

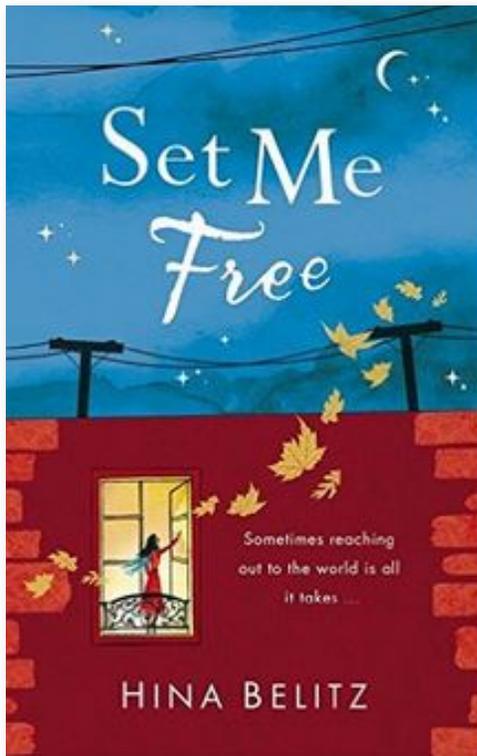


Helping you choose
your next book

Lovereading Reader reviews of **Set Me Free** by Hina Belitz

headline

Below are the complete reviews, written by Lovereading members.



Alexandra Harper-Williams

This novel is a rare find - beautifully written, poignant and life-affirming.

Siblings Mani and Nu grow up in colourful Lahore until they are forced to flee the country with their mother and begin a new life in a dark flat in London.

However, far from being safe here, their lives change irrevocably when Mani and Nu's father turns up on their doorstep one day...

Hina Belitz not only manages to bring to life the colours and scents of Pakistan, but also the streets of London and the people there.

An atmospheric book that deals with some difficult issues. The reader goes on a

journey of self-discovery with the main character Mani which I found very thought-provoking.

Some passages of this novel make for a tough read; be prepared to feel sadness, anger, pity, sympathy and a lot more: a colourful mixture of emotions.

Fantastic debut novel - you won't want to put it down!

Lindsey Whittle

*Although the book starts with the terrible action during her childhood which defines Mani through the rest of her life within this book, it's **a slow-burning,***

absorbing novel which pulls you in to watch, with horrible fascination yet understanding, how her life develops inexorably towards the abusive marriage and the final confrontation which sets her free. It's not the usual 'beaten wife misery memoir' but instead shines a light on aspects of guilt and honour and feelings of responsibility; the position of women and girls in Pakistani society; how Pakistani society and families can operate their own traditional culture and values within and alongside living in Britain and how the resultant stresses can affect both men and women.

I found the section where Mani seems to have some kind of breakdown a little jarring – the incoherence and delusions felt wrong to me; that perhaps depression would have seemed more natural than mania. I also found the concept of the 'bus love letters' slightly difficult to grasp; I think most men would have dismissed them as 'nutter ramblings'. And the publicity over them was also unbelievable; no presenter would blow her nose on live television. Apart from these two quibbles, however, I enjoyed the novel and would recommend it to anyone who likes to read contemporary fiction which makes you think and enlarges your understanding of human beings, for instance JoJo Moyes and Marian Keyes.

Pauline Braisher

I am not sure what to say about this book. It took a while to get into the story and, had I not been reviewing it, I would have given up after the first couple of chapters. However, I persevered and completed the book. It's the story of Mani and her brother Nu but also of love, integrity, honour and revenge. I found it difficult to work out what was happening and it was only at the end of the book that the whole point of the story became clear. Moreover, I thought the characters lacked depth. However, **it's beautifully written, very descriptive but the story moves slowly** and I prefer something sharper. That said, I wouldn't rule out reading further books by Hina Belitz.

Rosie Watch

After the first few pages, I did not feel this book was for me, and could not see where the story was going. However by chapter 3 I was hooked and could not put the book down. The lives of Mani and Nu were so tragic and I suspect not totally fictional. It made me appreciate the safe lives so many of us lead and the contrasts, not only in culture but also in colour and light, flora and fauna, between Britain and Pakistan. It made me realise just how many people

particularly, with the current influx of migrants and refugees, are faced with the huge contrasts made by heading to Britain. It also highlighted the importance of the family and how we never really know what is going on in one's mind or behind closed doors. **It was a very thought provoking book with a strong message of hope and struggling against oppression and cruelty.**

Sharon Wood

Judging by the book illustration and the blurb I expected this story would be a bit frothy and a bit chick-lit but these belied the more serious nature of the book and the real issues it addressed.

Growing up in India, Mani and her brother Nu are very close but very different. After a happy early childhood surrounded by an extended family, Mani and Nu find themselves in a dark and bleak London when her mother flees their homeland in an attempt to avoid a violent husband. Mani witnesses a terrible event and then similarly faces a similar plight when she marries early in an effort to provide a better life for herself and Nu. In her situation, with a husband who veers from charm, to monster, to remorse on an increasingly regular basis, Mani's only escape is her writing and a series of letters she addresses to her lover whom she meets on London buses.

I found the book to be charming, even whilst tackling the difficult issues it did. It was easy to read and the characters and situations were well drawn. However, I found the ending a bit unlikely and silly and reveal too contrived, especially after the seriousness of the situation. Everything was just a bit too neat and tidy and packaged I felt.

Overall though a thought provoking but enjoyable book.

Dawn Vanstone

This book is written through the eyes of Mani and follows her journey from her life in Lahore, Pakistan, as a carefree child, to London where she grows into a young woman. In the first chapter we see terror and tragedy but we look back at her life as a child in Lahore at various stages through the book. Within the first few pages of this book I realised I was being led into a culture very different from my own and I enjoyed learning about different customs, however it was still very easy to empathise with Mani as she told her story.

The eloquent writer shares vivid details, uses a wonderful turn of phrase and grasps the imagination of the reader, telling a frank and intricate story. Mani's own story is interspersed with letters which initially do not specifically seem to be connected with Mani and her life, but all is not as it seems and the writer used a very unusual and original idea to keep the reader guessing right until the end.

Mani encounters much misery in her life at various stages but her brother is a constant comfort to her and she remains full of hope against adversity and you will see that the book has a happy ending when love overcomes sadness.

I shall definitely look out for more books from this author in future.

Sarah Tilley

The best book I have read in a very long time. Absolutely beautiful.

This has to be a 2016 prize-winner – it is just the best book I have read in a long, long time.

It is beautifully written but with so much hidden pain and emotion and it is very hard not to feel totally drained by the time you have finished the book.

It grabs you from page 1, and keeps you turning the pages until the end, with a fast moving tale.

Who is she writing to? I made several guesses but the ending surprised me, and in such a way that you at last felt happy for Mani the main character.

A heart rending story, with dark depths in to other cultures that shame and shock you.

Absolutely beautiful.

Cat Hogwood

An eye opening and moving book about betrayal, control but most of all love.

This novel follows Mani, a young girl who loves her family very much and her brother Nu. Nu is special and is always treated differently to Mani by both her mother and father. Events arise in Lahore forcing Mani, her brother and

mother to flee and from there on life is not the same for Mani or Nu.

Without giving spoilers, Mani and Nu suffer greatly in different ways but their love for each other remains constant. This book addresses how some people use control as a form of love and how destructive it can be.

The characters in this book were believable and the book as a whole was well written. The letters interspersing the chapters leave you guessing as to who the 'lover' is that Mexx is writing to and how it all fits into the story.

There was a cultural feel to the book which gave it a different edge to other books of a similar genre. Whilst the story itself was a shocking journey it kept me wanting to continue to read to see what happened to each of the characters.

A good read!

<http://thebookstheartandme.wordpress.com>

Suzanne James

An intriguing tale that makes you think.

Told in part by traditional narrative, in part in a series of love letters to an unknown person, each time addressed with a different bus route.

At first you wonder who this mysterious lover is, but as Mani's story unfolds, that detail becomes less important as you are caught up in her tragic story. It starts with an awful act of violence that Mani witnesses which colours her life and behaviour from then on - she has to live with a guilty secret and a feeling of shame whilst trying to coax her silent, withdrawn brother Nu back to himself. When she finds happiness for herself you feel a corner has been turned but then her tale becomes darker still.

I found this book became more and more thought-provoking as I read on. The reality of living with domestic violence being explored with sensitivity and intelligence, the relationship between Mani and her brother and hopefulness all interwove to make a beautiful story.

And the mysterious letter receiver? Well, I won't spoil it but the revelation didn't work for me as well as the rest of the book.

@suzanned

Nicola Edwards

A harrowing, but powerful book highlighting many emotional issues but proving hope, courage and love wins out.

Nu and Mani, brother and sister start their life in Lahore. However, as Nu grows up, the family start to be subjected to a lot of gossip and harassment from the community they live in as Nu looks slightly different to the rest of the family. This escalates to such an extent that they are forced to leave the country and they travel to London to live.

Once there, they begin to move on with their lives, until one night something terrible happens. As a means of moving on Mani puts her energies into her new marriage with hope of providing comfort to her and Nu. However, despite a promising start, her marriage is a daily struggle for her and she encounters many challenging occasions that test her to the limit. But, with plenty of courage and love, Mani finds a way to cope through it all.

This book contains some disturbing scenes, which really make you feel for Mani as a character. She has so many dreams and all she wants is to be happy. I really enjoyed this book, it wasn't a page-turner but I really grew to like Mani as a character and I wanted to know what happens to her and her brother Nu.

Genevieve McAllister

A searing exposé of how family and cultural expectations can trap and even kill and a chilling reminder of how women are being treated, even today.

In Lahore, Mani's community are whispering about her mother. The rumours get so bad that Mani, her brother Nu and her mother flee for their lives and make a new start in London. But their happiness is short-lived and Mani has to find a future for her and her brother without support.

Hina Belitz's novel explores domestic politics in a harrowing way, exposing the vulnerability of young women, even when they are in this country. The story jumps between timelines and at times takes a dream-like quality, as the narrative moves from recounting Mani's experiences in the here-and-now to the letters she is sending her lover.

Mani's spirit reaches out through the pages as she overcomes her difficulties and uses her imagination to set her free. While her domestic situation closes in,

her mind soars across London and reaches out to others to release them from their unhappiness.

The novel is a searing exposé of how family and cultural expectations can trap and even kill. Mani's response ultimately overcomes her situation, but it's a chilling reminder of how women are being treated, even today.

@genmcallister

Carrie Jones

A breath of fresh air - a story of brutality and guilt but also of love, recovery and redemption, written with knowledge and passion. I defy you to read it without shedding a tear.

When you read as many books as I do, it is a breath of fresh air to come across one that is really different. Even better if it is actually enjoyable! I loved this book and didn't want to put it down, towards the end I was propping my eyes open to reach the final chapter!

Hina Belitz's novel covers extreme brutality, guilt and is very dark, but it is also a story of love, recovery and redemption. Within the first few pages we view horrific scenes, and much of the rest of the book is influenced by these terrible events. As the main character, however, Mani is very sympathetically portrayed. I really cared about her, and, in spite of her young age, she shows much wisdom and compassion.

The story is set in a world very different to my own and it was interesting to learn something of a different culture. There are discreet footnotes which gently explain the occasional word, which I liked.

This book tackles some very tough issues, but without lecturing. The author is both knowledgeable and passionate about her subject, there are several twists to the story- and the final few chapters brought a tear to my eye.

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Victoria Halliday

This is an interesting novel and the story of Mani's marriage is particularly compelling.

A novel about the strength of sibling love. Set Me Free, by Hina Belitz, is a novel about two siblings, Mani and Nu. Escaping from their violent father, Mani and

Nu arrive in London with their mother to start a new life. But when tragedy strikes, the two of them are left to fend for themselves. This is an interesting novel and the story of Mani's marriage is particularly compelling.

Sarah Harper

A moving and yet uplifting account of the trials faced by some women, Set Me Free still remains full of hope.

Raised in Lahore as a strict Muslim, young Mani hears whispers about the origin of her strangely pale skinned brother Nu. Someone has planted a seed of doubt in her father's mind and once he starts to question his wife's fidelity, events begin to spiral out of control. Fleeing to England, the children and their mother start again. Although Mani has 'her Nu' she feels that she doesn't fit into this new life. She is isolated and continues to be rejected by her mother as second best to her male sibling. Just a child, she tries not to resent this but the horrific event that follows defines the rest of Mani's life. She is left to care for Nu alone however the trauma forces him to retreat into his own world and he is able to communicate only in writing. When Mani's marriage is rapidly arranged to the charming Khan she falls head over heels in love and, willing to support Nu also, he becomes her saviour. Naive and full of love she gives her all to this man but from the moment they are married things change. Not always Kind Khan, he morphs into Tortured Khan, passing through the phase of monster as he does so. With the sad combination of her own self-loathing and forgiving nature, Mani is able to justify and rationalise even the most despicable acts, up to a point. But with so much love in her soul she needs to find a release, and that's where Mexx comes in.

A moving and yet uplifting account of the trials faced by some women, this still remains full of hope. The letters of Mexx are an interesting twist, adding another dimension to the story and I appreciated the use of the glossary and footnotes to avoid the need to overly westernise the language. Thought provoking and engaging"

Ann Alderton

*The story of a young woman who witnesses the honour killing of her mother by her father is never going to be an easy read, but **Hina Belitz tackles the harrowing subject matter with a deft touch, great warmth and insightful sensitivity.** The character of Mani has a naive innocence which is*

both charming and frustrating and I struggled to understand her behaviour through the imagining of her perfect lover given the potential for misunderstanding and the severe cultural consequences that would follow. I also struggled with the character of Khan, whose motivation for revenge was never completely clear to me. As a reader who always seeks to understand motivations and behaviours, a bit more explanation of the triggers to Kahn's actions and the influence of culture on attitudes to women would have helped my understanding and enjoyment of the book.