

# The Book Of Everlasting Things is a dazzling, immersive literary debut

Historian Aanchal Malhotra's novel about the legacy of the 1947 Partition is a gorgeous meditation on memory, scent and human resilience

BY JANET SOMERVILLE Dec 19, 2022

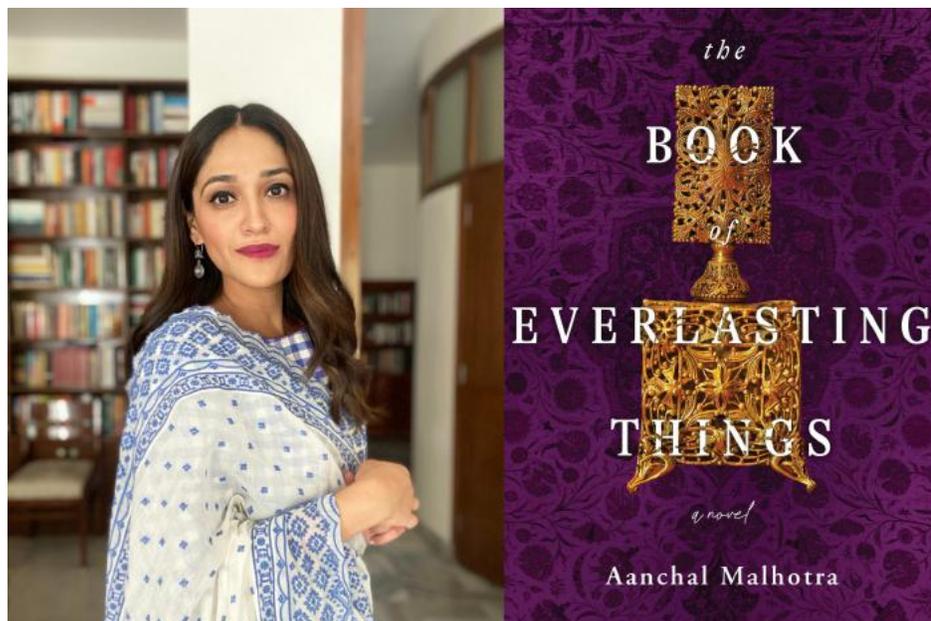


Photo of Aanchal Malhotra by Aashna Malhotra

**THE BOOK OF EVERLASTING THINGS** by Aanchal Malhotra (Flatiron Books, 480 pages). \$39.99. Rating: **NNNNN**

New Delhi-based oral historian Aanchal Malhotra writes extensively about the legacy of 1947 Partition in *The Book Of Everlasting Things*. This lush, immersive, intergenerational saga is her dazzling debut novel.

The book's epigraph from Joan Didion's *The White Album* sets the tone and is the imperative by which her perfumer protagonist, Samir Vij, a Hindu, lives his long life: "A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image."

The story opens in 1938 Lahore on the morning of Samir's tenth birthday: fittingly,

“his nose woke up first.” Like his paternal Uncle Vivek, he has a rare talent for discerning scent and becomes a perfumer’s apprentice, beginning that day. Sniffing the essence of tuberose, Samir explains, “I smelled a beautiful, endless night... the smell made me feel safe. Like I was lying in a bed of stars.”

One day esteemed calligrapher Altaf Khan visits the Vij family’s shop, looking for a rare rose elixir to perfume the paper for a special manuscript he’s been contracted to create. With him is his daughter Firdaus, a shy Muslim girl with pistachio-coloured eyes. Samir is drawn to her, especially when he discovers that she is learning her father’s craft, a custom typically restricted to boys. He ends up taking weekly lessons from Khan in order to create tidy, beautiful future labels for the little glass vials used in his family’s perfume business.

The two teens fall in love, and over seven years Samir writes Firdaus 388 letters, her most treasured possessions. He also creates a scent just for her, confessing, “... wherever you are, wherever this smell is, that is my refuge.”

However, 1947 Partition and the creation of Pakistan cleaves the two (now 19 and 18) and has a devastating impact on Lahore, where friends and families of different religious affiliation previously lived in harmony. Partition dooms the star-crossed lovers as Firdaus, a Muslim, becomes entrenched in the newly-established Pakistan and is forbidden to see Samir, a Hindu, who is forced to leave Lahore when a fire devastates his family, home and business.

Samir leaves India in 1948 making a new life for himself in Paris where he gets work as a hospital porter and meets Léa, who becomes his wife. They have one daughter, Sophie.

One of the few talismanic objects connecting Samir to his past is his uncle's journal. In addition to his expected professional notes about creating fragrances, Samir discovers that Vivek kept a detailed account of his time on the front during WWI. He becomes obsessed with the war details and discovers previously hidden truths that alter his perception of the past.

This ongoing obsession fractures his marriage, and Samir relocates a decade later to the flower fields of Grasse – where Vivek trained in 1916 under perfumer Édouard deRose, now approaching 90. There he discovers Vivek's tragic secret. With deRose's guidance, Samir becomes who he is meant to be. He learns that scent can be a refuge. And that, like other artists – musicians, painters, writers – perfumers “elevate human life during crisis.” In moments of great trauma they become “the transporters to a world absolved from grief.” What finer service to humanity could there be?

In 1970, Samir returns to Paris and opens a shop on Rue Visconti, Les Jardins de l'Inde, where customers “come to buy history, memory, dreams, desires and romance.” His most poignant compositions emerge from moments that linger: “memories of love and happiness, or periods of deep longing, or moments of unfathomable loss.”

In this epic narrative Malhotra moves fleetingly from decade to decade with the last section of the novel devoted to the up-and-coming young professionals, specifically Samir's granddaughter Anouk and Firdaus's grandson, also named Samir, a journalist.

In 2000, when Anouk is 13, she moves to Paris to become her grandfather's apprentice, understanding that her avocation demands devotion and mystery.

Two decades later, skilled in her trade, she meets Samir Khan who travels to Paris to return a box of letters to his namesake, the man his grandmother always loved.

The winding story drives to a pitch-perfect ending with Anouk recognizing the essential lifelong love that inspires the final, most personal perfume her grandfather creates.

The Book of Everlasting Things is a gorgeous meditation on memory, the abiding influence of scent, and the resilience of ordinary people.

*Janet Somerville is the author of Yours, For Probably Always: Martha Gellhorn's Letters Of Love & War 1930-1949, out recently in paperback from Firefly Books and also available in audio, read by Ellen Barkin.*