

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

“Pettiness, Prejudice, and Pets with Panache”

Review of Anastasia Ryan’s ‘You Should Smile More’ (Sourcebooks Casablanca, 2023)



COLLAGE: AMREETA LETHE

“This book is laugh-out-loud funny even as it holds up a mirror to the toxic work culture that is prevalent in too many offices today”.

FARAH GHUZNAVI

I first came across Anastasia Ryan’s work through my Instagram wanderings and was instantly intrigued by the sound of her recently released novel. Not least by its title, *You Should Smile More*. Anyone familiar with casual social interactions will have come across this phrase—or at least, many women will have—because it’s a very common, unsolicited comment from the men who actually think it’s acceptable to give such “advice” to women they often don’t even know. You would usually hear this on the street or from someone on a bus—or perhaps even, rather inappropriately, in a workplace scenario. And speaking of offices, Vanessa, Jane and Trisha work as telemarketers in an organisation where the workplace policies are...unorthodox, to say the least. The problem is that they all, for different reasons, need the job. Jane still lives with her parents; Trisha is a single mother to a four-year-old girl; and the protagonist, Vanessa, volunteers at an animal rescue centre. She is also, for the moment, financially supporting an entire tribe of calico

kittens, who are being prepared for fostering. Their gross boss Xavier insists on coming to office barefoot and using fictitious terms like “coheeing” to the general confusion, and widespread despair, of all (sane people) within hearing distance. And that’s without even going into his ideas for how swivel chairs should be used for the “Office Olympics”. Nobody—other than Xavier’s two henchmen, Bobbert and Gary—make any active attempt to interact with him. Quite the contrary. Not that this saves Vanessa, or Jane, who lose their jobs—in the case of the former, for having “the wrong kind of face” and the latter, for having a laugh that’s not acceptable. So clearly, women shouldn’t just smile more, they should smile THE RIGHT WAY! Meanwhile, Trish narrowly escapes the same fate by cooperating with management’s absurd demands to write a letter apologising for keeping company with such bad influences as Jane and Vanessa (who has now become understandably self-conscious about her face). While the other two are picking themselves up off the floor, Trish goes ahead with implementing the “6 Step Plan” the trio had

rather creatively dream up one night. And the most delicious hilarity ensues. The plan itself is sheer genius—if, perhaps, not altogether legal. Among other things, it involves bugging Xavier’s office and listening to his conversations with his henchmen. However, what starts out as a bit of a joke turns into the discovery that Xavier’s attitude to human resources policies is not the only thing off about his management style. This book is laugh-out-loud funny even as it holds up a mirror to the toxic work culture that is prevalent in too many offices today. I’ve had a few experiences of my own which may not quite match the evil of Xavier, but trust me, came uncomfortably close. Like the time a racist foreign manager invited all of us in the work group to join him for lunch except me. When he was asked why, he said, “Because she’s Bangladeshi, obviously.” This too, in a Dhaka-based office, where my other work group colleagues were European and American. So, using a parallel to this book, I guess I had the wrong degree of melatonin-enrichment?! Cat-lovers will also be delighted to know that Vanessa’s foster kittens have a very important role to play in this story, alongside Haiku the hairless pedigreed cat whom Xavier kidnaps (cat-naps?) for reasons explained in the book. But unlike the puny humans traumatised by their boss’s vile shenanigans, Haiku enacts his revenge on his kidnapper in more immediate and highly effective ways. Anastasia Ryan is a terrific writer, one whose other works I will be looking out for, and I recommend this book highly if you need to read something light hearted which nevertheless ensures that everyone gets their just desserts! As a bonus, the story also offers some serious social commentary about work culture that is cloaked in humour, misbehaving kittycats and a very relatable revenge fantasy. Don’t miss this one, or you’ll be the one missing out.

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator and development worker. Her work has been published in 11 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and the USA. Writer in Residence with Commonwealth Writers, she published a short story collection titled Fragments of Riversong (Daily Star Books, 2013), and edited the Lifelines anthology (Zubaan Books, 2012). She is currently working on her new short story collection and is on Instagram @farahghuznavi.

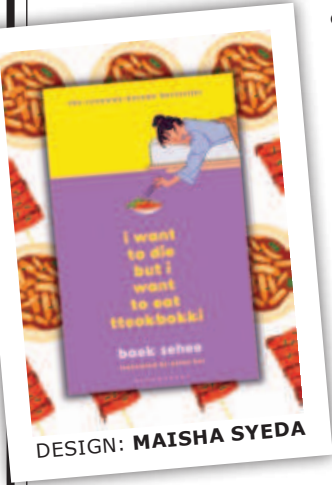
BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Mood mirror

A review of ‘I Want to Die, But I Want to Eat Tteokbokki’ (Bloomsbury UK, 2022)

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

Whenever depression is depicted in pop culture, it is shown in some visible extreme, with blue-grey lighting, dark rooms, ashen faces peering out through rainy windows, bodies curled up in bed. Indeed, in a post-pandemic world, with this relatively recent push for more discourse on mental health coming against centuries of conservative culture repressing or denying the same, it’s harder for people with possibly less severe issues to come to terms with their struggles. Having worked on periodicals for most of my career, I am intimately familiar with that phase of the publication cycle where everything feels like a drag, and if you’re in the business long enough, this feeling can seep into other areas of your life. For me, this phase is usually accompanied by insatiable cravings for noodle-based dishes. It is because of this quirk that the runaway South Korean hit *I Want to Die, But I Want to Eat Tteokbokki* by Baek Sehee first caught my eye. That a title would so perfectly capture a nuanced emotion was reason enough for me to want to dive in. I would hear of the hype much later. This is quite simply, the true account of a person diagnosed with dysthymia (persistent low-grade depression). Along with transcripts from actual conversations Baek Sehee has with her psychiatrist, she provides a short, self-help monologue, usually summarising the latest self discovery, and these are supplemented by more bonus features at the end of the book. There’s a short message from the therapist (who also



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seems to have made some self discovery upon revisiting the transcripts) as well as a number of mini essays covering a range of personal observations. “I wonder about those like me, who seem totally fine on the outside but are rotting on the inside, where the rot is this vague state of being not-fine and not-devastated at the same time.” Sehee yearns for validation, but has a hard time taking compliments. She is constantly comparing herself to people around her, always falling short of her idealised self, but also finds herself being overtly critical of others, and the awareness of these contradictions often sends her into spirals. This radical act of public vulnerability is brave enough in this age of social media and the scrutiny it invites, but if one considers just how taboo the topics raised are in the society she comes from, it becomes that much more admirable. The warts-and-all telling not only provides an intimate, unflinching view of a person at their lowest point, it also exposes just how slow, repetitive and messy the process of healing can be. One sees Sehee sliding back to old patterns, exposing some very ugly thoughts, and struggling with discoveries of new dimensions to her illness. It is also brave of her psychiatrist to have allowed her subject to record these sessions, and to admit that her methods may have been less than perfect. This is the sort of thing that could (and probably would) get her ‘cancelled’ on social media. In the author’s note, Sehee states that she decided to publish this so that other people out there suffering similar conditions would know that they are not alone, and perhaps be convinced to seek help, just as she did. This best-selling book has sold millions of copies worldwide, been translated into seven Asian languages and made available in English through the translations of Anton Hur, and the overwhelming response has been that people feel ‘seen’. Anyone who has been through low moods and felt the burnout from social pressures and just life, will be able to see themselves in this book, whether or not they have a diagnosed condition or are in need of intervention, and the message is simply this: your feelings are valid. And that’s a lot. Is it a fun read? Not at all. But it is definitely an important one.

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is a writer, journalist, and the founder of Sehri Tales.

THE SHELF

6 wonderful books to celebrate the Women in Translation month

NUR-E-JANNAT ALIF

‘Women in Translation’ is an all-inclusive, international project that aims to terminate the continual discrimination faced by non-English female authors, and gives them due recognition. So for this Women in Translation month, we have curated a list of six wonderful, translated books for you to enjoy. **Plumed Peacock** Selina Hossain, Kabir Chowdhury (translator) Adorn Publication, 2009 Authored by one of the leading female authors of Bangladesh, in both native and English language translation, *Plumed Peacock* is Selina Hossain’s war-centric masterpiece. At the centre of this novel is a poor, young poet, whose overzealous and unflagging patriotic mind set drives him to rally against the then feudal king in protecting the dignity of his mother tongue. His crusade against the system to honour his culture and individuality is a brutal but motivating remembrance of our own national history: the Language Movement of 1952. *Plumed Peacock* is a quick, riveting read for lovers of historical recounts, and a rewarding tribute to this year’s Women in Translation month. **Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982** Cho Nam-joo, Jamie Chang (translator) Scribner UK, 2020 First published in Korea in the year 2016, this novella had the whole world in its small grasp of 163 pages. Rightfully so, for it is simultaneously revolutionary and important, a voice of all the disfavoured Kim Jiyoungs around the globe. The story follows our titular tricenarian who has only recently quit her job to be a full-time mother to her first child, a beautiful daughter. While her mother-in-law wants her to bear a son and her husband

thinks it is atrocious for their newborn to have the mother’s maiden name, the unreliable, “madwoman” protagonist deftly paints a very real picture of the little yet wounding prejudices Korean women face at the hands of the primitive Korean society every day. **The Search** Shaheen Akhter, Ella Datta (translator) Zubaan, 2011 Also set against a war-torn background, *The Search* by Shaheen Akhter was initially published as *Talaash* in native Bangla in 2004. A scholar named Mukti enters Mariam’s life 25 years after the war that was supposed to liberate Bangladesh; she brings back with her memories that have plagued Mariam ever since. She recalls the mysterious, dark swamps that she and her little brother crossed to flee the bloodshed. She recalls the day he, Montu, had vanished. The war took many aspirational, idealistic, and patriotic young boys before they ever even understood what it was about. Shaheen Akhter, in this book, skillfully chronicles the brutal experiences of the Birangonas many years after the Liberation War of Bangladesh. On November 1, 2020, the Korean translation of the book won the Asian Literary Award. **Fever Dream** Samanta Schweblin, Megan McDowell (translator) Riverhead Books, 2017 A book widely described as strange, *Fever Dream* by Samanta Schweblin follows Amanda, a woman on her deathbed desperately counting the days till she meets her end. Beside her, keeping company is a young boy named David, who is neither her kin or kith. That, along with the whereabouts of her family is a rather odd mystery. The book advances as the readers move along with Amanda in her early lifecycle that gradually develops into the heinous

circumstances that put her in this position. For fans of ambient psychological thrillers, childhood ghost stories and fever dreams, this book could be an interesting pick. **My Brilliant Friend** Elena Ferrante, Ann Goldstein (translator) Penguin Random House, 2012 A presumed autobiography, a story that spans over years and decades, *My Brilliant Friend* is the first instalment to the four-part volume on the lives of two friends, Lila and Elena. Situated against the vivid backdrop of 1950s rural Italy, we experience the protagonists blossoming into their roles as fierce individuals, mothers, wives and global leaders. From their first encounter as nascent 10-year-olds to adolescence and then ultimately adulthood, the plot thickens to see if their friendship can indeed stand the bitter test of time. **Radha Will Not Cook Today and Other Stories** Purabi Basu, Niaz Zaman (editor) Writers.ink, 2007 A timeless short story collection, ranging from the mid 70s, *Radha Will Not Cook Today and Other Stories* is an illustration of Purabi Basu’s brilliance and the diversity of her craft. The readers get a show of the author’s strong humanistic and feminist sensibilities through these stories, like in the poetic lilt of “Radha Will Not Cook Today” or in the prosaic listing of scientific facts in “Mother-Earth”, or sometimes in a mythical locale like “The Rage of Moonlight”.

Nur-E-Jannat Alif is a Gender Studies major and part-time writer, who dreams of authoring a book someday. Find her at @literatureinsolitude on Instagram or send her your book/movie/television recommendations at nurejannatalif@gmail.com.

Were you aware that less than only 31 percent of translated fiction is written by women? Not due to a dearth in non-English female authors but because of the raging gender disparity materialising in the literary scene. While only 36 percent of books from non-European countries are translated into English, the number is minimal when it comes to women, as well as transgender, non-binary, and intersex identities, littérateurs.

