

BOOK REVIEW: HISTORICAL FICTION

A fierce queen overlooked by the history books

TOWRIN ZAMAN

Little has been written about Maharani Jindan Kaur, the youngest and last queen of the Sikh empire. Born as the humble daughter of the royal kennel keeper, Jindan saw a life of massive upheaval, living as the youngest queen to a regent and then ultimately a rebel and an exile. So it is surprising that a woman so remarkable got such little attention and space in history as it is taught. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni tries to amend that in her book *The Last Queen* (HarperCollins India, 2021), a compelling retelling of the magnificent history of the Sikh empire through the eyes of a fearless woman who influenced much of it.

Divakaruni tells the story in four parts, Girl, Bride, Queen, and Rebel, with Jindan narrating her story in first-person point of view. We are introduced right at the offset to her tenacity and willpower, a quality that is cemented throughout the book. Jindan had an impoverished childhood, bolstered by her irresponsible father's gambling. An ambitious student and a partner in crime to her elder brother Jawahar in his conquests of stealing food, she had to eventually quit school because the male children made her life difficult, drawn by her astounding beauty. It is her beauty for which Jindan's father takes her to the capital of Lahore, with the secret intention of enticing the emperor into taking her as a bride.

What follows is the most uncomfortable part of the book: a romance between Jindan and the king, almost 40 years her senior. One can understand why the young girl becomes fascinated with the charismatic king. She was raised on the stories of his brave conquests, and meeting him only strengthens her admiration for his chivalry. But in a refreshing twist of events, it is she who first acts on her feelings. King Ranjit Singh, to his credit, keeps the process of courting respectful, sending Jindan to her hometown until she is old enough at age 18 to marry. The excitement for us readers begins after their marriage, when royal and domestic politics come into play, throwing Jindan into a tumultuous fight for survival.

Jindan is a flawed protagonist. She can be vengeful, egotistical, and obstinate. Yet if her tenacity lands her in unusual circumstances, from imprisonment to asylum, it also

empowers her to fuel the events not only in her own life, but also in her son's and in the empire her family has built.

It is not easy to capture such a tumultuous history in such a short length of pages. But Divakaruni, a teacher of writing who has previously authored Sita's voice in her retelling of the *Ramayana*, *The Forest of Enchantment* (HarperCollins India, 2019), is more than up to the task. Her pacing is fast and her writing flows smoothly. Revolts and battles unravel within a matter of sentences, new characters appearing and significant ones

Jindan shares a bittersweet equation, stand out in particular.

Through them and the other women in the novel, Divakaruni does a brilliant job of illustrating the plights of women in the 19th century. Jindan herself is a prime example, having been forced to quit school at a young age, being expected to offer herself as 'Sati' to be burned with her husband in his pyre. Her grit and fearlessness are a thorn in the side of the British, so much so that they resorted to maligning her character, referring to her as the "Messalina of Punjab".

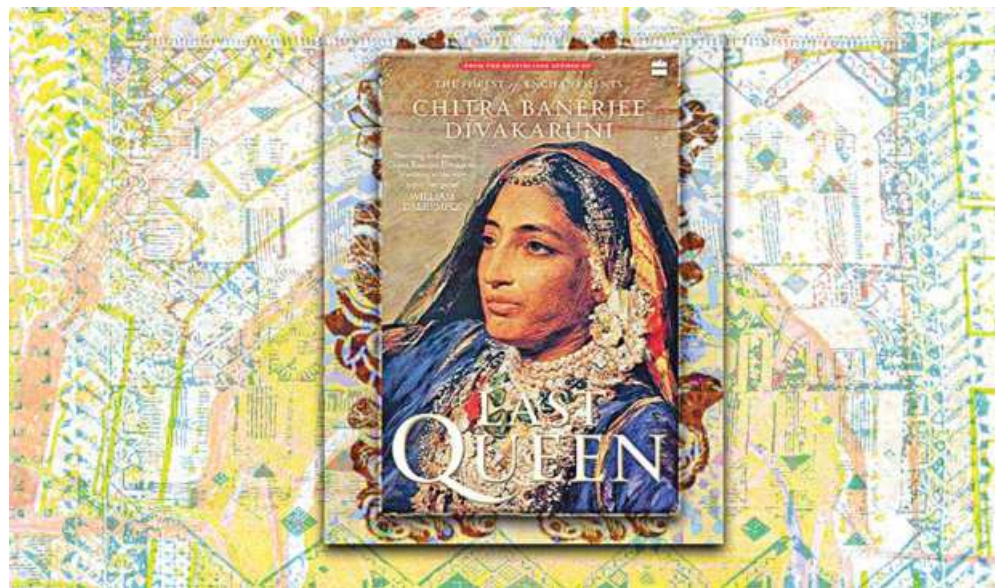


ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

being killed off without much fuss. Even then, it is easy to grow invested in them and their fates. There is no clear villain here, and the characters have shifting loyalties, grieving in one moment when they were apathetic just a few pages prior. Jindan herself makes you furious at her choices and then a few turns later, earns your sympathy. This is where the strength of the writing lies, with its ability to make you care for characters whose fates are already somewhat known to you.

The most beautiful aspect of the story is perhaps the friendships between the women in the novel and how little they are affected by men and politics. Jindan's relationship with Guddan, another queen, and with Pathani, the wife of a man with whom

Jindan's passion and resilience inspire her to reject the limitations of the veil compulsory for the women of her time. It empowered her to steer state politics, defying the British and keeping Punjab from being annexed. All of that she does for the rights of her son, a premature heir to the throne. What *The Last Queen* ultimately comes down to is the story of a remarkable woman, told remarkably by a woman. It celebrates the flaws of a woman as much as it celebrates her strengths.

Towrin Zaman is a researcher who loves reading anything and everything. *The Last Queen* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (HarperCollins India, 2021) is available at Omni Books, Dhanmondi.

BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC NONFICTION

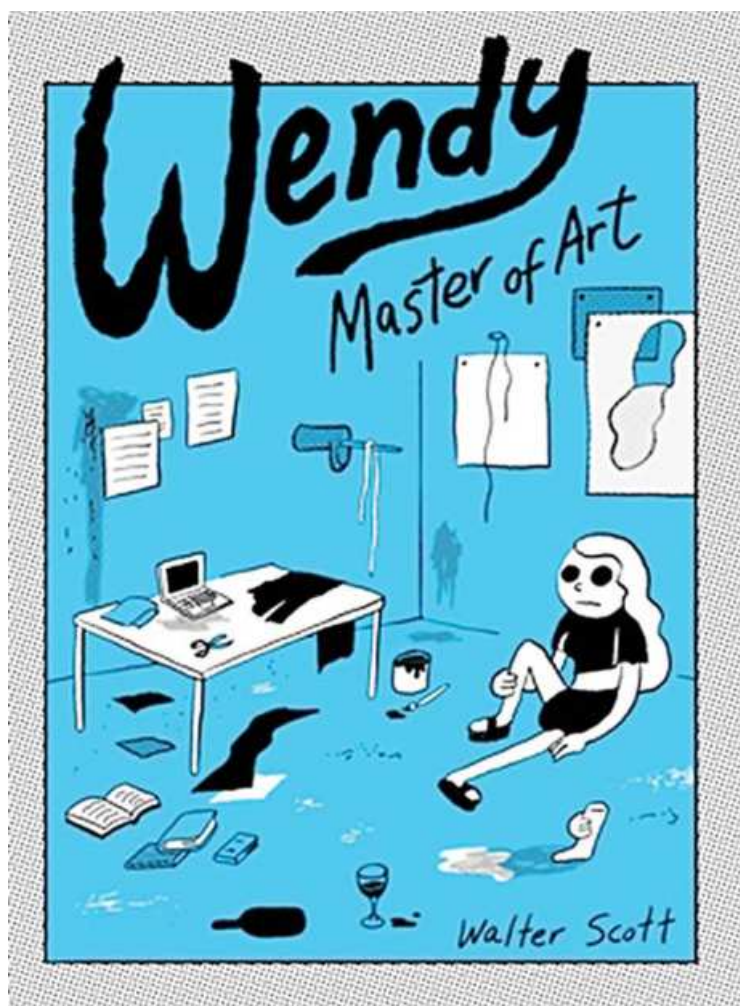
The life of the artist in graduate school

ISRAR HASAN

No one said earning a Masters in Fine Arts (MFA) would be easy. After all, art is anything but a linear process of creation. It zigzags through tumultuous periods of unease, delicate uncertainties, and perpetual anxieties, along with quite a mouthful of self-induced negativity. Wendy, the titular character of *Wendy, Master of Art* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2020), remains its most vivid personification in both content and art work.

The *Wendy* series chronicles the ups and downs of an emerging female artist, and *Wendy, Master of Art* is the third book, which sees our heroine going to art school at the fictional University of Hell. Drawn and written by interdisciplinary artist Walter K Scott, the graphic novel is semi-autobiographical, borrowing elements from Scott's experiences of completing his own MFA.

We see Wendy going to a graduate school set in the fictional town of Hell, Ontario. Wendy is chosen amongst an elite few to attend a prestigious degree with a select number of students. What follows is Wendy's trysts with fellow artists, falling-out with old friends, dabbling in a relationship with someone already in a polyamorous relationship, mild substance abuse, existentialism, and questioning of life choices. In what seems like a mouthful, the graphic novel, at 276 pages, is the largest and most playful in Scott's series, with new and old char-



acters juggling their space and characterizations in a streamlined sequence, which allows the reader to understand the nuances of their relationship to the protagonist.

The book gives the reader an all-encompassing look at Wendy's

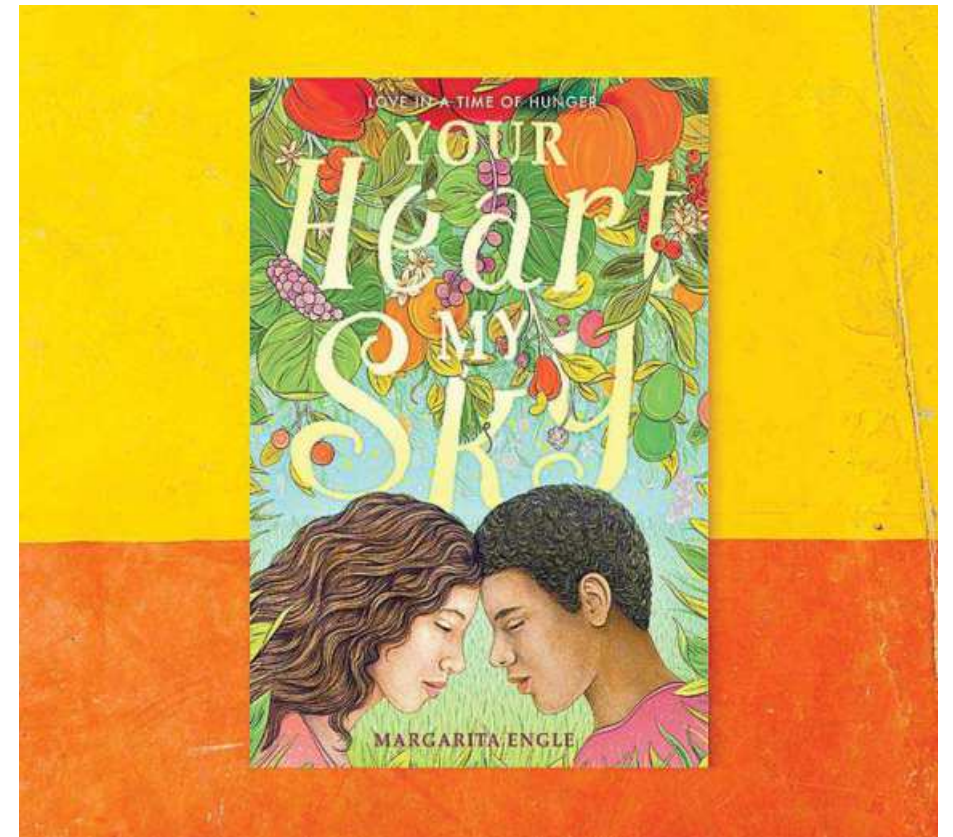
struggle in art school through her thesis project, which she describes as "teasing out the conundrum of autobiography through some kind of writing AND drawing essay." Apprehensive about life and job prospects, the book offers a fascinating portal into the world

of art at the graduate school level, as rebellious students try to make a name for themselves and push the boundaries of "art". Not to forget, there are tender moments in which students and teachers talk about the relationship between art and Lacan.

What is perhaps the most beguiling aspect of the graphic novel is the authorial voice and artistic synergy. Drawn in shades and lines of black and white, the artwork is simplistic, with ink blot eyes, gaping mouths, and distilled facial expression—all of which add different layers of comical experiences. The artwork is funny and touching at the same time. It follows a trail of command that alternates between rhythmic emotion and outright craziness.

Acutely engaging and thoroughly funny, the book can be relatable for many, but especially for those who are still in university and transitioning to choices pertaining to "adulting" or graduate school. Whether you are an artist or not, the graphic novel holds the potential to carve a special place in your heart due to its endearingly honest storytelling. In all the struggles Wendy faces, you find an image of yourself and an extension of the gentleness of the comic which universalises our experiences.

Israr Hasan is a research assistant at BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health.



BOOK REVIEW: YA FICTION

A timely YA novel-in-verse about the 1990s Cuban "Special Period"

SHEHRIN HOSSAIN

Early in July of this year, thousands of Cubans took to the streets, pushed over the course of the pandemic to a breaking point by a persistent, two-year-long shortage of medicine and—most importantly—food. Cuban protesters marched and shouted for an end to the Communist regime, which has lasted over six decades. To many of the older protesters, one of the worst possible outcomes of this continuing scarcity might be a repeat of the *período especial en tiempos de paz*, the Cuban "special period in times of peace," which had lasted from 1991 to 2000.

This Special Period is the centerpiece around which Cuban-American Margarita Engle's verse-novel *Your Heart, My Sky* (Simon & Schuster, 2021) revolves. It's the summer of 1991, and Cuba is facing a crisis of widespread food shortages and poverty. The protagonists are starving teenagers Liana and Amado, who inhabit the picturesque town of Trinidad, alienated from the capital Havana where, somewhat ridiculously, the 1991 Pan-American Games are being hosted. While the tourists attracted by the Games are feasted like kings, common Cubans are restricted to rations which are meagre at best and imaginary at worst. Furthermore, they are, inconceivably, prohibited from farming their own land or even leaving the country. The average Cuban family is, therefore, left with a few bleak choices: continue to starve, risk imprisonment for illegally growing their own food, or become one of the thousands of *balseros*, refugees fleeing on self-constructed rafts to the East Coast of America. Castro's government insists that all this is merely part of a "special period" during which Cubans must gather all their nationalistic pride and make the sacrifices required to sustain the regime.

At the start of the story, Liana and Amado are strangers, but both are guilty of being truant from *la escuela al campo*, the "voluntary" farm labour program sanctioned by the government for teenagers all over Cuba. The two teenagers are brought together when a "singing dog"

befriended by Liana begins to play the role of a mythical matchmaker. Accompanied by their canine companion and their ever-present hunger, the two roam all over town in search of sustenance. They slowly fall in love even as they search for uncanny, indispensable sources of protein.

Although this plot moves in fits, and falls short of being wholly satisfying, it nevertheless depicts the halting uncertainty of being a Cuban during the Special Period, and in turn, reflects the impeded development of Cuba itself, left in the lurch after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and weighed down further by a brutal American trade embargo (which persists to this day). The "singing dog," fashioned on a breed of legendary, fox-like Cuban canines of old, brings a thoughtful, albeit underdeveloped, touch of magical realism.

What makes *Your Heart, My Sky* such a special novel is its author's use of free verse. Be it the absurdity of state-sanctioned starvation or the cruelty of forced farm labour (being absent from which bars the teenagers from future professional and academic opportunities), the altering cadences of Engle's free-verse poetry do it justice. When read out loud—as all verse should be—Engle's efforts to spotlight the story of Cuba's ongoing travails assume a nobility not easily felt in the unimaginative conventions of mainstream young adult novels in prose.

In *Your Heart, My Sky*, as in many other of her novels written for young readers, Engle makes accessible an important part of Cuba's history that is, in many ways, repeating itself. She situates the soft splendour of adolescent love right beside gnawing hunger in two growing bodies. And in doing so, she succeeds in relaying the struggle of a people who are still, decades later, trying to find something to eat.

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BOOK NEWS

Join our reading challenge with Bookcentric!

STAR BOOKS DESK

Daily Star Books is excited to be teaming up with Dhaka's Bookcentric library for their monthly reading challenge, which encourages readers to read books following each month's theme and write their own book reviews. Starting from August, reader reviews stand a chance to be published online on *The Daily Star*.

This month's theme is "nautical books", and Bookcentric recommends titles spanning fantasy (*Life of Pi*) to historical fiction (Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy) to mythology (*A Thousand Ships*) and more. Follow @bookcentricbd and @thedailystarbooks on Instagram for more information,



PHOTO: BOOKCENTRIC and tag us in your book review posts on social media using the hashtag, #bookcentric2021readingchallenge.