

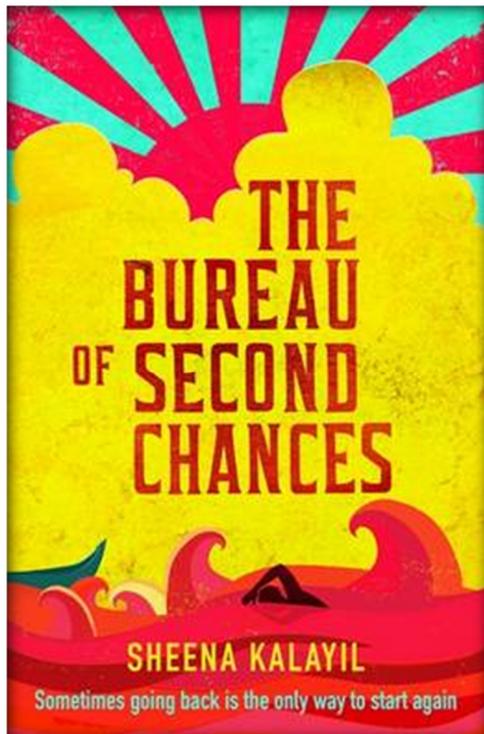


Helping you choose
your next book

Polygon

LoveReading Reader reviews of **The Bureau of Second Chances** by Sheena Kalayil

Below are the complete reviews, written by LoveReading members.



Lou Woods

A beautifully written book exploring how life can change unexpectedly, and make you find things out about yourself and your relationships you weren't expecting.

This book is a beautiful story about a man who finds he has lost more than just his wife. He does the only thing he thinks will help and transports his life back to India, to a house they never got to properly share, and a life he doesn't know how to live. Along the way he discovers he has lost his relationship with his daughter, and he has lost himself.

Trying to find a sense of purpose, and to move forward with his life he accepts a temporary position as an optometrist, helping an old friend. But all is not as it seems in this little shop, and as he becomes inevitably embroiled in the side business going on, his own life takes a dramatic turn, and his choices don't always lead where he expects.

I really enjoyed this book, it deals sensitively with the grief he feels, and the realisation that he perhaps wasn't the husband or father his family deserved. How he chooses to move forward is both encouraging, but at times also shocking, and by the end of the book unexpected. I felt there was more to give at the end, you are left to draw your own conclusions about his choices, but I very much enjoyed this read.

Phyllippa Smithson

A unique observation of life for a recently widowed husband trying to find reason and purpose in his life by returning to India – the land he left some 20 years previous.

Thomas and his wife, Nimmy, held a last minute marriage ceremony before immigrating to London UK where she had secured a nursing job. Work and a daughter kept them satisfied with life in their adopted country but when Nimmy lost her fight with illness, Thomas is left emotionally stranded and unsure of his future. His daughter, now 20+ had set up life in Paris and over some years their relationship had become strained at best, not least as a result of him disapproving of her living with another man out of marriage.

So he chose to return to his childhood home where Nimmy and he had already had a house built with a view to returning in their retirement.

And it is in trying to find his feet in a land as strange in many ways as London had been all those years earlier, he grows to understand life in a new and humbling way. Starting with him accepting the opportunity to work in a friend's business, he befriends Rami, who ages with his own daughter yet has secrets that slowly but surely are revealed to Thomas.

And in learning of Rami's real world and challenges, he grows to find a way to resurrect his relationship with his own daughter and find purpose, a second chance, to his own life.

A wonderfully paced piece of writing which made me truly engage with the character Thomas and the world of his life in India. So real was Kalayil's talent as a writer, I felt as if I too existed in that world.

Les Wood

A bittersweet story, gently paced but examining some deeper issues than the usual fare of "life in India" comedies.

A bittersweet story of a man's return to Kerala, the land of his birth, following the death of his wife, after a lifetime living in London.

I was expecting this to be a comic account of his experiences in his homeland, as there seem to have been a spate of ""life in India"" books recently detailing the idiosyncrasies of the country, but although this was a gentle and interesting read, it was also much deeper than this in places. I enjoyed the descriptions of the fishing village in Kerala and the pace of life and customs. The book

described Thomas' return to work, with his assistant Rani, and realisation that he had a life to live after the death of his wife.

I was perhaps not so convinced of the outcome but for a happy ending it worked quite neatly.

Victoria Emerson

'The Bureau of Second Chances' is a feel good read.

It is the story of Thomas Imbalil returning to his homeland of India after the death of his wife.

We follow Thomas through his adjustment to his new life in India and his friendship with Rani.

A good holiday read but not one I'd re-read.

Julie Bertschin

Thomas Imbalil is the epitome of a good man doing the right thing, restoring our faith in human kindness. A great summer read!

The death of his wife causes Thomas to reflect on what he wants from life. He decides to follow his heart and return to his homeland in India. He reflects on his marriage, his daughter's upbringing, the decisions he has made and his choices for the future. When he agrees to look after his friend's business he meets and befriends Rani, the young assistant. As time passes he grows fond of this young girl, who he learns has a mysterious past and designs at becoming the local matchmaker. Thomas questions his own desires for his future, which is brought further into question when he meets an attractive tourist who shows interest in him. As Thomas learns more about Rani's problems he finds himself drawn in, unable to turn his back on a girl in trouble. The decision he makes epitomises the kindness of the man and restores our faith in humanity.

Val Rowe

A gem of a novel! A delight to read!

Despite his daughter's reservations, recent widower Thomas Imbali decides to continue his life in a small fishing village in Kerala in India. Whilst supporting a friend by temporarily taking over his optical store, he makes the acquaintance of many people, including Rani, the store's assistant. Struggling emotionally

with his relationship with his daughter, loneliness and his role as widower, Thomas learns that Rani is a more complex character than he had originally envisaged and becomes entangled with her in a way that he might not have originally foreseen.

This readable novel intrigued me from the onset and I became easily involved in Thomas - his life, relationships and feelings. Kalayil's ability to get under the skin of her characters is commendable and her skill lies in offering the reader just the right amount of information to sustain interest.

I particularly enjoyed the descriptive passages of Thomas's life and experiences, the development of the fragile relationship with his daughter, Nina and glimpses of his life with Nimmy, his wife.

My only criticism is the inclusion of the rather bizarre incident relating to his beloved brother at the end of the novel as this seemed contrived and just did not work for me.

Aside from that, I enjoyed this novel immensely and look forward to further work from this author.

Karen Clark

There is an air of sadness throughout the book as Thomas thinks of his life, both past and present, and in particular of his relationships with his daughter and his deceased wife.

A pleasant easy read, perfect for the beach. *The story does not demand too much effort from the reader but evokes the sights and sounds of both the beach and a small town in Kerala. There is an air of sadness throughout the book as Thomas thinks of his life, both past and present, and in particular of his relationships with his daughter and his deceased wife. While his past life was not unhappy, there is the sense that Thomas had no real purpose in life and feels that he let life and his own easy going personality lead him into a conventional job, home and family. He also failed to really understand, or allow himself to express, his true feelings for his wife and daughter.*

Meeting Rani gives him the opportunity to do some good, first in small ways by discussing books with her or turning a blind eye to her business activities but later in more significant ways which will completely change his life and possibly give him a second chance to demonstrate his feelings to those he cares about.

Sabine Little

The book questions where we belong - whether our roots stay truly rooted, and what our own roots may mean to our children. A tender and artful work.

This book is about so many things - tenderly and artfully hinted at by Kalayil - so that every reader will find something for themselves. The book questions where we belong - whether our roots stay truly rooted, and what our own roots may mean to our children. The storyline has a beautiful balance of the familiar and the strange - not all words are translated, not all customs explained, making a reader unfamiliar with the circumstances remain ever a stranger, and the characters' choices sometimes difficult to understand.

This is not an easy book - it doesn't take easy routes through familiar territory, and it doesn't shy away from detailing complex relationships. In the beginning, I found it hard to persevere at times, as I was getting used to the pace and the characters. There are several surprises in this book, but they don't come with a fanfare, they creep up on you, unsuspectingly, and pull you in.

Glenda Worth

A great heart-warming read about a man who deals with the loss of his wife by returning to India and making a new life for himself. The description of the characters and way of life is excellent!

'The Bureau of Second Chances' by Sheena Kalayil was a joy to read from beginning to end. A real feel good story beginning with Thomas Imbalil, the loss of his wife and his subsequent move back to India after more than thirty years. As he begins to make a life for himself immersing himself in the Indian culture, he looks after a friend's opticians business while he is away visiting family. His relationship with his assistant and her side line of a marriage bureau makes for interesting reading. Is it morally correct? Should he report back to his friend and who are these desperate people looking for love? Thomas finds himself wondering whether he needs the marriage bureau himself.

Thomas becomes immersed in the lives of the many characters around him, helping some, and letting them help him trying to overcome the loneliness of being back in his home land but feeling like a stranger.

When Rani goes missing, his concern grows and eventually he makes tracks to try and find her, not knowing what the long term consequences will be. A warm story with lots of description of the coast where the story is based and the towns

and villages. Add to that the simple way of life and the heart-warming details of Thomas's loneliness and his attraction to a married woman who he knows he can never be with even though she feels the same way and you have a great story with a happy ending.

Cathy Small

Thomas has lost his wife to cancer and wants to set up a new life but one that they had planned together. However it isn't as easy as he thought, his routine takes time to create before it unsettles.

Thomas has returned to India which was his retirement plan for him and his wife but the plans changed when he lost his wife to cancer. His move from London puts a strain on his relationship with his daughter and part of this story takes us through as he build a different relationship that works for them both. He created his own routine as he settles in to his new home but he then fills in for a friend at the optometrist and his life changes. The assistant has also run a matchmaking service from the shop without the owner knowing. No one should know but there is mystery around who is interested. Thomas meets an American woman and builds a friendship but challenges his life as it is. The story takes us into the world of a heartbreak of loss and how he builds a life for himself.

Sheila Dale

I find this quite a difficult book to review; on the one hand it is a story where not much seems to happen but then when you think about it there is an awful lot going on in a very quiet way.

It is about a widower returning to his roots in Kerala and re-evaluating his life after many years living in London in an arranged marriage. It is very easy to read but I found Thomas a very naïve character who did not seem to have changed his mind set a great deal even though he had been a Londoner for many years.

Without giving away the 'plot' I found some of his actions extremely unlikely - particularly toward the end of the book - almost as if the writer realised the book jogged along quite nicely but needed something to happen to liven it up!

*However, as I say it is very easy to read and I'm still thinking about it so it must have something. **I think a lot of people will really enjoy this book but not sure that it is really to my taste.***

Angie Rhodes

Thomas Imbalil has lived in London for over thirty years, his daughter lives in Paris and his wife has recently died and now he feels that he now needs to go home, back to India. Thomas is happy, even though he lives in a house overlooking the Arabian Sea, in a little fishing village in Kerala and here he meets Rani. A young girl who works in his friend Joe's Chacko's Optical Store.

Rani has a side line and it's this that makes him realise how lonely he is and now Thomas is fast becoming entangled with the people all around him.

This is such a feel good book that you will long for a sequel .

Jennifer Merville

This book's main character is Thomas. He lives in London with his wife Nimmy and has a daughter. But his wife dies and Thomas is left feeling that he would like to return to Kerala, India, the country of his birth. His daughter doesn't agree with the strange take her father has on his future as she has never known India.

Thomas takes early retirement from his job and moves to India. After some settling in he agrees to look after his friend's Optical Store for six months and it is here that he meets Rani the assistant.

But all is not as it seems - she is not as innocent as Thomas first thought.

Rani is running a second business under the counter so to speak. It is not supposed to be something that Thomas finds out about and wishes he hasn't but he decides to keep quiet and wait until his friend returns for him to sort out.

Through this book you follow Thomas as he finds out India has changed over the years. Rani is not just a woman who would have been taken for granted in the past. She is trying to be her own independent woman. He also finds out that he is misplaced. India may have been his birthplace but now he is no longer a local as he moved to another country and nor is he a tourist as he is now living in India on a permanent basis. He is also given the name "Mr Thomas from London" which makes it sound like he is very different from all the other people living in Kerala. He realises that moving into a new home and settling in is only part of the process of moving to a new country. Being accepted by the community is a major deal.

Katie Hoare

*This is a **charming story told with warmth** about Thomas Imbalil, who has recently been widowed from his wife Nimmy after 30 years, and returns to India. To keep him occupied he agrees to run his friend's optician's business, and meets a young lady called Rani, who has her own side business, running a matchmaking business. This is something very unusual for Thomas and something that is against the norm in India. A friendship blossoms with her and he helps her along the way, especially when things turn messy.*

Thomas is also trying to improve relations with his own daughter, Nina, who is slightly older than Rani, and this is not always easy. To add into the mix Thomas meets Vishukumari, is an American Indian who also returns to her roots with her son, to find herself. Whilst Thomas is finding out about himself with regards to his new start, his past, his identity, and his future, he helps Vishukumari do the same.

This book shows how some things appear to stay the same in one aspect, societies and places can change quite dramatically even in 30 years. And when coming back trying to make a new start it is always not as easy as it seems, however, it is also not too late about making new friends and new experiences.

Evelyn Love-Gajardo

*This is a **beautifully written, poignant story** of Thomas, a recently widowed Indian man who decides to go back to his homeland after living in London for 30 years.*

Once there he agrees to run his friend's optician's business while he is away for 6 months and there he encounters Rani, the assistant, who he discovers is running a marriage bureau as a side-line. Gradually you realise that there is a lot more to her character than meets the eye and Thomas's life is changed because of her.

The book describes relationships beautifully and while there are moments of humour, it's essentially quite sad.

I enjoyed the book but if you are expecting a Marigold Hotel kind of novel, you'll be disappointed.

Lynda

Just who is getting a second chance in this story? Is it the clients of the Second Chance Bureau, or Thomas the main protagonist, or could it be Rani who runs

the bureau as an offshoot to her main employment in the opticians, or maybe it's Nina, Thomas' daughter who is aggrieved that her father did not consider her feelings when he moved away so soon after her mother's death.

This story explores all these possibilities beginning with Thomas. He has recently lost his wife to cancer, and after living in London for over 30 years has decided to return to his homeland of India. He and his wife had hoped to retire here and had built a home to return to.

Thomas is asked to help out his friend and goes to work on a temporary basis in his friend's optician business where Rani also works. He is lonely and looking for a new life but is overtaken by events, and life does not turn out how he imagined

Relationships are at the heart of this story and Sheena Kalayil gave me many thought provoking moments. I recommend this book to you.

Nicki Southwell

Charming, gentle and wonderfully different, are words to describe this lovely book. *Widower Thomas Imbali, living in London, is mourning the passing of his wife Ninny. He and his daughter Nina are sorting through the final belongings which need to be disposed of before he leaves for his native India.*

We follow him back to the beach house, in Kerala, he and his wife had built. Rani the young but bewitching assistant and people he meets on his journey. After a period of quiet and reflection, his friend Jos asks that he looks after his business for a few months. He reluctantly agrees to work in Chacko's Optical Store.

There he meets Rani, the young but bewitching assistant who is more complex than on his first meeting with her. The key to many answers are based around a classic book, Chemmeen, which Rani is reading and he decides to re-read.

This gentle man is coming to terms with his loss, and feeling he is too young just to retire. His daughter lives in Paris with her boyfriend (something he is not comfortable with) and does not appear to need him. Her "marriage bureau" which is run from the office, and without the owner's knowledge, does worry him but her motives are genuine. The setting is beautiful and people varied. I love the way they are described, and Thomas's kind and generous character shows through.

My thanks to Lovereading for this opportunity to read and review.

Pam Woodburn

This book tells the story of a recently widowed Indian man, living in England, who decides to return to India to spend the rest of his life in the land of his birth after the death of his wife.

***The author paints an enthralling picture of life and climate on the other side of the world** and tells the story of how he returns to live in a house that he owns there and easily slips back into the Indian way of life. This all changes when a friend asks if he will take over the running of his optician's business while he goes away for six months.*

As a qualified optometrist, he is happy to oblige and all goes well until he discovers that the receptionist is running a secret dating agency under cover of his friend's business. While he is still struggling to work out exactly what is going on, the receptionist disappears.