



BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Of noodles and NOSTALGIA

Japanese Breakfast releases memoir on caring for an ailing mother

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MEHRUL BARI

“Ever since my mom died, I cry in H Mart”, reads the stark opening line in Michelle Zauner’s 2021 memoir, *Crying in H Mart* (Knopf), starting the same as in her preceding *The New Yorker* essay. Tellingly, the next line differs. *The New Yorker* piece reads: “For those of you who don’t know, H Mart is a supermarket chain that specialises in Asian food.” Gone are the over-explanation that dominates the foreigner’s world, the feeling sorry, as Zauner puts it, for even existing, for taking up space in someone else’s world.

Born to a Korean mother and American father, singer-songwriter Michelle Zauner, or Japanese Breakfast, has had to, from the very start, don numerous and often self-limiting identities—ever one and not the other. In *Crying in H Mart*, Zauner painstakingly details not only this fraught personal journey, but the severe complications added to it by the untimely losing of her mother, Chongmi, to cancer.

It would be a shame, though, to boil it down to just race relations. What the book exhibits often is the same quality that exudes much of Japanese Breakfast’s music. Zauner has that uncanny ability for crafting things that feel like they’ve always existed. In her finest songs, like “Everybody Wants to Love You” and especially 2021’s “Be Sweet”, the words and melodies alike burst with a fond familiarity.

About her father, a glaring omission of a parental figure, she writes: “Over time our conversations became a lot like explaining a movie to someone who has walked in on the last thirty minutes.” In the immediate aftermath of Chongmi’s passing, she notes, crammed between an assemblage of strangers: “It felt like the world had divided into two different types of people, those who had felt pain and those who had yet to.”

Crying in H Mart is perhaps at its most captivating when its writer veers straight into an under-observed territory of grief—the confused feelings of ownership. “I could not even cry in his presence”, she writes of her father, “for fear he would take the moment over, pit his grief against mine in a competition of who loved her more, and who had more to lose.” The introduction of her mother’s friend Kye, a fellow middle-aged Korean-American resident, is where the memoir shifts into second gear. The woman not only moves into their home, but soon takes up all the waking hours of the heavily-sedated Chongmi, communicating with her exclusively in Korean, while being standoffish to the other two, closer, parties of the house. Kye’s bond with the ailing woman, one which no doubt reminds the latter of the home she left behind, cuts in on Zauner’s plans to be there in every possible moment for her mother. This jealousy is so cruel, so petty, and so very understandable, that it’s worth almost another book dedicated to it.

One dimension I found the book lacking in, however, was the incomplete picture the writer leaves of her adolescence. There are

several mentions of Zauner being difficult and harsh as a teen, but they are all instances of telling rather than showing. Given the nature, and focus of the book, Chongmi receives the full biography treatment, which makes her out to be a personality capable of great love and great cruelty, whereas the narrator’s shortcomings, which are said to have scarred her parents, feel largely insignificant and easily forgivable. It doesn’t help when her mother not only gets violent but takes a stern stand against her aspirations as a musician, against pursuing a dream that would ultimately make her, well, the very reason I read this book.

It is a testament to Zauner’s writing ability, though, that Chongmi is never a hateable figure. In her daughter’s limning, Chongmi is life incarnate. And not to mention love. “Mommy is the only one who ever truly love you”, she had told her daughter numerous times, a line that reverberates all throughout the memoir. Sure, Michelle makes it through journeys of her own, she sticks the landing and is a beloved indie musician now, but this book really isn’t about her, sometimes to its detriment. What we do have in this book is what nonfiction excels at—the messy and the real and the exciting average.

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DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

OPINION

I can’t finish reading books. Should I stop trying?

HASSAN MUNHAMANNA

I struggle to finish books. Well, one can even say I struggle to read, if you think a good reader is someone who finishes the books they pick up.

It’s been this way for a number of years now. Back when I was 12 or 13, I used to be a vigorous reader. I’d read through line after line with ease, mostly because this was one of the only ways to pass time in a household without a satellite connection.

I now look back and wish this habit stayed, though I know the reasons behind why it didn’t. For me to sustain my prodigious readership, I needed an ecosystem of friends who read, whom I could talk to about all things reading. But back then, none of my friends did. They were into cartoons, wrestling, games, sports IRL—all of which I loved, all of which eventually pulled me away from reading. It just wasn’t rewarding enough anymore.

Fast forward a couple of years. At the twilight of my teenhood, I suddenly started harbouring this urge to be wise. Maybe everything else grew tiresome; maybe I had finally found friends who read and felt left out for losing it for myself; maybe life had beaten me down so bad that I needed some of that paperback goodness to pull me back up—but I just knew reading could save me. This wasn’t to be, of course. But hey, at least I wanted to give it a shot.

From here up to midway through university, I tried really hard to go back to my glory days of straight-up devouring books. My interests by now had diversified to include everything from anthropology to philosophical treatises on comedy as a literary form, but while starting my books was always an exciting undertaking, ending them was becoming a headache.



No, for real. Because there’s all this pressure on a reader to not put a book away till the last word has been read, even though we may not be aware of it. Somewhat paradoxically, the internet is full of memes on unread books that collect dust on the shelves, or on impulse buying titles while being fully aware that they’ll never be read, which tells you that the phenomenon of half-reading isn’t as rare as one might think.

And so, rather than trying to build myself up as the ideal reader, I simply came to terms with my reading personality over the next couple of years.

Long story short (which is also how I prefer my fiction), if you see me with a book in hand, or see a quote or a screenshot of a page posted on my socials, don’t ask me what the ending holds, or ask me to summarise the book in its entirety. But if you want to know what the introduction or the first chapter is all about, count on me to be your guy.

While I have no shame admitting or even championing this way of reading, I’m not unaware that most books are meant to be read whole if one is to extract its essence to the fullest. But as someone with an attention deficit—who has a knack for zeroing in on that one word on page seven of a book on psychoanalysis, downloading a PDF on it, and then proceeding to not finish it as well—I think it’s okay for me to be this way, rather than be too hard on myself for not reading the way society wants me to.

I mean, if you think about it, if it’s a choice between not reading at all or reading 30 introductions per year, I think the answer is pretty simple, no?

Hassan Munhamanna is the author of 20 unpublished novels, four of which have two chapters written down, while the rest are in his head. He is a sub-editor at The Daily Star’s City Desk.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

From the minarets, all their dark secrets revealed

NOUSHIN NURI

Certain identities can strip people of their right to identify as humans. These people find their existence undesired, their rights, freedom, choices unguarded. Nadeem Aslam’s *The Golden Legend* (Penguin Books India, 2017) can turn its readers into the guardian angels of these marginalised people to shield and sustain their stories long after one has put the book down.

The novel is set in Zamana, a fictional city in Pakistan, where someone has started broadcasting dark, secret sins of people from the minarets of the city’s mosques. Lily, a Christian taxi driver, and his daughter, Helen, pay the price of being members of a religious minority under Pakistan’s blasphemy law, which can inflict years of sentencing or even death for a sin as small as drinking from a Muslim’s utensils. Lily’s employer, Nargis, is an architect who is being threatened by a military intelligence officer to pardon the killer of her recently murdered husband. Through the lives of these characters, Nadeem Aslam makes vivid the utilitarian misuse of religion, legal endorsement of communalism, anti-patriotic greed of political forces, and what it means to live and love under these circumstances.

The story takes place in diversely picturesque backdrops: a dense neighbourhood named Badami Bagh, a spacious study with cabins modelled after the



Hagia Sophia and the Great Mosque of Cordoba, a glass flower museum, a home in a mosque on a secluded island, and the heavily militarised valleys of Kashmir. Aslam knits the words in his books with a rare intricacy and perfection. Like all of his previous work, this fifth and latest novel embodies the craftsmanship that casts a spell on the reader from the very first page. His pacing is fast enough to retain our attention yet slow enough to inject the author’s reflections on political impunity and

religious fanaticism in contemporary Pakistan.

Aslam puts the marginalised Christian community at the heart of the story to reveal the religious discrimination that never makes it to newspapers. Readers meet a Kashmiri character, too, whose past reveals heart-wrenching accounts of how homes grew empty and mass graves started filling up in the world’s most densely militarised zone. Shrieks from interrogation cells reverberate through the pages and

martyrs of the Mutineer Movement of 1857 haunt them with the traumatic afflictions of history. Trigger warning for readers—the novel has its fair share of violence.

This is balanced beautifully as Aslam drops little nuggets of trivia throughout the book. Riddles from the Bible mirror the questions eating away at a character’s heart; the long journey that poet Wamaq Saleem made to reach his beloved figuratively alludes to the journey of lovers in the book. Aslam uses such elements to foreshadow events to come and thus conjures his own, unique version of pathetic fallacy.

The Golden Legend contains within itself another book—*That They Might Know Each Other*—written by Nargis’s father-in-law. While *The Golden Legend* is rife with religious divide, extracts from *That They Might Know Each Other*, placed in different parts of the book, contain wholesome stories of unity from across the globe. But every page of this book gets shredded. Though its tattered pieces eventually coalesce to symbolise hope, Aslam’s book, *The Golden Legend*, remains far from it. It is not a story about hope. It is the chronogram of people left battered by the blows of an ultra-religious and politicised narrative.

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