

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: ART & POETRY

Nabil Rahman yearns for big truths with few words in 'Water Bodies'

MALIHA MOHSIN

About this book, I'd like to speak simply. Because Nabil Rahman's *Water Bodies* (Nokta/ Boobook, 2020) speaks simply too, without frills or embellishment. It holds space by offering it to the reader in the form of blank pages between its poems, much like the spaces that remain amidst Rahman's sculptures on the book's cover image.

I wouldn't call *Water Bodies* a book of poetry. Written with few words, it is an extension of his artistic practice, and accompanies his ongoing solo exhibition of the same name at Studio 6/6 in Mohammadpur. Rahman, who is an old, soft-spoken and restless friend of mine, tells me that the book and the show are two different bodies of work but nevertheless in conversation with each other. The book holds his poems and photographs of his sculptures and performances, and I'm of the sincere opinion that audiences can engage with this book better if they have visited the show.

His exhibition puts forward an oeuvre of visual works that meditate over symmetrical grids, lines, and shapes in search for a "code of life", all the while breaking out of these patterns just when I'm not looking. He engages with geometry and demarcations while reflecting upon his own existence and memories rooted in urban landscapes. I can read similar reflections in his book where his very first poem begins with a panic and a caution: we will become the very machines we have created.

I like to read his book in parts. The first chapter, for me, is a collection of poems and sculptures that evoke yearning and false nostalgia for a world he hasn't had access to as a brown man in the West. His poems complain about corn syrup and helicopters, imposterism and pretence, and internal conflicts.

But then a series of photographs (from his 2017 residency at the Philippines-based non-profit Bellas Artes Projects) documents Rahman's slow acknowledgement of a bed of nails, upon which he lays to rest carefully. And this marks the next chapter of poems for me, where the poet "rose like the phoenix" from his worldly disputes and is now healing "the burnt skin under their flaming wings" with a series of verses that read like small lessons of truth. They read a little preachy to me, but they are also accompanied by sculptures that are carved inwards to create hollow vessels. I cannot help but notice the irony of empty vessels set against verses that complain about human-kind's habit of hoarding and overproducing. Somewhere here, one can sense Rahman's politics, which can ironically read like a lack of politics too, because of how simple and easy his poems read. But here is some scepticism about science and modernity, some commentary about human nature, and some reflections on the vastness of time and being forgotten.

A photograph of Rahman holding a crooked tree branch cues the next and final part of the book for me. He recovers from the sermons and empty vessels he relied upon previously. Now, he starts speaking clearly, with abundant faith and without any regard for the rules of language or poetic style. His sculptures are now quadrilateral, sharp-edged; the ridges and grooves on them are uniform and certain. But the poet himself is now on a "search for roots", so his words move in all directions much like roots grow in the soil for water. In these poems, there are no set truths in the absurdity of his dreams and feelings, but simply the need to keep moving in ways only poetry can beyond borders and syntax.

It is a little annoying that there are no page numbers or titles, and therefore no way for a reader to refer to a poem except by what they remember and hold from it. Rahman almost nudges you to talk back because now you have to speak your mind about what you have read if you want to speak about it at all. So he leaves a few blank pages for the reader at the end. He is not too worried about marking territories with a book; after all, he is the kind of poet that would rather "always be leaving".

Maliha Mohsin is a writer, researcher, and community organiser, with a focus on the intersections of art and queer-feminist politics.



PHOTO: STUDIO 6/6



PHOTO: DRAWN & QUARTERLY

BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC MEMOIR

Sketchy memories

ISRAR HASAN

Travis Dandro's *King of King Court: A Memoir* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2019) is a large, dense book that reads light and fast. The coming of age story is packed with the raw emotional power of the author's traumatic childhood.

Dandro recounts from a child's eye view memories of growing up in a broken home with a drug-addicted father who bullies his child into loving him, an alcoholic and abusive step-dad, and a confused and overwhelmed mother. The story allows the reader to peek into the vastness of a child's imagination, his flights of fancy away from tension, and the refuge he seeks in toys, insects, and whatever else feels interesting around him. Rather than indulge in the complexities driven by lust, dysfunctional relationships, drug use, and infidelity, we see the malleability of a child's mind and his curiosity to make sense of the world around him.

The artwork is simple. The author draws both his child and teenage self in a rather cartoonish manner, with large bulging eyes, a half-circle for a nose, and triangular spikes for hair. The black and white pencil-like sketches mirror the heavy subject of the book, yet they are shaped as though scribbled by a child, punctuating both tender scenes of affection between Travis and his father, and more frightening episodes of drug abuse and violence. The absence of page numbers or too much text enables scene-building in a way that makes the narrative compelling, and often tear-jerking.

Accepting a compliment for a drawing at one point in the book, Travis replies, "Yes, it's the little details that make a drawing come to life." Unlike other memoirs like *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* (2006) and *Maus* (1991), Dandro steers clear of jargon-filled soliloquies and narration as a memoirist. It is the little details that allow his readers to interpret his images as they like. This story has no hero, no villain—it just is a life seen through the eyes of a boy hoping to gather meaning out of everything around him. It drives home the point that perhaps, even in a memoir, deciphering meaning can be left up to the readers.

Israr Hasan is a graduate of BRAC University who spends time lapping up classic films, memes, and graphic novels. He can be reached at israrhasan@live.com.

THE BOOK REPORT

Around the world in 80 books with David Damrosch

STAR BOOKS DESK

Literary historian David Damrosch's travels with World Literature are charted most often by those within academia. During the Covid-19 inertia between May and August 2020, the head of the Institute for World Literature at Harvard University opened up these conversations to a wider audience who were, like him, locked away from the world. Books, as usual, could offer a fitting rescue.

Enter Harvard University's project, 'Around the World in 80 Books', in which Damrosch takes the reader through 80 books compiled in themed clusters, each portraying a major city around the world. A professor of comparative literature, Damrosch has been teaching and writing about World Literature since his book, *What is World Literature* (Harvard University Press) was published in 2003. He defines the genre as "encompass[ing] all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or their original language." With this project, he begins by offering a dated itinerary—five days in each corner of the world, explored differently (in different eras) by different authors. One embarks from Damrosch's own room with Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days* (1873) and Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage Around my Room* (1794), and sets sail to London (Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, Virginia Woolf), Paris (Proust, Barnes, Cortazar), and Venice (Dante, Boccaccio, Italo Calvino). The next four months chart through Cairo,



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

Israel/ Palestine, Tehran-Shiraz, Kolkata, Shanghai-Beijing, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, Guatemala, Guadeloupe, New York, Bar Harbour, and the final frontier—an 81st book.

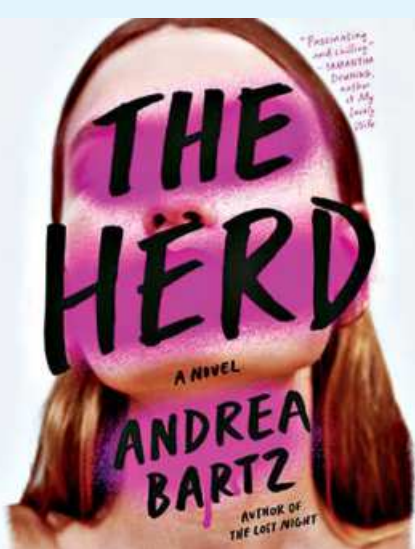
The choice of these particular titles inevitably grounds each stopover to specific time periods in a way that might clash with expectations, but

this produces refreshing results. One would expect to find Zadie Smith or Ali Smith during a layover in London, for instance, but we visit the city when *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) is unspooling on an ordinary, war-haunted day, and when Wodehouse is revolutionising the comic novel with "riotous, multi-layered prose" and "bumbling aristocrats,

strong young women, eminent loony-doctors, and beneficent or malevolent aunts." Days in Paris, for a change, look beyond the Lost Generation of American expats, revealing literary gems like Georges Perec's *W, or The Memory of Childhood* (1975).

If a stop in Tehran opens up contemporary reads like Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* (2018)—winner of the 2019 International Booker Prize—or graphic narratives like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007), then in Kolkata we land to meet old friends Tagore, Rushdie, and Jhumpa Lahiri, and Lewis Carroll and Tolkien in Bar Harbour: The World on a Desert Island. New, old, or long-forgotten, the merit in rediscovering these books through Damrosch's series is in accessing the images, commentary, and additional resources he provides to explore how each literary work and its author engaged with a particular city in a particular time. As a by-product, we learn how the cities themselves have evolved in fiction and history over time.

Being in a blog format allows visitors to comment on these choices of books and places, and engage in a conversation with both Damrosch—who is quick and generous in his replies—and other like-minded readers. Damrosch completed the project on August 28 with an announcement that the series will soon be elaborated upon in book form, published as *Around the World in Eighty Books*, but the series can still be visited and followed at projects.iq.harvard.edu/80books.



BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Hot mess—Andrea Bartz's 'The Herd'

ZUBIER ABDULLAH

When it comes to book reviews, I have found an interesting paradox—the better a book is, the easier it becomes to write about. Words flow effortlessly, superlatives pop out of the ground like errant weeds and writing is a breeze. The same can also be said for the books which make you drag your nails along the wall. The difficult part is the book in the middle: the book not quite nondescript enough to be completely forgettable, yet one that defies description. *The Herd* (Ballantine Books, 2020) by Andrea Bartz is one such book. Set in present-day New York, it centres on Eleanor Walsh, founder and owner of "The Herd", a co-working space for women and marginalised genders.

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