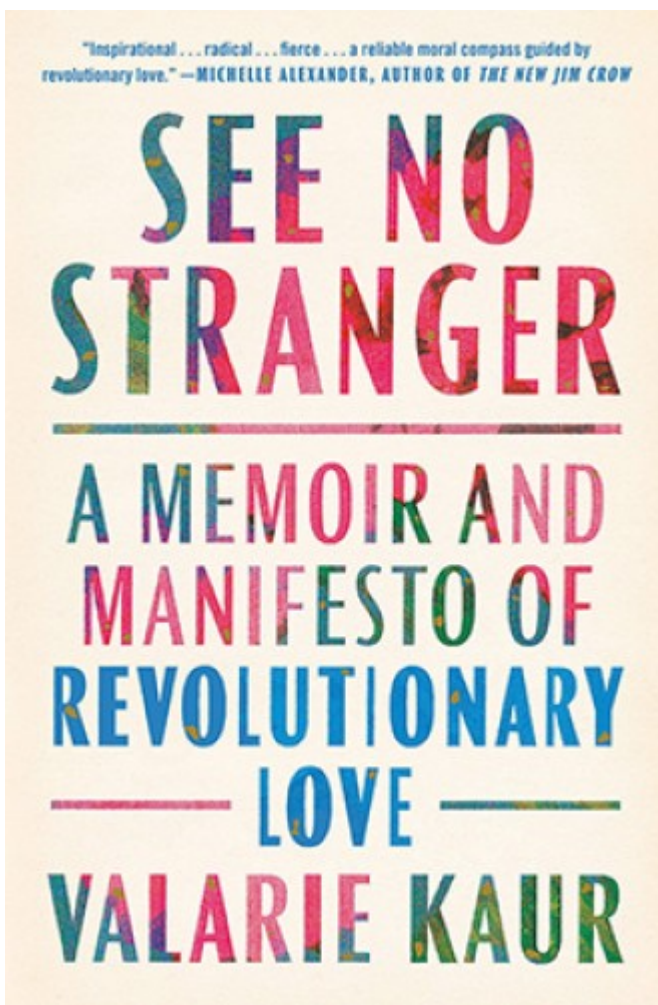


For Valarie Kaur, love is sweet labor

A memoir of an activist whose life is grounded in Sikh mysticism

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue

In Review



See No Stranger

A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love

By Valarie Kaur

One World

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When I settle into my cozy reading nook, I am never alone. These days I am surrounded by my children, who always seem to be home. I am also hemmed in by a herd of elephants in the room: the COVID-19 pandemic, systemic racism, and the frayed state of American democracy, to name a few. I picked up *See No Stranger* at a time when these children and these elephants were trumpeting so loudly I could barely hear myself think. It seems a small miracle that Valarie Kaur's quiet yet commanding voice cut through the cacophony.

Kaur has been formed by many experiences. She is a Sikh whose family has farmed in California for more than 100 years. She is a Yale-educated lawyer with a master's degree in theology from Harvard Divinity School. She is a survivor of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. She is a filmmaker, a feminist, a writer, a speaker, and a mother. These disparate threads are fused together in her core identity and vocation: Kaur is an activist who has lent her presence, time, and voice to nearly every major progressive movement of the past 20 years.

She has spent her days honoring the victims of hate crimes, fighting for prison reform, protesting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the injustices of Guantánamo Bay, exposing police brutality and racial profiling, advocating for immigrants' rights, and campaigning for Barack Obama (whose administration later disappointed her). This is an incomplete inventory; the array of causes with which she has aligned herself is dizzying. As one who has been quickly worn out by my own brief forays into advocacy and activism, I found myself truly astonished by Kaur's endurance. She is a tireless and unapologetic social justice warrior in a world that has rendered that phrase a slur.

The title of the book, borrowed from the teachings of the first Sikh sage, serves as the foundation for Kaur's worldview. When she sustained her first racially motivated verbal attack at age six, her grandfather tended her wounds with wisdom. "If you choose to see no stranger," he taught her, "then you must love people, even when they do not love you. You must wonder about them even when they refuse to wonder about you. You must even protect them when they are in harm's way."

Kaur takes this fundamental conviction and spins a whole way of life from it. Quoting her own widely celebrated TED talk, Kaur appeals to the practice of “revolutionary love.” She writes,

“Love” is more than a feeling. Love is a form of sweet labor: fierce, bloody, imperfect, and life-giving—a choice we make over and over again. If love is sweet labor, love can be taught, modeled, and practiced. This labor engages all our emotions. Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger protects that which is loved. And when we think we have reached our limit, wonder is the act that returns us to love.

Kaur argues that love must be practiced in multiple directions—toward the self, toward the other, and—most laboriously of all—toward the enemy. With depth and surprising vulnerability, she explores each of these practices through compelling narratives plucked from her life and the lives of the people with whom she has labored. The manifesto is inextricable from the memoir.

Perhaps this all seems a little familiar, a reiteration of extant spiritual wisdom. And maybe it is—but in the best possible way. It matters that Kaur’s activism is deeply grounded in her Sikh tradition. She unironically embraces the sort of idealism that most often emerges from religious conviction:

Every social justice movement in the United States has been infused with the energy of faith leaders who ignite our moral imagination and connect us with our ability to re-create the world around us. We do not need religion to imagine the world we want. But we do need more spaces to imagine and wisdom about how to do it. Prophetic teachers and faith leaders can offer sacred spaces for collective imagining, rituals for resilience, and stories and songs of ancestors that infuse our struggles with purpose. They can lift our gaze beyond immediate victories toward the world we are longing for.

And, I hope, they can lift our gaze beyond immediate losses. In this bleak moment of American history, a healthy idealism rooted in sincerity of vision is called for.

Perhaps, too, you are wondering if Kaur might be one of those storytellers who inadvertently casts herself as the heroine. And maybe she does, but again, in the

best possible way. These days, aren't we all a bit desperate for a hero? Kaur does not for a moment believe that she can sustain the movement alone. She longs for more co-laborers, and she's determined to inspire an army of people committed to the philosophy and practice of revolutionary love.

As I finished the book, I realized that the biggest wonder isn't that I could hear Kaur over the trumpeting of the external elephants in the room. It's that I could hear Kaur over the terrible rumblings that are taking root within me: the relentless drumbeats of grief, anxiety, and despair. Even against that pulse, I was able to make out Kaur's fierce, bloody, imperfect, and life-giving call. *See No Stranger* was written for such a time as this.