

# NEWS REVIEW & FEATURES

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**'I didn't feel like I was good enough. I was horrendous at the start'**

refrigeration units to supermarkets), Guha was the first cricketer of Indian origin to join the England women's team at just 17.

As a player, she always fitted cricket around her studies, graduating with a degree in biochemistry and molecular biology from UCL, and later gaining a Master's in the philosophy of neuroscience – all while playing world-class cricket. "I went through a phase after we won the World Cup of 'what am I going to do with my life?'" she recalls, which led to studying.

"I would spend three or four days a week training in the morning and then going to university. It took seven years," she explains of her attempt at a PhD, "and I wanted to quit after the second year because it was just too much."

In the end, the volume of broadcasting work coming her way meant finishing with an MPhil instead – a decision that has served her well, given she is working for Sky Sports and the BBC's *Test Match Special* throughout the men's Ashes series.

"Five years ago, there were probably two or three names anyone had ever heard of from England women's cricket – Charlotte Edwards and Katherine Brunt, or Sarah Taylor," she says. "Now there's maybe 10 or 11 names you could pick out around the country, and that will continue to grow."

But since 2017, during which every game of the Women's World Cup (which England won) was broadcast on TV, things have changed. "Visibility is absolutely key," Guha says.

There is still a way to go, however.



**Put to the test:** Isa Guha at her father's home in High Wycombe, left; commentating as England's Joe Root tosses the coin on day one of the first Ashes Test, above; and during her playing career, below

It was not lost on her that the men's World Cup triumph last month was described as England's "first". Guha duly pointed out on Twitter that the women's team had achieved the feat before.

"It's not to have a go at the guys," she explains, "it's more that there's a real opportunity to remind people that the women did it, too."

Four times, in fact, but who's counting?

It's these sorts of comments which can get her in hot water on social media. "When I first started I did receive a lot of abuse" – particularly from English social media users, who Guha says are the most misogynistic, posting "things like 'get back in the kitchen'. I'm just like, really? It's 2019."

A quick scroll through her recent Twitter mentions makes for interesting reading. They range from high praise – "one of the best, and most professional, in the business" – to offensive: "trouble is she is only there to tick a box".

"It's frustrating," Guha admits, shrugging, "but I just leave it."

She can handle herself, though. "I've always been attracted to that anyway," she says of boys' club environments, in which she finds "I actually thrive. If you feel they ever cross the line, you can always say what you think and they respect that."

She has been "one of the boys" since she was eight years old, when she joined her brother on the boys' team at her local cricket club – the only girl from an Indian background in a team full of British and Pakistani boys.

While playing in a boys' team might have been frowned upon by some traditional Asian families, she says, her parents "never saw it as a problem, so I never did."

"I was very lucky, and I owe my mum a lot for that... she was the one who really encouraged it to happen."

When she talks about her mum, her eyes glisten with tears. Guha hasn't seemed totally at ease throughout our interview; it's only now I learn why.

Her mother, Roma, died in January after a short battle with cancer. And while Guha may be able to get behind a microphone and natter away about



## Rising from the Ashes to break up the boys' club

*Eleanor Steafel* meets Isa Guha, the World Cup-winning cricketer – and trained molecular biologist – who is taking the commentary box by storm

Cricket commentary always seems more of an art form than it does with other sports. Football punditry is an endless stream of platitudes: "at the end of the day, it's a game of two halves", while rugby is a maze of rules, heavy on the description. Wimbledon commentary now seems to be more of a who's who of the Royal Box than detailing the match at hand.

But cricket is different. For a start, there is endless space and time to chunter on about anything from the weather to the quality of the pork pies at lunch. Until very recently, the world of cricket commentary was, like the sport itself, a boys' club.

Enter Isa Guha. A former England star in her own right, she was part of the team that won the Women's World Cup and retained the Ashes in 2009. She has now made a name for herself in the commentary box, quickly becoming one of the most recognisable voices in cricket. The Australian fans love her (she earned their respect during last year's summer series, with many writing on social media about how impressed

they were with her coverage), and the English fans are growing to feel the same way – they're a harder bunch to please, she says. And as the men's Ashes began this week, Guha was granted the honour of conducting the coin toss – becoming the first woman to do so in a men's Ashes series – before taking her place in the Sky Sports commentary box alongside Ian Botham.

"I think we're seeing a sea change now in how people view female commentators," the 34-year-old says as we chat in her dad's sunny garden in High Wycombe, two days after the men's world cup win. "For ages I didn't think I was good enough. I was horrendous at the start."

"I probably didn't feel like I was good enough until 2015, and again I didn't think it was a real career path because there just weren't as many opportunities back then."

Born into a Bengali family in Buckinghamshire (her father, Barun, came to Britain from Kolkata in 1965 and runs a business selling

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NEWS REVIEW

# I hope Lyra will be able to live on in her writing'

### At the launch of murdered journalist Lyra McKee's book, her family and friends share fears of new Troubles with Cara McGoogan

It is our hope that by the time this book makes it to publication, we will have the answers we desire and require," wrote Nicola Corner in a foreword to her little sister's first book. Six hours ahead of its launch, Corner is acutely aware that in the silence that would have been filled with Lyra McKee's characteristic excitement, there are only questions about her death.

"In an ideal world, what I wrote in the foreword would have been as prophetic as my sister's work," says Corner. "All I can hope is that in 40 years' time we're not still waiting, like a lot of people in this country are, for justice to be delivered for Lyra's murder."

Fifteen weeks have passed since the 29-year-old journalist was killed by a single shot to the head, fired by a dissident republican gunman during a riot in Londonderry on April 18. Her killer is still at large.

"We want someone to be held accountable for taking away such a wonderful human being and our beloved family member," says Corner, when we meet in a café in an area of Belfast where McKee did much of her reporting. The 44-year-old is wearing a badge depicting her sister's smiling face and her favourite phrases, which has become the grieving family's slogan: "Failure is not an option."

Today is a stark reminder of how McKee was cut down in her prime. She had finished writing *Angels with Blue Faces*, her book about the 1981 murders of Ulster Unionist MP Robert Bradford and caretaker Ken Campbell at the hands of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), just a week before her death. The launch at Linen Hall Library, in central Belfast, where she had spent years poring over the archives, should have been a celebration. Instead, it is a second memorial.

The atmosphere is surprisingly buoyant. Lyra's fiancée, Sara Canning, sits in an audience packed with family and friends, wearing the engagement ring with which McKee had planned to propose to her in New York in May (she had already asked Corner to officiate the wedding). Lyra's family laugh proudly, tears rolling down their cheeks, at jokes about how many questions she used to ask.

Earlier, however, Corner visibly wrestled with her grief. "It has been like living in a nightmare," she tells me, holding back tears. "I forgot from time to time. Then, it comes back and the reality is that this is actually real. It's like it happens all over again – learning that she's not with us any more."

A couple of weeks ago, Corner was shopping with their mother, Joan, 68, when she saw a Harry Potter-themed bag with the message,

"Don't let the muggles get you down". On autopilot, she says, "I bought it for Lyra, because I'd forgotten."

McKee was obsessed with books. Aged nine, their grandmother bought the sisters the first *Harry Potter*, which bound them across their 15-year age gap. "She was Hufflepuff and I was Gryffindor," says Corner, now an English teacher and mother of three.

The youngest of six, McKee grew up in north Belfast, just off Antrim Road, dubbed "Murder Mile" at the height of the Troubles. A child of the Good Friday Agreement, she was eight when the ceasefire was signed, but although violence abated in her lifetime, it had a lasting impact on her generation; something she later wrote about in a piece called "Stuck in the Ceasefire Bubble", after a wave of deaths among her peers.

"She wanted to understand the violence and the Troubles here," Corner explains, and at 15, she won a grant to study with media school Headlins UK, where she trained two nights a week and every Saturday. "She had enormous ambition," says Joan Boyle, 52, McKee's mentor and Mayor of Derry at the time of her death. He recalls



Photo: Paul Phillips



Photo: Paul Phillips

# I owe it to Mum to carry on her legacy'

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months. "He was just incredible. I am super-lucky to have him in my life," she says.

"Work keeps her busy, and she and Rich travel all over to ensure they see enough of each other: "I'll try to visit him on tour and he'll try to come out and see me." She loves presenting, and feels her commenting is going from strength to strength. But if the broadcast work were to dry up? "There's a pretty solid career to them. So what have they been up to?"

Happily, many have been posting photographs of themselves on social media to make clear that, in some ways, they're rather enjoying their new-found freedom.

Greg Clark, the former business secretary, shared a picture of himself swimming in the River Medway. James Brokenshire, the former housing secretary, has been having cakes (and has already received an order from Robert Buckland, the new Justice Secretary, for a batch of salted brownies). Mel Stride, sacked as leader of the Commons after just two months, has been discussing his next move with his beagle pup, Peggie.

Former Scotland secretary David Mundell has been enjoying a beer or two. "There's more time for this sort of thing on the backbenches", and Caroline Nokes, former immigration minister, has been in her garden, knee-

deep in manure ("Shovelling s---. Plus ça change").

Naturally, they still have their constituency work to be getting on with, even if it does tend to be a little less glamorous than the great affairs of state over which they formerly presided. Two weeks ago, David Lidington was the de facto deputy. This week, he's been on Facebook, updating constituents on the condition of the pavements in Aylesbury. Meanwhile, Penny Mordaunt, the former defence secretary, has been visiting her local job centre. In her capacity as an MP, of course.

As for Theresa May? She looks the happiest she's been in years. Admittedly, that isn't saying much.

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