

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Tanveer Anoy explores gender roles and identities in his second novel, 'Duradhay'

MAISHA SYEDA

Tanveer Anoy's second novel, *Duradhay* (Anandam, 2021), felt like a punch to my stomach; a wake up call, to be more precise. It seemed to offer wiper-blade clarity to all those subtle and stark nuances of uncertainty that a privileged, millennial, cisgender person like me could have a derivative idea of but would never truly fathom of their gravity. Am I qualified to write this review? I don't know if that is for me to decide, but I feel the need to mention that I could only have written this article from the perspective of an ally, as someone who wants to know, learn, and expand their understanding of people and society as a whole, without accommodating or unknowingly adhering to the lines that determine or discriminate.

The meaning of 'duradhay', the narrator-protagonist mentions, is something one cannot study or assess—it's the only word they have truly ever resonated with. Sixteen-year-old Tonim struggles with the reality of being born as a boy, in a family that struggles to understand why "he" dresses up like a girl and calls himself Tonima. The story opens with Tonim having attempted to take their own life, being rushed to the hospital, and being blushed by their financially struggling family for wasting money on hospital bills. Eventually, as school friends mock and abuse Tonim, and as parents demand an explanation for this "drama", Tonim reveals, through stream-of-consciousness monologues, that they feel more like a girl.

For us Bangla speakers, pronouns are figures of speech that we learn fleetingly in school; their application seldom goes beyond ticking a box on official documents and emails. Ironically, it is because Bangla has no distinctive gendered pronouns that I found it so overwhelming to explore, in limited words, the massive significance of Tonim having dual identities.

But Tonim's struggles throughout the book go beyond issues of gendered pronouns, and they are two-fold: the young protagonist deals with the characteristic troubles of adolescence, like being misunderstood by family, being bullied at school, and confronting innocent, often conflicting teenage emotions; on the other hand, their predicaments are more complex



COVER ILLUSTRATION: ANKUR SINHA, DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

and up against formidable foes: centuries of antiquated, unforgiving and conformist social norms. Tonim is sent to a militantly religious "rehab" to get "fixed", from which they are rescued only to be sexually abused by their saviour. Running away from these very visceral dangers, Tonim vacillates between remaining the "effeminate" boy that everyone demands they are, and embracing their alter, Tonima, in whose persona they feel more at home.

Truth be told, the beautiful cover art was what first drew me to this book. Artist Ankur Sinha does an excellent job in portraying the rich and complex world of a discovering teenager—a person perched, ornamented with flowers and birds—seemingly all awaiting to be explored.

The story, too, works as an extension of this elaborate microcosm in representing the

protagonist's internal world. The author paces the succession of events leading up to their culmination in a way that makes sense in a short novel; the brevity allows the reader to internalise its full effect. And although the contents of the story are distressing, the quietude of their tone ascertains a softer blow to those watching.

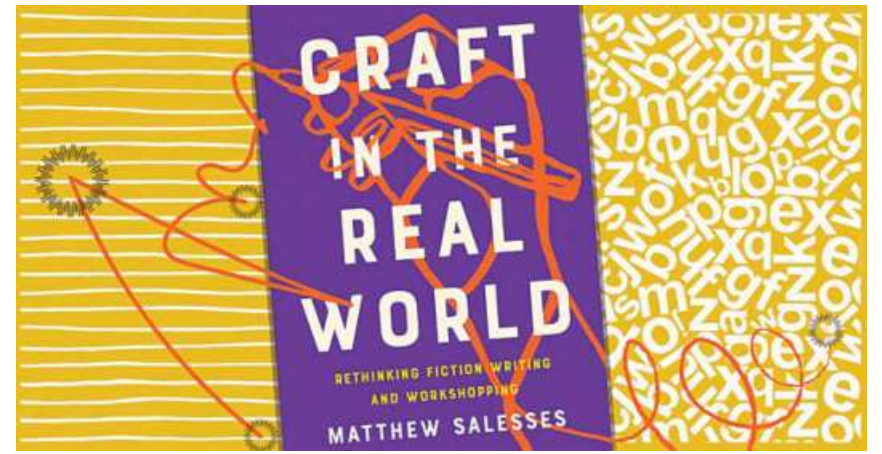
Fair warning for the reader, though: this novel deals with graphic details of suicide, rape, and physical and psychological abuse; on various occasions, I needed to put the book down and grapple with the impact of what I had just read. But the purpose of these details transcends their need to flesh out a character. They will pull you down from the cloud of blissful ignorance and shake you into seeing the reality of an insular society.

The one thing that hindered the story from reaching its full potential, in my opinion, was the

language. Tonim's vocabulary is quite complex, enough to be unconvincing as coming from a 10th grader, especially when you compare it with the simple, almost pedestrian language of his parents and peers. There is no clear reason given as to what would constitute this almost academic diction apart from a few fleeting references that the protagonist likes to read. Perhaps the writer tried to use language as a foil, to make Tonim's character seem more complex and thoughtful compared to others. But while the author uses stream-of-consciousness to great effect in reflecting Tonim's mind, their choice of words in Tonim's speech feels jarring. This becomes especially complicated in context of the seriousness of the themes explored in the book—we want this narrator to feel real and reliable, and the language seems to take away from this achievement. Some events in the plot, similarly, needed more expounding. The shift from Tonim's narration in the past to the present feels quite abrupt and leaves the reader asking for more context. These minor factors notwithstanding, Tonim's world as portrayed in the novel is powerful, vibrant, and telling.

Reading *Duradhay*, I realised that Tanveer Anoy's activism, and the vocalisation of issues including identity crises, assigned gender roles, sexual abuse, and trauma, has given floor to some potentially defining discourse for our community. This can lead to some difficult but necessary conversations in homes that are as indifferent and as severe as Tonim's. We see similar narratives play out in countless Western YA novels, but how often do we see them in conservative, sweep-things-under-the-rug South Asian cultures? I get asked a lot why I decided to come back to Bangladesh after I spent all that time abroad. The only answer that I have is that I see this country on the brink of a revolution. It has been buzzing with the noise of an ushering change, and I didn't want to miss it when it happened. For me, *Duradhay* is a testament to that burgeoning change.

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DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Demystifying the craft of writing

ISHRAT JAHAN

Storytelling is a space in which, as writers and readers, we experience the ways of how we know the world and interact with it. Korean-born American writer, Mathew Salesses, offers a thoughtful insight into the backstage of this space. He moves beyond the place where we perform or experience writing as an artform and offers us a look at the mechanics of writing as a craft. His analysis is in-depth and the questions he poses are not surprising, yet it feels as though one hasn't thought about them as deeply before.

Craft in the Real World (Catapult Books, 2021) questions the ways in the institutions and systems that generate and uphold current models of writing as a craft, mirror the power dynamics of a world that is centered around the white, cis-hetero male. As a whole, the book is a reflective guide for writers who are trying to navigate institutional spaces that have not been built with them in mind. The central themes it engages with are the relationship of culture (and a writer's positionality within culture/s) with craft, its audience, and the ways in which power dynamics manifest in creative writing and their workshop models.

Salesses emphasizes throughout the book that craft is not just an individual act or experience of writing, but it is 'the history of which kind of stories have typically held power—and for whom—so it is also the history of which stories have typically been omitted.' He highlights that 'craft is a set of expectations' that are shaped by institutional models of workshop, readings, awards, etc., and shape the threshold through which we define which stories matter and which don't.

The book is divided in two parts; the first looks into questioning and bringing out the need to redefine craft terms of plot, conflict, vulnerability, character and setting, among others. Salesses highlights that in institutional or workshop spaces, these devices are not recognized as being rooted in the writer's sociocultural context, lived experiences, and realities. For instance, the famous axioms created

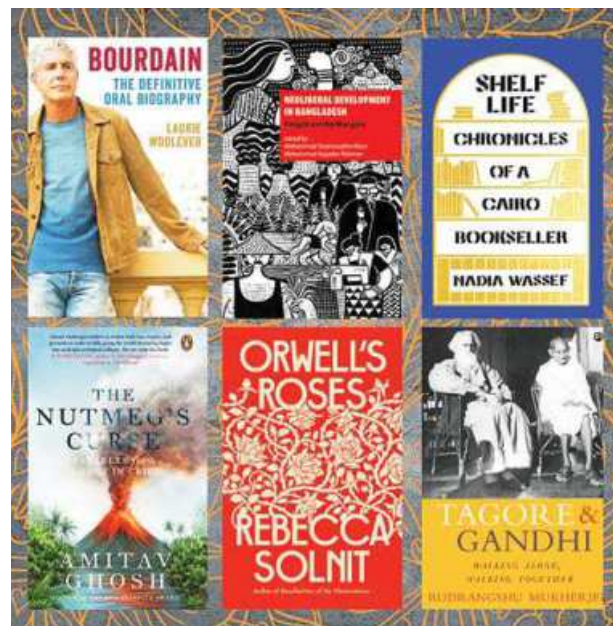
in workshops of "show don't tell", "kill your darlings", and "write what you know" have become universal and add to further marginalising the ways in other cultures of storytelling where these may not apply. Salesses reminds us that it's not enough to push back against the myopia of these axioms, but also to understand the context in which they are rooted.

The second half of the book critically reflects on the traditional workshop models used in American MFA programs. These writing models and workshops frequently build the idea for minority writers or students of creative writing that their writing only matters if they favour what is striking (about their work, by extension their experiences) to the dominant point of view of their workshops, which, Salesses points out, are white and cisgender. "It is effectively a kind of colonization, to assume that we all write for the same audience or that we should do so if we want our fiction to sell," he says.

While the book talks about the ways in which stories are judged or criticised based on cultural biases/expectations of what a "good" story should be, a more nuanced deep-dive into how Western forms of storytelling became dominant and the ways in which other forms of storytelling continue to be marginalised, despite the progress in recognising diverse voices in other spheres, would have been more helpful in identifying where the power manifests and needs to be dismantled.

Whether one is a writer in the middle of navigating the institutions Salesses critically looks at or is an avid reader and lover of the craft, this book has much to offer. It is not simply a reminder that writing is not an artform isolated from the influences of the disparities and inequalities of our daily lives, but it also demystifies the creative writing processes and points to the ways in which gatekeeping continues to occur.

Ishrat Jahan is an early stage researcher who writes in her free time. You can follow her on Twitter @jahan1620.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

THE SHELF

New in nonfiction this month

STAR BOOKS DESK

Amitav Ghosh traces back to the lineage of nutmegs originating in the Banda Islands to argue how colonisation deeply influences the geopolitics even in the contemporary world, a violent phenomenon that has led to natural disasters linked to climate change.

Rudrangshu Mukherjee explores the friendship that formed between Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi during a tumultuous time, the disparity in their writing, and the ideologies that united them.

Rebecca Solnit takes a closer look at the exploitative rose industry in Columbia and through George Orwell's great fascination with gardening, presents a vivid portrayal of Stalinism, the Spanish Civil War, colonialism, and imperialism.

Read about these and more in this article online—on The Daily Star's website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

Numair Atif Chowdhury takes us, once more, through the cartography of a homeland

In this monthly series, we review short stories that deserve to be rediscovered and appreciated.

SARAH ANJUM BARI

The version of Bangladesh we received in *Babu Bangladesh* (2019) was astonishing. Not because we didn't recognise the violence, the resilience and the political cross wiring making up the story of this country recounted in the novel, but because watching these seemingly banal details of our existence elevated to the ranks of magic realism had not been offered through literature in a long time. Not in the presence of a global audience, at least. As mind bending as Numair Atif Chowdhury's way with language was, winding and soaring and crawling through the page to bring to life a nation miraged onto a man, the more precious treat was to realise that the images, the textures, and the anecdotes of our own childhoods can rival those of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Colombia or Roberto Bolaño's Chile as ingredients in the process of myth-making.

The novel, Chowdhury's portrait of his country, felt like tasting alchemy, and from that bubbling cauldron the author offers us a small dose of its capital city in his Short Story, "Taxi Wallah". It spearheads *Taxi Wallah and Other Stories* (2021). HarperCollins' recently released collection of older, critically acclaimed short fiction by Numair Atif Chowdhury, including "Rabia", "Chokra", and others.

In "Taxi Wallah", as in his novel, Chowdhury is interested in the anthropological filtered through the lens of the spatial—in how spaces and lives draw energy from each other and how their exchange shapes demarcations in class, in experiences and temperaments. But while *Babu Bangladesh* so cleverly wrought a mirage of Bangladesh, using fragment upon fragment tied loosely together by a distanced and overbearing narrator, "Taxi Wallah" takes a more direct approach. We hop into a taxi at the front gates of Dhaka's international airport and we sit in the backseat of its driver's mind as he takes a just-arrived foreigner across the city to Purbani Hotel.

Dhaka as we know it, and as some of us—foreigners especially—would never know it, comes alive. Shadows and voices of other spectators muffling the pirated films shown in theatres. Not men and women but "expressionless skin and bone" sitting outside the Masjid. *Bostis* with bloated bellies, drunken labourers, abused third and fourth wives. In Gulshan the air stiffens with traffic and new wealth. In Banani it throws a newly arrived villager into panic. Mohakhali, where our taxi driver lives, carries the stench of fryers from *mishti* stalls, cassette tape music wafting in the air. Balloon *wallahs*, *paan wallahs*,

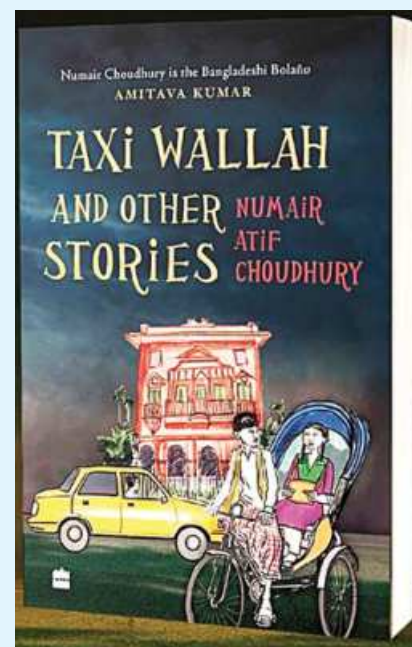


PHOTO: HARPERCOLLINS INDIA

amra wallahs all go unnoticed by his passenger who has flown in this time to "spare" Dhaka some time.

There is nothing new in discovering a city through its less glamorous underbelly. What Numair Atif Chowdhury does here, in the way that only he can, is map the cross currents

and undercurrents buzzing through the city onto a compact, visual whole that we can absorb an inch at a time and all at once. It is Dhaka collaged onto a mood board.

He evokes, also, the texture and flavour of moving through life in the city, which feels so often like sludging through a lake bogged and sprinkled with the detritus of overcrowded, discriminate inequality. As our taxi wallah's mother says of his eyes, life in Dhaka can often be like "dirty water: hiding the insides, not letting light through".

What redeems it? The same precociousness that supported the heft of a novel like *Babu Bangladesh*, that inspired its author to work on a single novel for 15 long years. The precociousness of a street child who shoots a *rajanigandha* against the glass panes of the speeding taxi, in rage, afraid but fragrant with resilience. "Like anyone who has held a newborn and let its weight sink into their arms," the taxi wallah reminds us, "[we] know there must be a way out of what we are doing".

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