

A NOVEL CRISSCROSSING CULTURES AND TIME

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ARIF ANWAR

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The Storm is a tale of multiple compelling characters from around the world but all tied back to a crucial time and place in South Asia—a storm based on the real 1970 Bhola cyclone. Covering as it does six decades of history of South Asia and Bangladesh in particular, Arif Anwar takes us through World War II, Partition and communal riots, the Liberation War, to the central story of a young Bangladeshi man, Shahryar, in the early 2000s whose US visa is set to expire and who would have to leave his daughter behind.

The book is named aptly with the three parts of the book mimicking a storm—the ominous gathering, the calm of the eye of the storm, and the surging afterwards. Debut novelist Arif Anwar, now based in Toronto, was born in Bangladesh. He talks to *Star Weekend* about his debut novel, which crisscrosses multiple cultures and generations but manages to uniquely capture Bangladesh's history for readers.

The Storm is highly informed by six decades of events in Bangladesh and South Asia. While familiar to us (South Asian readers), did you think you could draw in readers globally?

I think good stories and memorable characters are universally appealing, so those were my first focus when writing the book. People are also curious about countries like Bangladesh that are often overshadowed by their larger, better-known neighbours. I've actually had a lot of readers express how much they learned about the region in general and Bangladesh in particular. Bangladesh has an often tragic but fascinating history. It's time the world learned more about the country.

The book is packed with historical events from Partition to WWII and more contemporary issues such as immigration in the US and the Rohingya refugees. How did you write so familiarly about such a range of places, countries, times and people? Did it require a lot of research?

Even if you've lived in or visited a country, writing about historical events is difficult because you obviously can't go back in time. So books, films and documentaries are often all you have. For *The Storm*, among many others, I read Louis Allen's book on the Burmese Front [*Burma: The Longest War 1941-1945*] and Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's book on Japanese Tokkotai soldiers [*Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers*].

For the parts set in South Asia, it

helped that I was born in Chittagong and consequently knew the area well.

Additionally, in 2014 I had the opportunity to work for Unicef on a consulting project and spent a substantial amount of time in Myanmar (Burma).

Some of the issues around the US immigration system I wrote from personal experience from when I was living there, although my circumstances were nowhere near as dramatic as Shahryar's.

You never planned to write and this is your first novel. How did you transition from a reader to a writer?

I was always a reader, but when I decided to try writing I started reading like a writer. I revisited my favourite novels, and read new ones by trying to really understand what it was I liked about them, what techniques and styles the writers were using that resonated with me. It sounds distinctly unromantic but that really

up with this structure and ensure this series of connections?

My goal with the novel was always to incorporate a storm metaphor into the structure, but at first, I wasn't sure how to do it. What I eventually arrived at was, for the first half of *The Storm* to go backwards in time, with a middle section that is static, and the second half mirrored so that the story lines introduced in the first half complete themselves and connect to the larger arc.

This structure is sometimes called the Russian Nesting Dolls structure (a big doll containing a smaller doll and so on). Italo Calvino used something similar for *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*. David Mitchell iterated on it with *Cloud Atlas* by adding a central chapter around which the story lines are mirrored. My twist on it was to add a through-line narrative (Shahryar's story) so that the reader can stay oriented.

Once I had committed to the structure it was an enormous challenge to realise it while still protecting the integrity of the story. There were many nights where I was pulling my hair out. In the end, I was happy with the final product.

Which English and Bengali literary figures do you look to for inspiration? Which books are your go-tos?

Growing up I read everything by the Ray family (Upendrokishore, Sukumar, Satyajit, and Leela Majumdar). What a talented bunch they were!

I read lots of Humayun Ahmed (just about everything) and Sunil Gangopadhyay. Shirshendu [Mukhopadhyay], Bibhuti [Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay], etc.

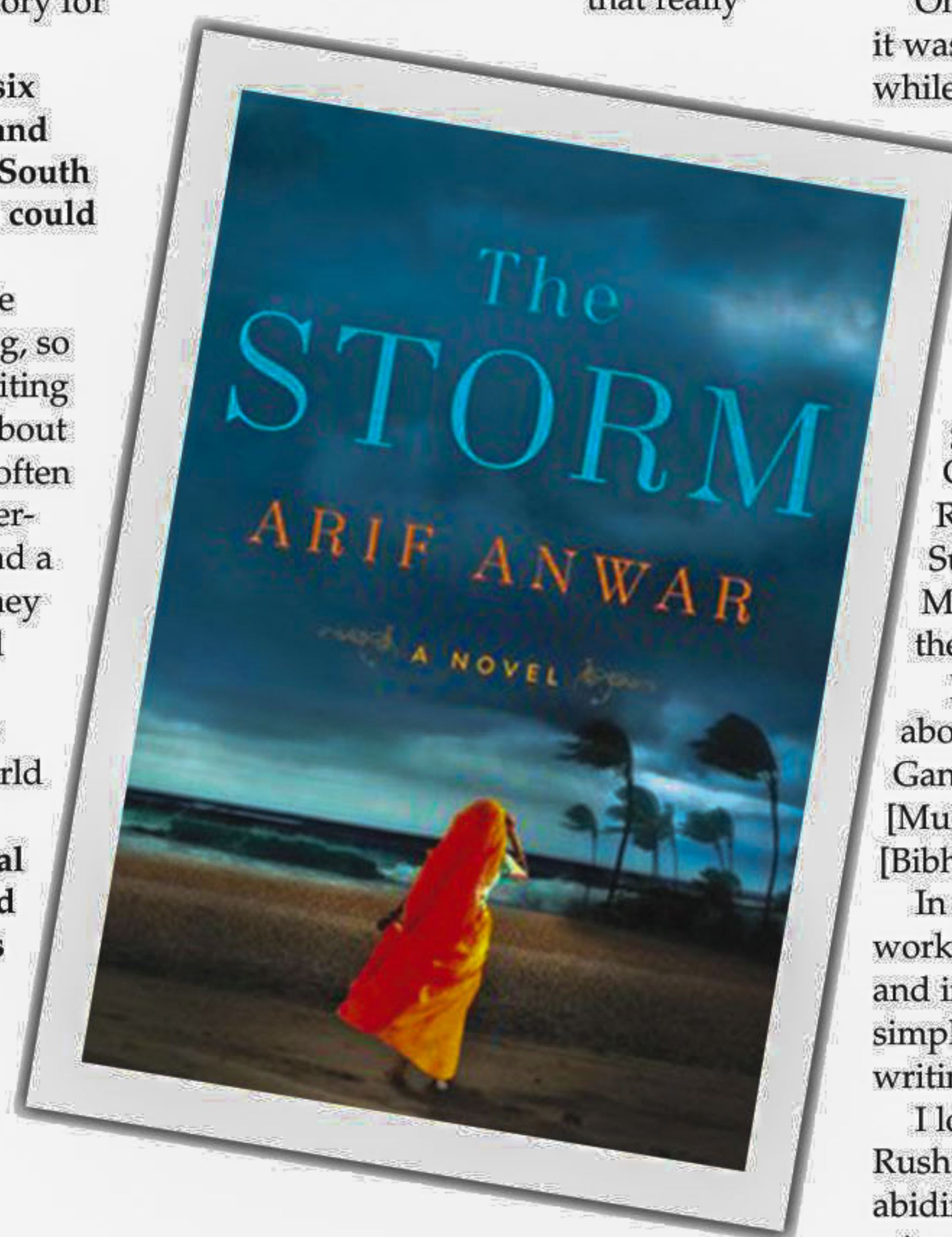
In English, I love Jhumpa Lahiri's work. She writes with astonishing clarity and insight. Her prose is beautiful in its simplicity. Too bad she's no longer writing in English.

I love Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie, but at the same time I have an abiding love for fantasy, horror and science fiction. Case in point, I've read just about everything by Stephen King.

The Lord of the Rings is definitely a go-to. I re-read it every few years.

With such a fantastic debut, what's next? Which literary genres and forms are you excited to venture into?

I'm busy at work on the next novel, which I hope to finish next summer. This one is still set in the past, spanning 1930's India, Ireland and Tanzania. But the structure will be linear. It's also going to be quite scary. I'm actually very excited about it.



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I also took a creative writing class at the University of Toronto. I made great friends with the students in it and once the semester ended, we decided to keep meeting bi-weekly to workshop and (kindly) critique each other's pieces. That was seven years ago and we're still meeting regularly!

Connections were made beautifully throughout the story. How did you come