow, the book did not live up to the promise of either the storyline or the strong beginning. Harry Johnson is a young writer who has published one biography, on Nehru, and has been commissioned by publisher, Rob Deveraux, to write the life story of the great author, Mamoon Azam. Azam is a 'serious' novelist which, in reality, means that he has a lot of status but not a great deal of money. His reputation is fading, along with his book sales, and a new biography could be just the thing to help bring him back into the public eye.

Harry Johnson longs for wealth and security. He wants to settle down with his fiancée, Alice; to have a house worthy of his status and enhance his reputation. For him, writing Mamoon's biography can bring him as many plaudits as the book could earn the subject of the biography. Meanwhile, as Mamoon's second wife, Liana, begs Harry to write a 'gentle' book, Rob is asking him to seek out as much dirt as possible and write a salacious biography which will sell. Before long, Harry's life is becoming complicated, he feels manipulated and his dreams begin to fall apart. Meanwhile, although Mamoon states he is happy to have Harry write his story, the author seems to avoid him at all costs – beetling away whenever he approaches and refusing to answer any questions.

Even while writing this review, I keep thinking what a good book this could have been. If I had only cared about the characters or found them more sympathetic, but somehow I didn't. In the middle of the novel, the storyline floundered and I struggled to the end. Overall, the beginning of the book is the most enjoyable part, but it lost focus, although the author did manage to create a good ending. A reasonably enjoyable read, but it could have been so much better. Lastly, I received a copy of this book from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.

Ro Prufrock says

Ugh. What I hoped to get were interesting and funny insights on writing, remembering, identity etc blah blah. What I got was: sex, as usual. It's like since authors have realised that you are indeed allowed to write about sex they don't even try to find interesting things to say anymore, because penis is mightier than the word or whatever. This sounds overly dramatic, but books like this make me tired of literature. I just want to open one goddamn book without a penis popping up into my face like some sort of freudian jack-in-the-box. :/

A little thing I found actually good: [spoiler] when a few chapters before the end we get to know that Mamoon wrote a book, too. This was actually interesting and unexpected, unlike basically everything else in the book.

Gerhard says

I loved this book. It is the first Hanif Kureishi novel I have read; I had no idea he was so prolific, including short stories and screenplays. The 'writer writing about writing' genre is a well-trodden area, but Kureishi deftly delivers a very funny and ultimately highly affirming account of the profession.

I think to some extent *The Last Word* was a victim of its own publicity when it was published initially, due to the perceived wisdom that Kureishi's book would be a thinly veiled skewering of the relationship between V.S. Naipaul and Patrick French. While the allusion is always there in the background, it is nothing more than a mirror to reflect Kureishi's own ideas about writers and writing.

Thus many people were equally disappointed and puzzled by *The Last Word*, which is a real pity, as it is an incisive and engrossing book. The plot, as it were, is about writer-for-hire Harry Johnson's assignment to research a warts-and-all biography of the famous Mamoon Azam.

Both writers are dependent on the project for various reasons: Harry for a steady job, while the Azam family hopes that its timely publication will resurrect the dying embers of the patriarch's reputation (not to mention rekindling his book sales).

Much of the humour, and indeed the sadness, derives from the sparring between these two men: Harry is monumentally frustrated by Mamoon's reluctance to divulge the kind of dirt he is dependent on, while Mamoon resists both the intrusion and the crude attempts to recast his life as the elements of a tabloid

bestseller.

Both men are extremely unlikable characters, whose behaviour has had lifelong repercussions for their families and friends. It is testament to Kureishi's craft that he allows the reader to empathise with these total shitheels.

Indeed, both Harry and Mamoon do not realise they are on a kind of journey of discovery together: exactly what this journey is, and its final outcome, is both poignant and ironic (and explains, with solemn majesty, the true meaning of the book's title, *The Last Word*).

One of the most important points raised by this book is the extent to which the reading public has a 'right' to know everything about a writer, versus that writer's own need for respect and privacy (and the right to be a total shitheel if he or she wishes to be).

So much of popular culture is celebrity-driven, and writing is no exception: one only has to look at the cult of personality around writers as diverse as Harper Lee and J.K. Rowling. Even if writers choose to opt out of the celebrity circuit, like Salinger and Pynchon, this does not stop the relentless mythologising and gossip-mongering.

We also tend to lose focus on the true role of an author, Kureishi argues, "as an artist, a writer, a maker of worlds, a teller of important truths, and that this was a way of changing things, of living well, and of creating freedom."

antónio says

Mamoon é um famoso escritor indiano que vive em Inglaterra. Com mais de 70 anos, a sua reputação não está no melhor momento: as vendas de seus livros decaíram e sua nova mulher, Liana, tem gostos um tanto extravagantes, que tornam a vida do casal financeiramente insustentável.

Harry, jovem e ambicioso escritor, é contratado para redigir uma biografia que salve a carreira - e, sobretudo, a conta bancária - de Mamoon. Como admirador do autor, quer fazer um bom trabalho e tenta descobrir / retratar o homem por detrás do seu herói literário.

Rob, o editor da biografia, espera um livro polémico, com intrigas pessoais que gerem manchetes escandalizantes e levem Mamoon de volta à ribalta (e às vendas!).

Para levar a cabo a sua tarefa, Harry passa largas temporadas na casa de Mamoon, no campo, e terá de empenhar todo o seu poder de persuasão para entender a constelação de personagens da vida surreal de Mamoon. Os dois autores entrarão num embate pela última palavra, que será também o "debate entre a impetuosidade da juventude e as fragilidades da velhice".

"Romance com reflexões sagazes e contundentes sobre o ofício literário, o mundo editorial e a construção de uma biografia."

Esther says

Oh my. Really didn't like this. I've read and liked most of Kureishi's novels (loved *The Buddha of Suburbia*) but this was awful. The elderly Indian writer and the younger guy assigned to write a biography of him are both just complete shits. Not in a funny way, just rather whiny or pathetic or even worse, just dull. Also there is a whole bad smell of misogyny over the whole book. The female characters mostly wives, current and previous, of the elderly writer are depicted as needy or shrill or bad at oral sex, not pleasing Mamoon enough etc. The young biographer has a one dimensional girlfriend who the elderly writer lusts after. Reading this in January 2018 in peak #metoo era was just too much. Its all male entitlement, dominance, sexual harassment dressed up as humor. But the writing was not good enough for this to be funny or a sharp satire. It was really two crappy men, messing about. 'You are a succulent woman, juicy as a dolphin' vomit.

Googling some reviews from when this was published puzzled me. The Guardian really rated it. The 'enjoyable set pieces' I just found a bit embarrassing.

Bernadette Jansen op de Haar says

The Last Word by Hanif Kureishi is funny and at the same time very sad. Kureishi pokes fun at aging authors looking to revive their career and young would be novelist having to become biographers or ghost writers in order to survive. At the same time it is sad because of the desperation of keeping up appearances and having to settle for second best in relationships. No one is really in control, however much they like to be. Bittersweet but engaging and yes enjoyable, but it makes you fear for humanity. Well, any good literary book gives you something to take away with you and Kureishi definitely succeeds in doing that.

George Ilsley says

This has to be the strangest, most perplexing, least satisfying novel I've read in ages. The tone is inconsistent and the dialogue, in places, has to be a parody of over-writing. I'm surprised I got through this, because it is quite boring in stretches, but it was so weird I just kept reading because I just could not believe it could be so bad without some kind of surprise pay-off or revelation. Like the whole thing had been some kind of joke. That's why I labelled it a satire, because that is really the kindest thing you can say about it.

Finished it yesterday. I can't remember what happened.

Lesley Botez says

The Last Word tells how a young journalist is sent by his publisher to interview an older, established but forgotten author. His task is to dig up the dirt and write as scandalous and attention-grabbing a book as possible.

Hanif Kureishi has been in the news this year for his unkind comments about creative writing students. He claims that some 90 something % of them have no talent. I wanted to read his book to get a better idea of his writing style. I am an admirer of his films, I particularly enjoyed *Le Weekend*.

I was disappointed. I enjoyed the writing style and turn of phrase but was surprised to see that the book consisted mostly of characters describing their interviews and discussions with others. It was very much a case of telling rather than showing which would seem to go against the golden rules of CW. As a result I didn't find it engrossing and was not drawn in but felt duty-bound to read it till the end.

Jibran says

Typical of Kureishi's style, but not as good and interesting as his last novel (Something To Tell You), this is a tempestuous story of a literary novelist (Mamoon Azam), an Indian immigrant who moves to England as a student, who commissions a young writer (Harry) to write his biography. In old age, and with struggling book sales and depleting income, the septuagenarian novelist sees his biography as a good publicity stunt and to come full circle with 'the last word'.

A game of wits ensues: finely-crafted and hilarious series of incidents that see the novelist resisting the biographer's piercing questions, interviews he's always evading, withholding vital information, not wanting the curtain of secrecy to lift from his past, and basically requiring the biographer to write a loud paean hailing the great services the novelist has rendered to the post-colonial literature.

Things begin to fall apart when the biographer insists on interviewing a lover of the novelist whom he'd dumped for an Italian fashionista. The biographer is put through a lot of mental pressures, but he comes out with the book when the novelist suffers multiple strokes and goes bedridden, but at the cost of losing his partner and mother of his twins to the dying novelist's amorous advancements.

It's a dark satire of the modern literary world, its penchant for showering plaudits on writers who can be best described as mediocrities, of the necessities of the publishing business, and duping the public with what's worthwhile and that what is not. The narrative also critiques the faux halo of superiority around great writers: they are normal people like us, not necessarily more intelligent than non-writers, but certainly special as 'word-masters', but despite all, they have the same fears and desires like the rest of us.

But I have to say, Kureishi's characters are perfect examples of a Freudian world in which everyone responds to their libido in a freewheeling, uninhibited way. In fact, a person's life trajectory is dictated by their privates. Fidelity is not possible, no one is happy with their spouses or partners for long, and there comes inevitable infidelity, adultery, and sexual depravity - an unavoidable reality that is much challenged and condemned by our social mores, albeit unsuccessfully.

Kureishi expends a lot of space pontificating on the relationship between love and desire and whether both are compatible. It seems they are not, if honesty be made the judge.

Filled with piercing insights, loaded with cleverly-crafted sentences, charged with politically incorrect statements ('surely', says the character of Mamoon to a black feminist academic, 'being black isn't an entire career these days, is it?') and a clever laying out of the story through long and interesting dialogue-writing, it's quite an enjoyable novel.

Manick Govinda says

Thoroughly enjoyed this warm, funny musing on the nature of biography - the subject in question is so Naipaulian - the literary genius, and what drives an author to write, to ask uncomfortable questions that goes against the tide of belonging, when the migrant breaks his ties with his race, nation and religion. I like Kureishi's writing style - witty, sardonic, cool, but not cynical as Amis tends to be. It's a warm novel that ponders on what we want to leave behind and how do we want to be remembered. An implicit satirical critique on the urge to uncover every possible offending aspect of someone's character that's so popular in (auto)biographical writing at the moment. Mamoon, the protagonists comes up with some great, meaningful quotes, uncomfortable observations on contemporary life, race, and identity.

Shane says

“The madness of writing is the antidote to true madness” - one of the myriad of insights into writing and publishing that pepper this book, suggests just that: this is a writer’s novel, a novel about writers and their hangers-on, and one that discards pretensions of plot, character, pacing and all those other elements of craft that readers come to expect in a novel, but which writers consider necessary evils to accommodate when delivering a novel.

The story covers a month in the life of a biographer, Harry, who spends it with his subject: a renowned but fading Nobel-prize winning Indian-born, colonial writer, Mamoon, and his gatekeeper Italian wife, Liana, in a crumbling country manor. Mamoon is a despicable man and so is his biographer; both are libidinous, adulterous and self-absorbed. The wives, partners and lovers of these men crave love and attention from them, which they are unable to provide because they are absorbed only in themselves and their work. As Harry plumbs into Mamoon’s life, pulling out as much salacious detail as he can, the Nobel winner in turn is getting his own back on the biographer by writing a novel about him, exposing Harry’s own peccadilloes. As for the women, Liana has a “see but not touch” sexual flirtation with Harry, while the aging Mamoon has a “see, but we are not sure whether he has touched” relationship with Harry’s pregnant partner, Alice. And Harry has a sexual relationship with the maid, Julia, while proclaiming his undying love to Alice. No one feels guilt, they just get on with it.

The modus operandi of the publishing industry is laid bare: write a saucy biography of this fading literary star and rekindle interest in him; issue reprints of his many books in their many translations to catch this wave of renewed interest; sell the salacious bits unearthed during the research for the biography to the tabloids; spin off into a TV show; republish the biography in five years as a second edition with a new chapter detailing the writer’s death and start the circus rolling all over again.

The story line is haphazard, the characters are one dimensional; all that matters is what spews from their mouths in terms of their insights into the “madness of writing.” Quotes are abundant:

“Literature was a killing field—no decent person had picked up a pen”

“Words were the bridge between chaos and reality.”

“Art is seduction. Indiscretion is the essence of biography.”

“Marriage domesticates sex but frees love.”

“All sex must include a poisonous drop of perversion to be worth getting into bed for.”

“A writer is loved by strangers and hated by his family.”

“In London, you never see white people working.”

“Frustration makes creativity possible.”

“All religions are concerned with weaning their adherents off desire.”

Why am I regurgitating these quotes? Because they are all that is merit worthy in this book. The story line spirals into a cartoon and the scenes jump around with a lack of continuity and fluidity. Character information is strewn all over the book, some at the very end, resulting in us not quite knowing these people even by the time the novel concludes.

One thing is obvious: biographies can lead to fractured relationships and ill health, and there is no guarantee of the planned outcome. A lot of emotion gets released, many secrets are revealed, and new and tangled relationships are formed.

As for the work itself, the publisher at one stage looks at the biographer’s manuscript and says, “This is shit. Improve a million times,” and I wondered whether this was a true quote hurled at Kureishi himself while he was wrestling with this book, a criticism that he didn’t quite take to heart, or if he did, resulted only in a half improved version. I suppose he set himself up with a tough challenge when, given the premise, this story is derived primarily from encounters between the biographer and his subject, and the supporting cast, and when all there is to work with is dialogue between the players about events that had occurred in the past. The only way I could reconcile myself to reading this book was to say, “It’s a book about a writer and a touchy subject: the writers’ biography. How would you feel if people went poking into your personal life trying to find skeletons in the closet?”

The last word left with me was more a question: can one separate the life of an artist from his work, and appreciate or deprecate each half separately and distinctly? This is a question for our times as many artists are falling off their pedestals today for lives improperly lived.
