

Review of **'The Village by Nikita Lalwani'**
by Rhosgadfan Book club

The story is set in an Indian village, which is an open prison inhabited by murderers. Three people are sent from England by the BBC to make a documentary about the people who live there. The Director is Ray who is of Indian ethnicity and speaks Hindi. Serena is the Producer and Nathan is the Presenter. The idea for the programme came from Ray, and the other two had been allocated to work with her.

It takes some time for them to settle in the village, and the relationship between the three of them is a strong part of the storyline. Ray had various encounters with people in the village including the guards and the Prison Governor, Sujay Sanghvi. She met the wives who had moved to the village with their children to be with their father. Most of the prisoners worked outside the village, and one even ran his own business.

An important central character is Nandini. She is educated and elegant. She has calmly accepted her fate and works as a teacher and counsellor. When Ray got to know her she told Ray her story, near the end of the book.

The first half of the book was very slow and concentrated on the three main characters. These characters have difficulty in relating to each other, being selfish and arguing much of the time. They were unprepared for what life would be like in India. Ray was very naïve; she drank water, which was not bottled, wore tight trousers and wanted to be accepted and liked by the other two crew members. None of the three main characters were likeable; Nathan and Serena were only interested in getting a good story, having a good time together and didn't care about the people.

Gradually the stories of two murderers emerged, Nandini and Daulath. Nandini was the strongest character in the book. Both of these characters were treated very badly by the three people making the documentary. We felt that it seems unlikely that the behaviour of these three would be acceptable for the BBC. They also seemed unprepared for the filming and nothing was planned. The filming team lived in the village and behaved in a way that offended the local people, e.g. the way they dressed, the drugs they took and their sexual activities. None of these would have encouraged the locals to tell their stories, we thought.

Sujay Sanghvi, the Prison Governor has a very small part. He seemed to have very little to do with the people of the village. He didn't try to sell the idea of an Open Prison to the filming team, and did not take any interest in what they were doing.

The idea of an open prison in an Indian village was an unusual choice of subject and the idea of filming in an area where you would be surrounded by murderers was intriguing. The Open Prison was run in a very different way to Open Prisons in the U.K. The prisoners went out of the village every day, they worked to support their family, they lived together and they had a fairly normal life. On the surface a good idea for certain sorts of crime.

The book was well written, with good sentence structure and use of adjectives. There were some very good descriptions of the village and the way of life there. Ray saw everything as if she was looking through a camera, which created a good image for the reader.

The style of the book was slow but raised many questions. Why was the governor not involved a lot more in filming? Just what is an open prison in India? How is it different from open prisons in Britain, which the reader could relate to more easily? What was Ray's remit for the production? What is a murderer? Why didn't she want to ask direct questions of the murders?

Was this based on a real BBC situation? Maybe the main point of the book was to show how television exploits people. How much was the BBC involved in selecting Nathan and Serena to work with Ray? Is the BBC aware of the implications of having their name in this book?

We had a very animated meeting; we all had very different views and strong opinions. The discussion was very entertaining. It was a good book for a book club because it gave rise to so many questions.

We have a scoring system:

Five stars – Excellent

Four stars – Good

Three stars – Average

Two stars – Poor

One star – Did not finish the book.

For this book we had a wide variation in members' scores: two 4, two 3, two 2, two 1.

What people liked about the book was that it was well written. The descriptions of scenery and use of a camera was good. It was suggested that one of the best parts of the book were the stories of Nandini and Daulath. We all agreed that the best of the book was the cover!!! It was very attractive and the information drew us in to read it.

What people didn't like was that the first part of the book was very slow and two people didn't get past this! The three main characters were not likeable and Ray was very naïve. They didn't try to integrate, they behaved in a way that offended the local people, and they didn't seem to care. The whole project was chaotic, as if they had never planned anything. They had not researched the way of life in India or the way their open prisons were run. It was annoying that the book posed so many questions but few answers. We expected to learn more about India and the open prison system and perhaps also how to plan and produce a documentary. There were times when some activities were described in too much detail. A quote from one of our members "... Too much emphasis on diarrhoea ."

In the end most of us agreed that the main point of the book was to show that television exploits people.

Even though some of us didn't like the book, we all enjoyed the experience of having to articulate our responses more than we usually do and we hope that this will help us in following Book Club meetings.

Thank you for the books!