

**BOOK REVIEW: FICTION**

# History, lost love, and the road not taken in Jodi Picoult's latest novel

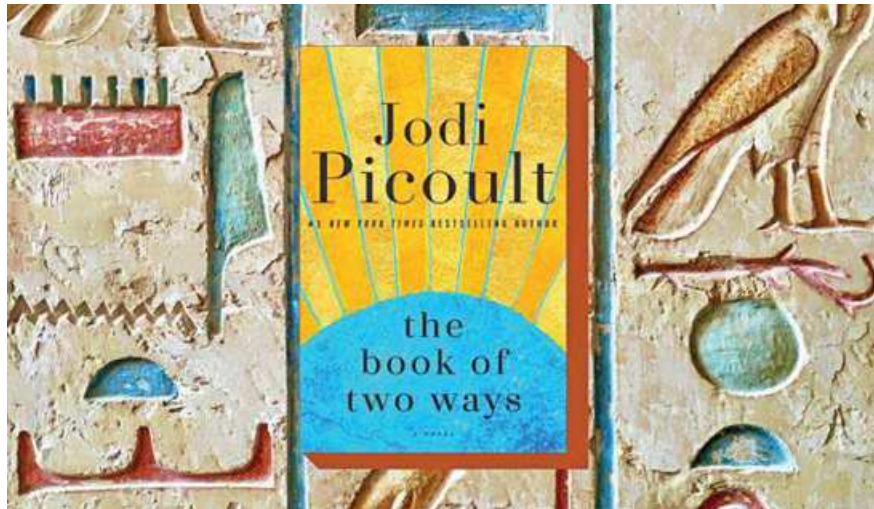
SAMEIRAH NASRIN AHSAN

Jodi Picoult's *The Book of Two Ways* (Ballantine Books, 2020) discusses with great candour the complexities of human choices, of love, regret, death, and other tumultuous complications that make up life. This book couldn't have arrived at a more fitting time, because in many ways it addresses the perpetual uncertainty that has plagued minds throughout the past year and still continues to do so.

The story begins with Dawn McDowell, our protagonist who is flying home to Boston when the aircraft she is on has to make a sudden and potentially dangerous landing. Dawn is a death doula by profession, which means she assists terminally ill patients with the process of dying. As the plane dives for the crash, she expects to meet her own death, and her life flashes before her eyes. She does not, however, see the face of her physicist husband, Brian, or their moments together; nor does she see their daughter Meret and her many stages of growing up. When Dawn closes her eyes during what could have been her last moments, she sees Wyatt Armstrong, a man she had once loved and abandoned long ago. Along with the memory of Wyatt, Dawn's mind is flooded with the dull yet persistent jabs of doubt about past choices, silent regrets, and a timorous thirst to put them to rest. Dawn miraculously survives the crash and in a moment of impulse, switches her travel route to Egypt where she had last seen Wyatt 15 years ago.

The book follows Dawn in her two lives, one in Boston—with Brian and their daughter, where a mask of comfort and predictability eclipses the slow yet permanent cracks forming in their marriage, and where her job as a death doula was never the first choice; and another in Middle Egypt—with Wyatt, where they were rivaling post-graduate students of Egyptology, unearthing wondrous history together and falling in love. Both her lives mirror each other in the most surreal, and an almost poetic manner.

In this latest novel, the author of the acclaimed *Small Great Things* (2016)—



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

which is soon to be starred in by Viola Davis and Julia Roberts—discusses many interesting parallels: fate versus free will, science versus mythology, life and death, past and present, and growth and comfort, among a myriad of others. Picoult wonders if the laws of quantum physics are in fact splitting us into different versions of ourselves, each believing that the road taken is destined. She questions whether destiny is determined through choices alone or whether we are inevitably headed towards the same fate no matter what path we ultimately choose to follow.

This core question, and the book's title, is influenced by an ancient Egyptian coffin text known as *The Book of Two Ways*. This coffin text is said to be a map to the underworld which charts two possible routes, one by land and another by water. In Dawn's life, water represents her safe and familiar existence in Boston and land signifies lost opportunities: an incomplete love story and forgotten career aspirations in Egypt. Picoult uses quantum physics, Egyptology, the possibility of the existence of parallel worlds, and the philosophy of hospice to tell this multi-faceted story of loss, self-discovery, and the limits of love.

*The Book of Two Ways* does have the power to overwhelm your senses with

its assemblage of information and the heart-wrenching moral choices the characters are forced to make. But this is the signature Jodi Picoult we all love and appreciate. She asks quite simply, throughout the book: Who would you have been if you hadn't become who you are? Why am I alive when many others aren't? What is left unfinished?

In this Covid-ridden world, where death, unemployment, and lost opportunities have forced many of us to seek alternative paths for livelihood and happiness, there are perhaps no words more appropriate than a quote from Picoult's novel, "Ancient Egyptians believed that the first and most necessary ingredient in the universe was chaos. It could sweep you away, but it was also the place from which all things start anew." Perhaps 2021 is the start of something new for us too—an opportunity to revive abandoned dreams, heal from loss, rebuild from the rubble and ashes of a pandemic-ravaged world and start anew. A hopeful book is a good place to start.

Sameirah Nasrin Ahsan is a mechanical engineer in Dhaka. She aspires to be an author someday. For now, she is content with reading and sharing the stories that make her think beyond herself. Instagram: @booksnher.

**INTERVIEW**

# "Boi Mela-centric love for books poses obstacles for the publishing industry."

EMRAN MAHFUZ, TR. SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

Minar Mansur, the current director of the National Book Centre (Jatiya Grantha Kendro), was born on July 20, 1960 in the Barlia village of Chittagong. He studied at the University of Chittagong's Bangla department. Amidst the whirlwind of political instability that followed 1975, the poet and researcher published the anthology *Sheikh Mujib Ekti Lal Golap* (1979), and went on to edit *Autobiography of Shaheed Dhivendranath Dutt* (1995), *Neglected Heroes of the Liberation War* (2008), and *Society, Politics and Development of Bangladesh: Thoughts of Prominent People* (2010), among others.

During Bangabandhu's birth centenary year, Minar Mansur organised several book reading programmes, competitions, and library initiatives. Emran Mahfuz of Daily Star Books speaks to the director of the National Book Centre about his thoughts on the country's reading landscape.

**Emran Mahfuz, Daily Star Books (DSB): Readers and writers have been debating the pandemic-induced uncertainty over Boi Mela 2021. How would you evaluate our fair-centric enthusiasm for books?**

Minar Mansur (MM): We are very fortunate that so much creativity and publishing incentive has become inextricably linked with the spirit of *Ekushey*. As a result, a significant chunk of the publishers' annual activities are conducted around the book fair. However, in order for the publishing industry to thrive, it must shed its dependency on a single annual event; it must find ways to actively promote and publish books throughout the year like it does in February.

**DSB: What initiatives has the National Book Centre taken during your tenure to help the publishing industry?**

MM: First of all, I would like to say that this is a multidimensional and long-term work that is never possible for the government alone. It requires the concerted and sincere initiative of all parties concerned, including authors. Unfortunately, effective, well thought out, and far-sighted initiatives are still lacking.

The National Book Centre purchases books worth huge sums of money from publishers every year and distributes them to more than 800 private libraries as grants. Book fairs and book-centred activities are organised and encouraged at divisional and district levels. On an international scale, we have created opportunities for publishers to participate in festivals including the Frankfurt Book Fair and the Calcutta International Book Fair.

**DSB: Please tell us about the recently completed 'Pori Bangabandhu Boi Shonar Manush Hoi' initiative. What other plans does the NBC have in the near future?**



MM: Under such suffocating circumstances ushered in by the pandemic, we started the program on an experimental basis with 10 well known libraries in Dhaka. We encouraged school students to read Bangabandhu's *Unfinished Memoirs*. College students read the *Prison Diaries* and university students read *Amar Dehka Nayachin*.

Our target was to engage 150 students and we received far greater response than expected. After reading the books, the participants wrote their feedback, which was evaluated by professor Shamsuzzaman Khan, writer Selina Hossain, and Liberation War researcher Mofidul Haque. All three judges unanimously admitted that the assumption we often make about the youth not wanting to read books is not true. Lack of initiative seems to be the main reason behind their dimming interest in books.

In addition, 'salon libraries' are being established in 100 salons across the country under the objective of 'Mujib Shotoborshe Shoto Pathagar'. We are also working to run a book reading program across the country to fulfil the promise of 'Mujib Borshe Ongikar, Graame Graame Pathagar'.

**DSB: What roles can universities play in resolving the multidimensional crises in our state today?**

MM: When we started, there were only a handful of universities and their impact was felt all over the country. It was the universities that sustained our struggle for independence. Now there are more than 100 universities, but is there any space for enhanced research? Even in this Mujib year, has there been any significant research on the life and philosophy of Bangabandhu? Only the people associated with universities can say why a gap remains in that space.

**BOOKS BRIEFING**

## Book sales and review competitions mark the beginning of February 2021

**STAR BOOKS DESK**

In any other year, the beginning of February would normally be marked by the month-long Amar Ekushey Boi Mela which unfolds across the Bangla Academy and Suhrawardy Udyan grounds. With the fair starting on March 18, 2021 as per the last updates, due to coronavirus complications this year, bookstores and platforms from around the city are offering their own alternatives this month.

**Baatighar Ekushey Boi Utshab 2021:** Inaugurated by actor, politician, and activist Asaduzzaman Noor and author Anisul Hoque, Baatighar's book fair is scheduled to run every day until February 28, 10am to 10pm, at the bookstore's premises at Bishwa Shahittya Kendro, Bangla Motor, Dhaka. Locally published books will be available with a special discount of 25 to 40 percent.



**Courtside Boi Mela 2021:** Jointly organised by Chef's Table and online bookseller Rokomari.com, the fair will continue until February 14. The modest set up at Chef's Table Courtside includes stalls by Bookends, Boi Bichitra, Jamil's Comics & Collectibles, Rokomari.com, Ruhama Publications, Shomokaleen Prokashon, and popular children's publisher Mayurpankhi Publications, along with stationary by Pilot, Lotte, and Pentel Bangladesh.

Winners of the Chef's Table Courtside & Litmosphere Book Review Contest, which was taking submissions until January 30, will receive gift vouchers.

**Abul Mansur Ahmad Book Review Contest:** With the objective of reacquainting readers with the works of the renowned writer, journalist, and politician, the Abul Mansur Ahmad Smriti Parishad are hosting the competition until February 21. Submissions must be previously unpublished reviews of the books *Sher-e-Bangla Hoite Bangabandhu* or *Bangladesh-er Culture*, comprising 1,000-1,200 words in Bangla. Participants can post the submissions on the Abul Mansur Ahmad Facebook page or on their respective Facebook profiles—the caption must include #AbulMansurAhmad (in English and Bangla) and #BookReviewProtijogita (in Bangla). The reviews can also be emailed to amatrust2015@gmail.com. Top three winners will receive BDT 1,000-3,000.

**THE SHELF**

## South Asian pasts in books

**STAR BOOKS DESK**

History is made up of more than battle stories—the most riveting and nuanced of historical tales are those that touch upon the lives, experiences, and textures of the stories making up any region or civilization. The following books, published over the past few weeks and months, etch a history of Bengali and South Asian lives through the lenses of radio dispatches, food recipes, historical fiction, and research.



**SHUNCHEN SHWADIN BANGLA BETAR KENDRO 1971**  
Modhupok, Bangladesh  
Alamgir Kabir

Film director and activist Alamgir Kabir aired the first of his Shwadin Bangla Betar Kendro dispatches on the Bangladesh Liberation War on June 15, 1971. From then on until October 7, 1971, he continued to release radio dispatches that offered unflinching commentary on West Pakistan's genocide on East Pakistanis and on the geopolitical forces at play. First published in English as *This was Radio Bangladesh, 1971* (Bangla Academy, 1984), the dispatches are now for the first time available in Bangla, translated by Afzalur Rahman, Arastu Lenin Khan, Priom Pritim Pal, and Shamsuddoza Sajen, with an Introduction by Kamal Lohani. The collection has been edited by AKM Atikuzzaman, Tahmidal Jami, and Arost Lenin Khan.

**CARPUS MAHAL THEKE SHANTI CHUKTO: PARBOTTO CHATTOGRAM-E RASHTRIO NITIR ITIHASH**  
University Press Ltd (UPL), Bangladesh  
Anand Bikash Chakma

Comprising the product of years of research by Dr Anand Bikash Chakma, Associate Professor at the department of History, Chittagong University, the book explores the development of events in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region from the Mughal period to the British and Pakistani rule and its ongoing existence as part of Bangladesh.



**THE RUNAWAY BOY**  
Eka, Westland Publications, India  
Manoranjan Byapari

Manoranjan Byapari was born in Barisal, East Pakistan in the 1950s. He moved to West Bengal at the age of three, settled in refugee camps as a child, and became part of the Naxalite movement in his 20s, which landed him in jail. He taught himself to read while in prison, and upon gaining release, became a writer after a chance encounter with Mahasweta Devi while driving her rickshaw in Kolkata.

His latest novel, translated from the Bengali by renowned translator V Ramaswamy, begins in the marshlands of Barisal during Partition, and follows the turbulent lives of a family forced to migrate to West Bengal while suffering the caste prejudices imposed upon "Chandals".



**DESI DELICACIES**  
Pan Macmillan, India  
Claire Chambers

A professor of Global Literatures at the University of York, England, Chambers has written extensively on literary representations of Muslims in Britain and South Asia. Her new essay anthology—complete with mouth-watering recipes—explores the sentiments, relationships, and histories entrenched in South Asian Muslim cuisine.

