



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

OPINION

The dangerous game of Marlon James

Can genre fiction be great literature?

Authors of genre know exactly the Faustian pact they make when they enter the genre game: Your books will sell and make money, perhaps even get lucrative TV or film deals, but they will never be mentioned by your high school English teacher as required reading, graduate students will not pore over your career to write dissertations on meaning and truth that can be decoded from your work, and you will never be up for a Nobel prize.

ABAK HUSSAIN

Salman Rushdie often recalls that early on in his career, he realised that he could not write about India in “cool, Forsterian English” a la *A Passage to India*, because India was not cool, she was hot, and her story needed to be told in a new kind of hot, grimy, chaotic language.

This early confidence in this newly forged voice, made flesh and blood through the smart-mouth narrator Saleem Sinai, allowed him to put down on paper the piece of literary audacity that was *Midnight’s Children* (1981). If Rushdie back then knew how to write hot, today Marlon James—a self-professed Rushdie fan—turns the oven up a few degrees, and comes close to burning down the kitchen ... along with the paternalistic authority of the Anglo-American literary world in dictating what an English novel should look and sound and smell like.

James, like Rushdie, is a supremely skilled stylist of English prose in all its forms—and he is perfectly capable of writing in the straight and narrow, that is, if he wants to. But he doesn’t want to. This defiance, along with his hypnotic skill, blinding originality, and willingness to break every rule in the book makes him a force impossible to ignore.

With a Booker prize behind his back and two-thirds of the way into a fantasy trilogy somewhat superficially dubbed an “*African Game of Thrones*,” Marlon James is, right now, the hot one to watch in the game of novels.

Tear down this wall

When James won the 2015 Man Booker Prize for his third novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), he was on top of the world, and could have chosen to do just about anything next. Fresh off the Booker win, with all doors opening for him, he turned in a direction few could have predicted, except a handful of insiders who were already aware of James’s

childhood interests—high fantasy.

From a very traditionalist point of view, this looks like not just a mere thematic departure, but a breaking of the barrier between that which is somewhat smootily referred to as “literary fiction” or simply “literature,” and “genre fiction,” the latter understood to be belonging to a lower order of entertainment, i.e. thrillers, romances, horror, science fiction, fantasy, in other words, books written quickly to tell an absorbing story but written without much style or grace.

A piece of genre fiction has a clear and utilitarian purpose—you have that specific itch, for, say, a spy thriller, you purchase a Tom Clancy, digest it in the morning, forget it by evening, and even without a doctor’s prescription, the book can do no harm.

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Genre titans like George RR Martin, JK Rowling, and Dan Brown will have to cry into their truckloads of cash with the knowledge that the literary establishment will never see their work as great literature.

Or so went the narrative.

Recent years have seen a gradual erosion of this wall separating genre and lit fic. Writers like Yann Martel, Margaret Atwood, and Eleanor Catton, all Booker winners and therefore qualifying as writers of “literature,” have been at one time or other criticised as populists of a lesser order, or at best as slightly-elevated genre writers who play a delicate dance.

These criticisms have been losing their

power. After all, novels are meant to be read, pages are meant to be turned, so is it really so bad to be accessible and easily digestible? Catton, to be fair, is not “easy” (simply due to the size of her book), but her Booker-winner *The Luminaries* does, sort of, fall into the murder mystery-romance category.

Still, so far, unstable as the border between the two worlds may be, there has been a semblance of one. Marlon James is the next step to tearing it down—here I truly believe the novel is having a very special moment.

Unlike previous writers who flirted with the blurred lines, James’s transgression is more complete, and without apology. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019) and *Moon Witch, Spider King* (2022) are the first two books in James’s Dark Star trilogy. Here we have a sprawling fantasy epic set in Africa. There are vampires and river dragons and grass trolls and water nymphs and a long roster of creatures too bizarre to explain or visualise. But when is the story taking place? Is it pre-colonial Africa? Is it a parallel Africa that might have been if not for the colonial overlords cutting up the territory into irrational chunks? This is not clear.

He is playing a dangerous game: By tossing *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* and *Moon Witch, Spider King* at the literary establishment, and promising a third book in the pipeline, James seems to be saying to the establishment, to the same generous folks who once gave him the Booker and propelled him to the stratosphere: Go ahead and say this is not literature, I dare you.

Read the full version of this article on The Daily Star website and on Daily Star Books’ Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages.

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REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

No country for honest men in Shahidul Zahir’s “Woodcutter and Crows”

SUBRATA ROY

Prolific writer, novelist, and pioneer of postmodern fiction in Bangla literature, Shahidul Zahir, is known for the unique practice of magic realism in his works.

His short story “Woodcutter and Crows” is a good example which, while remaining firmly grounded in reality, manages to blend in mystical elements unique to life in Bengal.

The story, translated from Bangla by Layli Uddin and Mir Rifat Us Saleheen, was first published as part of a collection titled *Dumurkheko Manush O Onnano Golpo* (Shilpotoru Prokashoni, 1999).

The plot revolves around a woodcutter named Akalu and his wife Tepi, who lead simple lives in their village home of Baikuntapur in Sirajganj.

The central themes in the story are marriage, morality, and wealth. Throughout the story, the couple—who have a strong bond as they have nothing but each other in this world—consistently find themselves in unfortunate situations, as evil men in society take advantage of Akalu’s honest and naive demeanour to cheat and frame the man and wife.

Zahir uses crows as a symbol of magic realism, as found in local folklore, where animals serve as omens of luck both good and bad. The crows seem to bring bad luck to the couple, and wherever they go, the birds surely follow.

But it isn’t until the very end that things start to change for Akalu and Tepi when they realise that their fate is intertwined with that of the crows, thus allowing the true reason for their presence to come forth in the childless couple’s life.

It is when they are able to coexist peacefully that the importance of the crows becomes clearer. Their presence around the couple begins to inspire jealousy among neighbours. They attempt to harm the couple and the birds.

Zahir uses sudden and unfounded instances of physical pain or discomfort to foreshadow misfortunes that are about to befall these characters.

I believe people who like to read tragedies will enjoy this short story. It is told in a linear narrative from a third person’s point of view. It’s well-written, easy to follow, compelling, and highly relatable.

While feeling upset and helpless at the fate that Akalu and Tepi meet, readers cannot but relate to their tragedies, no matter how unfair, as, in the end, it is undeniable that life is hardly fair for any of us.

And so the reader will want to keep on reading, feeling compelled to learn how the story ends for these two characters who can’t seem to catch a break.

The element of magic realism linked to the crows can spark surreal wonder that is similarly evoked in children listening to grandmothers’ stories before bedtime, speaking tales of dreams containing knowledge of finding long lost treasures.

The ending, in particular, is straight out of local folklore, which, despite how absurd it may sound when spoken aloud to someone for the first time, is still unquestionably accepted by those who grew up hearing it.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Bleak realities in the shadow of China’s rise

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

In May 2022, Joanna Chiu won the Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for her debut nonfiction book, *China Unbound: A New World Disorder* (Hurst, November 2021). A well-versed reporter on Chinese affairs around the globe, she weaves into the book years of her professional and personal experiences that make the reader feel they’re on the right vehicle to discovery. Divided into three parts, *China Unbound* begins with a basic exploration of China’s troubled history, progressing to its relations with the western world, and through it all, manages to keep its grip firm on the “human consequences” of China’s global ascent to dominance.

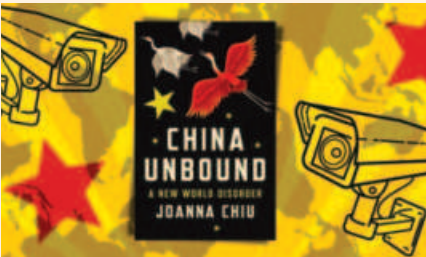
Although an economic giant,, China has staggering income inequality. While the Chinese Communist Party supported businesses and entrepreneurs with grants and tax concessions, the poor were made to bear the brunt. This, coupled with an endless crackdown on civil society, ensured the poor’s inability to mobilise against the CCP. For instance, to build a heritage park in Chikan in 2007, the government asked the residents to sell their properties and leave. The compensation they were supposed to

receive “was nowhere near enough”. When they protested, they were arrested and jailed briefly. Layoffs and factory closures induced resentment in the working class as China became a more technology-oriented economy from a manufacturer-based one. Chiu knows that such a reality of income inequality is not exclusive to China. Their troubles are not restricted to the economy, however.

From abundant security cameras with facial recognition technology to “high-tech

In a more ominous version of economic coercion, Chiu shows how the Uyghurs’ (the ones who have fled to Türkiye) fate hangs in limbo. As China and Türkiye’s economic relations continue to prosper, experts fear the possibility of the Turkish Government’s betrayal of the Uyghurs.

sunglasses” with the ability to scan through crowds to unhindered access to biometric data, China’s surveillance measures have constructed an Orwellian society “where people don’t expect much privacy”. In this



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society, the CCP demands utmost devotion from all citizens. So much so that even religion is seen as a threat.

In this spirit, Chiu acquaints us with an underground church lying low from the CCP’s eyes. As if to compete with this particular dimension, Chinese surveillance strategy has gone borderless by harnessing the power of technology and social media. “Beijing leaders truly feel anyone of Chinese descent is fair game and they have a right to curtail their freedom of speech years or even generations after they settled abroad”, Chiu writes of China’s ghostly presence in the lives of Vancouver residents of Chinese origin whose social media likes, posts, or

participation in certain events triggered the CCP. What makes it more frightening is the fact that when the residents reluctantly choose to complain to their mayor, “they want the blinds closed”.

China’s famous Confucius Institutes also play an instrumental role in its surveillance policies across the globe. Since 2004, these institutions have been promoting the Chinese language and the culture’s popularity by collaborating with educational institutions worldwide. Allegations of harassment, academic censorship, and spying from the CCP agents have been levelled at these institutions. In a hideous case, we see Dan, a Chinese student in Canada, alarming the CCP agents by criticising the government on Twitter (anonymously). They threatened his family back home. One police officer even reached out to him on WeChat asking him to delete the “offensive posts” or face repercussions.

In a more ominous version of economic coercion, Chiu shows how the Uyghurs’ (the ones who have fled to Türkiye) fate hangs in limbo. As China and Türkiye’s economic relations continue to prosper, experts fear the possibility of the Turkish

Government’s betrayal of the Uyghurs. In 2020, China ratified an extradition treaty with Turkey (although Turkey is yet to ratify) for “counterterrorism” purposes. But Chiu echoes the critics’ suggestions that China’s vague definition of counterterrorism might as well negatively affect the innocent Uyghurs in Turkey.

This review cannot do justice to the extensive research that has gone into the book and neither can it capture the sprawling, multidimensional essence of the topic with Chiu’s invaluable insight. Besides illuminating the bone-chilling dystopian tactics of the CCP, the book shines in contextualising China’s foreign policy by underlining relevant bits of history (such as China’s liking for Russia as an anti-American entity). It also strikes in its humane approach by producing before the reader real victims with real sufferings beyond the blurriness of statistics and numbers. My only longing from *China Unbound* would be for an account of the human impact of China’s presence in Africa, given the continent is a major recipient of Chinese infrastructural aid.