

THE SHELF

Books that reinspire the creative spark

At some point in the life of a writer, there comes a day—perhaps disguised as any other Sunday morning, when the weather is exceptionally pleasant and full of hope for productivity—with plenty of time to brew yourself a cup of coffee before you sit down at your desk to do what you love most: create.

SYEDA ERUM NOOR

And on this day, when you are almost certain you will complete what you set out to do (hit your word count), you pick up that pen and flip open your notebook, and it hits you.

Emptiness. A resounding blankness that seems to blare with the sounds of static. All words seem to have left you. The vision for your story is nothing more than a faraway thought some version of you had in some other life. It is as though all your inspiration to create was only a thing of the past, belonging to someone who no longer exists.

Writer's block can be caused by a number of things. For some, it can be the feeling of having lost that spark for your current project while for others, it can be the all-consuming feeling of being unable to drag yourself out of bed, sit yourself down and just do the work. Whatever may be the cause, however, it is important to remember that it can be solved, no matter how bleak it may feel right now. So, while moments like these can feel dark and hopeless, I've found solace in a combination of books that I read in the following order that have helped me and, judging by the reviews, thousands of others find a spark when the creative energy in the world seems depleted.



BIG MAGIC
Elizabeth Gilbert
Riverhead Books, 2015

For the dreamer in us, this book is pure magic. Elizabeth Gilbert writes conversationally, making the readers feel as though we are speaking with that artsy aunt who's visiting from Paris, with only one goal in mind: to inspire. Like little treats left for her readers to find, she leaves lessons on how to best cultivate inspiration and creativity sprinkled throughout the pages that are otherwise filled with personal stories and real life anecdotes from both her own life and other creators she has come across—each one coaxing us back to the creative place that is inherently stored in our minds.

Through concepts that redefine a creator's relationship with inspiration, she shows us the process of creation through a refreshing lens of magic. She takes time to shed light on the beauty and the magic of how ideas are born and reminds us that it is up to us, creators, to bring it to life. She humbles us, reminding us that ideas are not for us to own, but simply to serve as a medium to, bridging the gap between vision and reality. She reminds us to stop and smell the roses. To enjoy the writing process, including all its ups and downs. The book serves as a reminder we can all use as we so

often forget to enjoy creating once we enter a race of pursuing perfection in our craft.

ON WRITING
Stephen King
Scribner, 2000

After that wonderful dose of magic, I turn to Stephen King's *On Writing*. His book, being a mix of a memoir as well as tips and tricks for the aspiring writer, felt grounded in a reality any one of us can relate to. And I think that's what made it so lovely to read.

90 per cent of the memoir is on his pre-success, giving us a very real insight into the hardships that come with being a writer with no audience. It, to me, served as both a testament of hope as well as a reality check—reminding me of and preparing me for what I'd signed up for. This journey is not easy. There is so much to overcome to be able to just create something that you like—let alone fight the fight to have it presented to the rest of the world. And Stephen King reminds us of just that.

He also serves up a few lessons that are essential for any writer at any stage of



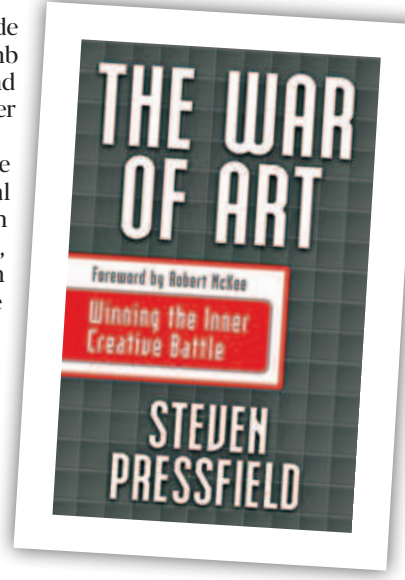
their lives. These include some rules of thumb regarding grammar and recommendations of other reading material.

As opposed to the magical, mystical approach Elizabeth Gilbert takes in *Big Magic*, Stephen King writes with grit and wit. So while Gilbert will help you fall in love with the magic that comes with creation, King will ground you and show you just how you can use all that magic—that to some may feel overwhelming—to achieve what we set out to do, regardless of where we are in life.

THE WAR OF ART
Steven Pressfield
Rugged Land, 2002

At this point, having taken a journey through magic and being served with a dose of reality, Steven Pressfield's book takes us through what I think is the last step in this process of getting back into creating.

By now, you should be geared up and ready to go and write, pumped with newfound inspiration and a will to keep you writing. And this book will ensure that inspiration to *The War of Art* teaches you arguably



the most difficult aspect of being a creative—to keep at it. And it does so beautifully. Simplifying what to most of us feels impossible, Steven Pressfield's message is to, come rain or hail, sit down every day and work at your craft.

From creators just starting out all the way up to successful ones, discipline and perseverance is always the most difficult to maintain, and most often the defining difference between an expert and a student.

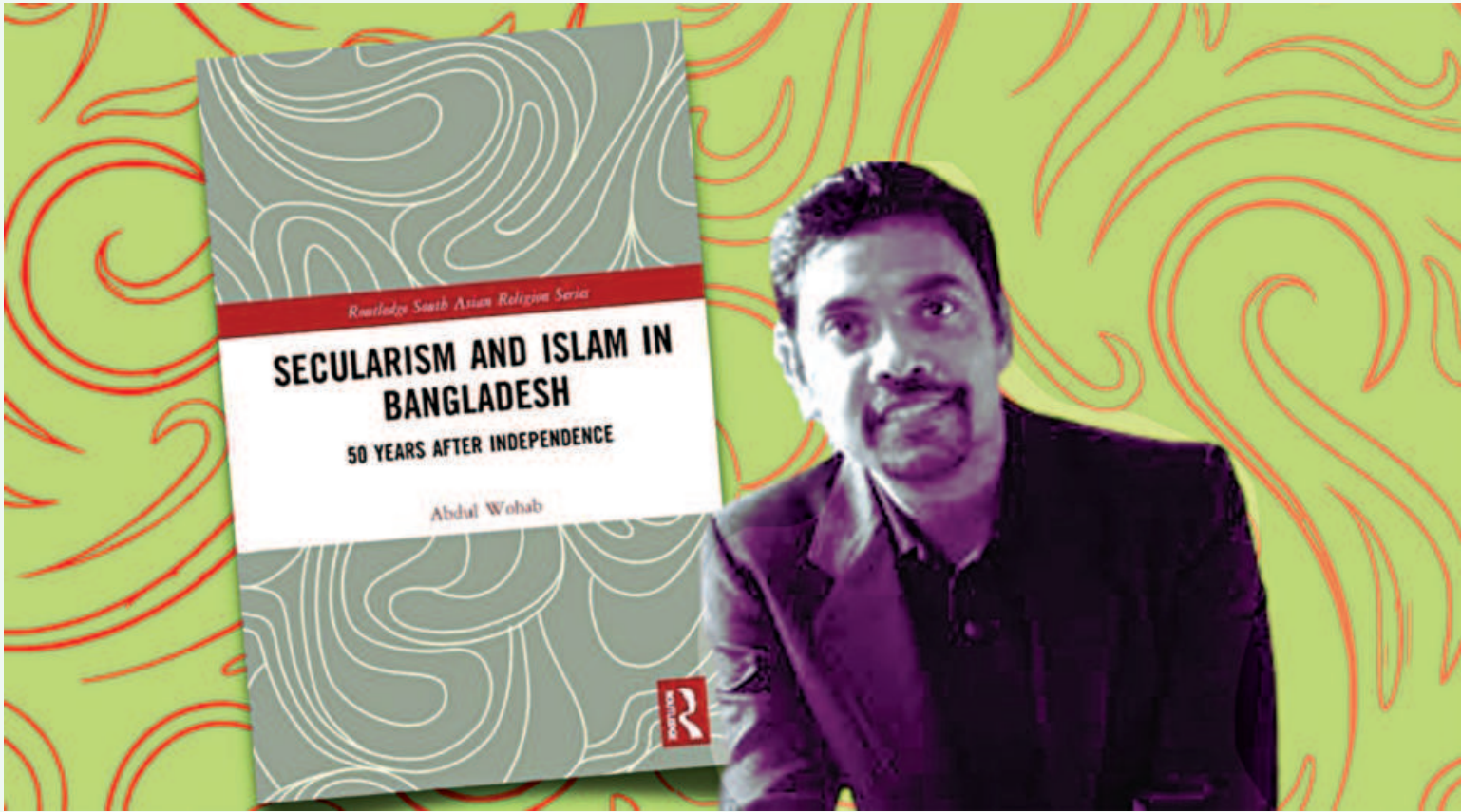
Steven Pressfield discusses concepts of resistance and how much of it stems from within us. He teaches us why it exists and most importantly how to fight it. On the journey to getting right back into creating after having fallen off the wagon, I think this is a good reminder that it is okay to stray from the path and to be reminded of the ways to keep coming right back to it, no matter how many times we get knocked off course.

Syeda Erum Noor is devoted to learning about the craft of writing and is an avid reader who can talk endlessly about the magic of books. To talk to her about either, reach her at s.eru

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Navigating the labyrinth of Bangladesh's secular identity

Review of 'Secularism and Islam in Bangladesh: 50 Years After Independence' (Routledge UK, 2023) by Abdul Wohab



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

Dr Wohab observes, "Secularism... in Bangladesh, refers to the freedom enjoyed by people of all religions to observe their own faith without fear of prejudice or discrimination"

REESHA AHMED

The debate about the constitutional position of secularism in Bangladesh with Islam as the state religion raises one burning question, "Is the country undergoing an identity crisis?" In *Secularism and Islam in Bangladesh*, Abdul Wohab searches for an answer to this question by exploring the complex interplay between religion and state. Spanning the period from the third to the early 13th century, the book visits the Maurya, Gupta, Pala, and Sena dynasties to show the readers the shaping of the sociocultural scenario in Bengal with the arrival of Muslim conquerors.

Abdul Wohab, who teaches Sociology at Dhaka's North South University, traces the development of cultural traditions associated with

syncretistic Islam that embodies the Bengali values of secularism, tolerance, and humanism, and consequently challenges the notion that Islam and secularism are inherently incompatible. He, then, focuses on recent historical events, such as the communal conflict between Hindus and Muslims that led up to the creation of Pakistan, the 1971 Liberation War and the birth of Bangladesh, the banning of Islamic anti-liberation parties in the first Bangladeshi constitution, the August 1975 coup and the resulting revival of Islamic forces that shifted Bangladesh's trajectory from secularism towards a more Islamic state.

Dr Wohab observes, "Secularism... in Bangladesh, refers to the freedom enjoyed by people of all religions to observe their own faith without

fear of prejudice or discrimination". This encapsulates the essence of the struggle between secularism and Islam-oriented political forces in the Muslim-majority nation. In this compelling discussion on syncretistic Islam, the incident involving the harassment of a Hindu woman for wearing the "teep" or "bindi" in Dhaka, the hijab ban in France, and the attack on secular bloggers in Bangladesh serve as powerful symbols of the friction between secularism and Islamic fundamentalism, while bringing a vivid and relatable aspect to the academic discourse.

Dr Wohab's inclusion of attitudinal surveys, electoral results, and opinions from key informants (secular and Islamists) enriches the book's empirical foundation. The use of elite interviewing provides firsthand

accounts from politicians, academics, activists, and media commentators, offering valuable insights into the current political climate of Bangladesh. Wohab's meticulous research, coupled with his accessible presentation of complex ideas, makes this book a must-read for scholars, policymakers, students, and anyone keen on understanding the intricate dynamics of secularism and Islam in South Asia particularly Bangladesh. However, a more explicit exploration of potential solutions or recommendations could enhance the book's practical relevance in unravelling the complexities of the Bangladeshi sociocultural landscape.

The chapter "Revisiting Worldviews on Secularism and Religiosity: West and Beyond" identifies the Treaty of Westphalia as the symbol of the secularisation of international life. By exploring classical sociology through the lenses of Comte, Durkheim, and Weber, the author acquaints the reader with the gradual disenchantment of the world and the emergence of rationalisation in human life. The juxtaposition of freedom and religion in the first wave set the stage for a thought-provoking discourse on the implications of secularism for modernity and democracy. Conversely, readers are encouraged to reevaluate their preconceptions by the second wave, which emphasises the rising religiosity in the modern world and its sociocultural importance within multicultural Western societies. The discussion, then, seamlessly transitions into the third wave introducing post-secularism and suggesting a paradigm shift in understanding the role of religion in the modern era. Wohab, in his clear and engaging academic prose, suggests that post-secularism may offer a more fitting framework for understanding the immanent role of religion in society.

The book offers a compelling history lesson, and argues that while echoes of historical religious tensions persist within the South Asian diaspora, this study on syncretism may

very well serve as a potential catalyst in restoring harmony and overcoming the shadows of past discord by shining a light on the shared heritage of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains in the cultural melting pot of Bengal.

To the reader's delight, Wohab calls a spade a spade and doesn't shy away from addressing the threats posed by extremist ideologies to Bengali nationalism. Be it the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina orchestrated by the extremist organisation Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh, the attacks on cultural programs and secular intellectuals such as writer Humayun Azad, the removal of the Lady Justice statue from the Supreme Court building, or the curtailment of free speech by attacking bloggers—all of these incidents encourage much-needed introspection on the country's current sociopolitical climate.

With this book, Abdul Wohab has not only made an invaluable contribution to the literature on the sociology of religion but also challenged preconceptions by initiating difficult conversations. His call for strengthening democratic institutions resonates throughout the book. In debating the future of secularism, he places Bangladesh within the bigger picture of a global perspective by drawing parallels with Turkey, a country with a unique geographic position, lying partly in Asia and partly in Europe. Ultimately, *Secularism and Islam in Bangladesh* transcends conventional boundaries. The contentious waltz between secularism and Islam sparks intellectual wildfires in a nation wrestling with the delicate balance between tradition and modernity. As Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture, the book stands as a beacon in the sociology of religion, paving the way for a nuanced understanding of secularism in relation to religiosity globally.

Reesha Ahmed is a contributor at The Business Standard and the founder of the youth nonprofit, Share Your Closet.