

COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Of music, migration, Mao Zedong’s China, and more

On the cusp of the Cultural Revolution, Dawn, an aspiring violinist, meets and makes a mark in the life of Momo, an engineer, introducing him to the beauty of classical music and teaching him how to play the violin.

JAHIN KAISSAR

Spanning nearly three decades and moving back and forth between Communist China and the United States, Linda Rui Feng’s debut novel, *Swimming Back to Trout River* (Simon & Schuster, 2021), follows a family fractured by physical and emotional distance.

The story begins in 1981 as 5-year-old Junie is sent to live with her paternal grandparents in their home in Trout River, a small village in China. Her father, Momo, recently relocated to the US to pursue his graduate degree, and her mother, Cassia, is due to follow. Years later, Junie receives a letter from her father, promising to bring her to the US by her 12th birthday. Born with congenital amputation of legs below her knees, Junie is determined to stay with her beloved grandparents in the peaceful countryside, vowing to swim back to Trout River if they send her away. Whisking the reader back in time, the narrative then shifts its focus to the intertwined lives of Momo, Cassia, and Momo’s former friend, Dawn. It portrays the various hardships that these three characters face during and after China’s Cultural Revolution—in China, life under Mao Zedong’s rule is filled with violence and oppression. The characters are consequently forced to bear the compounding weight of historical alongside personal tragedies, such as deferred ambitions, deaths of loved ones, postpartum

depression after stillbirth, and more.

At the heart of Feng’s novel lies the Chinese concept of *yuanfen*, a condition that “acknowledges some unknowability in the workings of the universe, and it implies that there is an invisible mesh that loosely binds people and circumstances”; it draws the characters together, separates them, and reunites them in unexpected ways. Music is another thread that wordlessly guides, inspires, and connects the characters of the story. On the cusp of the Cultural Revolution, Dawn, an aspiring violinist, meets and makes a mark in the life of Momo, an engineer, introducing him to the beauty of classical music and teaching him how to play the violin. Even after they go their separate ways, music plays a prominent role in their lives, ultimately causing their stories to overlap once again. The novel, too, like a good arrangement of classical music, gradually gathers pace and rhythm as it introduces and elucidates themes of love, loss, grief, and resilience.

With lyrical clarity and keen insight, Feng movingly explores what it means to be a Chinese immigrant in the US during the 1980s. In China, Dawn had to give up playing the violin because classical music was considered counter-revolutionary. In her adopted country, however, her dreams and desires suddenly become tangible and achievable. This kind of freedom provides each character with a sense of purpose and hope. Momo finds himself making

new friends and focusing on his graduate studies as he eagerly waits for his family to reunite; Cassia learns to become independent as she wrestles with the ghosts from her past; and Dawn follows her dreams of becoming a successful composer as she grapples with her growing sense of otherness. Yet, Feng makes it evident in her book that no matter how hopeful the situation, freedom comes at a price. The characters have to give up what it hurts most to lose—family ties and their sense of rootedness.

The beauty of *Swimming Back to Trout River* rests in the depth of its unforgettable characters; they are flawed, complex, and multilayered. Their journeys, full of moments both beautiful and tragic, are bound to leave footprints across the reader’s heart. The only flaw is perhaps the lack of focus on Junie’s perspective. The novel begins and ends with Junie, but it is the stories of her parents and Dawn that lend the most emotional drama. Although this minor quibble does not detract from the book’s powerful achievements, some extra flesh would have strengthened the overall narrative, because the reader longs for more of the little girl’s story.

Jahin Kaiissar is a contributor. Reach her at jahinkaiissar@gmail.com.

BOOK NEWS

## UPL launches Samuel Jaffe’s book on US grassroots activism in the Bangladesh Liberation War

MAISHA SYEDA

In a live YouTube broadcast, The University Press Limited (UPL) launched their book, *An Internal Matter: The U.S., Grassroots Activism and the Creation of Bangladesh*, written by Samuel Jaffe, at 7 PM on Saturday, January 15, 2022.

An independent scholar based in New Zealand, Jaffe has a dual MA/MSc in International and World History from Columbia University and the London School of Economics, where his research interests focus on the international responses to Bangladesh’s Liberation War. An *Internal Matter* draws upon his graduate research on archival records, interviews, and activities of pro-Bangladesh grassroots organisations who advocated for the country’s independence in 1971. Contrary to the common focus on diplomatic figures, Jaffe’s narrative of the war highlights the contribution of ordinary people—from Dhaka and Manpura to those based in the United States and in the congress—who challenged the Nixon administration’s pro-Pakistan stance.

In her opening remarks, Mahruck Mohiuddin stated that the publication of Jaffe’s book aids UPL’s attempt to bring back “a fresh start for many accounts of the Liberation War that had been lost or gone out of print for some time”.

A number of notable panelists graced the book launch—Dr Shamsul Bari, former Director of the United Nations (UNHCR); Katherine Dunham, Adjunct Associate Professor of Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP); Abul Hasan Chowdhury, former State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh; Dr A Quayyum Khan, freedom fighter and former Managing Director of Bureau Veritas Bangladesh; Julian Francis, Independent Development Consultant; and independent scholar and the author of the book himself, Samuel Jaffe, along with UPL Managing Director Mahruck Mohiuddin.

Jon Rohde, Senior Low N Scholar of Global Health and Population at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, also made an appearance.

Author Samuel Jaffe, while introducing his book, said, “First and foremost, it is a story about an injustice and ordinary people responding to an injustice, which is the heartless and callous response of the United States to the plight of Bangladesh in 1971—the Nixon administration’s response”.

Dr Shamsul Bari remarked that the birth of Bangladesh is unique in world history in many ways. “One particular feature of that birth”, he stated, “is that we were the first colonial country to be born after World War II by exercising our collective human rights”.

“I had the opportunity to be a part of that activism. Samuel Jaffe has drawn an authentic picture of those activities”, Dr Bari said.

An *Internal Matter: The U.S., Grassroots Activism and the Creation of Bangladesh* can be bought from the UPL showroom, located in Farmgate, at 850.00 BDT (\$25.00).

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, and a graduate of English Literature and Writing. She is an intern at Daily Star Books.

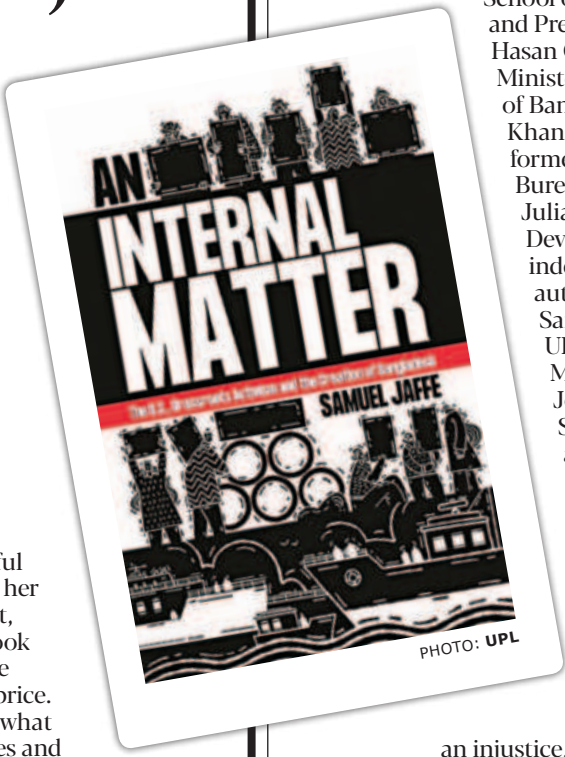


PHOTO: UPL

OPINION

# Why you should give your books a break

Neil Gaiman first came up with the idea for *The Graveyard Book* in 1985. It would be another 23 years before the novel would be published. He once remarked that when he developed the initial concept, he didn’t think he was yet the writer he needed to be to do the story justice.

AAQIB HASIB

A week or two ago, I came across an article by Hassan Munhamanna on Daily Star Books in which he talked about his struggles with reading books in their entirety. While I’m sure many readers experience this at some point in their lives, what concerns me is the long-term impression it may have on them—more often than not, this supposed failure makes readers assume that the book they are unable to finish is either not suited to their taste or not interesting enough to keep their attention.

I think there’s more to this phenomenon than meets the eye.

Similar to a writer’s block, readers too experience a reading slump at some point in their lives. You get into the habit of reading 20 books a year and then all of a sudden, you’re struggling to get past the first 50 pages of a novel. It could even be that you’re crippled with guilt or apprehension to even look at a book, let alone pick it up and read a few pages. If you’re experiencing this with some books but not others, then it might just be that you’re not ready for the particular book in question.



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Our reading habits and tastes change as we get older. Some of us hated reading classic literature when we were kids, but then grew up to fall in love with it. Even throughout our adulthood, we tend to evolve as readers; reading a variety of books with different writing styles and genres can help broaden our horizons and allow

us to enjoy books we were previously not fans of.

On top of that, our moods and mental states, along with the experiences we are having at any particular time, also play a factor in determining what kind of books we enjoy.

One book that I struggled to finish

was *American Gods* (William Morrow, 2001) by Neil Gaiman, which may come as a surprise to those who know about my absolute love for the author. The love story started when I was about 16 years old and read *The Graveyard Book* (HarperCollins, 2008); I fell head over heels for his ability to set a scene, write compelling characters, and translate words into emotions that strike the reader’s heart.

I would devour his oeuvre over the next two years—comics, novels, short stories, children’s books, yet the one book that I could not seem to get past the first 100 pages of was *American Gods*.

The novel came across to me as rather boring. It jumped back and forth between different characters and scenes, and the large interlude sections felt pointless to me. The plot itself was rather slow.

Yet I kept coming back to it for eight years before I could finally finish it. During this time, I had grown an appreciation for history and mythology. More than that, I had learned to appreciate books that wouldn’t give me instant gratification in the first 10 chapters.

Similar to how writers often come

up with ideas that they cannot immediately write about with a certain level of maturity, readers, too, need to let some books sit. Gaiman himself first came up with the idea for *The Graveyard Book* in 1985. It would be another 23 years before the novel would be published. He once remarked that when he developed the initial concept, he didn’t think he was yet the writer he needed to be to do the story justice.

If you or someone you know is experiencing this with respect to reading a book, I suggest putting it back on the shelf temporarily; go and read something else. Switch it up between genres and styles until you’re enjoying the experience again. Or maybe even take a break from reading.

If there’s one thing I’d ask for you to take away from this article, it is to stop being hard on yourself for not being able to finish a book. Just because you were reading 20 books a year at one point, it doesn’t mean you need to be doing so now or even ever. After all, why should a hobby stress you out?

Aaqib Hasib will someday finish writing his book. But not today. Write to him at [aaqib.hasib@thedailystar.net](mailto:aaqib.hasib@thedailystar.net).