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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Despair and death in ‘Truth or Dare’

Review of Nadia Kabir Barb’s ‘Truth or Dare’ (Renard Press Ltd., 2023)

At times, it is a stroke and not an accident that the characters must confront (“In Case I Die” and “When Crows Come Calling”), yet a genuinely interesting aspect of ‘Truth or Dare’ is the frequency of characters being pushed over the edge.

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Bangladeshi literature in English has had a considerably late start compared to its South Asian counterparts in India and Pakistan. A few exceptions aside, a consistency came to be seen only by the early 2010s. Bengal Lights Books, founded in 2011 and presently known as ULAB Press, has been among the prominent actors here to have helped usher in a string of new works of English from Bangladeshi Writers. In 2017, they had put out *Truth or Dare*, the debut book of stories by Nadia Kabir Barb, a British Bangladeshi writer and long-time columnist at *The Daily Star*. The book is part of this new wave of literature (along with the works of her contemporaries Nadeem Zaman, Ahsan Akhbar, and Sharbari Z. Ahmed) that seeks to approach Dhaka and its diaspora with a more pronounced cosmopolitan vision. Therefore, it is delightful to see Nadia

Kabir’s collection has been given a new life in Britain six years later. *Truth or Dare*, reprinted in a revised and expanded version by the UK publisher Renard Press, sees Nadia Kabir Barb weave a dozen and a half stories out of themes of death and despair. She writes with clarity. Occasionally moving, *Truth or Dare* at its best is able to provide a complexity of emotions and history through its characters. In stories such as “The Enlightenment of Rahim Baksh” and “My Father’s Daughter,” the author shows her expertise in writing minute scenes encompassing entire lives and characteristics of these individuals populating her world. Especially in the latter story, which revolves around a daughter’s dealings with a father who left to start another family, the reader finds themselves fully immersed in the cruelty of fate and family. In other places, however, Nadia Kabir Barb’s stories of families fall flat.

Reading “Inside the Birdcage,” one can come to realise that the portrayal of working class lives may not be the author’s strongest suit. How realistic is it, that the reader would certainly question, to have a family who lives in a flat to not have access to ceiling fans and making do with a lone table-fan? In “Don’t Shoot the Messenger”, siblings come together to discuss the impending end of their parents’ marriage, but a fantastic premise is let down by an over-reliance on typical twists and turns. The stories in *Truth or Dare* deal overwhelmingly with death through road accidents. The repetition is meditative and unnerving, mirroring the regularity of accidents in the city. In “Stranger in the Mirror”, a son discovers, after the death of his parents in a road accident, an old photo of his mother with an ex-boyfriend who looks suspiciously like him. “Living with the Dead” sees a lady

remorseful at losing a friend when he doesn’t “see the oncoming bus as he [steps] off the pavement”. In “The Life of Others”, Manik survives his road accident but he might as well be dead as job-prospects die up and he turns increasingly defeatist, begging in front of the American Embassy to make ends meet. Among these, the story “Let Me Go” is a rare gem, where a wife’s anguish in dealing with a husband dying at the hospital after a car accident shows Nadia Kabir Barb’s real strength in the medium of the short story. At times, it is a stroke and not an accident that the characters must confront (“In Case I Die” and “When Crows Come Calling”), yet a genuinely interesting aspect of *Truth or Dare* is the frequency of characters being pushed over the edge: a bridge or a window ledge, at times by accident or choice. It is surprisingly wonderful, then, to find the title story play around

with these same emotions and tropes only to outwit the reader in the end. Raju and Tareq, the young schoolboys in “Truth or Dare”, dare each other to climb atop a 10 storey building that is under-construction. Though Raju understands the danger in this act, he is unwilling to back down. He believes “not going through with a dare was unthinkable and tantamount to being labelled a coward”. But as we see Raju attempt this feat in the end, we are left not with the usual horror and distress but rather with hope and the triumph of innocence. One comes away from this story optimistic about what Nadia Kabir Barb will offer next to her readers. **Shahriar Shaams** has written for Dhaka Tribune, The Business Standard, and The Daily Star. He is nonfiction editor at Clinch, a martial-arts themed literary journal. Find him on X: @shahriarshaams.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

IN SEARCH OF LOST EDEN

Review of ‘This Other Eden’(W. W. Norton & Company, 2023) by Paul Harding

NAJMUS SAKIB

There are authors who build lush and ornate worlds by whimsically stringing words as they go along and then there are authors whose prose feels like finely chiseled pieces of blocks strung together with the perfect amount of agglutinant, making a splendid structural marvel and you read and re-read every line while indulging yourself until your soul sates. Paul Harding falls into the latter category. His prose seems so thoughtful and well structured that he possibly does that wild Wilde stuff of spending all morning putting in a comma and all afternoon taking it out. Now, there’s no evidence that he actually does this but the supremely refined prose of Harding suggests that he probably would. *This Other Eden* is a novel based on a true story, of a community’s eviction from its home island. Malaga Island, called the Apple Island in the novel, was home to a mixed race fishing community from the mid-1800s to 1912, when the state of Maine evicted 47 residents from their homes and exhumed and relocated their buried dead. Eight islanders were committed to the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded. Racism and the science of eugenics’ prevalence of the time made this shameful act possible and this novel is a ruinous rumination on it all. From the beginning we see Benjamin Honey, the patriarch of the island, longing to return to his past, in a garden, the Eden of his childhood where he reminisces about being with a woman who might or might not have been her mother. Harding fills the book with biblical allusions from the start. As the grandchildren of Patience

Honey—wife of Benjamin Honey, the first settler on the island—huddle around her, she tells them the tale of the flood that devastated the island and took all of them to the precipice of death and some, to actual death. Harding doesn’t keep the parallel subtle as he draws it promptly, with the motley number of 30 or so people’s only abode, Apple Island to Noah’s Ark and the flood to the great flood of the Genesis. The most predominantly palpable of the biblical allusions that he plays with is the concept of Eden. The *Eden* in the title alludes to two Edens. One, the Apple Island and the other, a garden from Benjamin Honey’s past which he wants to recreate and yet, the novel ends with no Eden recreated and the one which was present, decimated by the government—the Eden lost and the inhabitants evicted. The theme of reckoning with the racist past of America is not new to American authors. They have been exploring this theme for a long time now and Harding isn’t unique in this aspect but *This Other Eden* can be called extraordinary because of its arresting prose—the best thing about this book, even more so than the complex themes he explores. His sentences are usually long, words strung with one another like a long flower garland that once starts doesn’t seem to end and yet you’re being drawn into reading every word with utmost attention and cannot exhale until you finish a sentence which always feels like a passage and a little story in itself. The sheer prosaic power of Harding is most evident when he narrates the incident of the hurricane that struck the island in September of 1815, 22 years after Benjamin and Patience



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

Honey had come to the island and begun the settlement. Vacillating between a first-person and a third-person narration, Harding makes the hurricane’s whirlpool and soul-sucking devastation so gasping that, for a moment, I forgot I wasn’t actually experiencing a hurricane myself. The inhabitants of the Apple Island, “a granite pebble in the frigid Atlantic shallows”, are the central characters of this novel and a lot of these characters have a meaty depth and development but amongst all the characters of this novel, the one who’s the most intriguing is not one of those inhabitants of the island

but rather astonishingly an outsider named Matthew Diamond, a white missionary, who comes to the island to teach the children. His is a character of, at once, deep folly and humane goodwill. He’s the embodiment of racism and white dominance in the novel and he admittedly feels disgusted by the people of the island as he says, “I have wholly believed if appallingly never felt—that all men are my brothers, all women my sisters, all souls my family—I nevertheless feel a visceral, involuntary repulsion whenever I am in the presence of a living Negro”. Notwithstanding his folly, he wants to teach the children of the islanders, and the children,

in contrast to, grown up people, don’t seem to arouse a repulsion in him. His landing on the island doesn’t have any fiendish motives but his deeds on the island would only draw the attention of the mainlanders. He’s not innocent in the sense of being blameless, but in the sense of being oblivious to the greater catastrophe into which bringing a school would draw the islanders in. *This Other Eden* is not one of those lengthier books spanning 500 pages and instead it’s a scrawny one, of just 224 pages, but Harding is an exceptional miniaturist, he has the extraordinary skill to carve so much in so little a canvas. Paul Harding is one of those rare writers who can pen down words so precisely to convey what he intends to without resorting to any “clumsy jumble” that his prose feels like refined marble yet being capable of vigorously penetrating through every trope. All three of Harding’s novels are testament to this incredible capability of his. He shines mightily in *Tinkers* (Bellevue Literary Press, 2009), dips a tad low in his second novel *Enon* (Random House, 2013) but *This Other Eden* is a triumphant return for him. He not only matches his debut Pulitzer winner *Tinkers*, but rather remarkably, he outshines himself with this one. *This Other Eden* has been shortlisted for this year’s Booker Prize and is a finalist for this year’s National Book Awards. It will only be fitting if he ends up winning. **Najmus Sakib** studies Linguistics at the University of Dhaka. Reach him on X at @sakib221b.