

Sometimes the unlikely makes sense. A dissident strikes a chord within a fretful soul. The villain is more to be admired than the hero. Fictional answers apply to real-life questions. The intact bowl is prettier after reconstruction. Philip John, Saad Hossain, Marzia Rahman and Sudeep Sen tell us how. Comments, viewpoints and contributions are welcome at: DSLitEditor@gmail.com

MUNIZE MANZUR

# THE DISSIDENT

PHILIP JOHN

Lucy had always wanted to play the piano but her artistic ambitions outstripped her talents. And so over the years, Lucy had to be content with being a loyal wife and a diligent homemaker. What more ennobling work could a woman do? But Lucy had so much music bottled up inside her.

One evening, Lucy's husband Mark brought home a musician friend named Andre for dinner. When Andre spoke, his words came from a profoundly melancholic region in his soul. Later, as the evening wore on, Andre confided his secret to Lucy and Mark: he was not of this country. He had been exiled from his homeland. Back home, he and his people had rebelled against a fascist dictatorship but the rebellion was ill-planned and had been squashed. Later, Andre and several other people who had played a part in the rebellion were

expelled for being 'dangerous dissidents.' Andre had been a composer. After the revolt, his records had been banned from stores. And so Andre now carried his music inside him, as he moved through a foreign land.

Lucy took to Andre instantly. Years of living in a marriage that had stifled her soul had created a similar void inside her. And so as Andre spoke about the 'lost music' of revolution, Lucy fell in love.

One evening when Andre dropped by, Lucy was alone. Mark was out of town for the weekend. Andre and Lucy opened a bottle of wine and started talking. One thing led to another and they kissed. Lucy asked Andre to make love to her.

'I have a curse,' Andre warned. 'Whoever makes love to me carries my melancholic music inside them forever. It is a tumultuous noise.'

'I want your music,' Lucy said. She wanted to consume the fire of Andre's art so that it might become her own. It had

been a long time since Andre had been with a woman. So he relented and they made love. The next morning, Andre left before Lucy awoke.

Lucy's alarm clock rang. As she reached for the alarm to turn it off, her fingers experienced a tremor upon touching the clock and a shrill piano note pierced the air. Startled, Lucy sat up in bed. She touched the sheets. Another piano note. She ran to the kitchen and touched forks, knives and spoons. Everything she touched created a series of piano notes. But since Lucy didn't know how to play, the music was far from pleasant; it was off-key, discordant and it followed her everywhere she went.

Suddenly, the door bell rang. 'Who is it?' Lucy asked. 'It's me,' a voice said. It was Mark. He had come back earlier than expected. 'I can't come to the door right now,' Lucy blurted. 'Open up, I'm famished!' Mark said.



As Lucy retreated into her bedroom, her hand knocked down a vase but her fingers released a cacophony of piano notes that drowned out the sound of the vase crashing. 'You bought a piano!' Mark laughed.

'Oh, I can't wait to see what you can do!'

*Philip John is an advertising professional, writer and teacher who lives in Bangalore, India. Read more of his work at facebook.com/labyrinths.philipjohn*

## B O W L

(for Manisha Bhattacharya)  
Sudeep Sen



The cracked bowl that I mean to repair everyday keeps getting neglected by my secret awe for bone china and its story of unbreaking.

There were happier times when it stood perfect in its shape, its porcelain clay-fluted nape elegant as a swan's neck.

I found it in a heap of beautiful pottery, one among many, that its maker carefully crafted in her tropical rooftop studio.

To me it was new even after it accidentally slipped from my hands as I tried to wipe the Delhi dust

that clung to us like camel-brown film, like innocuous powder — transparent and deceptive like make-up.

There are scenes I painted on its milk-white skin, words I wrote, lines etched in, fragments of poems left unfinished, hieroglyphic

encoded secrets that only I knew and understood, impervious to gossip's glare and jealous chatter.

Today, I shall bring out Super Glue and try to make repairs. Maybe I will splurge

on a rare metal — silver or even gold, to seal the cracks and fill them with molten healing.

Anointing it with gold, memory, love and desire, is better than the perfection

of its prior shape. Unbroken, poised as it was, unhurt love is not necessarily purer than love that is flawed.

*Kintsukuroi* — a gift I have been granted. My bowl deserves the lacquer touch of a silver-wish and the purest of rare gold.

*\*Kintsukuroi (n.) (v. phr.) "to repair with gold"; the art of repairing pottery with gold or silver lacquer and understanding that the piece is more beautiful for having been broken.*

SAAD Z. HOSSAIN

Joe Abercrombie hasn't invented any new worlds. His First Law series, consisting of six novels and some short stories, are set in a world suspiciously like our own. He hasn't coined any nifty genre spanning terms. He hasn't created any alien races or systems of magic. He hasn't even tried his hand at a dialect of Elvish. Clearly he's a lightweight.

The thing is, Abercrombie is hysterically funny and marvelously violent. He straddles the fine line between complete satire and completely serious fantasy. This combination is somehow irresistible, and I found myself wolfing down his entire output in one go. Now I'm always trawling the bookshelves for something new from him. I've even contemplated buying hardcover!

I might have given the impression

that Abercrombie is a bit of a hack, but the truth is, he's actually at the forefront of a new breed of fantasy writers, where the kings, mages, princes are all replaced by dirty thieving murderers who stumble around doing crappy things and sometimes affecting the course of destiny by accident. The sweeping epic balladic stories of 'good vs evil' are slowly being subverted to 'slightly bad vs really evil'. Pretty soon it will just be 'them vs us'.

This upending of clichés and a focus on realism is giving us a new depth to fantasy, and attracting perhaps more talented authors to the genre, who would otherwise disdain the formulaic writing. With any kind of genre fiction there is a danger of falling into assembly line writing, and for authors who have made a name there must be a temptation to

just churn out books. I'm all in favour of populist writing, and originality might be low down the list for a reader who simply wants something comforting and familiar. Abercrombie's financial success, however, shows that there is room for something sophisticated.

Abercrombie starts off with something familiar, but his brutal humour and insane characters actually land us very far off the reservation. By the end of the first three books, I was actually cheering for a crippled torturer and a nine fingered mass murderer. The really refreshing thing here is that there aren't actually any heroes. None. There isn't a single person with a halo on his head. Everyone is a bastard, and without any moral imperative, we are left to simply enjoy the hysterically funny prose of despicable people cutting

each other up. He gives us villains against villains, and forces us to root for them. As an aficionado of villains, I'm impressed.

Abercrombie's crowning glory is Logen Ninefingers, easily one of the best characters in fantasy today. He's a Norse berserker with a heart of gold, except when the battle madness comes, he stops differentiating between friend and foe, and typically ends up killing everyone. It's Ninefingers' fault that the entire North is constantly at war, because everyone has a vendetta against him. No situation is too dire that Ninefingers cannot make it worse. His last name is Ninefingers. What's not to love?

*Saad Z. Hossain is an entrepreneur and author of "Baghdad Immortals". He is currently working on his second novel.*

## Journey With Alice Munro

MARZIA RAHMAN

I came across the magical, phenomenal world of Alice Munro during my early teens, when my perception of life, love and destiny was stubbornly naïve. I discovered her quite accidentally while fishing for another fiction in a bookstore. The unique title – "Lives of Girls and Women" caught my interest. Standing there, forgetting my preferred book, I turned a few pages, read a few lines and immediately bought it. Thus my journey with Alice Munro began.

At that phase of my life, puzzled with the work of Karma, I was trying to comprehend the dubious play of fate, while searching for the ultimate love. It's a tragic irony that I achieved nothing. Instead, I stumbled across

Alice Munro who was equally fascinated with fate, time and love.

Two things about Munro were of most interest to me. Firstly, this Canadian author of fourteen books of short stories and the recipient of many literary accolades, including the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature, started writing in the sixties when fiction writing by women was not a common phenomenon. Secondly, she brought women to the forefront by depicting the extraordinary experiences of ordinary women - housewives, small town girls, stay-at-home mothers, middle-aged divorced women, solitary widows. She showed the world how such women were heroes in their own lives, experiencing the supreme drama called Life.

Munro's work is often compared

with the great short-story writers. She shares Chekhov's obsession with time and peoples' inability to delay or prevent its relentless movement forward. Liking her stories to a house, she said: "A story is not like a road to follow...it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows."

Munro's stories reveal the ambiguities of life: "ironic and serious at the same time". Like Frost, her fiction has layers of meaning, exploring human complexities, the mystery of human relationships. In her own words: "The complexity of things—the things within the

things—just seem to be endless. I mean nothing is easy...nothing is simple."

When I first read Munro, it felt avant-garde, revolutionary. As an adult, rereading the stories; I have a deeper sense of her magic like revisiting some childhood fantasy with deeper, better meaning and wisdom. With time, so many changes take place; so many things are discarded, forgotten. But one thing has remained unchanged: my fascination for Alice Munro. I have effectively grown older and wiser with her books. Through her creation, she has given me the greatest gift - a magical world. And for that I will treasure her.

*Marzia Rahman has an MA in English Literature from the University of Dhaka.*

## SLR WRITING COMPETITION

Aspiring writers are **invited** to send in a **short story** or **poem** on the theme of "Lost and Found".

You must be over **18** years old.

Only **ONE** entry per person.

Word Limit: **500** words.

Deadline: **12th September.**

Winning entries will be printed in the SLR page. Attach your story as a .doc with the email subject line: "SLR Competition". Send your entries to DSLitEditor@gmail.com