



ILLUSTRATION : MAISHA SYEDA

ESSAY

# The ethics of ghostwriting in fiction

Unpacking Millie Bobby Brown’s ‘Nineteen Steps’ (HarperCollins, 2023) and the ghost in the story

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TASNIM ODRIKA

When I first heard that Millie Bobby Brown was writing a book, I initially thought, “A memoir? At 19?”. Turns out, it’s a historical fiction novel called *Nineteen Steps* about a tragic accident that happened in Bethnal Green, London, in March of 1943. Set against a World War II backdrop, the novel tells the story of protagonist Nellie Morris and her life in East London during the war.

During that time, Bethnal Green Station served as an air raid shelter, and it was the 19 steps of stairs leading down to the station where, in an attempt to rush down for cover, a woman tripped and caused the descending crowd to topple, resulting in a mass crash that killed 173 people.

I was excited to read about this often untold tragic incident of the war. But my excitement was short-lived as the book began with the following passage: “It was hot—the kind of heat that makes you yearn for the weather to cool down and the leaves to fall, but then you berate yourself for wishing away the good weather.” The book is written in a clichéd descriptive way that reminded me of certain fanfictions I grew up reading on Wattpad, filled with

two dimensional characters and poorly constructed dialogues.

Halfway through the book, the clichéd plot of a love triangle becomes evident, but due to the way the characters are written, it’s difficult to feel any connection or empathise with them. It’s challenging to feel empathy when the love interest begins with the same-old clichéd “not like other girls” dialogue: “This girl, with her obvious love for her little sister, her spirit, her unconventionality, her disregard for danger—now she was different all right.” And even after reading through to the very last page, there’s not much you can make out about the main character other than the fact that she is “quite attractive” and “feisty”.

I see no necessity for writing a scathing review of a book authored by a 19-year-old, and this article is not about that. It turns out that if I am to criticise the book, there’s another person to join the equation. That is the ghostwriter, Kathleen McGurl. So, instead, I am more curious about the ethics of ghostwriting in collaboration with a celebrity. Since my main quailm with the book itself is more about the way it was written and less about the story, who should be critiqued here?

Ghostwriting is not new, and Millie Bobby Brown is not the first celebrity to hire a ghostwriter. But, soon after she published her book, she came under fire for using one. Fans have been quick to point out how the cover had Brown’s name in large gold print with no mention of the collaborator. More criticism was hurled when the ghostwriter mentioned in her blog post the actual contribution made by Brown—“I was sent a lot of research that had already been pulled together by Millie and her family, and plenty of ideas, and we had a couple of Zoom calls. And then I knuckled down and wrote the first draft, while Millie continued sending more ideas via WhatsApp.” Now, the question arises, can you put someone’s name as an author when they have not written a single word?

Similarly, ghostwriting can be common for other kinds of nonfiction work as a ghostwriter might help organise the research material into the pages of a book or help in gathering the research material.

But the situation slightly differs when the conversation is about fiction. With fiction, audiences expect words to have some connection to the author itself. Fiction is never just about the story; it’s

also about how it’s told and that varies from author to author. Every author will write the same story in a slightly different way based on their writing style. Their life experiences will also add something to a piece of literature, adding value to fiction. This is perhaps why the audience feels cheated with Brown’s book where the words were never her own.

Amidst the backlash, people have also defended the young actor by saying that the story was her family’s. But *my* two cents here are that every piece of fiction is taken from someone’s story. People have also defended the actor by saying how celebrities are known to put their names on perfumes, makeup, etc., without ever having to do anything with the product itself, forgetting that fiction is supposed to be a creative work of art and not simply a product to be sold. With AI already taking jobs from writers, ideas such as these could be a downhill slope to disaster.

But, it is true; the backlash here might have been louder because of misogyny, as this is a young woman who dares to explore and move beyond just acting. There are authors such as James Patterson who have published more than 200 novels with the help of

ghostwriters and faced not even half the criticism of Brown. The difference here might be that Patterson actually does put his words to the paper—almost half the writing is done by him.

Ghostwriting is an essential industry, serving as important collaborators for authors who lack the time or expertise to thoroughly refine their work. However, when it comes to works of fiction, endorsing the practice of crediting authors on the cover with minimal actual writing contribution should be discouraged.

Even amidst the negative press surrounding the book, *Nineteen Steps* stands out as one of the few pieces of literature addressing the Bethnal Green Station tragedy. For the longest time, the public was not allowed to discuss it, making this work of fiction inherently significant. The book aimed to showcase life in East London during the war, and perhaps if the writers had managed to vividly depict that life instead of relying on clichés, one could critique the book itself rather than start a conversation about ghostwriting.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

## LEARNING TO LET GO

Elisa Shua Dusapin’s ‘The Pachinko Parlour’ (Daunt Books, 2022) is an interrogation of identity and belonging

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To care for ageing relatives is to learn to let go, in gradual increments, your idea of the people they used to be, as they navigate the changing dynamics of the role reversal between them and you. It is a continued process of forgiving them for repeating patterns you have had to heal from again and again. You’re achingly aware of how little time you have left together, and yet there is something mind-numbingly tedious about the everyday aspect of it. Because South Asian societies would rather preach duty, guilt, and shame than show compassion or even guidance for those struggling with the mental toll of elder care, you struggle to articulate the nature of all these weighty emotions, feeling increasingly alienated and misunderstood.

That is until you walk into your local bookstore one day, and pick up a copy of *The Pachinko Parlour* by Elisa Shua Dusapin. You’re not expecting to relate to it, at least not regarding your present situation;

the author is Franco-Korean and all her books are set in Europe or East Asia, but you welcome the possibility of an escape into a different setting so you get the book and dive right in.

You meet Claire who comes to Tokyo to summer with her grandparents. Her grandparents are “Zainichis”—Koreans who settled in Japan in the aftermath of the Korean War—and in the tradition of this community, they own and operate a pachinko parlour, which is something like a gaming arcade, considered by many to be

As the novel progresses, you peel back layers of history between Claire and her grandparents and realise that the Korea issue isn’t as straightforward as our protagonist imagined.



ILLUSTRATION : AMREETA LETHE

soft gambling. Claire and her grandparents are not particularly close. They grew up in a Japanese-occupied Korea where speaking their own language was punishable by death, and now they resist speaking Japanese, which makes it hard for them to assimilate into the country they live in. Claire lives in Switzerland, where Korean is not taught, and so she is studying Japanese, but must communicate with her grandparents in basic

English, which doesn’t make for a very close relationship.

When the book opens, she has arrived in Tokyo. It’s a sweltering summer and Claire, who has been trying to convince her grandparents to join her on a visit to Korea for a few years now, is once again met with a stubborn resistance. To break up the monotony of her days in this city, she takes up a part time job, tutoring a local child, Mieko, in French. Mieko lives with her mother,

and her memories of a vanished father, in a deserted hotel.

As the novel progresses, you peel back layers of history between Claire and her grandparents and realise that the Korea issue isn’t as straightforward as our protagonist imagined. Claire’s grandparents have never quite fit into Japanese society, and yet this small, self-contained world of their apartment, the pachinko parlour, and their small community, is all they know, but as their years begin to catch up to them, even the familiar is starting to become unfamiliar—a source of much distress to their granddaughter. Claire, who is considered exotic in Switzerland, feels alien in Japan, a feeling that is underscored by her interactions with Mieko’s mother. She projects some of that on to her grandparents, believing that a visit to Korea, where they’re “really from”, will be significant in some way, and grapples to understand why they are gently resisting her efforts to make it happen. Driven more by emotion than plot, the

story builds gradually until its intense conclusion.

There is a calmness in the sparse prose, the vivid, but restrained descriptions that allows a certain lassitude seep in during the reading of it. You might be reading this book amidst the drone of Dhaka life, far removed from the heat of Tokyo in summer, but will find yourself connecting to everything the narrator communicates without saying it outright—the melancholia, the boredom, and frustration that comes through from her dealings with her grandparents, or even Mieko at times. The book revolves around themes of absence and abandonment, cultural history and identity, belonging and otherness, and language and connection—things that transcend borders and cultural barriers.

By the time you arrive at the emotional conclusion of the novel, you feel seen.

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