

OPINION

# What you call your own

How reading 'Letters to a Writer of Colour' (Penguin Random House UK, 2023) shows us a possibility for Bangladeshi writers to make it big



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

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SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

As an Anglophone writer in Bangladesh, I've frequently faced the rather inane question of why I write in English. I've learned it the hard way that this is a trap meant to engage the writer in a pointless debate about cultural politics, but in his essay, 'On Authenticity', from the anthology *Letters to a Writer of Colour* (Random House, 2023), Indian writer Amitava Kumar says it best, I think, when he says:

"I would say that English has been taught to us as a language in which we had to do our homework; to write fiction or imaginative non-fiction was to find liberation in language. That feeling of freedom is what now seems to make writing most real to me." He continues to say, "Authenticity, or what you call your own or adopt as your own, is to a large extent, based on your education."

My parents put me in an English medium school. During the 80's and 90's, with the exception of Bangla classes, we were expected to only communicate in English while in school. The pros and cons of this

system have subsequently been widely debated, resulting in some reforms, but what I got out of it was first language proficiency in English.

Interestingly, for the first two decades of my life, this didn't pose many problems for me. My English fluency gave me a good early start to what would become a lifelong career in journalism, and my Bangla was functional enough to navigate my life in Bangladesh.

And then I went to creative writing school in North America. Caribbean-American author Tiphonie Yanique has some wise words of advice for writers of colour attempting to do the same, in her essay 'On Character': "The creative writing workshop will destroy you if you are not prepared to stand confidently in your own clarity of thought and talent. And it is also to say that constantly having to prove yourself to people is actually no way to stand in your own clarity of thought and talent. It is emotionally exhausting, for one thing. It can also make it too treacherous for us to experience and communicate our true feelings of vulnerability—a vital and ongoing part of being a fiction writer."

By the time I signed up for my MFA, I had already been a working journalist for over a decade, with a weekly readership numbering in the thousands—I was arrogant enough to assume I was prepared to stand confidently in the clarity of my thought and talent. The next two years would disabuse me of that notion in ways I now realise are so common, I am practically a cliché.

Thrust into a predominantly white classrooms and workshops, I suddenly found myself expending energy having to defend myself against preconceived notions that my peers and professors alike seemed to have about the cultures I was writing about, or overexplaining simple things because my workshop audience was unable—or unwilling—to infer from context. There was of course the struggle of describing untranslatable emotions and scenarios to a different culture. So many translation panels at the Dhaka Lit Fest ask the question, "How do you explain 'obhiman' to a non-Bangali?" But I also began to struggle with my learned aversion to summary and exposition, with my classmates needing more context for the things

that happened in my stories, and my professors repeating "show, don't tell" in their feedback. I wondered how best to incorporate all the cultural, familial and communal histories needed for my story, without resorting to blocks of exposition.

Whatever story I had in mind took a backseat to addressing repeated concerns about mundane details, until it became increasingly tempting to sandpaper over nuance, avoid structural/narrative experimentations, and make the whole text more palatable to minds unaccustomed to BIPOC literature. Things reached peak ridiculousness when a young prof asked me to change the surname of my protagonist from 'Rahman' to "something less reminiscent of ramen, because it is so distracting". I wish I was making this up.

Tahmina Anam describes the dilemma beautifully in her essay 'On Humour':

"Here's the thing no one tells you when you're a POC writer. You are there to serve a purpose, and that purpose is to tell the world about the place you're from, whether it's a small town in Bangladesh or a council flat in East London. You are the representative of your country and your people."

I had witnessed some of the local pushback against Ms Anam's debut novel, *A Golden Age* (John Murray, 2007) when it came out, with her "authenticity" being put on trial by the deshi literati, a phenomenon discussed in detail in Amitava Kumar's essay. One of the things that all the essayists in *Letters to a Writer of Colour* want to emphasise is that just as the "rules" for writing BIPOC fiction need to take into context the colours, flavours and nuances of the cultures that these Anglophone writers come from, the rules for reading these stories by non-white writers are also different. And unless the readers are exposed to a larger variety of non-white writing, they don't necessarily develop a palate for it. Even if the writing is in English, the syntax, the pacing, the very grammar of it is affected by the work of translating these cultural details into that language, and to be able to slide into those voices and worlds is an acquired skill.

**"In a world and an industry dominated by whiteness, Anglophone writers of color**

**make a conscious choice to use a language in which we don't often have the luxury of feeling safe or understood."**

—Zeyn Joukhadar

In the last decade or so, the growth of literary fests in formerly colonised countries, international events that draw in writers, publishers, translators, and editors from all around the world have done a better job in service of diversity, by shining a spotlight on the wealth of BIPOC literature, and the nominations for major literary awards are starting to reflect that. But of course, we can do much better—and it starts with our own backyard.

A casual glance at the O' and A' level literature syllabuses for 2024-2026 shows me that the recommended reading list is still dominated by old white men. If we are ever to hope to produce Bangladeshi writers in the calibre of Salman Rushdie or Arundhati Roy, we have to first create a readership with the kind of cultural exposure to a diversity of writing. It's harder to change a syllabus set by a foreign body, but it is perfectly possible to supplement it with recommended reading lists that provide a richer diet of literature. It is perfectly possible to schedule reading events and storytelling sessions inside the classroom and around in the city. Events like the Sister Library sessions at Goethe-Institut, or readings held at The Bookworm Bangladesh, and of course, Dhaka Lit Fest are positive steps in that direction. It is more than possible for anyone—parent, teacher, or casual reader—to pick up a book by an author of colour, read it, and recommend it to someone else. *Letters to a Writer of Colour* came out years after I had managed to survive my MFA, revive some of my confidence as a writer and develop *Sehri Tales* which exposes me to a lot of fresh experimentations in craft by Bangladeshi writers writing in both English and Bangla, but reading the book felt like validation and healing. Careful, concise explanations on issues of storytelling, character growth, translation, and editing by experienced writers, supplemented by a rich variety of recommended reading texts make the collection a must-have for Anglophile writers beginning their journey.

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

## BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Twistier than a jilapir pyatch

Book review of 'A Twisted Love Story' (Berkley, 2023) by Samantha Downing

FARAH GHUZNAVI

It's a truism to say that modern life is complicated, but even a couple of decades ago, it would have been hard to predict the things we are dealing with today. For example, while seeking a partner by meeting a person that someone you know has vouched for—or going out with a person met through circumstance—has always been a fraught issue, it is probably safe to say that romance these days has become increasingly problematic, particularly post-internet! If you don't believe me, ask the distraught parents of rural Bangladesh experiencing the phenomenon whereby their kids are running off and getting married after a Facebook "love affair"...

But even in the classic movie *When Harry Met Sally*, you find two friends entertaining each other with stories of their dating disasters before, thankfully, they figure out their mutual attraction—something that should have been evident to them years ago.

Of course, not all dating experiences result in love. And when they do, not all love stories end well. And that's the case even if your surname is neither Capulet nor Montague.

Take the couple featured in Samantha Downing's new book. Wes and Ivy have known each other for a long time, but somehow they just can't seem to work things out. And yet they are both unable to close the chapter on their relationship and move on. In fact, these two take the

whole "it's complicated" relationship status to a new level. They have one heck of a past, and a present that is deeply problematic, so does their relationship have any future at all?

In some ways, each is the love of the other's life. When the relationship between Ivy and Wes works, it works beautifully. When it doesn't, it is the stuff of nightmares. And where this couple is concerned, that is really no exaggeration.

Which is why they have told each other innumerable times that it is over, only to rescind that decision and find themselves back together again—apparently very happy.

The problem is, their happiness just doesn't last. And the fall-out can be dangerous, as it was on one memorable occasion, many years ago, binding them together in a shared secret of monumental proportions.

With each iteration of their "make-up and break up" process, the stakes get higher, as the levels of toxicity inch inexorably upwards. Both Ivy and Wes are aware of this, to some extent, but they don't seem to be able to prevent themselves from ratcheting things up further. After all, one protagonist is named after a stubbornly-rooted and poisonous plant, while another shares his name with a film director who haunts our nightmares, on Elm Street and elsewhere.

After their most recent falling-out, Ivy decides that it would be "fun" to get Wes's attention by doing something really outrageous. So she reports him as a stalker to a policewoman working in the sex

crimes unit. But this time, Ivy has gone too far, and the consequences will be devastating. As, really, they should be.

Demonstrating the profound unhealthiness of their connection, Wes finds this move on Ivy's part amusing, and it kicks off yet another round of their relationship. The point at which things spiral out of control is when Karen, the policewoman, decides to look into the matter further, on her own initiative. And it turns out, Karen has her own agenda when it comes to cases like these.

Meanwhile, things are also getting more complicated at his end than Wes realises. Bianca, an administrative assistant in his office, also has her own agenda—and an insatiable level of curiosity that is inadvertently activated by the policewoman's visit to Wes's office.

And if all this were not complicated enough, these new developments risk exposing Wes and Ivy's shared secret from the past, which would really set the pigeons.

This is an interesting

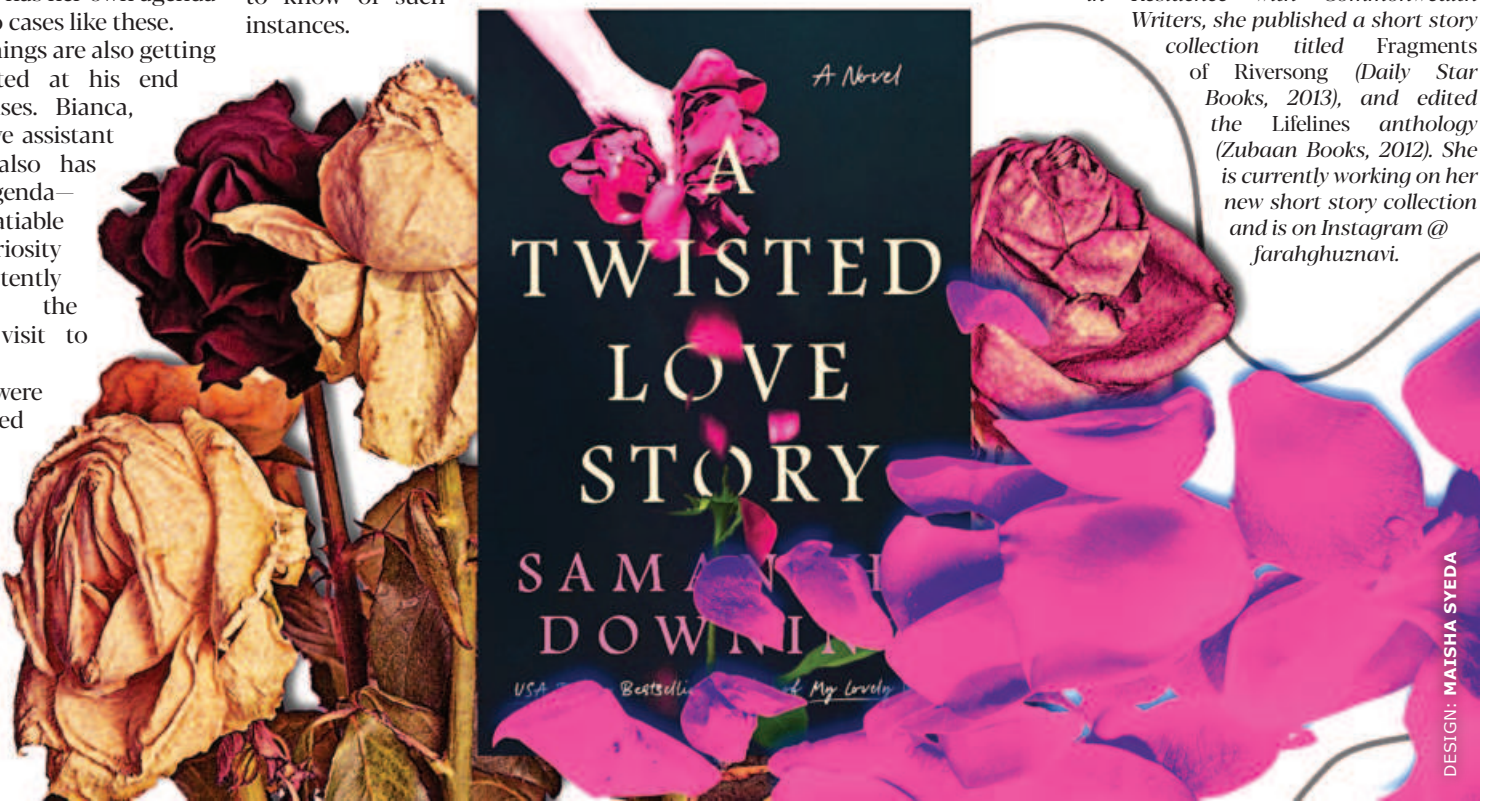
read and well worth your time, especially if you enjoy reading suspenseful stories about complicated relationships. Not least because many couples today justify some pretty bizarre behaviour in the name of love. Most of us will likely know of at least one such case. Many will know of more than one—which may or may not be as extreme as the relationship between Wes and Ivy. Chances are, the younger you are (as adults), the more likely you will be to know of such instances.

Continuing on a serious note, this book works well as a cautionary tale about red flags. Too often, people stay in relationships that are dangerous to their mental health. And it's important to know when enough is enough, and even more important to know when to move on, however attracted or invested a person may be in a relationship. Because, like Ivy and Wes, the fall-out of staying may well be more than you bargained for.

Finally, while Wes and Ivy

undoubtedly have a toxic relationship, Bianca and Karen are pretty strange people too. The story emerges from all four points of view, and is disturbing at multiple levels. I ended up feeling very glad that this was fiction. Because clearly, it's not just the love story that's twisted here!

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.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA