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Author [Kia Abdullah](#) shares her rise from a working-class childhood in London to a career as a successful writer, now based in the historic market town of Richmond

# Escape to the Dales

## Books

**L**ONDON has a reputation as one of the greatest cities of the world. The verve and vigour of the capital is such that people from all over the globe flock to its crowded streets in the hopes of fulfilling a dream. The city teems with possibility; one serendipitous meeting might place you in the path of the love of your life or secure a coveted job and furnish you with fortune beyond your wildest hope.

People are surprised, then, when I say that my childhood in London actually felt quite small. My daily orbit ran from home to school to home, with occasional trips to the 'adventure park' down the road – really just a shabby square of sand dotted by a dozen rope swings.

Tower Hamlets wasn't the London of postcards, but a sprawling stretch of high-rise flats with very few patches of green. Those we did have were steadily culled in the Nineties to make space for extensive housing.

My life could so easily have stayed that size were it not for one simple fact: I was a voracious reader and collected books by the armful from Limehouse Library on Commercial Road. I cut my teeth on fairytales and graduated to Judy Blume and Sue

Townsend. One of the books that affected me most was Anne of Green Gables by LM Montgomery. This novel about a wayward orphan called Anne Shirley taught me that young girls didn't have to be quiet and docile: we could be brash and brave and troublesome, just like our male counterparts.

This caused some friction with my parents. As immigrants from Bangladesh, they held onto the conservative values that governed their own childhoods. While this taught me a number of valuable things – a respect for my elders, an aversion to debt and a strong duty to charity – it hindered me in other ways. For example, I wasn't encouraged to pursue education with the same zeal as my brothers.

Thankfully, as a reader, I learnt that my reach should exceed my grasp. As a result, I became the only one of eight siblings to graduate from university. I wanted to be a writer, but I chose computer science for its promise of financial security.

I secured a job in tech and worked there

happily for the next three years. Then, at the age of 24, I made what I consider the biggest mistake of my life. I bowed to societal pressure and agreed to an arranged marriage, as is custom in the Bangladeshi community. Over the course of several months I was presented with a dozen suitors and eventually agreed to marry one. It may not come as a surprise that the marriage didn't last. I – who grew up on a diet of Anne Shirley and Jo March – could not play the part of a dutiful wife.

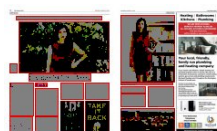
This was a significant turning point in my life. I was done trying to make others happy and following the path of the good immigrant child. I quit a lucrative job to follow my

dream of becoming a writer – taking a 50 per cent pay cut in the process. I joined Asian Woman magazine and soon met my partner, Peter, a teacher, photographer and keen traveller. Much to my mother's dismay, we did not choose to marry, but are still together a decade later.

It took a few years, but I carved out a rewarding career as a writer. I worked at Penguin Random House and was published in The New York Times, The Guardian and The Telegraph. Most recently, I signed a two-book deal with HarperCollins, one of the biggest publishers in the world. My novel, a courtroom drama called Take It Back, was named one of the best thrillers of 2019 by The Guardian and The Telegraph. The follow-up, Truth Be Told, is out this month.

Before the book deal Peter and I spent a year saving for a trip around the world. We visited far-flung countries like Vanuatu, Tonga, Fiji and Samoa and when we returned to London, I realised I no longer wanted to settle in the city. I was tired of cramped spaces and stressed commutes, of concrete blocks and flashes of hostility. Thankfully, Peter and I had set up a travel blog to chart our trip – atlasandboots.com – which rapidly gained popularity. Our readership of 250,000 people a month meant we could work on the website full time and were no longer tied to jobs in London.

We began to search for a new home with better access to nature. We initially looked inside the Yorkshire Dales National Park and nearly settled



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in Reeth. It was by pure luck that we discovered Richmond. Our estate agent mentioned in passing that she lived in this charming town and we decided to take a look. The castle looming above the Swale, the expansive views from Westfields, the cobbled streets and listed buildings felt quintessentially English and we knew that this was where we wanted to be.

We moved to Richmond in September 2018 and set a new orbit: Duncans Tearoom, the Angel's Share Bakery, Castle Hill Bookshop and Mocha

café, with frequent trips into the Dales. Peter is aiming to climb the Dales 30, a collection of peaks inside the park, and is currently at number 26. I, meanwhile, am writing my next novel.

I do miss my friends and family in London – often fiercely – but I remind myself of the things I have gained. There is space, fresh air, fresh food and a calmer pace of life here. When I have a deadline looming and I glance through my skylight to see Richmond Castle lit against the evening sky, I feel a sense of peace I did not have in childhood. Life, it seems, isn't so small after all.

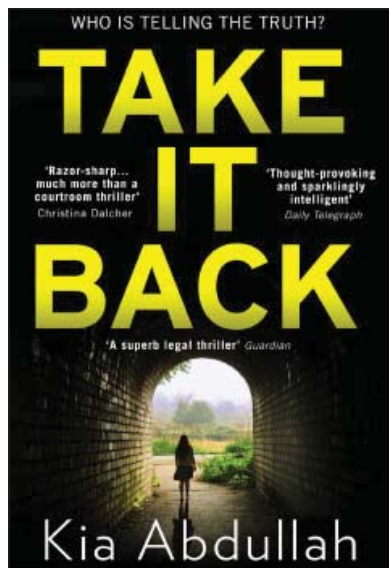
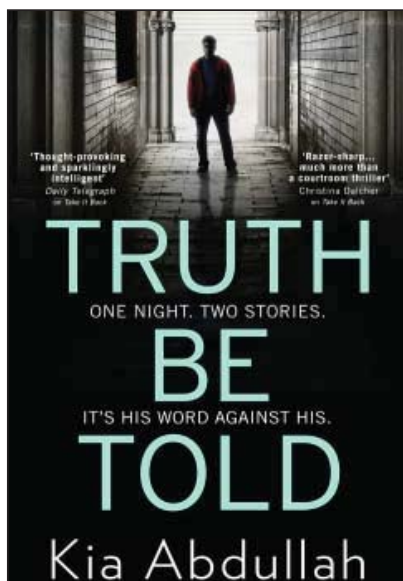
■ **Truth Be Told by Kia Abdullah (HarperCollins, £12.99) is out on September 3. Kia will be signing copies at the Castle Hill Bookshop, Richmond from 11am-12pm on Saturday, September 5. W: [kiaabdullah.com](http://kiaabdullah.com).**

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**Kia Abdullah:** misses friends and family in London, but is loving the fresh air and open spaces of the Dales



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**Richmond: a far cry from the concrete blocks of Tower Hamlets in London**