

DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

OPINION

When BookTok amplifies diversity, who controls the narrative?

Contemporary romances feature near-constant diet culture, makeover stories, and praise of small bodies. These books send a clear cultural message about who deserves the happily ever after, and it is straight, thin, non-disabled, and mostly white characters. The popularity of such romance novels on BookTok is both a reflection of and a reaction to the genre's history of fatphobia and lack of representation.

SHABABA IQBAL

As months stuck indoors during the Covid-19 pandemic helped propel the popularity of TikTok, a more niche community also emerged on the social media platform: BookTok. The book-loving users on TikTok have gained a lot of sway in a short time. They've minted new influencers, won book deals for their favourite indie authors, and caused sales of their best-loved novels to spike.

The BookTok algorithm plays a crucial role here in determining which voices and stories are amplified, as the user base on the platform holds considerable sway. But this emphasis on specific content can create power imbalances and reinforce algorithmic and demographic bias, leading to the exclusion of certain voices from the conversation.

The lack of diversity on BookTok is reflected in the select group of well-known authors who receive significant attention on the platform and in the narrow range of themes and genres that dominate its content. TikTok's partnership with Penguin Random House allows users to place links to books within the app, elevating certain titles but resulting in repetitive recommendations. I've felt a sense of frustration over it myself, while trying to find something new only to be met with the same 10 or 20 books and genres.

Try typing 'BookTok' into the search engine and you'll find a slew of mostly white creators discussing books written by white women. The BookTok algorithm loves Colleen Hoover, Taylor Jenkins Reid, and Sally Rooney, to name a few authors. Among the most popular titles are Hoover's *It Ends With Us* (Atria Books, 2016), Reid's *Daisy Jones & the Six* (Random House, 2019), and Rooney's *Normal People* (Faber & Faber, 2018), all novels told from predominantly white and heteronormative lenses.

BookTok's heavy focus on popular romance tropes and sexually explicit writing, commonly

known as 'smut' has also led to an influx of books that follow a predictable formula, revolve around white and heterosexual main characters and target an almost exclusively white and heterosexual female readership.

When certain types of romance books, such as those that prioritise smut, are consistently marketed and sold more than others, it can result in a lack of diversity in the types of stories and perspectives that are being shared. Such books often garner significant attention on BookTok and can contribute to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes about sex and relationships. Popular books that come up include *Ugly Love* (Atria Books, 2014) and *Twisted Love* (Boba Press, 2021), which depict dominant and controlling men as attractive and desirable. While the content may seem like harmless fun, it is important to consume such literature with caution and seek out books that promote sex positivity, emotional intelligence, and vulnerability in relationships.

Romance novels also have a long history of fatphobia. Old school historical romances, in particular, are filled with heroines whose waists are so small the heroes can encircle them with just their hands. Contemporary romances feature near-constant diet culture, makeover stories, and praise of small bodies. These books send a clear cultural message about who deserves the happily ever after, and it is straight, thin, non-disabled, and mostly white characters. The popularity of such romance novels on BookTok is both a reflection of and a reaction to the genre's history of fatphobia and lack of representation. Many BookTok users who enjoy romance novels are advocating for greater diversity and inclusivity in the genre, and promoting books that feature protagonists who are queer, plus-sized, disabled, or people of colour. Nevertheless, certain romance novels that perpetuate harmful stereotypes and promote narrow beauty standards remain popular and raise concerns.

Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (Atria Books, 2017) has become a BookTok sensation, praised for its nuanced representation of diverse characters, including a bisexual Cuban-American protagonist. The novel is even set for a film adaptation.

Regardless of background, however, bookish communities online tend to amplify already popular books, resulting in a feedback loop made worse by algorithms, making it difficult for lesser-known authors to break through. Although a compelling read, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* seems to feature on at least every other recommended reading list, revealing a preference for white and mainly heterosexual authors, even in the promotion of diversity.

This lack of representation for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ voices in BookTok's algorithm has sparked frustration. In response, niche hashtags like #BlackBookTok, #BIPOCBookTok, and #LGBTQBookTok have emerged, creating inclusive spaces for more diverse content.

That being said, those who are seeking out content from underrepresented authors and readers may face trouble fine-tuning their algorithm. It can take a lot of proactive, long-term measures to like and comment on videos by those creators, in addition to following them, to see that content consistently on TikTok's For You Page.

As with any social media platform, there's a lot of room for error, and there are questions about whether we should let a faulty algorithm be partially responsible for driving taste. Nonetheless, BookTok's impact on the way we consume and perceive literature cannot be overstated, and we should be optimistic about what it can achieve. I only hope it can evolve with new readers and authors, despite its limitations.

Shababa Iqbal is a journalism graduate from Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), who likes Jane Austen's novels and Disney movies. Email: shababa@icloud.com.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Mohammad Isam's new book recaps Bangladesh cricket through the ages

'On the Tigers' Trail' by Mohammad Isam (The Mighty Press, 2009)

ASRAR CHOWDHURY

An aerial photo of Mirpur Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium by the BCB photographer Raton Gomes instantly tells the reader that *On the Tigers' Trail* is on Bangladesh cricket. A foreword by Rahul Bhattacharya—author of *Pundits from Pakistan: On tour with India* (Picador, 2005)—hints that the book is also "beyond a boundary", to quote CLR James.

The author, Mohammad Isam, is a household name to those who follow Bangladesh cricket through ESPNcricinfo. This is his first book. It is a collection of his articles in ESPNcricinfo from 2012 to 2021. Isam's friends selected 50 odd articles. From that set, he chose 26. He ordered them in what he thought would be fitting to read.

Each article has a timestamp that mentions when the article was originally published. The reader needs to read the articles in the context of that time. The articles have been presented either in their original or with minimum editing.

Mohammad Isam is no stranger to cricket. He was the sub-editor of sports at *The Daily Star* between 2006 and 2012.

He was also a handy left-arm spinner who played professional cricket between 2001 and 2010.

The book starts with an entry from June 2019. It features Shakib Al Hasan's heroics at that year's ODI World Cup in England and Wales. The next entry from March 2020 narrates Mashrafe Mortaza through the eyes of Tamim Iqbal and Mahmudullah after the end of Mashrafe's captaincy. The first two entries were aptly chosen. The reader gets an inkling that the book is full of anecdotes that will amuse all from the casual follower to a connoisseur.

There are six interviews. Two of them feature Shakib Al Hasan and Mushfiqur Rahim. Two include Hashim Amla, and Trent Boult & Tim Southee. The last two include Sri Lankan umpire Ranjan Madugalle, and Richard Hadlee. As mentioned above, the timestamps are important. Shakib and Mushfiq are presented in their careers in March 2012 and September 2018, respectively.

The three profiles of Tamim Iqbal, Mashrafe Mortaza, and Mohammad Ashraful are well researched and articulated encyclopedic entries. They



PHOTO: RATON GOMES, PHOTOGRAPHER OF BANGLADESH CRICKET BOARD

present these three icons with freshness and from interesting angles. The book does not end here. Feature articles on Mahmudullah's sudden retirement, Shakib Al Hasan's ban, Khaled Mahmud's controversial conflicts of interest, and the all-present Nazmul Hassan get mentioned. The reader also reads the experience that Isam and Bangladesh cricket went through during the terrorist attacks in New Zealand in 2019.

Four articles stand out. Isam once found himself bowling his left arm spin in the nets to Kevin Pietersen during England's tour of 2010. Salauddin Sakil, a migrant

worker in Dubai, returned to Bangladesh after his work visa expired. Luck shined on him. He became a first-class cricketer. The rise of corporate finance and its effect on shaping Bangladesh cricket is narrated through a description of the Dhaka Premier League. The article that stood out for this reviewer was the one that introduces Mohammad Salahuddin and Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, the unseen and silent coaches of Bangladesh cricket.

The book is not without its limitations. The author did not present an introduction to the background of the book. URL links are presented at the end, but there are some typos in timestamps. Some of the links do not correspond with the order in which they are presented in the book. Putting these aside, *On the Tigers' Trail* is a wonderful read that presents Bangladesh cricket through the eyes of Mohammad Isam, for whom cricket has been more than a passion all his life.

Asrar Chowdhury is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University. He has been contributing to *The Daily Star* since 1993. Email: asrarul@juniv.edu.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Tough choices, terrifying consequences

'I Did It For You' by Jayne Cowie (Penguin, 2023)

FARAH GHUZZAVI

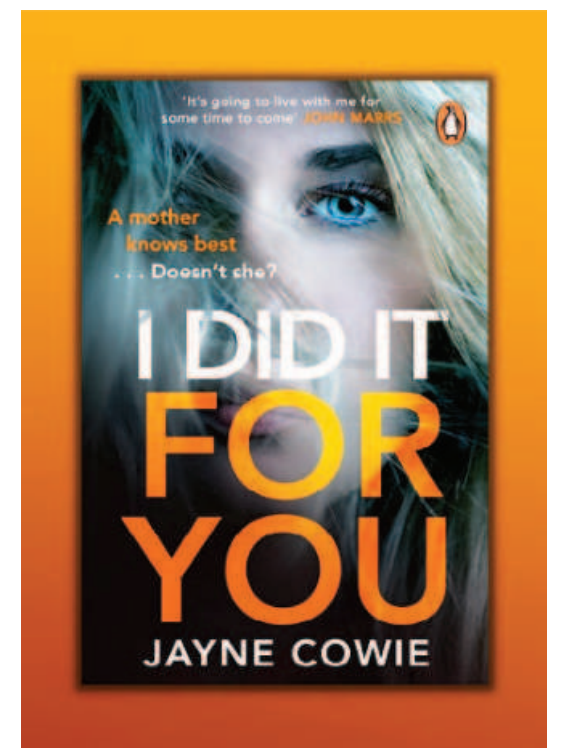
As any good parent can tell you, parenting invariably involves some pretty tough choices. And while we are bombarded with media images that show happy, well-adjusted children and the equally joyous adults around them partaking in wholesome delights ranging from a cosy, home-cooked meal at a family dining table to outings at theme parks and foreign holidays, the day-to-day caregiving kids require is rather less glamorous.

And always, always, always, there is the guilt about whether you are spending enough time with your children, sending them to the right schools, giving them the right food, spoiling them too much or not spoiling them enough, and so on, in a never-ending series of questions and an ongoing attempt to give your children the best possible start in life.

How much harder would that already-challenging process be if there were a possibility that your child's entire future could hinge upon the results of a single genetic test? Jayne Cowie's novel, *I Did It For You*, tells us just that.

In a world that is easily recognisable as ours, a major scientific breakthrough has ensured that boys born with a particular gene can be identified as having the potential to grow into violent men. This gene, known as M+, can be identified in baby boys with the use of a simple DNA swab of the mouth.

While the discovery has implications that could bring about widespread positive changes in society—particularly with regard to reducing



domestic violence—it quickly leads to a split among those who support the test versus those who find the idea invasive or problematic.

Nevertheless, within the space of just a handful of years, the test begins to determine the fate of young boys. Everything is affected—their access to schools, careers, relationships and, perhaps most importantly, how they are judged by the adults around them.

In this story, we are introduced to two sisters, both of whom give birth to boy children. That too, quite close in age. Antonia is the wife of a doctor, Owen, and a mother who coddles her son, Jack, to a degree that her sister, Bea, considers ridiculous. Antonia also chooses to have her son tested. Jack turns out to be M+, and does not carry the dangerous gene.

Sensing the money-making potential of this social shift, Antonia and her husband Owen subsequently decide to open a clinic for M+ boys, and become very wealthy in the process as rich desperate parents seek a way out of the situation that their sons are likely to face as they get older.

By contrast, Bea and her partner Alfie decide, on principle, not to have their son Simon tested. But this leads to years of a situation where Simon is effectively treated as M+ by default, as he does not have a test result that can prove otherwise. Bea's social circumstances are the opposite of Antonia's, and the two boys each have access to a very different set of resources as a result of this.

Nevertheless, the cousins remain close. But as Simon and Jack approach adulthood, years of closely-held family secrets and the very different choices made by their mothers begin to play out in a dangerous fashion. And Cowie delivers twist after twist of storytelling magic that really makes you question what choice you would make under this terrible set of circumstances.

While fathers' decisions, and their consequences, are very much part of the story, at its heart, this book is about the sacrifices that mothers make for their children—and what being a good mother really means.

The narrative is frighteningly plausible, and raises major ethical and social issues, beyond the already-complex minefield of parenting successes and shortcomings.

Cowie has delivered a gripping read which engages the reader's interest until the last page—particularly since the story goes turbo, hitting its stride (and how!), in the last few chapters. If you want a breathtakingly engaging read with just one speculative element, this is definitely a book worth reading.

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator, and development worker. Her short story collection, *Fragments of Riversong*, was published by Daily Star Books in 2013.