

THE HENNA TREE AND ITS PASTE

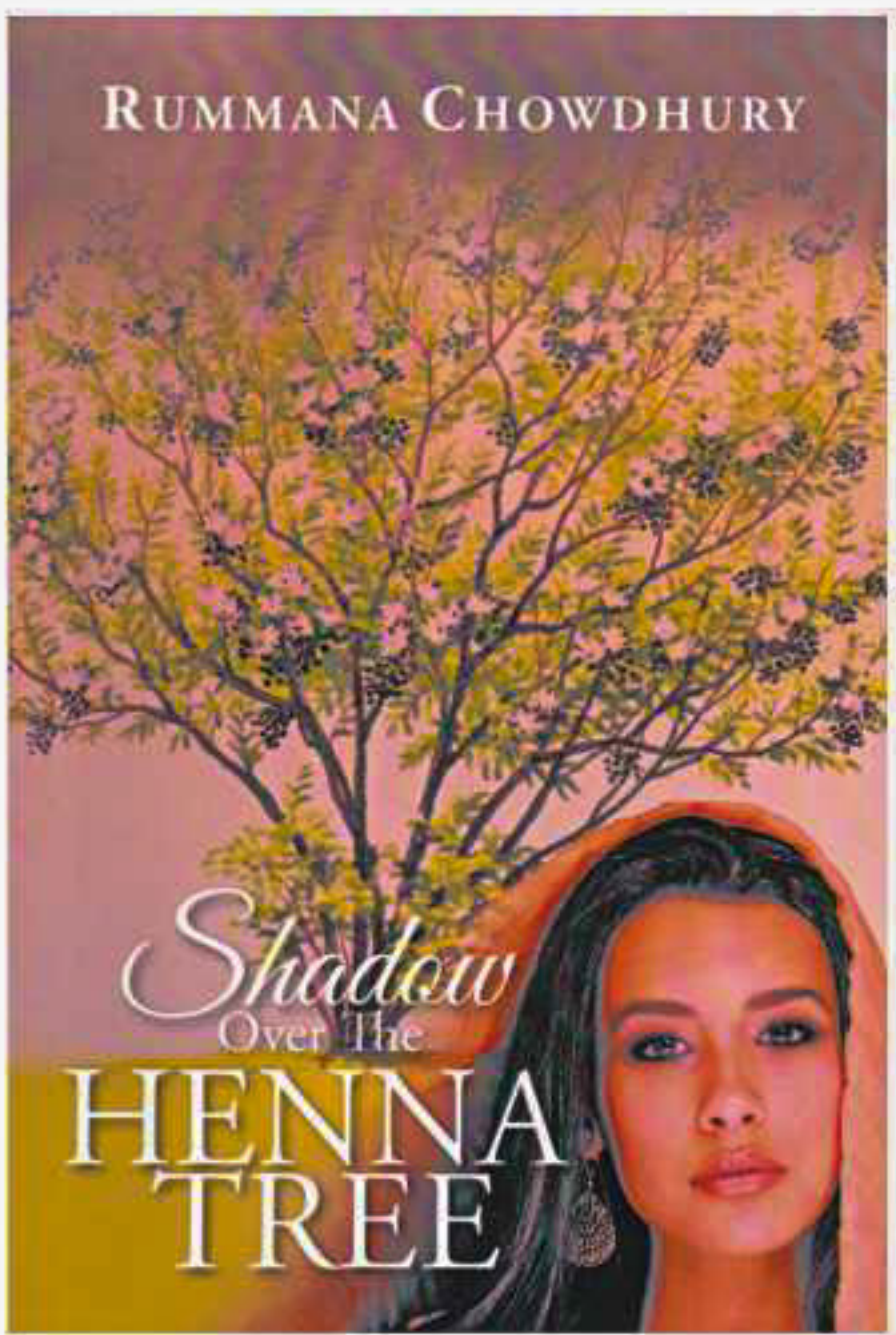
AUTHOR: RUMMANA CHOWDHURY

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

YOU can get away from Bangladesh, but Bangladesh can never get away from you. That is, if you are a part of the first generation Bangladeshi diaspora, in whatever part of the world you are in, whether as a temporary sojourner or as a permanent resident. The ties that bind you to Bangladesh is simply too strong for you to turn a blind eye to them. This is a peculiar phenomenon, possibly matched by a few other nationalities, but hardly surpassed, and generations of Bangladeshis have proven this point. The Internet has made it infinitely easier than previously to keep in touch with the homeland on a regular and frequent basis across time and space, but the same predilection and the powerful urge to stay in touch had always been there. Bangalis are highly emotive in general, and their feelings for their homeland and its culture and traditions, not to say relatives and friends, are a pleasant outcome of that character trait. The reader will find plenty of that in *Shadow over the Henna Tree*, Rummana Chowdhury's first novel published from the United States.

Chowdhury has been a prolific writer, a former national badminton champion of Bangladesh, was an accomplished debater and radio and television talk show host, and has won numerous awards in her adopted country of Canada and India. Although she lives in Canada, she makes time to visit her birthplace, and, in her novel, the love she obviously feels for these two places comes through strongly. In fact, she says as much in her dedication: "...to my beloved birthplace, Bangladesh, for timeless love through its priceless literature, culture, heritage, and history." "...to my adopted country, Canada, for blessing me with a chance to explore the boundless sky." *Shadow over the Henna Tree* is chockfull of these two sentiments as expressed through its principal protagonists.

The novel centers on Moyna, a beautiful and sensitive woman of twenty five, who was born and brought up in Toronto, Canada, of Bangladeshi parentage. Her odyssey from Toronto to Bangladesh and back on numerous occasions since her childhood allows the



reader a peek into the dilemma of a Canadian (hyphenated, in the manner of the Americans, as Bangladeshi-Canadian; interesting, though, one does not hear of English-Americans, or Scottish-, or Welsh-, or German-, or Dutch-Americans, but their ancestors were among the early European colonizers of the US; maybe the answer lies there). The story opens on a delightful day embodying "the summer madness of Toronto". Such expressive imagery pops up on several occasions throughout the novel, although, on the very odd occasion, the richness is stretched a bit beyond credulity. Her recollection of walking down University Avenue in downtown Toronto includes this philosophical observation: "Some things in this life and in this world have no apparent explanation. Anything away from the norm need not necessarily be so extraordinarily unique if the people's understanding and perception were not always so stereotyped and compartmentalized." Similar other reflections crop up intermittently in the book.

The author, then, through Moyna, juxta-

poses life in urban advanced Canada and the one in rural developing country Bangladesh. She recalls a trip to Mirsarai ("a very wise decision" that she had taken), and to her father's village of Shaherkhali. It is interesting to note that the author must surely have knowingly or unwittingly relied on her own experiences as she is originally from Mirsarai and has made her diasporic home in Toronto. She, through Moyna, waxes eloquent on the charms of the Bangladeshi setting, and presents a rich imagery and minute attention to details: "The almost-forgotten fragrance of the mango blossoms thickened her blood like honey.... The city of Chittagong, with its enchantment of the Bay of Bengal, and the sea along with the lush green mountains always made her feel an irresistible bondage to her roots. She picked up a handful of dust. It shone like gold in her brown palm."

This particular trip allowed Moyna to reflect on the differences between Bangladeshi and Canadian societies, and, indeed, between urban and rural life in Bangladesh. So her Aunt Meena comments on the difficulty of Moyna wearing a saree in the village (although, these days, it is not at all uncommon to see rural women preferring the shalwar-kameez to the saree) after wearing shalwar-kameez in Dhaka, and pants and shirts in Toronto. She is enchanted at the love and affection shown her by her relatives, and ruminates: "What a difference of lifestyle and bondage here in this little Bangladeshi village compared to the crisp, modern, impersonal relationships in Canada." The presence of overt or implied racism in the country of her birth does not escape this perceptive and sensitive soul. Reminiscing about their neighbours of eleven years in Toronto, she thought that they were neither friendly nor unfriendly to her family: "Was it because they were white and Moyna and Aresha (her younger sister) were brown? Or was it simply the norm of neighbourly behaviour in a modernized Western country like Canada." She contrasts such behaviour with that of the Bangladeshi village folks who "were so friendly and endearing. People meeting Moyna for the very

first time would shower her with love and hospitality." Moyna explains this phenomenon to herself, in the process drawing the attention of the reader to her various character traits: "The East and the West had its distinctive social and cultural norms and often clashed. Living in Canada but with roots in Bangladesh made her a person with two different personalities."

During that trip, the cosmopolitan Bangladeshi-Canadian Moyna with her fulltime computer programming job and part-time studies felt a strong attraction for Mizan, a young rural Bangladeshi farmer and folksinger, and "the shining symbol of manhood in...Bangladesh." His attraction towards her was equally deep, though neither verbally expressed their feelings for each other and, eventually, the matter fizzled out at the attraction stage, as Moyna left for Canada. Chowdhury is reticent about the failure of the mutual attraction to go beyond the silent gaze phase as she concentrates on painting a pen picture of the proverbial six seasons of Bangladesh (are they really recognizable in these times of climate change having an effect on seasons?), the works of Bengali poets like Jasimuddin, Tagore, and others who wrote odes to the timelessness of rural Bengal, and being awed by the majesty of the great rivers and the "infinite natural beauty" of the country. Chowdhury also takes note of the changing face of Dhaka city: "The old aristocracy of Dhanmandi residential area had given in to the new streamline in Gulshan and Banani.... Food habits of people had changed so much along with their lifestyles."

The novel is more about social observations, diasporic connections between the old country and the new, and portraying the rich culture of Bangladesh than any solidly built storyline around built-up characters. And several piercing observations. For example, "...a time and moment comes in everyone's life when the bonding of maternal and paternal ties has to be cut though these ties are permanent and intricately woven into the fabric of eternal life." Here is another: "...what is right and what is wrong has no

fixed standards or evaluations, except for the rules laid down by society.... The tide of everyday matters drowned a lot of people with its force and direction.... There was a physical side, and there was a spiritual side to this matter."

Meanwhile, on another of her numerous visits to Bangladesh, she had fallen for an urban sophisticated young man, Bishal, whose "charm, self-confidence, and unknown depths of mystery did bring her to a point of no return", and who returned her feelings. This, too, ultimately came to nothing, and, again, that story is kept sketchy and left to the reader's imagination to give it body. Chowdhury does provide a pointer: "Illusions often clouded his vision, but clarity won over in the end." Eventually, she developed a deep relationship with an adopted war baby, Shafiq, whose Bengali mother was raped by a West Pakistani soldier during the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, and who was adopted by a Canadian couple. Their relationship took some interesting twists and turns that the reader should find out for him/herself.

Chowdhury spends a fair amount of writing on the spiritual poets like Lalou Shah and Hason Raja, and uses the symbolism of henna paste to depict Moyna's life. In her portrayal of Moyna, she establishes a positive for the diasporic world: "Bangladesh and Canada --- both countries had moulded their best into her. She had taken the optimum from both worlds. She was a better person for that." Yet, somehow one feels that such an outcome lies outside many in the Bangladeshi diaspora. Two minor mistakes. Zia International Airport has for some time been renamed as Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, and Madonna is an American by birth, not English. *Shadow over the Henna Tree* is a novel that should cause most readers to pause and think about diasporic life, and Rummana Chowdhury should be commended for having written it.

The reviewer is an Actor, and Professor and Head, Department of Media and Communication, IUB.

A never ending journey through history

AUTHOR: ZEESHAN KHAN

REVIEWED BY NUSRAT HUQ

THE first impression I have of this book is that it is simply marvelous in its execution, language and content. Normally we expect travel books to be a chronology of events in the writer's process of travel, but "Right to Passage" is not simply a travel book. It is a treatise on the places he has visited specially highlighting the culture, history and social conditioning of the people. I have decided to keep it as a reference book because Zeeshan has researched in detail the history of every city, every shrine as well as the genealogical history of the places mentioned in the book. I feel that the most difficult part of the research must have been the linguistic history of the people that he met in the different regions he visited.

In India, in Bodhi Gaya amidst the chanting in the temples he imagines Buddha himself meditating under the Bodhi tree 2,500 years ago and he is humbled by how he could transcend the fear of suffering, poverty and death and found one of the most important religions in the world today.

It is in picturesque Rajgir that the Jain prophet Sri Mahavira delivered his last sermon and Ashoka breathed his last. Including the legends associated with Rajgir he shows us how it is a place of great historical importance. The hot springs of Rajgir are said to have been formed when Sufi Makhdoom Saheb threw pebbles at a rock face to scare off a tiger. In as late as 1034 a court order forbade Muslims from entering the water lest they pollute it! Zeeshan wisely comments that prejudice rarely needs a law to give it licence. Jainism and Buddhism may have been confrontational, but both played vital roles in the history of India. From the ruins of Rajgir he proceeds to Nalanda where he describes the architectural grandeur of the Buddhist temples and centres of learning. In Delhi I personally love his observation and research on the Sufis, Yogis, Bauls and Boishnovis.

In Delhi he is appalled by the condition of the slums which is as bad as the ones in Dhaka, but he does notice that the middle class is speeding ahead to be at par with the developed world. His hosts in Delhi, Faiz and Disha, have had long conversations with him about the Muslims in India. He wants to be an Indian, not just a Muslim. Much of what they discuss is along the lines of aspirations and philosophies of Syed Amir Ali, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq, Husain Suhrawardy and Md. Ali Jinnah. He feels India is ready for take-off despite fractures along caste, class, race, language and religious differences.

I loved Zeeshan's commentary on Lord Thomas Burlington Macaulay's policy when he spoke of creating, in those they governed, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinions, morals and intellect. Zeeshan's hilarious response: "that is how mutts like me were created!"

In Amritsar the culture of eating at the 'langar-khana' confuses him initially when he is reluctant to be a 'freeloader' there. He soon realizes that it is the sense of community and kindness along with charity is what it is about. He sees the spot of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 1919 where unarmed villagers, unaware of the curfew that was in place were killed by the thousands, but the real horror is where, by Winston Churchill's own admission, the act of terrorism was applauded by many members of the British society both in India and in U.K. They opined that Brig. General Dyer had the right to be firm with the native servants. (When ten million people perished in the Bengal Famine of 1770, Churchill actually said "I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion. The famine was their own fault for breeding like rabbits"!) The famous Golden Temple is described in detail and he finds Sikh doctrines are similar to those of Islam and Hinduism.

The Wagah border has a carnival-like atmosphere and there is a great energy about the place. He did find that recitations of 'Surah Yasin' and 'Vande Mahtaram' were pitted against each other, but that was an expression of each side's identity, each side's nationalism.

In Lahore he looks at the Badshahi mosque on one side and Heera Mandi or 'courtesan street' on the other from Cooco's Den and café-testaments to man's varied and contrasting choices.

In Pakistan trains can be late by an entire day, so he prefers to travel by bus. In Lahore he is very honoured to meet Maham, a lawyer who is a woman of Asma Jahangir's stature. She is not daunted by the 'new' Pakistan which curbs the rights of women significantly. He feels that Pakistan is embroiled in America's and Al-Qaeda's Great Game in Central Asia. Violent Taliban attacks are regular, yet life goes on.

He travels to Taxila, the most visited archaeological site in Pakistan, and remembers that it is there that the Mahabharata was recited for the first time. Zeeshan gives us wise insights into the Mahabharata, the greatest epic ever to exist. It is in Taxila that Alexander's famous horse Bucephalus was killed in the Battle of Jhelum. In Taxila the Taxishala University has in the past boasted the likes of the following students: Panina the grammarian, Kautilya or Chanakya the political scientist, Vishnu Sharma the professor of ethics, Charaka the health scientist whose medical knowledge led to the Ayurveda system of medicine.

In Lahore I loved his visit to the tomb of Baba Ganj Baksh, the first sufi in South Asia from Afghanistan. The atmosphere of the qawwali music, the 'langar-khana' and the frauds who try to extract donations from you for the 'mazar' is aptly described.

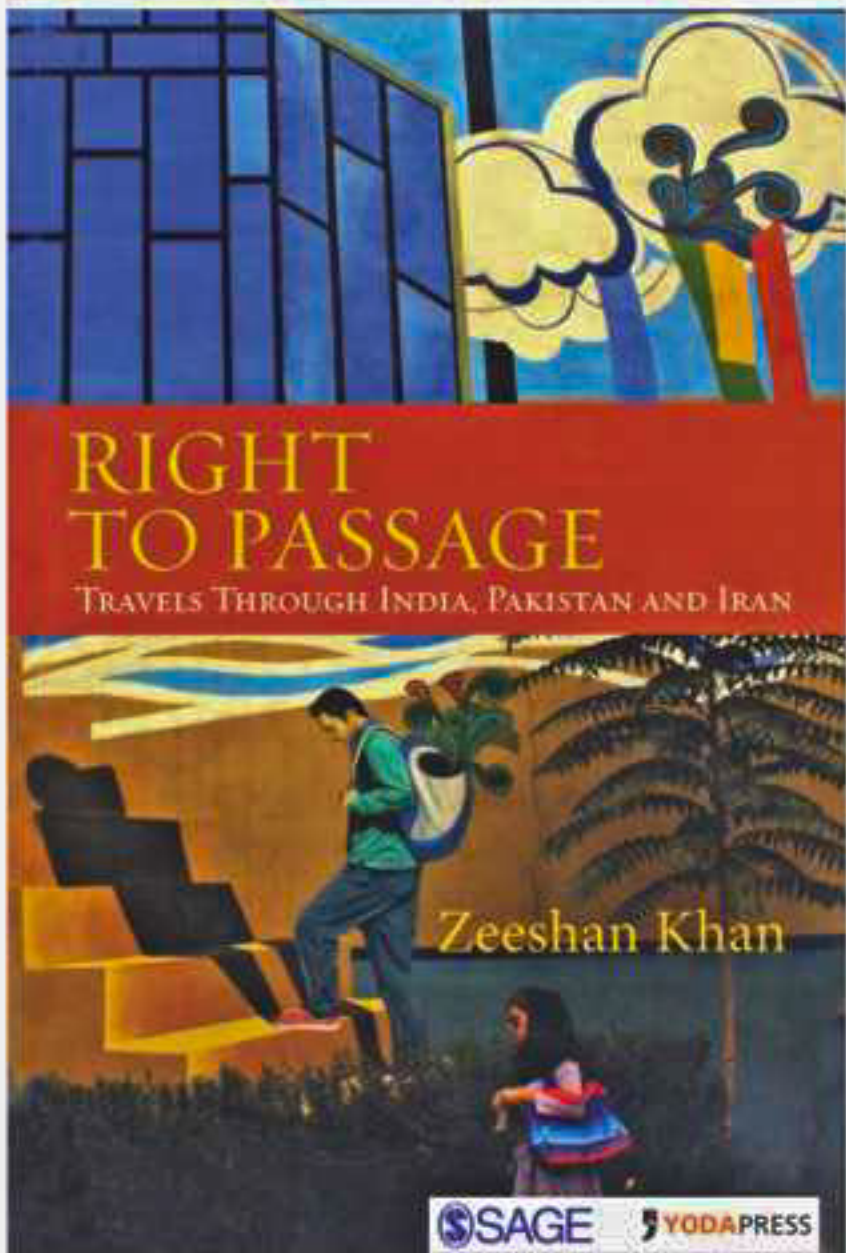
He describes Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan, as a beautiful city, but lacking in character. After all, a city in our part of the world must have its chaos to give it a soul. He captures the natural beauty of

Quetta, Peshawar and Multan in his descriptions of the landscape, but what impressed me equally was the research he has done on the history of their languages and dialects.

Zeeshan's descriptive skills are in high gear when he describes the scenes at the train stations of India-the vendors, bookstalls, noise and commotion.

The chapters on Iran are Zeeshan's greatest triumph. The historical research is thorough and he has savoured every moment he spent in the cities he visited and with the interesting people he met. He was full of admiration for a 'zoorkhaneh', a fitness centre where the fitness of the mind and body are developed, a combination of yoga and martial arts. These combined with kindness and virtue will produce a 'bastanikar'. The highest form of bastanikar is a 'pahlewan'.

The two aspects of Iranian architecture that the world can learn and benefit from are the 'yakchal' or ice house which can



keep large quantities of ice frozen in the middle of summer in a desert, and the 'qanat' which is used to channel groundwater.

He visited the shrines of Imam Gazali and Iran's great poet and philosopher Omar Khayyam. Imam Gazali was a sufi and theologian who wrote on 'fiqh' or jurisprudence. At every shrine and tomb he visited he reflected on the philosophies, wisdom and art of the revered sages. Fariduddin Attar of Neyshabur uses allegory to describe the search for divinity by which he actually means 'the enlightened self'. The 19th century mystic poet Mansur al Hallaj talked about the essence of existence, the truth. He along with Rumi and Attar were following the footsteps of Bayazid Bastami, who coined the term 'fana' to describe the state of being dissolved, through complete union, in Allah.

In Tus he visited the tomb of Ferdousi, Iran's most respected poet. He wrote the 'Shahnameh', a poem on Iran's historical

and mythological dynasties, a historiography, an encyclopedia, a dictionary and more.

Since Zeeshan is a young eligible bachelor, I paid attention to his opinion of Iranian women. Yes, he does find them very beautiful despite the chador they wear. He is more observant than the average individual- many women had bandages on their noses and he found out that this was because they had nose jobs done! He came to know that not only was it was fashionable for women to get nose jobs, it was also an evidence of their being able to afford one! In most cases he found them very intelligent and modern in their way of thinking.

In Yazd he gives us his comprehensive reflections on Zoroastrianism and of-course his explanations of Zoroastrian funerals will be of interest to every reader. They leave bodies of the dead for vultures and other birds of prey to pick apart and eat as they consider earth burial and cremation an abomination, a poisoning of the earth.

We have often wondered why anyone would want a 'muta' wedding. It is a marriage for a fixed term for a certain sum of money. The sole purpose is temporary companionship as you are stoned to death for having sex outside of marriage.

Zeeshan also comments on the regimes of the Shah of Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini. He thinks like many of us do, that the Ayatollah's regime at least freed Iran from America's manipulative grasp and from its stronghold over Iranian oil.

In Hafez's tomb a TV crew was present when he visited it. There are beautiful descriptions of Hafez's column-ringed grave, covered in elegant marble and calligraphy. He is the poet who said he would happily trade the cities of Samarkand and Bokhara for a mole on a beautiful Shirazi's cheek! (Was this the pinnacle of romantic expression?!) At Hafez's tomb readers of the 'Diwan', his famous book of poems, sit under trees and recite his poems. The author is reminded of students who sit at Bokultala, at Art College in Dhaka and listen to Baul music.

His journey would not have been complete without a visit to the Jewellery museum in Tehran. There are many interesting details about the crown jewels. The 'Daria-e-noor' is the cousin of the famous 'kohinoor'. Yes, they are related! Other important pieces of jewellery are the Pehlavi Crown and the Imperial Sword, each encrusted with thousands of diamonds, and hundreds of pearls, emeralds, sapphires and rubies. The history of each piece is given in detail. The jewels are displayed only three days a week for two hours a day.

He ends the narration of his journey by saying 'ashi', which means 'I'll be back'. I hope this extremely talented writer keeps his word.

The reviewer is a member of The Reading Circle and a senior English teacher at Sunbeams.

Small book on a large life

AUTHOR:

DR. PROTIMA PAUL MAJUMDER

EDITED BY HAYAT MAHMUD

Publisher: Sunanda Majumder, printed by Othoba Binnash, June 2016

"Bathare mor modhur koro" is a book on Aninda Majumder Bappu, a successful banker, was the eldest son of Dr. Pratima Paul Majumder. According to the writer the protagonist of this book was a philosopher who always tried to analyse everything of daily life around him. This book is not only a piece of writing of a grieving mother on her departed son but also a valuable guideline for all mothers for raising their children. In this poignant memoir the writer discusses various aspects of life of the central character. It contains 43 articles, two poems, letters, personal diary and message of condolence at the sad demise of her beloved son. The writings in the book reflect her personal emotions which are heart-touching.



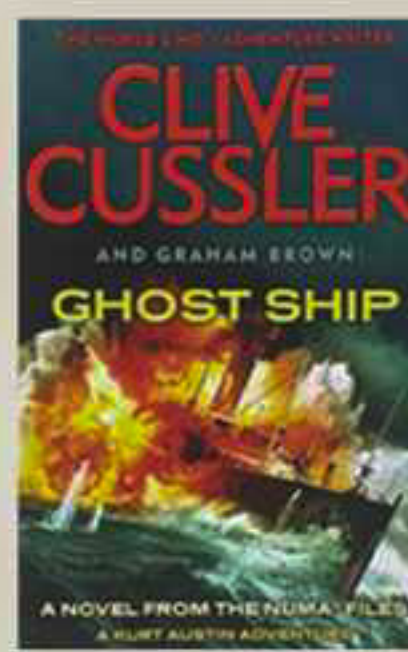
OMNI BOOKS

Ghost Ship

BY GRAHAM BROWN
CLIVE CUSSLER

Kurt Austin, head of the numa special assignments team, is no stranger to danger, either above or below the waves. With Joe Zavala at his side, he and his team have defended the USA against some horrifying threats.

In this, the twelfth numa files adventure, Austin and his team must undertake their most dangerous mission yet, taking on enemies more deadly than those they have ever faced before.



Ten Cities that Made an Empire

BY TRISTRAM HUNT

The final embers of the British Empire are dying, but its legacy remains in the lives and structures of the cities which it shaped. Here Tristram Hunt examines the stories and defining ideas of ten of the most important - Boston, Bridgetown, Dublin, Cape Town, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Bombay, Melbourne, New Delhi and twentieth-century Liverpool.

Rejecting standard binary views of the British Empire as 'very good' or 'very bad', Hunt describes the complex processes of exchange

