

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Reclaiming Historical Spaces through Fiction

With a touch of whimsy, 'The Adventures of China Iron' rewrites a historical narrative and renders spaces inclusive.

ISHRAT JAHAN

The Adventures of China Iron by Gabriela Cabezón Cámara (Charco Press, 2019) begins in the poor encampments of a village in 19th century Argentina, with the protagonist marvelling at the hope and light she finds in the sight of a puppy playing in some dirt.

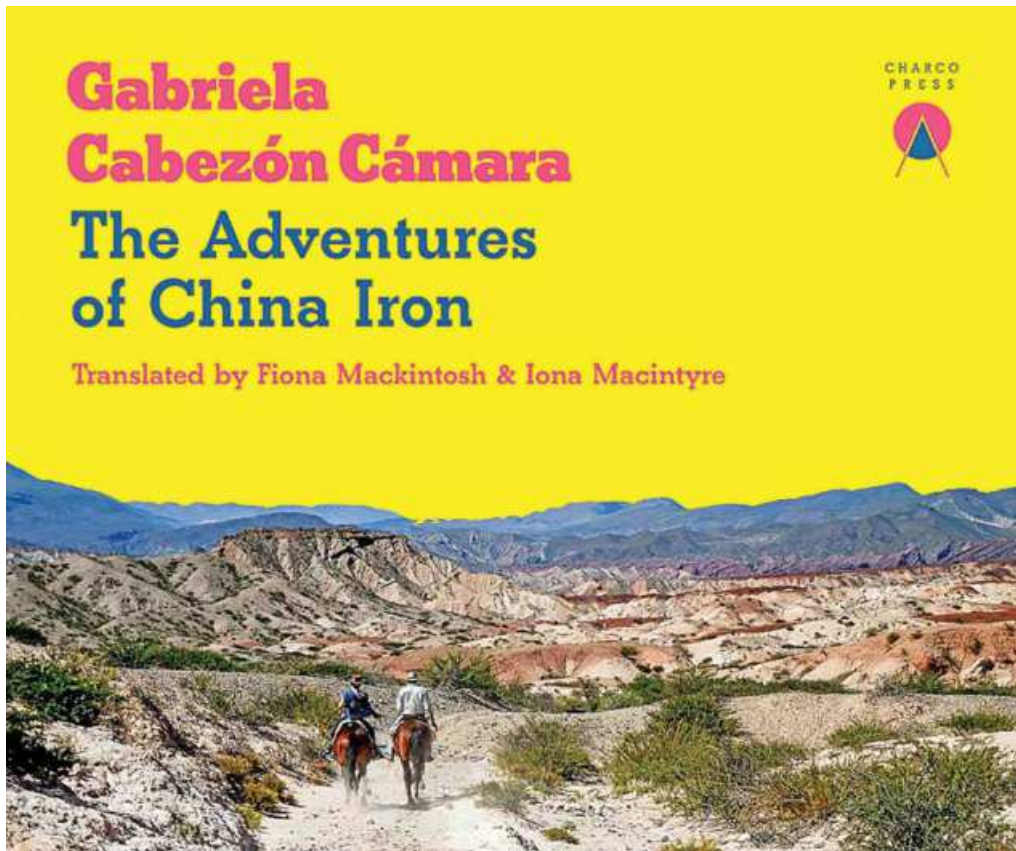
The 14-year-old narrator does not have a name; she answers to "La China"—pronounced Chee-na—a Quechua word that translates to "someone's woman." As an orphan China was raised by abusive parents in the slums. They eventually sold her off to one Martin Fierro with whom she bore two children. After her husband is (forcefully) conscripted by the Argentinian Army, China is left alone to navigate a life for herself. She discovers joy and freedom in this solitude, an experience that others around her perceive as misfortune.

As she settles into the novelty of her freedom, China meets Elizabeth, a Scottish woman left alone in their village because her husband, too, was mistakenly picked up by the Army. Liz shares that she will be journeying in search of him far into the frontier and indigenous territory. China sets off with her on impulse, taking along the puppy whom she has lovingly named Estreya (translating to "The Star"). It is Liz who first gives La China the dignity of a name, La China Josefina Fierro: China Josephine Iron. And together they set off across the Argentinian pampas, juxtaposed against a nation being adopted into the British colonial project.

China narrates her story in three parts and one can sense her voice mature as she learns about herself and the world. Her narration is conversational, with a childlike sense of wonder both for the beautiful skies and grasslands, as well as the unforgiving landscapes "pearled with bones" across the pampas. "No longer flat, it heaved with grain, tents, Indians on the move, white women escaping from captivity, horses swimming with their gaucho riders still astride, while all around the dorado fish darted like lightning into the depths, into the middle of the bursting river. It didn't seem real to witness such a thing, to see the whole world being dragged along, slowly spiralling, muddy and dizzying, a hundred leagues away to the sea," she writes.

First published in Spanish in 2017, the book was translated into English by Fiona Mackintosh and Iona Macintyre in 2019, shortlisted for the International Man Booker Prize 2020. This translation does the characters and their voices justice, weaving in local terms to stay true to the original and providing sufficient guidance for a reader unfamiliar with Spanish.

China's voice—and Camara's skill as a writer—are strongest when speaking of brutal and systemic injustices through ordinary events of their excursion. An example of this is how the British Empire's nation building ideologies



overshadow Liz's budding relation with her. Liz speaks of the wonders which Britain has discovered: tea illustrates India, whisky, her native land; French craftsmanship in skill petticoats and gowns; Chinese paddy field and its curly roofed pagodas. Liz populates China's perspective with her own, in which the British Empire is at the top (quite literally, in her notion of the world map), controlling and navigating the fates of far off countries. While China is enraptured in her evolving feelings for Liz, she questions, albeit naively, the notion that the glorious Argentinian pampas should form the dull bottom half of that world.

Through this story, Cámara upends the epic tales of Argentinian resistance, which were predominantly narrated through the male gaze of "macho men corralling with the natives and cultivating the vast grasslands." China's story is placed on top of José Hernández's 1872 epic poem "El Gaucho Martín Fierro" (The Gaucho Martin Iron), which carries heavy national significance in Argentina, having established gauchos—skilled brave horsemen who roamed the peripheries of Argentinian and Uruguayan land and law—as a symbol for the fight against corruption and pro-European sympathies.

But Cámara does more than draw inspiration. She reinvents the classic tale. From the margins of *El Gaucho's* single-voiced narrative, she brings to centre stage the wives left behind and the

indigenous communities. This shifts not only the centre of Hernández's epic poem, but also the narratives of political struggle, colonial agenda, and nationalist sentiments created in and cemented into literature.

In Hernández's poem, Fierro's wife and her struggles are condensed into the following verse: "When she hadn't a single copper left, And of husband and sons she was bereft/ If she wasn't to stay and starve to death, What else could the poor thing do?"

Cámara shows "the possibilities Fierro's 'poor wife'" navigates for herself amidst the trauma and turbulence of national and personal power struggles. If one has read *El Gaucho, The Adventures of China Iron* will reveal the blind spots in the epic poem. But China's tale stands on its own merits as a feminist queer romance, a coming-of-age story that critiques an enduring patriarchal, capitalist world order. There are no boundaries between imperialist agenda and national resistance inside China and Liz's travelling wagon. Despite its short length, the book is an immersive lesson that the personal and political are forever in flux in all our realities. In fiction it manages to become what we expect our realities to be—honest and inclusive.

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BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

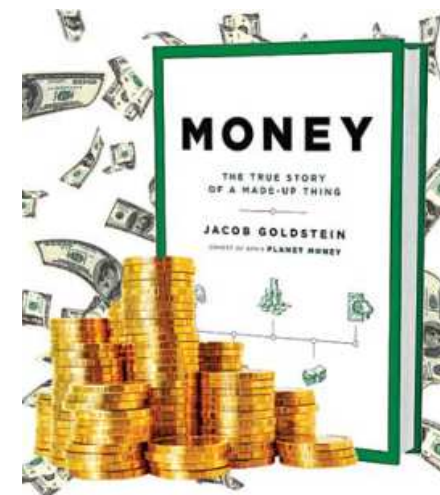
Money Still Makes the World Go Round

ASRAR CHOWDHURY

I Jacob Goldstein, author of *Money: The True Story of a Made-Up Thing* (Hachette Books, 2020), and the co-host of the radio podcast, *Planet Money* of npr.org, isn't an economist. He completed a Master's in creative writing from Concordia University. He slowly found his way reporting on stock markets during the financial crash of 2008. That is when he started asking the question: what is money?

A few weeks after the 2008 financial crash, Goldstein had dinner with his Aunt Janet, a business graduate who was a poet in her younger days. "Money is fiction. It was never there in the first place." Aunt Janet's response to the financial crash was the eureka moment for Goldstein. Twelve years later, Goldstein narrates a story of the history of money.

The book is based on two central and recurring themes. First, that money is a 'shared fiction'. We all accept it and value it. "Otherwise, it's just a chunk of metal, or a piece of paper, or... a number stored on a bank's computers". Second, the history of money hasn't been linear. Out of necessity, or due to some unexpected accident, money has changed form over time.



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

II Before money, people exchanged through barter. Barter works well in communities where members are aware of each other's needs, and where everybody has the necessary skills to produce what others need.

With the formation of cities in Mesopotamia, a 'shared fiction' of a medium of exchange was needed. This is where the story begins with Babylonians using clay tokens as an accepted medium of exchange to clear

debts. Goldstein sets the stage in Greece, where coins and metal money took off.

III As he seeks to find how money changed over time, Goldstein dramatizes events and explores how they influenced societies.

Paper money was invented in China by a merchant in Sichuan around 995 AD. This freed people from carrying and storing heavy metal coins. The effect was explosive. By the 13th century, China became the most prosperous country in the world.

However, hyperinflation during the Ming dynasty led to China reverting back to metal coins. China became the 'sleeping giant' Napoleon was to 'coin' centuries later.

The Mongols introduced paper money to run their empire and facilitate trade. All of a sudden, paper money became 'shared fiction' for different cultures and regions. This had an explosive effect on trade and what would today be termed as 'globalisation'.

Goldstein then jumps directly to renaissance Europe, bypassing the Arabs. He delves into the historical events that lead to the creation of stock markets, central banks, and Europe's adoption of paper money.

The Great Depression of the 1930s was a turning point. Roosevelt took the US off the Gold Standard. Whether by accident or by design, the US Dollar slowly became the global legal tender after World War II.

Goldstein shows how panic during the 2008 crash led to the collapse of a financial system. States ended up bailing out big corporations. Looking into the future, Goldstein finishes the book with bitcoin, and modern monetary theory.

IV Goldstein's exploration of history bears traits of Ibn Khaldun's *Al Muqaddimah*. It looks at history objectively. His 'shared fiction' hypothesis rings bells of Yuval Harari's *Sapiens* in its ability to accept and believe 'shared myths'. Once the trust of the 'shared fiction' of money breaks, societies find a new 'shared fiction'.

Books on economic history should be written like this. Whatever one's back ground, Goldstein has an uncanny ability to blend facts with humour and wit, leaving the reader to pause, think, and move on.

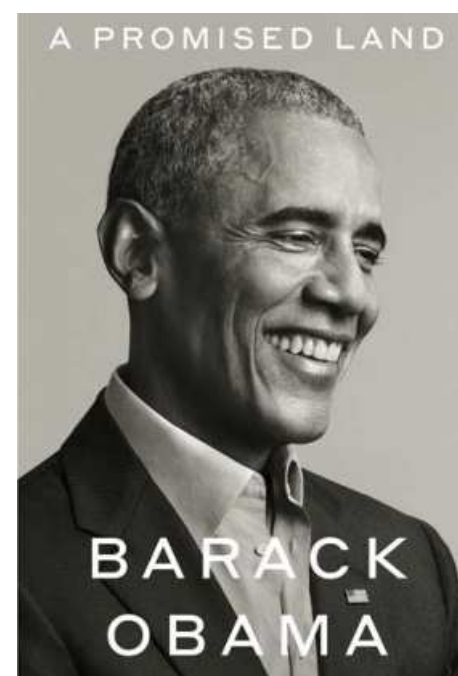
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THE SHELF

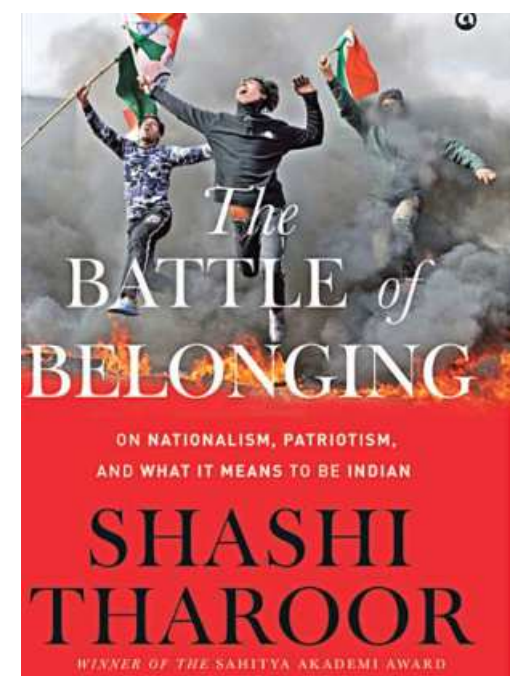
5 NEW NON-FICTION RELEASES TO LOOK OUT FOR THIS MONTH

STAR BOOKS DESK

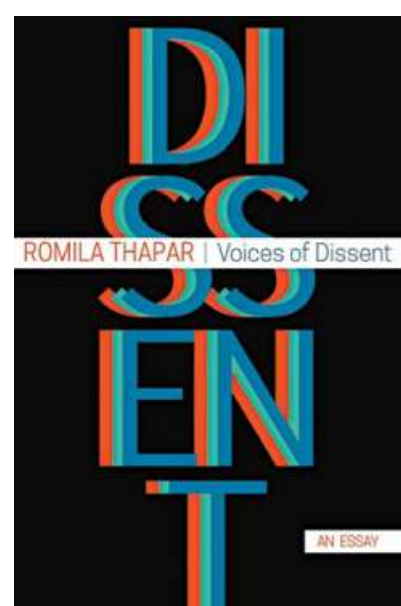
Autumn means a harvest of new books the world over. While novels and short stories continue to sweep through shelves, this past month has brought about an especially exciting basket of non-fiction releases, covering history, politics, reportage, and literature. Stay tuned for Daily Star Books' reviews and interviews on some of these new books in the coming weeks! Read more about each book on the online version of this article.



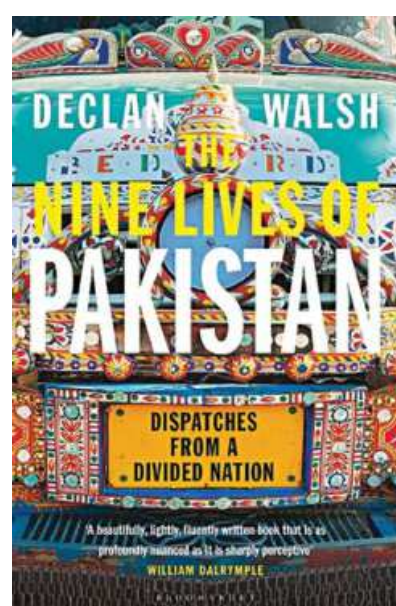
A PROMISED LAND
Barack Obama



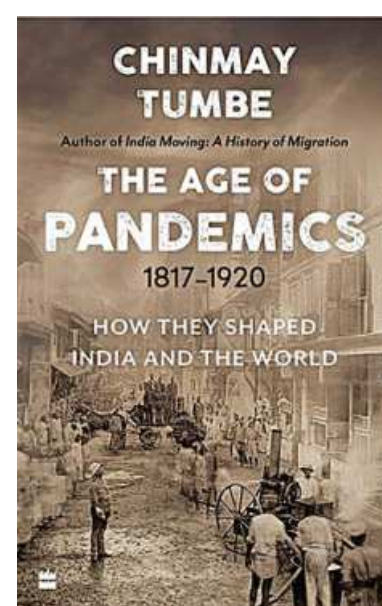
THE BATTLE OF BELONGING
Shashi Tharoor



VOICES OF DISSSENT
Romila Thapar



THE NINE LIVES OF PAKISTAN
Declan Walsh



THE AGE OF PANDEMIC (1817-1920)
Chinmay Tumble



HUMAYUN KE NIYE
Hasan Shawon

ILLUSTRATION: NAFIA JAHAN MONNI

THE BOOK REPORT

On Children's Literature in Bangladesh: Then and Now

RASHA JAMEEL

For World Children's Day on Friday, November 20, Daily Star Books speaks to contemporary and veteran authors, publishers, and readers of children's literature written in Bangladesh.

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