

# Lion: A Long Way Home

## Author Background

Saroo Brierley (with Larry Buttrose)

Born: 1981, Khandwa, Madhya Pradesh, India

Raised: Hobart, Tasmania

Born in Khandwa in 1986, Saroo Brierley was only five years old when he lost all contact with his family. Waiting at a station for a brother who never returned, he fatefully boarded an empty train and eventually found himself stranded nearly one thousand miles from home. Brierley survived on the streets of Calcutta for 3 weeks by himself before being placed in a local orphanage, and later adopted by an Australian family. His new parents brought him home to Hobart, Tasmania where he spent the next 25 years.

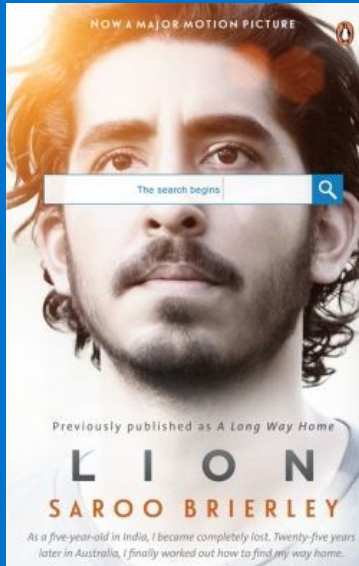
After studying at the Australian International Hotel School in Canberra, Brierley surrendered to his long-held desire to locate his home and family. He spent hours, months and years studying Google Earth, following train lines and searching for landmarks. Finally in 2011 he identified Khwanda as his home town, and then travelled to India to try and find members of his family. In early 2012, after 25 years of separation, he was at last reunited with his mother.

Today Saroo continues to live in Hobart. He travels the world as a motivational speaker, and visits his family in India regularly. A prequel to *Lion: A long way home* is being discussed.

Brierley worked with Blue Mountains writer Larry Buttrose to produce the story of his childhood displacement and his search for home. Buttrose is a novelist, poet, and a writer for the stage, and has also published travel books and graphic novels. His non-fiction titles include *Speeches of War and Peace* (2009) and *Tales of the Popes : from Eden to El Dorado, an Infamous History* (2009).

Buttrose recorded hours of interviews with Brierley and also travelled to India with him. Together they drew out the book's narrative and Buttrose absorbed Brierley's idioms and speech patterns, enabling him to bring Brierley's singular story to the page.

Sources: Author's website; Wikipedia; *A Long Way Home: Ghostwriter Larry Buttrose on telling Saroo Brierley's story behind the film Lion* (Amanda Hoh, ABC Radio interview transcript, 16 Feb 2017)



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## Book Summary

When Saroo Brierley used Google Earth to find his long-lost home town half a world away, he made global headlines.

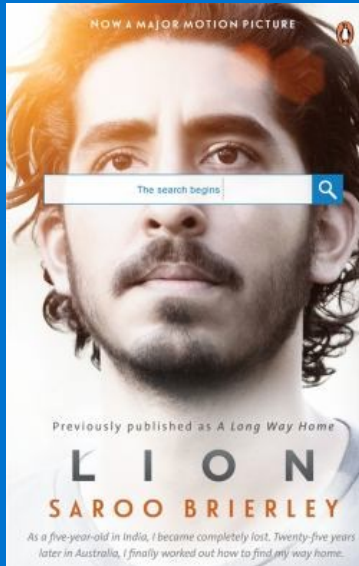
Saroo had become lost on a train in India at the age of five. Not knowing the name of his family or where he was from, he survived for weeks on the streets of Kolkata, before being taken into an orphanage and adopted by a couple in Australia.

Despite being happy in his new family, Saroo always wondered about his origins. He spent hours staring at the map of India on his bedroom wall. When he was a young man the advent of Google Earth led him to pore over satellite images of the country for landmarks he recognised. And one day, after years of searching, he miraculously found what he was looking for.

Then he set off on a journey to find his mother.

*Lion: A Long Way Home* is a moving and inspirational true story that celebrates the importance of never letting go of what drives the human spirit – hope.

Source: Penguin Australia website



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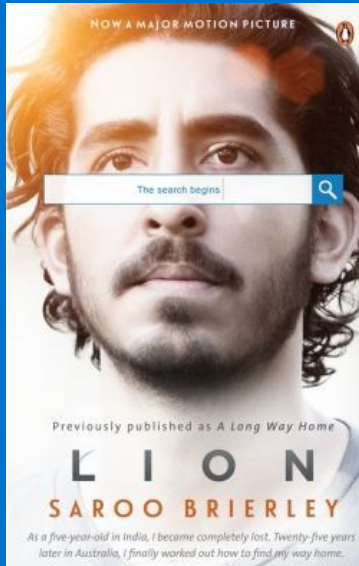
## Discussion Questions

1. What propels Saroo Brierley as an adult to search for his birth home, especially as he writes, "I am not Indian...and I have family bonds [in Australia] that cannot be broken"? If that is the case, why the drive to find his Indian roots?
2. What role does memory play in shaping our self-identity? What are the memories Saroo has of his early childhood, and how have those memories shaped Saroo's sense of himself? How did Saroo exercise his mind in order to keep his childhood memories alive for 25 years?
3. Discuss Saroo's ordeal on the streets of Kolkata. Also, what about the railway worker who took him in for a time. What makes Saroo run away from the man's seeming kindness?
4. Talk about the genuine kindness of other people Saroo encounters in Kolkata: the ISSA orphanage and Mrs. Saroj Sood, in particular.
5. Describe Sue and John Brierley as parents and the kind of family they provided for Saroo and his brother Mantosh. To what degree did Sue's background as a refugee influence her wish to adopt two Indian children?
6. Are Kamala's experiences as a single mother and her struggles to keep her family fed typical of Indian village women? Also, consider her insistence on remaining in the same home in hopes that her son might someday return to her. What does that suggest about the kind of woman Kamala is and the strength of her optimism and her faith?
7. Consider the challenges and skills involved in ghost-writing somebody else's story. Would it be particularly difficult in the case of recounting such an emotional and personal journey? How well do you think Larry Buttrose effaced his own voice and adopted Saroo Brierley's?

### *Just for Fun*

8. What are your experiences, if any, of using Google Earth? Has anyone in your reading group revisited their childhood or ancestral home online to reminisce or learn about their past, or to observe any changes? Would it be interesting for you to retrace your old walking route to school or view the site of your great-great-grandparent's home?

Sources: Most questions adapted from the LitLovers website.



# Lion: A Long Way Home

## Reviews

*A Long Way Home* by Saroo Brierley with Larry Buttrose is a book worth reading even after you have seen its internationally renowned film adaptation *Lion* (2016). Like many readers, this reviewer is deeply moved by the story of a five-year-old Indian boy who became lost on a train.... But it is [ghost-writer Larry] Buttrose's calm and sensible writing that really shapes

Brierley as the main character of this book. The story is expertly told, presenting a man capable of facing his own shadows while maintaining faith in the light of his life. In the midst of all the traumatised memories is a determination to return to the beginning, a sense of purpose equipped with an acute awareness of possibilities/opportunities to confront both failure and success along the way. A mature man, indeed, who reflects and keeps hoping, who knows himself well.

...This is no doubt an interesting and rewarding process, to get to know a person so well that one is able to tell the story of that person's life in such an intimate way yet remains professionally invisible in that story. It is perhaps a writer's ultimate goal, to live in the world of his/her own subjects and share their experiences while maintaining some sort of detachment from them, achieving a perfect balance between the story itself and the act of storytelling.

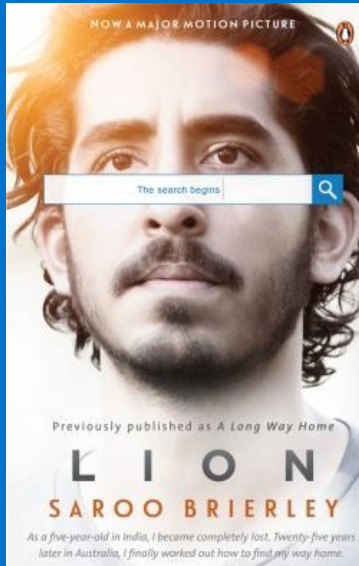
Christine Sun, *Voices Under the Sun* website.

Losing a child is every parent's nightmare; in Australia it's the bush they fear most. Being lost in a city brings with it the hope that police and kind strangers provide. But when a five-year-old, impoverished child gets lost in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), which Saroo Brierley did 25 years ago, hope is a rare thing.

...Brierley writes in a straightforward manner without trying to do anything fancy except tell a remarkable story. As well as the tale of his quest, he provides an informative and fascinating insight into how Third World families live with, and somehow survive, their poverty.

Dianne Dempsey, *The Age*

Every once in a while, a story comes along that seems too remarkable to be true, the sort of miraculous sequence of events that would once have been ready fodder for Oprah Winfrey in her talk show days, or, as it turned out in reality, for a joyful movie, one seemingly larger than life. Luckily for readers — and moviegoers — there is such a tale: Saroo Brierley's memoir *A Long way Home: A Boy's Incredible Journey from India to Australia and Back Again*, which served as the basis for the highly acclaimed 2016 movie *Lion*, starring Dev Patel.



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## Reviews (continued)

There is a real feeling of catharsis when reading Brierley's astounding narrative, in the classic sense of a happy ending, for the journey of the author as a boy — and then again as a young man — evokes the audacity of a fable, but it is set in the real world, a place where wonderment and miraculous occurrences can often seem wanting.

...Brierley writes... with such honesty and expressiveness, the reader is transported to the terrifying bigness of the world that he inhabited as a lost little boy. His perilous situation lasted for months, and sheer luck and the kindness of a handful of strangers saved him from the myriad of fates that often claim countless unnamed and forgotten children.

...The remarkable outcome of his determination to persist in the belief that he could find his home again could have only succeeded in the modern world in which he found himself living, for without the aid of Google Earth, his story would most certainly have turned out differently.

Karina Weatherby *The Vail Daily*

Saroo Brierley's memoir is so incredible that sometimes it reads like a work of fiction. At five years old, he became lost in one of the world's most overpopulated cities. He not only managed to survive, but overcame adversity without a shard of bitterness.

...Although heartwarming, his recollections omit crucial details, such as the fear of abandonment, adjusting to an abundance of food [following his adoption by a Tasmanian family] and learning Australian customs. But some of Saroo's memories are extremely poignant, such as his adoptive mother drawing a map of his hometown based on his memories.

...Throughout his narrative, Saroo reflects on how it feels to be adopted.

*"Adoptees often describe the constant feeling of there being something missing. I didn't feel that. I never forgot my Indian mother and family, but being separated from them didn't (prevent) me from pursuing a full life. I'd learned... that I needed to take opportunities as they came."*

Saroo's values speak volumes about the quality of his upbringing. It would have been fascinating to learn more about his adoptive parents. That said, the utter enormity of his experience is inherently dramatic and his strength of character makes up for any shortcomings in his writing.

Deborah Bowers, *The Winnipeg Free Press*