

Praise for *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous*

'*Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous* is, undoubtedly, one of the most scathing social and political satires of our times. It's funny even when it makes you reel in horror, and it makes you hope even in the throes of despair. It is a book that will make you think. It is a book to slowly savour and turn in your mind long after it's over.' *The Quint*

'The plot of *Miss Laila* reads much like a thriller but with the mocking voice of political satire ... Joseph is brazen in depicting the politics of both sides as equally absurd. Bold and genuinely funny.' *Open*

'Joseph has a talent for puncturing the smug assumptions of the well-intentioned, while directing the gaze to deep injustices with a lightness of touch you wouldn't suspect ... The most memorable moments are the ones between Laila and her younger sister Aisha ... a throwaway moment of quiet love in an otherwise frenetic, wisecracking book, bristling with opinions and politics.' *Elle*

'Joseph's subversion of the conventions of fiction is in the same vein as Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, in which readers get an extensive insight into the author's musings on where our culture is headed.' *The Hindu*

'Joseph's *Miss Laila Armed and Dangerous* further establishes him as one of most engaging storytellers and insightful interpreters of our times. With the rigour of lean and unsentimental prose, the novel weaves a gripping tale set in contemporary India and echoes all the key whispers and screams that mark country's conversations with itself... [When] VS Naipaul said that novels had outlived their utility and were likely to be replaced by cinema as a powerful form of storytelling, he perhaps didn't anticipate writers like Manu Joseph, who can illuminate both worlds.' *News Laundry*

'A compulsive read, Joseph's often clever, sometimes wise and always entertaining new novel combines elements of satire and the political thriller.'

India Today

'Wicked, sarcastic and garnished with wit. Some readers will laugh, raise eyebrows and even disagree with portions of this novel, but this is certainly not a book to be missed.'

The Book Satchel

Praise for *Serious Men*

'The finest comic novelists know that a small world can illuminate a culture and an age. With this funny-sad debut, Joseph does just that for surging, fractious India ... The absurdity and humiliation of social exclusion drives the comedy of one of the year's most auspicious debuts ...'

Boyd Tonkin, *The Independent*

'Manu Joseph's satirical tale of an ostensibly new India still in thrall to its caste-ridden and sexist traditions is so much more than a mere comic caper.'

Catherine Taylor, *The Guardian*

'Manu Joseph, a leading journalist in India, has written a debut novel that skewers a society where new ambitions and older class divisions co-exist. From the contrasts of contemporary India, he extracts pointed, often bitter comedy.'

The Sunday Times

'This is arguably the best of the recent crop of novels by Indian writers ... it does for India in the age of globalization what Salman Rushdie and Rohinton Mistry did for earlier eras ... If there is one novel you must buy this year, make it this one ...'

Anis Shivani, *Huffington Post*

'*Serious Men* could well be the most exciting debut in Indian writing in English since Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.'

Usha K.R., *Deccan Herald*

‘I’ve been meaning to read one of Manu Joseph’s novels since I heard him speak at a literary festival a couple of years ago. His comments had a witty arrogance and a weirdness that I thought augured well for his prose. And I was right! *Serious Men*, published in 2010, is the funniest, most stylish book I’ve read this year.’

Zoe Heller, Best Books of 2014, *New York Times*

‘Joseph is an acute, sensitive observer and his writing accumulates the myriad circumstantial details of everyday life which makes it real ... It’s been a very good year for South Asian English novels and *Serious Men* could be the pick of the crop.’ Pratik Kanjilal, *Hindustan Times*

‘Manu Joseph’s triumph is ... in creating characters whom it’s impossible not to care about, in a plot which it’s impossible not to enjoy.’

Anita Roy, *Outlook*

‘Manu Joseph’s debut *Serious Men* merits a one-word review: Hurrah! For here at last is a novel that keeps its wits, is nimble on its feet and speaks its informed mind in stylish prose ... It is replete with wit and barbed with anger that unerringly finds its mark.’

Kalpish Ratna, *Tehelka (Weekly)*

Praise for *The Illicit Happiness of Other People*

‘Joseph writes with extraordinary wit, cunning and sympathy about both family relationships and ultimate mysteries.’

Starred Review, *Kirkus Reviews*

‘Joseph’s smart new novel is laced with black humour and keen observations on human nature ... Joseph’s rich characters intersect in moments of tenderness, yet each continues along a path that gracefully highlights the titular Other and the emotional divides that separate individuals. Lucky for us, Joseph’s empathic prose deftly bridges those gaps.’

Publishers Weekly

'Manu Joseph's prose is clear, wry, dry and witty – reminiscent of the work of Haruki Murakami.' Ariel Balter, *New York Journal of Books*

'*The Illicit Happiness of Other People* is ambitious ... It is a plot-driven yarn with themes of morality, sexuality, psychiatry and yet more science and philosophy ... but it does not feel overburdened ... quite an achievement.' *The Economist*

'Both wittily funny and darkly serious.' Harry Ritchie, *Daily Mail*

'Joseph twists what I feared would be a book for people wanting a second *White Tiger* into a cocktail of character, culture and religion ... Joseph's prose is exquisitely phrased without an excess of sentimentality ... the confident, immersing voice promises readers this is not the last we've heard of Manu Joseph.' Christine Edwall, *The Telegraph*

'A stylishly written book, which starts out as being darkly comical, and then grows progressively darker and more disturbing.' Anvar Alikhan, *India Today*

Miss Laila,
Armed and Dangerous

**MISS LAILA,
ARMED AND
DANGEROUS**
MANU JOSEPH

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MANU JOSEPH is the author of two previous widely acclaimed and bestselling novels, *Serious Men* (winner of the Hindu Literary Prize and the PEN/Open Book Award) and *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* (shortlisted for the Encore Award and the Hindu Literature Prize). A former columnist for the *International New York Times*, he lives in Delhi and writes for *Mint Lounge*.

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Around 7:30 a.m.

WHEN SHE RETURNS from a long run she finds her neighbours standing almost naked in the compound. Men in morose Y-front underwear, women crouched behind parked cars or hidden inside rings formed by other women who are not bare. Through the gaps in the cordons she sees flashes of naked thighs, waists, backs. It is Friday but that does not explain anything.

Akhila, in damp shorts and vests and a blue bandana, does not stop to find out what has happened. She is confident of solving the puzzle any moment. Everything that happens in Mumbai has happened before. She walks across the concrete driveway towards Beach Towers even though the behaviour of the residents should have warned her against entering the twenty-storey building.

The possibility of death does not occur to her. It never does. If she is ever in an air crash, she knows, she would be that lone miraculous survivor. She might even save a child. It is not hope, which is merely a conversation with the self. Hope is a premonition of defeat. She knew that even as a little girl

who used to wait for her mother to return, wait for days, for weeks. Optimism, on the other hand, is psychosis. Its victims alone know how cheerfully the disease takes them to doom. She has tried but is unable to have complete faith in the view that she will die one day. Science will find a way to make her immortal.

People find immortality amusing because they do not believe they deserve it. Like a gorgeous spouse. But death is merely a technology of the universe, and a time comes, doesn't it, when a science becomes obsolete.

Apart from immortality she has no grand suspicions about her life. It will be filled with friends, solitary sometimes, and beautiful, of course, as it is for people who run long distances. There might even be greatness at some point, but she is not very clear about the details.

She sprints up the stairs to the ninth floor as she usually does. She is still on the first flight of stairs when she hears the lift doors open. It should have been an unremarkable event, but this morning the doors have a loud clear voice and there are echoes. Echoes are rare in Mumbai.

From the lift emerges a tiny ancient woman with a mild hunch, her forearms splayed, holding in each hand a pressed kurta folded on a hanger. The old woman, in a lovely cotton sari, moves at an excruciating pace but manages to get out of the lift a moment before the closing doors can crush her. And she appears to know where she is going with the two hangers. Akhila follows her but it is hard to stay behind; the woman is too slow. It is as though she is lampooning the senior, which is not beyond her, actually. She watches the old woman walk

Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous

out into the driveway, towards a ring of women guarding the nudes. There, a man has begun to undress, looking valiant in his late decision. He flings his shirt first, then his trousers into the ring of women.

Akhila turns back and runs up the stairs in the unfamiliar silence of vacant homes. The stairway is littered with objects, which is unusual. There are pieces of clothing, eerie dolls, one daft Nokia that surely belongs to a maid, even food. There are footwear, and a streak of blood too. So much happens when people flee.

At home, she does the usual stretches on the balcony, watching the Arabian Sea. The sky is a clear blue. Far away a giant cruise ship sails across the bay, like a beautiful novel about nothing. A hectic breeze arrives. The winding bridge over the sea stands like a marvel. Her father hates that bridge. He complains about it every day to her, but she is spared this morning because he is not in town. Something about majestic cable-stayed bridges across shallow seas remind Marxists that they have lost to capitalism and human nature.

She walks to the kitchen, checking her phone, but there are messages that make her stop. They ask if she is alright. Several messages uniformly ask the question, 'Did you feel it?' When she sees the Twitter feed she figures that about half an hour ago there were tremors. That explains the neighbours. But the thought of fleeing the building still does not occur to her.

The tremors were mild, but an eighty-year-old, condemned building in Prabhadevi has collapsed. She is drawn to the images of the fallen building. She knows the place, it is not far. There are people still trapped in its debris.

Manu Joseph

In minutes, she is sprinting down, her spiral curls flailing. She has showered and changed into jeans and a T-shirt that has no message at all to convey.

She runs out of Beach Towers, through a mob of neighbours who are beginning to feel foolish. 'She even had a bath,' a woman mutters.

Akhila wonders why they had not stopped her from going up. They may not like her, or they probably thought she knew what she was doing, but still they should have tried to stop her. She likes the idea of a village of people, even if they are nude, asking her to be one of them.