

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

Whose Land Is It Anyway?

A study into the struggle for space

STEVE DONOGHUE

Land—its ownership, its deep history, its uses and abuses—forms the subject of best-selling historian Simon Winchester's new book, *Land: How the Hunger for Ownership Shaped the Modern World* (HarperCollins, 2021), which, given the topic, inevitably feels pitifully short at 400 pages. The subject of land is, after all, the stories of land, and there are as many of those as there are people in the history of the world.

Winchester is thus forced to concentrate, to isolate certain aspects of humanity's association with land and, in one of the book's many real estate-related figures of speech, drill down on those aspects to the exclusion of others.

One of his most effective focusing tools is his own land in Dutchess County, New York—its purchase, its title, its history, what it means to own it at all (“I had just purchased a piece of the United States of America,” he reflects). The book begins, that is, with a simple land transaction—a familiar enough ceremony in life and literature.

This effectively underscores the ubiquity of the subject: no matter where you are when you're reading this, you're on land that's owned by somebody. Even if that somebody is you, that's not the final word. You almost certainly still need to continue paying for the privilege of occupancy, in the form of things like real estate taxes. And not all the mortgage payments or real estate taxes in the world will protect you if your government decides to exercise its version of eminent domain and simply seize that land out from underneath you for its own purposes.

One twist to the story that provokes Winchester's sarcasm and befuddlement is what he describes quite accurately as “land demarcation made insane.” That story is, of course, Bangladesh, which inherited from the Mughal era a crazy-quilt of cross-purpose treaties and title deeds laid down onto what Winchester describes as “a landscape, with rice paddies and hills of the greenest beauty and loneliness, like nowhere else on the planet.” When East Pakistan became Bangladesh, there were little bits of India still speckled here and there inside its territory. “And in one particularly and unutterably mad instance,” Winchester writes, “a village of undoubted Indian ownership was inside a piece of Bangladeshi territory that was itself inside an Indian parcel that had been somehow pinioned inside Bangladesh.” His comparison to Russian nesting matryoshka dolls seems like

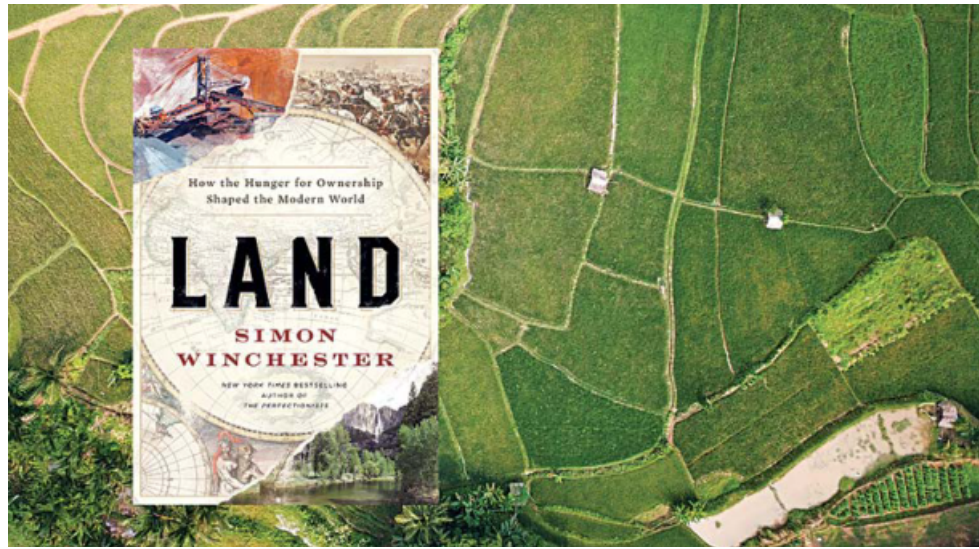
an understatement.

He notes, for instance, the fact that Britain's Queen Elizabeth II is one of the world's leading landowners, acting as “the owner of last resort” for the entire acreage of the United Kingdom, meaning that, “A quarter of the world's population lives on land in which, though the individual citizens may not know it, they exist in a notionally feudal relationship with the British Crown.” Whether or not these claims would be a surprise to the Queen herself (or her army of solicitors) is surely secondary to the fun of the claim itself?

Winchester is a famously omnivorous writer. His dozens of books range over all of Creation

equally obvious: it's no small thing to sit down for a long conversation with a thinker and storyteller like Winchester, to find out what's on his mind this time, and which stories about his new subject have captured his imagination.

When it comes to the subject of land seen in its most general terms, the story seems to have a grim immediate future. Winchester concludes his book by noting that “the land is under threat like never before in human existence.” Thanks to global warming, sea levels and tides are rising, and the pattern seems to have only one direction. “The trivial-sounding inundations of the recent past are recognized for what they were truly were [sic],” Winchester



and share nothing in common other than the most important things; a lively curiosity and a lively prose style. Readers have followed him to the eccentric personalities who gave birth to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the planet-altering eruption of Krakatoa, to, more recently, the surprisingly widespread effect of precision engineers in modern history. This hopscotching approach has its weaknesses, of course: it tends to produce books that can feel scattershot, more conversational than scholarly (and that can lead to occasional slips, as when he asserts that the borders of the United States have “little or nothing to do with any physical need for separation,” when in fact most US state borders are drawn along rivers or other physically separating features).

But the strengths of the approach are

writes, “auguries of a certain kind of global doom.”

His readers have already seen such auguries, in the daily news: disappearing ice shelves, super storms feeding off warmer ocean waters, eroding beaches and coastlines, shifting populations—all the signs of land under siege. It could well be that in less than a century, many of the distinctive charms of land described by Simon Winchester will be garish, or gone completely. But in the meantime, readers have this charming and challenging book as a snapshot.

Steve Donoghue is a book critic whose work has appeared in the *Boston Globe*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Washington Post*, and the *National*.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The Metamorphosis of a Country

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

The epigraph of *The Old Drift* (Hogarth Press, 2020), taken from Vigil's *The Aeneid*, briefly narrates the story of a diverse civilisation thriving on the banks of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness that “sommnolently” drifts past a “populous throng” of spirits. In Namwali Serpell's novel, the civilisation is Zambia, the Lethe's amnesia is the passage of time, and the spirits are a swarm of prophetic mosquitoes.

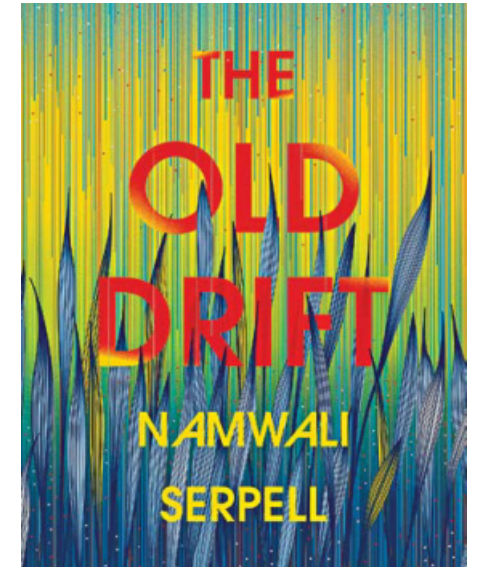
An intergenerational saga leaping from colonial to modern to a near-future Zambia set in 2024, *The Old Drift* tells the story of the country through the eyes of three generations: The Grandmothers, The Mothers, and The Children. Although Zambia's colonial past gets lost in the riverine passage of time as symbolised by the Lethe, indelible imprints of that past remain on the present, on the beginnings of the three generations' stories, and the interracial social fabric uniting them. At the end of each character's story, a swarm of mosquitoes narrates a summary and predict the characters' fate. In doing so, they become a bridge connecting the evolution of Zambia and its characters.

In an interview with the Reading Women podcast, Serpell shared that she wanted to explore the idea of a storm of errors and accidents guiding a narrative forward. This is exactly what she does. It all starts in the 19th century with the brutish act of a colonial settler Percy M Clark, in a settlement known as Old Drift around Victoria Falls. “That tiny chaos, like one of our wings, sets in motion the unwitting cycle: it will spiral across families for generations to come,” the swarm of mosquitoes narrates.

In every generation that follows, errors and accidents propel the story and shine a light on the evolution of Zambia from a colonial playground to one of the many posts of the Cold War, AIDS outbreak, globalisation, and fictional technology like ‘Mosketeoze’ and ‘Digit-all Beads’.

The novel refuses to be shackled by the tags of genre. It drifts in the haze of historical and science fiction, magical and social realism.

Through the character of Sibilla, one of the three Grandmothers, Serpell infuses the element of magic realism—Sibilla is covered head to toe with dense hair; if triggered, the long strands can create whirlwinds. Matha, one of the other Grandmothers who dresses up as a boy to receive education, illuminates Zambia's historic ‘Afronaut’ Space Program, for which science teacher Edward Makuka Nkoloso trained astronauts for a journey to the moon by putting them inside oil drums



and rolling them down the hills. Matha's daughter and one of The Mothers, Sylvia serves as a focal point of the AIDS epidemic in Zambia. The Children Jacob, Naila, and Joseph survey the rough terrains of the competitive, chaotic, and capitalistic world of a “woke” 21st century.

In no way does this novel follow a linear plot. Instead, it is driven haphazardly by the characters' actions and rides on the tides of time, exploring marriage, romance, politics, colonisation, disability, diseases, the ills of development, poverty, violence, grief, and a technologically driven authoritarian future.

As an enthusiast of intergenerational family sagas, I can say that *The Old Drift*, with its genre-bending elements, outshines others of its kind that I have read. Its use of local language and historic anecdotes challenges the reader to conduct their share of research to understand a certain elusive block of text. Serpell's language is also loaded with poetry, wit, and humour. It never falls into the trap of sounding didactic or encyclopaedic.

Readers from countries that have colonial pasts can easily sense the sweeping meditation on colonialism that *The Old Drift* essentially is. They can sense how their countries, too, like Zambia, are “a lazy, loose curve” into which time accidentally strayed, bearing colonisers on its back, and subsequently mobilised the turbulent births of nations. Those interested in intergenerational novels that trace the course of a country should not miss this book.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.

THE BOOK REPORT

Author Rabeya Khatun Passes Away at 86

STAR BOOKS DESK

Prolific writer Rabeya Khatun, a recipient of the Bangla Academy Literary Award 1973, Ekushey Padak 1993, and the Independence Day Award 2017, passed away on January 3, 2021 after suffering from a long period of health complications. She began her literary career in the 1950s while working under Jahannara Imam at *Khawateen* magazine, as the editor of the literature segment of *Cinema* magazine, and later as the editor of the monthly women's magazine, *Anagana*.

An apt chronicler of her time, Rabeya Khatun's oeuvre bears testimony to the changing historical landscape around her. Her novel on Partition, *Rajbargh* (1967) was first serially published in *Begum*, the eminent women's magazine of the time. Her critically acclaimed novel *Modhumati* (1963) depicts the



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lives of weavers on the banks of the river Modhumati. She wrote about her experiences of the Liberation War in *Ektattor Noy Mashe* (1990).

Film adaptations of her works *Kokhono Megh Kokhono Brishti* (2003), *Megher Pore Megh* (2004) and *Madhumati* (2011) have resulted in notable commercial and critical success.

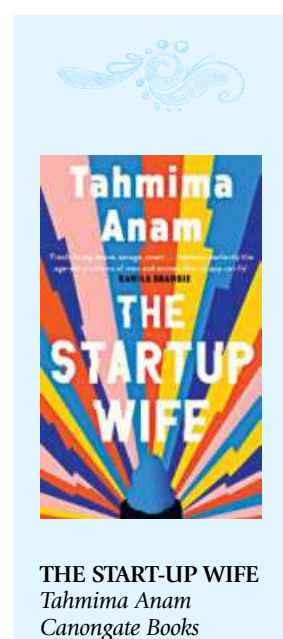
Rabeya Khatun has written extensively on her travels around the world, which include *Thames theke Niagara*, *Cherry fotar dine Japan-e*, *Kumari Matir Desh Australia-y*. Bengali women travel writers are very rare even to this day and it is a riveting experience to see the world through the eyes of a Bengali woman who spent her adolescence in British India and had lived through Partition, our troubling existence as part of Pakistan, and the Liberation War. These travelogues can read like eloquent entries of a tourist's travel log in their perspective but they reveal much more about the author's own cultural upbringing and socioeconomic niche. In a time when we no longer rely solely on books to learn about the current affairs of other parts of the world, what doesn't cease to delight one is reading Rabeya Khatun's joy on first seeing the cherry blossoms in Japan.

THE SHELF

5 New Books to Look Out For in 2021

STAR BOOKS DESK

As with the beginning of all new years, 2021 already looks promising with its offering of forthcoming titles. We at Daily Star Books are particularly excited about the following books.



THE START-UP WIFE
Tahmima Anam
Canongate Books

Asha Ray is a coder who, upon reconnecting with a high school love interest, abandons her PhD program to write a new algorithm for an exclusive tech firm. The platform launched by Asha and her husband offers to replace religious rituals. As it explodes into popularity, the couple buckle under the limelight offered by their millions of online users, and their story becomes a commentary on the slippery slopes of marriage and start up culture.

MURDER AT THE MUSHAIRA
Raza Mir
Aleph Book Company

From the author of *Ghalib: A Thousand Desires* and *The Taste of Words: An Introduction to Urdu Poetry*, this new whodunit unfolds in the India of 1857, when the city is teeming with poetry soirees and the thirst for revolution against the corrupt British East India Company.



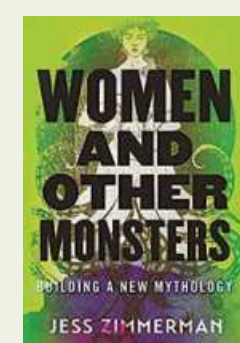
JUNGLE NAMA:
A Story of the Sundarban
Amitav Ghosh
HarperCollins India

In his first ever book written in verse, Amitav Ghosh revisits the Sundarban legends of Bon Bibi, whose original Bengali verses can be traced back to the 19th century, and which were also at the centre of Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*. In an illuminated edition illustrated by Salman Toor, Ghosh retells the stories of the rich merchant Dhona, the poor boy Dukhey, the spirit of Dokhin Ray who manifests in front of humans in the form of a tiger, and the forest goddess Bon Bibi.



WOMEN AND OTHER MONSTERS
Jess Zimmerman
Beacon Press

From the editor-in-chief of literary magazine *Electric Literature* comes a feminist critique of the notion that women who “step out of bounds” with their anger, ambition, greed, and sexuality are “unnatural” and “monstrous”. Zimmerman analyses 11 female monsters of mythology, including Medusa, Harpies, the Furies, and the Sphinx to paint a portrait of the female hero who embraces agency and power.



LAND OF BIG NUMBERS: STORIES
Ti-Ping Chen
Simon & Schuster

A collection of short stories on modern day China infused with magic and social realism, Chen's book follows the lives of gamers and underground bloggers operating under a communist state, employees of a government call centre navigating personal trauma, experiences of surfing through the Chinese stock exchange, individuals trapped in a subway without permission to leave, and more.