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In Sameer Pandya's 'Our Beautiful Boys,' teenage secrets are the dark heart of suburbia

Early in Sameer Pandya's new novel, four teenagers wander into a Southern California cave. It's a moonlit scene, heavy with adolescent swagger, the precarious balance between friendship and rivalry hanging in the air. When only three emerge unscathed, readers are plunged into a literary thriller exploring secrets, privilege and the blurry ethics of identity.

In "Our Beautiful Boys" (Ballantine, 2025), Pandya, an associate professor at UC Santa Barbara, frames his narrative around a central ambiguity inspired by E.M. Forster's "A Passage to India," where an incident in a cave leaves questions of truth unanswered. He transplants that uncertainty to contemporary California, intertwining race, privilege and passing — both racial and social — into a story that ripples outward through families and friendships.

Vikram, one of the novel's teenage protagonists, is caught between two worlds: the idealistic nonviolence of his Indian American family, symbolized by a prominently displayed photograph of Gandhi, and the aggressive physicality of American high school football. Pandya underscores the irony: *Is there a sport more un-Gandhian than football?*

"Vikram excels precisely because of his strength and aggression — traits seemingly at odds with his parents' values," said Pandya, also the author of "Members Only"

(Harper Collins, 2020), who teaches Asian American studies. This internal contradiction runs throughout the novel, highlighting broader tensions around immigrant identity, masculinity and family expectations.

Yet Vikram isn't alone in shaping his identity to navigate his suburban world. When an Indian restaurant owner dismisses his white friends as "these American boys," Vikram thinks, *I'm an American boy too,* but stays silent, strategically shifting identities based on context. Each of the teenage protagonists — Vikram, MJ and Diego — carefully crafts their sense of self, reflecting Pandya's broader exploration of American identity, shaped as much by class and privilege as by race.

MJ's wealth grants him a certain aloofness, crystallized by his refusal to wear shoes — a choice he considers carefree but his father points out as a subtle marker of privilege. Similarly, MJ's home, filled with inherited furniture, quietly signals inherited social capital. Pandya populates his novel with a litany of status symbols — watches, cars and insider trading, fine fish, upscale produce and leisure activities — shifting in value depending on perspective. "I've always been interested in money, class, privilege and how we use objects to leverage status," he said.

Diego, a gifted math student and football player, is raised by his mother, an academic whose carefully curated identity complicates notions of authenticity and clout. In her portrayal, Pandya subverts traditional narratives of racial passing and examines how identity shifts within families: "We often think about identity as individually performed," Pandya said, "but within domesticity — an entire family — how does it shift?"

Beneath these identity performances lies a darker undercurrent: hidden family truths. Parents, consumed by college applications and securing their children's futures, inadvertently become catalysts for their children's transition from boys to men. "Teenagers are far savvier about race than we sometimes give them credit for," Pandya said. "They've lived through discussions on racial reality, the post-racial and the return of race. They're extremely perceptive; they're just figuring out how to navigate it."

At the same time, "Our Beautiful Boys" discreetly functions as a sports novel, using football to explore how teenage boys navigate intimacy beneath their bravado. "It's

how boys are intimate without being intimate," Pandya said, describing sports as a language of friendship and a conduit for learning to express regret and disappointment.

The novel's intrigue deepens through Pandya's handling of multiple perspectives, a departure from his earlier first-person narratives. Shifting viewpoints augment readers' empathy and complicate simple judgments. "The trick is using different characters to explore various issues," he said. By capturing multiple angles of the same incident, Pandya mirrors the cave's echoes, where truth fractures unpredictably. Structured as a whodunit, the narrative compels readers to question not only what occurred but why. "There's something about caves — the echoes and darkness make truth and reality slippery," he added.

"Our Beautiful Boys" examines everyday life as a series of small betrayals, with families and friendships shaped as much by omission as by expression. In doing so, Pandya reveals not just the secret heart of adolescence but also the fragile veneer of an adult world striving — and often failing — to guide it.

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