

South Asian gangstas hit the mark

Gautam Malkani's hot novel about London's ethnic underside shines with brilliant dialogue

BY CLINT BURNHAM

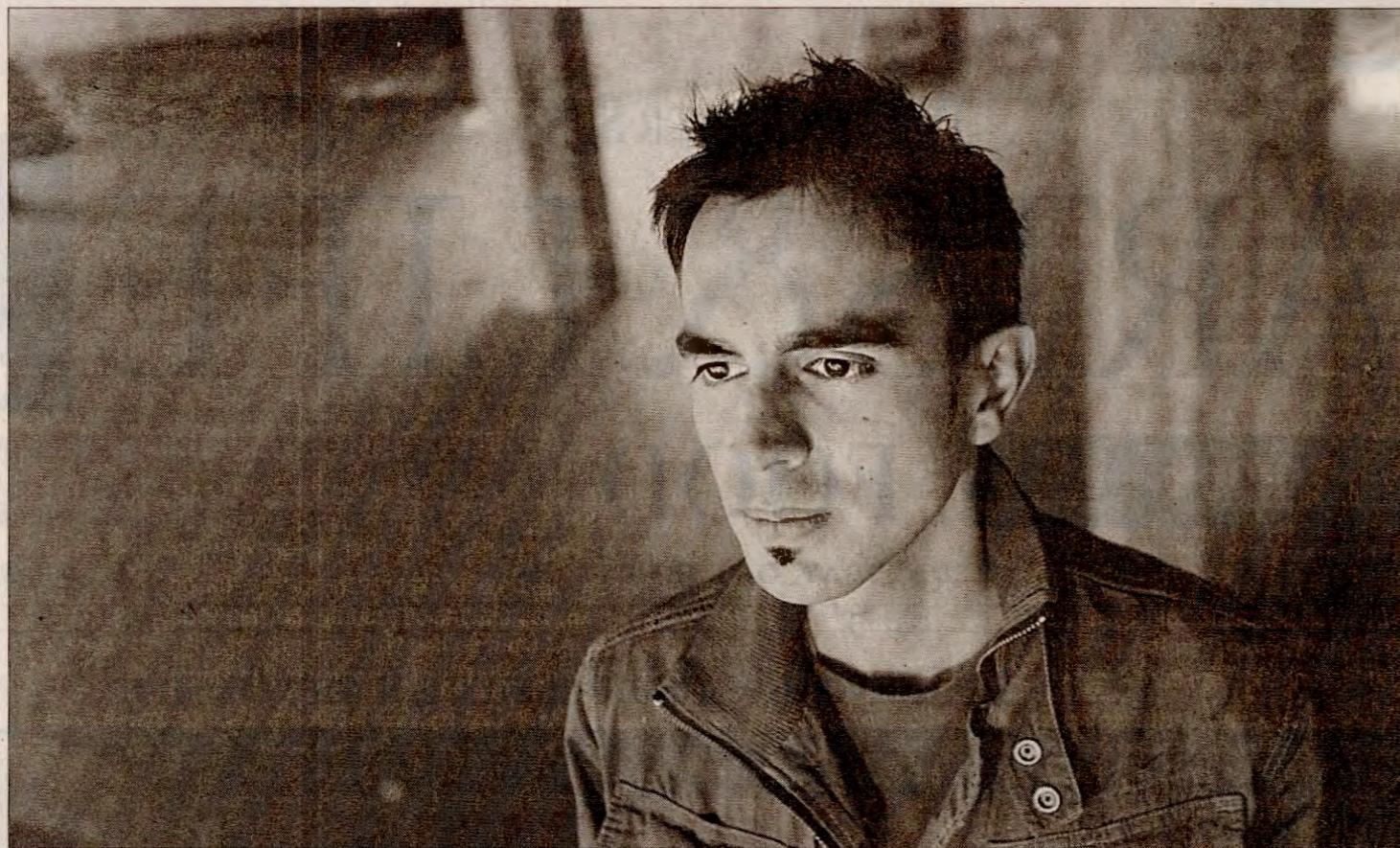
When Gautam Malkani was a student at Cambridge University in the 1990s, he wrote an undergraduate thesis about why his generation of South Asians were rejecting their parents' assimilation into British society.

After graduating and becoming a journalist at the *Financial Times*, he set out to turn that thesis into a non-fiction book. But he realized that he wanted the results of his research — his “foray into urban anthropology” as he described it to *The Sun* in a recent interview — to be read by his subjects, by the young “desis” (South Asians) of south London.

Sociology's loss is contemporary fiction's gain, and the resulting novel, *Londonstani*, has become one of the hottest books about youth culture since *Trainspotting*.

Londonstani is centred around a crew of South Asian gangstas — “desis” — who make money reprogramming cellphones. Their leader, Hardjit (he added the “d” to Harjit to sound tougher), epitomizes a paradoxical racial pride that sees no contradiction in emulating American hip-hop stars Nelly and DMX while lecturing a white boy — “gora” — about who can use the term “paki” as he beats the stuffing out of said gora.

Thus *Londonstani* begins, and what grabs you immediately is Malkani's assured brew of Indian slang, hip-hop lingo, text message spellings and British urban vernacular. Thus the Jamaican term “ras clat” sits next to “fone,” and “innit” shares the page with “wikkid” as we follow Hardjit, Ravi, Amit, and our narrator Jas on



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Journalist and author Gautam Malkani writes of South Asian youths living in a gangsta subculture in the novel *Londonstani*.

their journey. Slowly the novel switches gears from coming-of-age story to a more pulpish narrative, until things fall apart and Malkani applies a final twist of the knife in the book's closing pages.

Malkani, who will read Friday as part of the Vancouver International Writers and Readers Festival, spoke recently to *The Sun* about *Londonstani*.

First of all, he declared, “it isn't about race. It's about masculinity.”

South Asian males have gravitated towards American hip

hop, he said, “because that culture, like many aspects of their own, is characterized by hyper-masculinity, homophobia, misogyny and hypermaterialism.”

There isn't much difference, Malkani declared, between bling and the Indian desire for gold jewelry, or between calling women bitches and hos and thinking a daughter is only “an underperforming asset that brings in no income,” as one of the character's fathers explains to his sons.

Malkani's day job as a journalist no doubt came in handy when he was writing about shady capitalist Sanjay outlining what he calls “bling-bling economics.”

“Ghetto fabulous” becomes the rule and 14-year-old girls emulate Paris Hilton and Beyoncé: “This isn't about society becoming more affluent, this is about a subculture that wor-

ships affluence becoming mainstream culture.”

Finally, and this really is the most remarkable aspect of Malkani's writing of *Londonstani*, he doesn't think of his book as competing with other books.

“It's competing with Playstation and DVDs,” Malkani said.

He wrote the book he did because he wanted “non-readers” to read it, to discover what books can do. Hence the opening, full of verve and linguistic brio, to draw in the skeptical reader. Hence the turn, after a hundred pages or so, into a pulp gangster narrative — to keep the reader who would otherwise fire up his first-person shooter video game. And hence, finally, the end of the book's plot twist, a twist that Malkani rightly says is only possible in a book. In a novel.

Given the race relations here in the Lower Mainland, no

doubt the battles between Hardjit et al and their parents, and between Hardjit and the coconuts (assimilated South Asians, particularly those who listen to Radiohead) will strike a chord. And literary geeks will fall for Malkani's brilliant handling of dialogue.

But again, Malkani is also after a different reader, that non-reader.

He has said that in the months since the book's publication, people have told him time and time again that this is the first book they've finished, or their son or daughter has finished, in a long time. Better accolades no author could ask for.

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Gautam Malkani reads at two events Friday, the first beginning at 10 a.m. at Waterfront Theatre; the second beginning at 1 p.m. at the Revue Theatre.