

INTERVIEW

Kanishka Gupta on literary agents and the makings of a book

SARAH ANJUM BARI

As an editor—emerging or experienced—one of the truths you swallow on the job everyday is that editing is a backstage job, integral and constantly mutating, unnoticed, with the hour's need. You tease out an idea almost at the tip of the author's tongue (fingers?), probe them to reckon with the perspectives they're bringing to a work, look into the research, the formatting, the promoting—all the less romantic parts of getting a piece of writing out into the world. The labour of these tasks hangs hidden, in the spaces between the sentences we read in print, on our phones and computer screens.

If the job of the editor contains dozens of these tasks, the literary

agent performs perhaps tenfold of that. It is the agent who, in mature publishing ecosystems around the world, guides the author through the stages of finding the right editor, preparing the manuscript for the right publisher, and then marketing the book to the right readers, all while protecting the author's legal, financial and creative interests.

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Kanishka Gupta is a literary agent who founded Writers Side, Asia's largest literary agency based in India, and some of the authors he represents have been

at the forefront of literary conversations in recent years, his and their work having taken South Asian literature to a global stage. This list includes Shehan Karunatilaka, Sri Lankan author of the Booker Prize winning *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Geetanjali Shree and Daisy Rockwell, the International Booker winning author-translator duo of *Tomb of Sand*, Avni Doshi, the Booker Prize shortlisted author of *Girl in White Cotton*, Numair Atif Chowdhury, Bangladeshi author of the majestic, posthumously published *Babu Bangladesh*, and Iffat Nawaz, the Pondicherry-based Bangladeshi author of *Shurjo's Clan*.

In person, Kanishka is as humble as his authors are prominent. It is his passion for

What does the agent do for the author?

It marries a lot of professions—you're a reader, lawyer, counsellor, editor, friend.

An agent should have a very good understanding of the market and the requirements of all the editors and publishing houses. I would not want to work with an agent who has access to just one publisher in different houses in India—there are 8-10 commissioning editors at HarperCollins and Penguin, and each one of them is looking for a certain genre. Some of them are looking for a certain kind of book within a genre. So the agent should have a very good knowledge

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proactive about pitching their books to OTT platforms. And then you obviously have to make sure the contract protects the interests of the author in terms of the copyright, the royalty percentage, that there are no clauses which sound shady, etc.

What do you look for in a manuscript, and how does that differ between genres?

Fiction is a very instinctive thing. Short stories are as hard to sell as poetry. But with fiction we make sure that the most fundamental things are correct—the quality of writing, storytelling, even if it is experimental, it should not be so for the sake of experimentation, and it has to be original. I'm happy to take works of fiction or creative nonfiction that work with hackneyed storylines as long as it's done in a new way. For instance, there are so many mother-daughter feminist narratives floating around, but some of them are done in such a fresh way.

If it's political nonfiction or biography, the research is more important than the writing. If it is a book on a historical figure or event, I like to ask the author what new thing he/she is bringing to the table.

What are some of the things an emerging or aspiring author should know about the publishing process?

Read a lot of books. If you're writing fiction, ask yourself, why should someone invest money in it, edit it, publish it? Will this story have a wider resonance? Or is it just a form of catharsis for you?

The story needs to have a universality, finesse in the plotting. Your research sources have to be more than Google search. You should have travelled to the places where some of your characters or stories are set.

Be open to feedback, don't be in a

hurry to publish.

And—maybe this is a controversial statement—don't hero worship 2-3 writers and emulate their styles, and don't get so swayed by market forces that you are not experimenting enough. Just write.

Tell me about your work with Numair Atif Chowdhury and Babu Bangladesh.

Numair was introduced to me by Nadeem Zaman. He was not dismissive of me, nor was he reluctant. But for the longest time he was very wary of sharing the draft of *Babu Bangladesh* with anyone from publishing.

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We had several conversations and it took me a long time to get the manuscript out of him, which would mean that he would have to let me read it. So the draft came to me. In a day—and it was a working day—I spent half of it reading the text, while I was supposed to be responding to mail and calls. A lot of people say that parts of the book feel like nonfiction. That's the compulsive, hypnotic quality of the book.

Numair eventually said yes but he was not willing to do any paperwork. He was also teaching in a university and I remember he was deeply disturbed about the political unrest, the attacks on students that happened in 2018. I think somewhere down the line he started worrying about his safety because of the nature of the book—because it is explosive.

He passed away, and then I was very nervous that the book would go to someone else. I was also anxious to reach out to the family at a time like that. And this is where relationships come in—I repitched to the family.

Numair comes from a family of intellectuals and avid readers, they are very particular about quality, and they were very closely involved in the process [of it getting published]. The book was pitched and immediately I got an offer. None of them told us to make any changes. But I'm pretty sure that Numair would've wanted to work on it a little more.

Sarah Anjum Bari is Books & Literary Editor at The Daily Star.

The rest of this conversation touches upon how Kanishka Gupta launched Writers Side without any prior experience or training, the Bangladeshi authors he is working with right now, and the issues of plagiarism and literary circulation in South Asia. Read it on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages.



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD & SARAH ANJUM BARI

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storytelling that comes through in conversation, alongside an instinctive, entirely self-taught (and, in his words, utterly bizarre) understanding of the publishing system. Something interesting happens when I begin our virtual interview—unlike the authors, journalists, publishers and artists I normally have to ease into talking about their work, Kanishka rattles off answers to most of my questions about the South Asian publishing scene before I even have a chance to ask them.

of publishing trends, of what kinds of books are selling.

At the same time, an agent should not be mercenary, they should not say no to good manuscripts just because they feel like it will face a lot of resistance from publishers. You have to be passionate about the book and sometimes you have to be okay with knowing that a book will not do well. But sometimes an auction that starts at 1 lakh can end with 10 lakh.

Authors also expect us to be very

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Language can be the ultimate colonial weapon

'Babel, Or the Necessity for Violence' by RF Kuang (Harper Voyager, 2022)

SARAZEEN SAIF AHANA

Despite the time we have spent free of the British Raj and the decades of being independent, the impact of colonialism is deeply embedded into Bangladesh's national psyche. From our continued glorification of the English language to our youth's hidden obsession with the West, there are very few aspects of our culture that have not been touched, at least to some degree, by the centuries we spent under the control of Europe.

Perhaps this is why I related so much to RF Kuang's *Babel*. Published in August 2022, this dark academia tale is set in the 1830s. The world of *Babel* reflects our past in nearly every but one very important way: silverwork. In the novel, Britain's overwhelming colonial supremacy is powered using bars of silver which are tied to language. Pillaged from colonies across the world, much like real-life resources seized from colonised countries, these bars are etched with words in multiple languages which are near-synonyms. Using the power of meanings "lost in translation", these enchanted silver bars have the power to increase agriculture, improve infrastructure and efficiency in war, enhance

medicine, and much more. Because the silver is taken from the colonies, Britain is all but dominating the world by controlling its supply, the majority of which is centralised in the fictional Royal Institute of Translation at Oxford University—nicknamed Babel.

Robin Swift, our protagonist, is plucked as a child from his impoverished homeland of Canton, China by his white father, a member of the prestigious faculty at Babel. Gifted with a talent for languages, Robin is brought to London and is, eventually, accepted into Babel as a student. Robin's life at Oxford is both blissful and terrifying. Babel itself is enchanting, almost mythical in its beauty and power, cocooned within the heart of Oxford, but Robin is half-Chinese, making him an easy target for endless, varied and deeply ingrained hate. Coupled with the fact that his three best friends are, alternatively, Indian, Muslim, Black and female, the four both excel in and struggle to adjust to life so far removed from their homes. The cosy comfort of university life is destroyed, however, when the four are brought face to face with the reality of what their beloved Babel truly does—allowing Britain to forcefully set forth a disastrous war against China, winning which would all but cement



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

British dominance in the East. This is to be done primarily through a powerful influx of opium into China, slowly disabling its population and allowing Britain to overtake China's silver reserves. This is the setting that renders Kuang's historical fantasy

novel much more "historical" than "fantasy".

Kuang seems to be a writer with unflinching devotion to historical truth, no matter how harsh. Having emigrated from China to the US as a child, she went on to earn an MPhil

in Chinese Studies from Cambridge, an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies from Oxford, and is currently working on a PhD in East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale.

In this novel, we are front row witnesses to her love of language, seen in her lyrical, almost rhythmic descriptions of Oxford and Robin's rise and fall there. *Babel* is a study in just how powerful a tool this language can be, both for good and for terrible evil. Even today, for example, applying to study or work abroad means sitting for English language proficiency exams which, hilariously, have expiration dates—a combination of the merging of economic control and neo-colonialism.

The name of the novel, as well as the fictional institute in the book, is a powerful indicator of this legacy. The story of the tower of Babel, summarised, is this: long after the Great Flood, the descendants of Noah populated the world and spoke a single language. However, they grew arrogant and thought to challenge God by building a great tower, named Babel, high enough to reach the heavens. In anger, God introduced a variety of languages, leading to the downfall of Babel, and forcing the people to disperse and spread across the world. Kuang's

Babel begins with much the same premise: the British are attempting to conquer using a combination of silver and language, and we end the book witnessing such stunning violence that the fate of the Empire itself is left uncertain. Robin and his allies may have contributed to this, but it is important to remember that these people were simply products of the Empire. Every tyrant creates the means of their own destruction, and Babel is an easy example of this.

Despite these heavy themes, *Babel* remains inherently readable. It is quick to attract the reader's attention and then hold it captive, making it a very difficult book to put down. The length of the story—over five hundred pages!—can be intimidating for most people, and understandably so. However, the words flow, much as silver flows into Britain in the tale, and we are quickly introduced to characters that you will either love, or love to hate. This is the type of novel you read until you are startled by birds singing at sunrise—where did the night go?

Sarazeen Saif Ahana is an adjunct member of the faculty at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) where she teaches English and encourages her students to fight colonialism.