



INTERVIEW

Unpacking the craft of CREATIVE WRITING

The best thing I ever did for my fiction writing was 10 years of journalism—it was an editing and writing education—and for my journalism career was to take a bunch of creative writing classes. It allowed me to differentiate my writing from 50 other interns who were sent to report on the same car crash.

SARAH ANJUM BARI

November 15-22 saw aspiring novelists gather in a creative writing residency in Sri Mangal. Organised by Bangladeshi-Canadian writer Arif Anwar, author of *The Storm* (2018), the residency was mentored by award-winning writers: Joan Silber, American novelist and short story writer of nine works of fiction, most recently *Secrets of Happiness* (2022), and Egyptian-Canadian novelist and journalist Omar El-Akkad, most recently the author of *What Strange Paradise* (2021). In conversation with DS Books editor Sarah Anjum Bari, the three authors discuss the craft of creative writing and publishing.

Tell us about the residency.

Arif Anwar: The idea from the start was to build a close-knit, small group of students which would yield high mentor-student ratio. We're all eating together, spending time together. A lot of the conversations around creative writing are emerging organically.

There have been six lectures so far from the two mentors each. Within the sandbox of a topic, they could talk about whatever they wanted. Joan offered to talk about time. Omar is focusing on revision and pace. The idea was to organise it the way the work of a novel would unfold.

Joan, what is the one advice you give to students when you're discussing the use of time?

Joan Silber: That the length that a story needs determines its meaning. I talk about short times and long times. I talk about what I call classic time in *The Great Gatsby*—how it uses summary to give backstory. We both used examples very strongly and gave out a few generalities. That's how writers always learned to write. Long before we had writing classes, writers observed what they loved in other books.

You've both travelled a lot. Has that impacted your writing? How does a place like Sri Mangal affect it?

Omar El Akkad: I grew up on one side of

the world and then I came to North America when I was 16, so already I wasn't anchored in one place. One of the things about travelling for writing is that you get a very unique experience of the place. You're surrounded by other writers. It reminds me of how different the prisms are through which readers read your work.

I steal a lot from different literary lineages, from the western canon and Arab writers. The result is a weird hybrid that's hard to pin down. It used to confound me because a lot of my favourite writers were marinated in any one spot. Over time, it's become more comforting to know that I'm permanently unanchored.

Arif: Social scientists have written about the world in terms of a centre and a periphery. The centres are Tokyo, London, New York. Peripheries are Dhaka, Senegal, Lima. But peripheries have their own centres and peripheries. For Bangladesh, Dhaka is the centre and Sri Mangal is the periphery. The idea for me was to challenge these cosmopolitan centres that we associate with fine art.

Omar, how do you toggle between fiction and nonfiction?

Omar: I think of them as antagonistic muscles. Journalism by necessity is about finding answers. Fiction is where I go to sit with questions. I feel no obligation to provide a roadmap for any kind of answer.

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What goes into editing a manuscript?

Omar: The first process is interior. You're rereading your own work, you're reading out loud. And then it's a concentric circle growing outwards—your trusted friends. At a certain point you hit a boundary between the personal and the commercial; you're getting prospective editors or agents to read it—people who will have a business angle to the work. Now people are thinking about whether this will sell. What

demographics can be interested in this? How can we market it?

How does one balance that line between taking constructive feedback and preserving the essence of the text?

Arif: Sometimes a writer knows what the text is about before they finish the writing; sometimes they need those other eyes to tell them what it could become. Whether you have that willingness and openness depends on how strong a sense you have of what you need from the beginning.

With your first novel, I think you're a bit dazzled. You're willing to cede a little more ground. I didn't have as strong a sense of what my first novel was. With my second novel, I'm less open to directional input.

Joan: With students you can sometimes identify—oh this is the part that sounds most like them. Usually it's the part where they don't sound like anybody else.

These days we have labels like the diasporic novel, the refugee novel—books about sensitive, specific experiences. Who gets to tell which story?

Joan: I often get asked, has anyone objected to you writing a Thai-American or an African-American character? The whole story is never told from that point of view, it's a certain section of the novel. I've never gotten flack, probably because I'm not talking directly about race and ethnicity; I'm talking about love and sorrow, which emotionally I'm equipped to do. It's forever delicate.

Omar: I don't think it's so much about who can write what as it is about who gets published. By definition, any industry is going to cater towards the set of experiences that are more resembling that industry. The overwhelming publication of a particular kind of writer at the expense of others is where this debate is at its most useful. It is at its least useful when we're telling individual writers: write about this, don't write about that.

Read the rest of the interview on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' social media.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Andy Warhol and Truman Capote talk out their anxieties

'WarholCapote' by Rob Roth (Simon & Schuster, 2022)

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Rob Roth's play—he terms it a “nonfiction invention,”—is made out of real words and imagined situations. He takes two of the late 20th century's premier American artists of modern fame and builds a conversation—occasionally hilarious but often mundane—out of their real, taped conversations. It is a clear contrast to most works of this nature, which tend to go the traditional route of describing generally true stories with certain liberties in forms, sensations, affecting observations, authorial retorts, and the dealings and dialogues of the characters within.

Andy Warhol, painter, film director, one-time band manager of The Velvet Underground, but mostly known as the poster boy of the Pop Art movement—reached out to the writer Truman Capote in 1978 for a collaboration. He had been an admirer of the author, four years his senior and famous before him, with whom he found solace in their shared perils of the queer American boyhood. He suggested they tape their conversations on his Sony Walkman, to which Capote agrees. The collaboration never comes to fruition, and the cassette recordings (59 of them, 90 minutes each) are sent off to the Warhol Museum, where they stood collecting dust.

These conversations, now digitised and transcribed, lend the words to Rob Roth's *WarholCapote* (Simon & Schuster, 2022). The result is decidedly mixed. Both figures appear to make uninteresting small-talk as we, the readers and viewers, are invited to awe at some supposed meeting of great minds. The effect does not last for long, though. Their heartaches on the subject of fame and performance do not move the reader as their own books and art do. There are, of course, instances when both Warhol and Capote (more so) deliver lines that re-establish their literary brilliance.

When Warhol suggests his idea for a “play about real people”, Truman becomes excited. “See, that's the kind of thing I want to do”, he says, “Reality and art intertwined to the point that there is no identifiable area of demarcation”. It is interesting to see that decades before personalities like Geoff Dyer were harping about how cool fiction bleeding into nonfiction is, and years before auto-fiction began to infiltrate into the American literary consciousness, Capote was concerned about the avenues that nonfiction brought—a thought that perhaps was most visible in his spectacular 1965



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

novel *In Cold Blood* (1965), a “nonfiction” account of the murders of four family members in small town Kansas.

Both men in the play seem exhausted of fame. They are frantic about finding ways to deal and come to terms with it, yet they are also seemingly repulsed by those who do not possess it. When Truman talks about being at a program where he was the most recognisable figure, Warhol suggests, “You should have worn a wig. Have you ever seen Jackie with a wig on, somewhere else looking different?” Capote replies, “No. But I've always said that Jackie Kennedy was the world's greatest female impersonator”.

Fame becomes torment. So much so that Capote confesses to not reading any of his mail. Yet it's Warhol, of course, who goes through the worst of it, akin to Jackie. The ultimate nightmare: an assassination attempt. He talks about wanting to be around creative people, “... all these crazy kids were imaginative. So anybody that was peculiar, you know, we would have them around. Then I was shot. I was shot by Valerie Solanas at the Factory in '68....”

He stopped seeing “creepy people” afterwards. This, Warhol laments, has had the side-effect of him being surrounded by less gifted personalities.

The few interesting anecdotes, and the fewer memorable lines aside, Rob Roth's play is for the most part uneventful, chipping away the charm and mystery of its two personalities through conversations that paint them as little more than dull patricians, talking about the film stars they play around with (Humphrey Bogart) or the lewd things they will go about doing for the sake of art (urinating on paintings).

It is not difficult, then, to sympathise with Warhol when he remarks at the end, “God. It's too hard to think about things. I think people should think less anyway”.

Shahriar Shaams has written & translated for SUSPECT, Adda, Six Seasons Review, Arts & Letters, and Jamini. Find him on twitter @shahriarshaams.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A crafty explosion of flavour

Jane Borges' debut novel 'Bombay Balchão' (Tranquebar, 2019) is a beautifully crafted saga

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

Raised in a household that liked to adhere to a 'safe' level of flavour and pungency, I was a little late to the shutki and bharta game. While I remain picky about my dried and fermented fish as well as the mashed condiments, I remember the explosion of fireworks on my palate the first time I tried balachaw, and till date, it remains a flavourful go-to whenever I need a little pep on my plate.

It was perhaps my stomach that led me to pick up *Bombay Balchão* (Tranquebar, 2019) during Bookworm Bangladesh's clearance sales, although I had never heard of Jane Borges before. The feeling of reading it was no less impactful than that first taste of balachaw.

Set in the neighbourhood of Cavel in South Mumbai, home to a vibrant Catholic community, this book weaves a sweeping saga around the lives of some six families. Just like the balachaw which looks like a mass of crispy brown relish at first glance, but on closer examination reveals browned onions, toasted garlic and deep fried fish or shrimp parts, a closer look at the community reveals Goans, Mangaloreans, indigenous Mumbaian convertees and all their friendships, flirtations, petty rivalries that make up an incredibly vibrant canvas. The characters crackle with life, quirky and contradictory, despicable and sympathetic in turns, and because Borges hails from a community similar

to the one she portrays in this novel, she is able to steer clear of stereotypes of the Portuguese Catholic community in South Mumbai, while at the same time, create context for why some of these stereotypes exist in popular culture.

The structure of the book is worth talking about. To begin with, the narrative is non-linear, jumping back and forth between decades, using the character of Michael Coutinho as a sort of landmark to re-orient the reader whenever there is a shift in the timeline or perspective. Each chapter is a self-contained short story, which, like a modern-day Scherezade, Borges cuts off right at the climax, before the Big Event (Death? Marriage? Disaster?) happens. How does the story of Chapter X end? You'll find the answer as an aside in maybe Chapter Y or Z. It takes a little getting used to but when you do, as an engaged reader, it becomes a fun mental exercise.

But there's more to this than artifice; there's a line regarding two of the characters that says “they forgot they were

characters in a novel, not a short story” that creates a foreshadowing about the ripple effects of impulsive choices and pivotal decisions. Borges knows exactly what she is doing and never loses control.

The prose is frothy, hyperbolic, teetering between slapstick and dark humour at times, but manages to go to some intense areas, from colonialism to race relations, from domestic abuse to censorship during the Emergency. Jane Borges infuses her

natural instinct for reportage, drawn from her journalistic background, with that tender touch of nostalgia, drawn from memories of growing up in a neighbourhood and community similar to Cavel. For a novel as tiny as this one (*Bombay Balchão* numbers at 250 pages), there is a lot to love.

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is a writer, journalist, and the founder of *Sehri Tales* annual creativity challenge.

