



The Selector of Souls

Shauna Singh Baldwin

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The Selector of Souls begins with a scene that is terrifying, harrowing and yet strangely tender: we're in the mid ranges of the Himalayas as a young woman gives birth to her third child with the help of her mother, Damini. The birth brings no joy, just a horrible accounting, and the act that follows--the huge sacrifice made by Damini out of love of her daughter--haunts the novel.

In Shauna Singh Baldwin's enthralling novel, two fascinating, strong-willed women must deal with the relentless logic forced upon them by survival: Damini, a Hindu midwife, and Anu, who flees an abusive marriage for the sanctuary of the Catholic church. When Sister Anu comes to Damini's home village to open a clinic, their paths cross, and each are certain they are doing what's best for women. What do health, justice, education and equality mean for women when India is marching toward prosperity, growth and becoming a nuclear power? If the baby girls and women around them are to survive, Damini and Anu must find creative ways to break with tradition and help this community change from within.

The Selector of Souls Details

Date : Published September 25th 2012 by Knopf Canada (first published September 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9780307362926

Author : Shauna Singh Baldwin

Format : Hardcover 560 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, Canada, Asia, Adult

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From Reader Review The Selector of Souls for online ebook

Nancy says

Read this for my Book Club. Seemed to be a good book to be reading leading up to International Women's Day 2018. Because of my strong memories of Delhi, the Punjab, Kashmir in the early 70s, I like reading novels about northern India because the reads evoke memories and images, sounds and smells for me which enhances the read.

I found this book to be long. At 544 pages it is long, but it just felt longer than it should reading it.

I also found some of the connections among the characters just too convenient or set up for my belief. The fact that Anu and Damini recognized each other from the lawyer's office in New Delhi was a bit of a stretch for me, but okay. But Damini "knowing" that the son born to Goldina was her grandson - too much of a stretch for me.

I did appreciate what I learned about Hindu and Sikh customs from the novel. And the setting caused me to research online to locate the places - Shimla is a real place. Loved the reference to the mountain ranges and how they were so much a part of the story.

Appreciate the shift across generations of women - Leela saying yes to Kamna following her decision to drive her father's truck. Appreciate the character of Mohan with his disability being included equally in the story with gifts to give.

Appreciate the moral dilemmas, the struggle of conscience, truth-telling in the novel. Especially appreciate Damini's confession to the gathered villagers of her action toward Leela's baby. Her courage and resolve to make a change through telling her own story.

The novel really honours the story - that we each have a story and the impact sharing our stories can have on each other.

The importance of naming a child is very highlighted in this novel and that in the act of naming is where liberation of women can be found.

This book shines a bright light on the preference for boy children in India and the buy into that preference resulting in deep suffering for women, in this life and in future lives.

Very interesting focus on the role of Catholicism in the mix, notably by interactions between Sister Immaculata and Anu towards the end.

The novel is at time overwhelming with perhaps too many issues and too much history and geography combined. Found it hard to remember names and places as I went along. Even now after reading 544 pages I have to look back to recall names like Goldina. And I kept forgetting who Samuel was whenever he came up.

Had planned to read What the Body Remembers when I started this novel, but now at the end am not feeling as inclined to read more - even though I did like the relationship between Damini and Mem-saab, whom I understand is Roop from the earlier novel.

Outlined the book to better grasp the structure and found out what really bothered me as the reader: the text is broken up too often by chapter or sub-chapter titles that indicate place and date. Also that the voice changed often from Damini to Damini or Anu to Anu - so why break up the voice in those cases? Once I could see the outline, I then knew what was irritating me as I read the book. Remove the outline, Shauna, and let the story flow!

I also feel that the Epilogue is a weird add-on. I get that it puts Anu into the role of Selector of Souls, but it takes place 7 years after the main story does. Yes, it poses an ethical dilemma, but it just feels like an add-on as Epilogue.

Finally, after doing more research into the times in India in 1994 and following the context for this novel is so much clearer for me. I learned that the Post-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act in India was assented to on Sept 20 1994 and in practice Jan 1 1996. Oh, to have known that before reading the novel!!!!

Friederike Knabe says

Shauna Singh Baldwin's new book, *THE SELECTOR OF SOULS*, set primarily in India in the mid-1990s, is an ambitious novel, expansive and multifaceted in which she interweaves the intimate and personal worlds of two women whose lives couldn't be more different from each other, and their families with the background of the major political upheavals and social preoccupations in India that have reached into all sectors of society. At the most fundamental level, as the author states in an essay on the writing of her book, the novel is for her "... a meditation on creating and destroying. How can we redeem ourselves after destroying?"

Apart from the major political concerns of the time, such as the ongoing struggles for influence and power between parties, movements and individuals, Singh Baldwin delves deeply into a wide range of religious conflicts and social challenges. She touches on a multitude of themes, such as those resulting from the longstanding hostile relationship between the different religious groupings. These directly impact the personal circumstances of her protagonists. The fallout from the class and caste systems and the treatment of ethnic minorities emerge as additional important themes. Crosscutting these themes, however, and fundamental for the central characters and for the novel as a whole, is the treatment of girls and women, from gender selection, birth control, etc. to arranged marriage and domestic violence to the role of women in society.

Both women transcend the strict religious divides and refer to themselves as hyphenated Hindus - one accustomed to Sikh religious practice, the other drawn to the Christian faith. Their difference in religious beliefs, age, caste and social standing notwithstanding, Damini and Anu both have the capacity to listen and to learn. What emerges as the litmus test for their continuing relationship, however, is their differing attitudes towards birth control and family planning.

Baldwin tells the story of the two women in alternating sections or chapters, reflecting their individual experiences and musings. They also seem to be guided by an inner voice often questioning their behaviour or moral stands, visually identifiable by a different print style. At times the omniscient authorial voice appears to take over, explaining backgrounds to larger or smaller issues, some of them quite peripheral, rather than focusing on the protagonists' experience and the organic flow of the narrative. The male characters are much less developed than the female protagonists and other women around them. They represent types more than fully developed individuals; their presence is, however, essential on the political and societal spheres.

THE SELECTOR OF SOULS is as much a novel of personal stories as a meditation on "creating and destroying" as it expands into the many different themes of the novel. For readers knowledgeable about or interested in India this novel will be very engaging and also providing much food for thought. Readers less familiar with India or less interested in the intricacies of the societal challenges may feel overwhelmed at times by the sheer quantity of themes and issues being addressed.

Leanne Reads says

To would have rated it higher, but it seemed to take on too many ideas, too many events, too many people. Otherwise, it was a good read. Just a really long one, with lots of explaining around few critical events.

Elaine Bergstrom says

First off, a disclaimer. I know Baldwin well, and she read portions of this novel in our Milwaukee writer's workshop when she wasn't traveling back and forth to India to research this project. Even so, I found it difficult to put down once I started reading the finished project for the stories of the two women who are central to the novel and the insight the book offers on the many religions -- Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian -- of India and how they coexist and clash. But most importantly the often tragic plight of women in this male-dominated society is central to the plot. If the current horrific gang rape in India makes you want to know more about the culture that spawned the horrific deed, read this book. If you love well researched novels that open not only your heart, but also your eyes, read this novel. Highly recommended!

Jeet says

What an amazing beautiful book...all about the female energy...about the sacrifices women make as a mother, daughter, wife, sister, servant...this is is soul enriching the book dealt with all aspects of life especially for women in India...arranged marriages, the birth of girls, abortion of girl babies, the caste system, domestic violence, and so much more...

I feel all women who have any kind of connection with their feminine side (energetically) should read this and feel enriched.... alot of references to female deities believed in india and their influence in everyday lives of women who believe in them and their energy, you will have some sort of connection to the characters in this book...either you have experienced it or know some one who has.

I was transported away to India, I was in the room with Damini when she was channelling the energy of the female deity...absolutely amazing...I have read the prequel to this a long time ago...but you do not need to read it to enjoy this book...I was very young when I read the 1st book and I feel if I read it now I would get so much from it....anyway please read this book...it is very sad, raw, and emotional book...but it is one to read slowly and embrace...I could not read it fast I had to take it slow...a book I will buy to keep on my beloved book case for my daughters to read when they get older ...go on pick it up you won't be disappointed....

Erika says

Anu joins a convent after leaving her abusive husband. Damini returns to live with her daughter after the woman she cares for dies. Both stories become intertwined in a village in India. This is a story about Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Christian, about Caste, about India and Pakistan, about sons and mistakes (daughters). It was interesting to learn more about India and its history but I found the ending very disappointing, especially after reading over 500 pages.

Manjul Bajaj says

I loved and admired Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What The Body Remembers* greatly and that really was the main reason that I persisted with this book right up to the end despite feeling frustrated with it. It wasn't the only reason though. I liked the two main characters, Sister Anu and Damini and the setting of the book was deeply familiar to me both in terms of geography and period - Delhi and the hills of Himachal in the 1990's - as well as in the sense of the socio-economic milieu of the two protagonists' lives. Though I liked many parts of it I felt disappointed by the book on the whole. To my mind it is over-crafted, over-plotted and over-articulate of its central concerns (sex selection, domestic violence, religious intolerance). The characters and the plot are very subservient to the social message of the book. Each character is a representative of a social dynamic first and a person only after that. Their stories segue and dovetail into each others' with a mechanical precision that is entirely unbelievable. Paradoxical as it might seem good fiction cannot afford to appear so unreal, every loose end tied up, every question answered.

Anita Friesen says

This was a brilliant exploration of the multiple layers - religion, class, caste, rural/urban - of the experience of being a woman in India and the devaluing of women and girls.

Karen says

A wonderful insight into women's feelings and beliefs.

Doreen says

This novel is set in India in the mid-1990s. There are two major characters whose stories are told in alternating sections. Damini, a Sikh-Hindu, is a widowed grandmother who, after she loses her job because of the death of her long-time employer, moves in with her daughter and her family. Damini begins working at a health clinic. Anu, a Christian-Hindu, is a battered wife who leaves her husband after sending her daughter to Canada; she joins a convent and works at the health clinic which also employs Damini. The two work together to improve the lot of women.

This book is primarily about the (mis)treatment of girls and women in India, a supposedly democratic

country but one dominated by a patriarchal society which views females as expendable. After assisting with the birth of her granddaughter, Damini wonders, "What terrible deeds must this soul have done in a past life, to now be punished by taking form as a girl. What will she face but suffering that leads to more suffering" (236). In the Acknowledgements at the end of the book, the author mentions, "Demographers estimate that 45 million baby girls were missing in India in the nineties, and 42.4 million from 2001-2008 as a result of prenatal selection. Worldwide, 160 million girls are estimated missing since the 1970s. Those missing girls inspired this novel" (545). The novel touches not only on prenatal gender selection (abortion of female fetuses), but also on infanticide of baby girls, arranged marriage, rape, and domestic violence.

The book is full of historical, political, and religious references which often obscure the narrative. There is no doubt that the author is writing from experience and has done extensive research, but sometimes the novel reads more like non-fiction because it is so crammed with data. The author's voice overshadows the characters' stories.

Another problem is that the book has much too many coincidences. Damini and Anu are very different in terms of background, age, and social status, yet their lives repeatedly intersect. In a country with a population of over a billion, they meet not only in New Delhi but also in a remote mountain town in northern India. People who figure in the life of one character eventually feature in the life of the other. For example, Amu's husband's first love is the daughter-in-law of Damini's employer. Amu's husband also eventually employs Damini's son. The list goes on and on; the number of coincidences stretches credibility.

In terms of characterization, the men receive short shrift. Most are flat characters and all are misogynists to some extent. The one liberal-minded man mentioned is Anu's father and he's dead. Even Anu's liberated aunt, who publically fights for women's rights, is married to a man who, despite physical evidence, wants Anu to return to her abusive husband.

A further weakness is that the author uses vocabulary that would be very familiar to an Indian but not to a Western reader. Terms for clothing, caste, and religious ceremonies are often not explained, so the reader is left unable to visualize what is being described. A glossary would definitely have been helpful.

This book is worth reading because it certainly opens one's eyes to a major issue in India (and other parts of the world as well), but it is unfortunate that the narrative is not allowed to speak for itself.

Please check out my reader's blog (<http://schatjesshelves.blogspot.ca/>) and follow me on Twitter (@DCYakabuski).

Aru says

Like many others, I really liked this book until I got to the second half. I really had to push myself to finish the novel because it felt as though the story had already ended. Baldwin's book is wonderfully written, but I can see how some may find it difficult to follow as it constantly uses references in Hindi, Punjabi and other north Indian languages. As someone fluent in Hindi, I was fine, but I do think a glossary of terms would have been good for english speakers. Moreover, I didn't feel as though the translations provided any real additional value. While I understand some words are difficult to translate from one language to another, or do not have an equivalent, I do not feel as though that was the case with the majority of the non-English terms Baldwin used. I disagree with comments that the novel is unrealistic. Not that it isn't unrealistic, of course it is - it's a fictional novel. I just reject that as a real critique. The novel is a fictional account of the

lives of women in India. The spiritual/mystical elements work to reinforce the fact that the novel is a work of fiction - readers are required to suspend their disbelief. Despite the flaws, the book is a compelling read, for the first half at least, and does have some nice moments in the second half. If you're into feminist ideas and literature, the novel is a good read, but I wouldn't blame you if you have trouble finishing it. You don't really miss a whole lot in the end anyway.

Julie says

The Selector of Souls is an ambitious novel about the lives and place of women in India. It starts with the stories of two women from different castes and their stories, which eventually intertwine. The book deals with these women trying to empower themselves in a country where women's worth is next to nothing and the caste system still affects their lives in many tragic ways. It also delves into the various religious groups and some of the history of how they have co-existed in India. The Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Catholics. The book kept me pretty enthralled until near the end when the author went off on what seemed to me an unrelated tangent about nuclear bombs being set off in India. It may have been happening during the same time the story was set, but it really seemed incongruous to the rest of the story. She does get back to the main characters rather quickly though and ends the story with them.

Good writing, interesting and believable characters and fascinating social issues keep you picking this book up.

Savannah says

The Selector of Souls was an interesting novel that introduces people to the mentality behind gender selection in India. I liked how the story was told from numerous different points of views from different 'castes' of women.

The first half of the book grabbed my attention but after that I think the story dragged a lot; there was a lot of really long conversations that really didn't have much of a reason in being there. The end results for all the women were not too great, the impact of all the arguments/ battles did not seem to create that much of a victory to the women in the story.

I loved how seamlessly Shauna was able to translate all her Hindi into English to stay true to the characters while allowing the readers to follow along.

Overall this was an okay book that could have done with 200 less pages.

Jessie says

Okay, #theselectorofsouls by #shaunasinghbaldwin was basically an improbable plot forced around an agenda I think? It was about two women from vastly different backgrounds who come together to work in women's health and experience about every possible improbability two women could face to highlight patriarchy and sex selective abortion and femicide. There was a lot of running into people in multiple places and folks being attached my marriages and servants and rape and terrorism and hospitalizations and so on, it was just too coincidental. I felt like even Singh Baldwin herself knew she was pushing it by mentioning in

the novel once or twice that the storyline was more outrageous than a Bollywood film or that the chances of so many connections happening were stranger than fiction. I really felt that what could have been a compelling story was sacrificed for the message. Which was a shame. It was very heavy handed and not at all nuanced. The book was as well researched as #whatthebodyremembers but the quality of storytelling was not there. I sometimes got hooked on the soap opera ridiculousness of it, wondering "what else could she possibly fit into this one book?", but the story never resonated with me because it was written from a soapbox of outrage. There were a few good books forced into one novel. #jessiereads #jessiereadsalot #blackgirlreading #blackgirlsreading #blackgirlbookclub #booknerd #bookstagram #randomhouse #vintagecanada #usedbooks #usedbookstore #restingbookface

Ann says

Women in our society are still seeking equality. The Me Too movement and equal pay for equal work are two issues that come to mind. But, our concerns seem absolutely petty in comparison to a society where a father describes his family as one son and one mistake and no one blinks an eye. The entire Indian culture seems to be stacked against women. Not to mention all of the other divisive elements including caste, religion, ethnicity and wealth.

The two female characters who allow us to get a real look at how it felt to be living in India in the early 1990s (not historical, though it feels like it) are absolutely different, yet share many experiences.

Damini is widowed and has been a servant/helpmate for a wealthy deaf woman for many years. Anu is married to a wealthy man who abuses her. She has a daughter.

They first meet outside a lady lawyer's office and barely register each other's presence. But as their lives take on new twists and turns, these two women form an unlikely bond considering their backgrounds.

The first horrifying scene when Damini takes it upon herself to do an unthinkable act for her daughter sets the tone of the tale. One of the things that surprised me, though it shouldn't have, is that even thoroughly downtrodden women still look down on other women of lower status.

It is a tough read. Heartbreaking throughout. But well worth the effort to understand another culture and to appreciate our own.
