

ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The enchanting realism in Shahaduz Zaman's 'The Mynah Bird's Testimony'

Review of Shahaduzzaman Zaman's 'The Mynah Bird's Testimony' (Moving Words, 2023), translated from Bangla by V Ramaswamy and Noora Shamsi Bahar

Consequently, two of the strongest stories here are "Discard the Love of Clove" and "My Position Regarding Death is Absolutely Clear". The latter is a heartfelt story where Shahaduz Zaman's witty language and refrains ("burnt aubergine-like skin") coalesce into a memorable tale of loss.

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Shahaduz Zaman is a familiar face in Bangladeshi literature, whose literary career spans decades of fruitful work. He regularly writes columns for Bangla newspapers, has written a few notable biographical fiction, such as *Ekjon Komolalebu* (Prothoma, 2017), based around the life of Jibananda Das, and has garnered some duly needed appreciation for ethnographic work on the history of medicine during the liberation war. *The Mynah Bird's Testimony* is not his first short-story collection to be translated into English, either. Sonia Amin had earlier translated Shahaduz Zaman's *Ibrahim Buksh's Circus and Other Stories* (UPL, 2008).

The present collection of stories is a product of the Kolkata-based venture *The Antonym* (an independent publisher and online literary translation magazine). It sees veteran translator V Ramaswamy and Noora Shamsi Bahar, writer and academic at North South University, bring Shahaduz Zaman's eclectic stories to a global audience. The stories speak for themselves: peculiarly introspective and understated, Shahaduz Zaman's writing often provides an intimate portrait of his characters' visceral lives.

Take the story "An Envelope in the Semblance of a Piece of Sunlight," for instance. We find Andaleeb in possession of discarded letters, one of which is sent by a "convicted felon sentenced to death by hanging," (as it is ridiculously stated right on the envelope). The contents of this letter pulls Andaleeb to a different world and he finds himself

intervening in the lives of strangers. Where in the original Bangla, the felon appears vulnerable in the letter, in Bahar's English, he is a different character, almost irritated that his brother has seemingly abandoned him.

Bahar is better able to encapsulate the environment in, "Then, As I Kept Going," for which she had won the Tagore Award for Translated Fiction in 2021. It is a splendid story, a colorful mix of local and global. "Internet and pizza hadn't reached the village yet," the story announces, "A DVD player ran on battery power at the tea stall where I sat, sipping on my tea. Some actress was dancing to the song 'Tanki Futa' on the TV screen." It has a crisp, vivid image that stays with the reader.

Consequently, two of the strongest stories here are "Discard the Love of Clove" and "My Position Regarding Death is Absolutely Clear". The latter is a heartfelt story where Shahaduz Zaman's witty language and refrains ("burnt aubergine-like skin") coalesce into a memorable tale of loss. We see the son ruminating over his dying father, a man who once "had his pockets picked twice the same day." The ordeal is shown through a bleak series of repetitions, the best of which dwell on conversations with doctors that orbit unendingly on the time one's loved ones have left.

In "Discard the Love of Clove," one can find all the elements of storytelling that Shahaduz Zaman is known for. Unpredictable turns, throttling societal norms, and an awareness that borders on meta-fiction. The author's shortcomings in writing women (relying

usually on tired comparisons to the moon or celebrating them for being model housewives) are absent in his protagonist Nargis Parveen. A captivating character, she is known as "Chhokka Beti" for she screams out "Chhhokka a-aa" after rolling a six in Ludo. When she is married off to the recently widowed Mojammel Ali (puzzlingly the translation has the characters saying "I do" in their wedding instead of the more common "qabool"), Nargis upends all societal expectations from her. The story is an immensely enjoyable read and while its central beauty is a witty line that Nargis shares with Mojammel Ali's son-in-law, it is sadly untranslatable into English. In the original Bangla, it is a unique verse, full of wordplay and flair, which in Ramaswamy's English is an unconvincing summary of the line.

The title story speaks to Shahaduz Zaman's talents in fiction. A rags to riches story is given a near-magical depth. We find Bajlu, a mere tree climber, immersing himself into the world of punthi. The fairy tales in verse inspire him to concoct heroics and change his life for the better. It is one of many bright pockets in this new collection.

One definitely sees *The Mynah Bird's Testimony*, both the story and the collection entirely, to have a lasting presence. Zaman's devoted readers would not be disappointed.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A twisted tale of deception

Review of 'None Of This Is True' (Penguin, 2023) by Lisa Jewell

SYEDA ERUM NOOR

Reading this book was uncomfortable, like a car crash waiting to happen, it was hard to read and even harder to put down.

Focusing on the eerie fears that revolve around unpredictability and obsession, Lisa Jewell effortlessly takes us down a twisty path riddled with suspense, eeriness and the thrill of never quite knowing what to expect.

None of This is True revolves around two women, born on the same day but who seem to be living perfectly opposing lives. Josie Fair is quiet, mundane and invisible while Alix Summer is ambitious, accomplished and famous.

And one fine day, Alix Summer, a successful podcaster with a seemingly Instagrammable family, in pursuit of an interesting subject to interview, opened her door to the wrong person.

It's all downhill from there. The book explores concepts that are not foreign to psychological thrillers, but Lisa Jewell uses these all-too-familiar tools to make the reader squirm, keeping them in that state of discomfort throughout the entire novel. You quite simply

cannot breathe, until the book is over, because you are holding it either while you attempt to solve the mystery or out of sheer distress.

The eeriness that the book touches on is the kind that makes you want to lock your doors and draw your curtains. The discomfort and the fear that it fixates on is privacy and what an attack on it might feel like. Every word tends

to spew a kind of eeriness that makes you want to peel your own skin off to protect yourself.

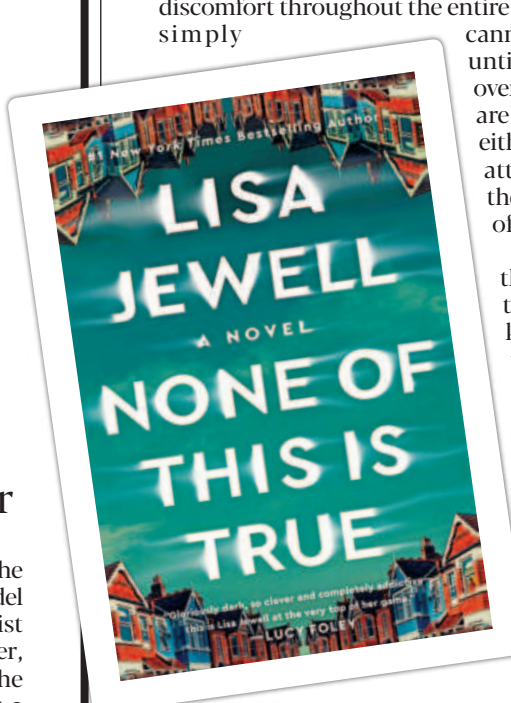
While the title does give away the importance of deception in this plot, the guesswork in detecting the lie only further elevates the experience of reading it. We are misled at every point in the book, constantly trying to figure out who's telling the truth. And the problem with trying to detect a lie is that it's that much harder when the liar believes it to be true, throwing us into a whirlwind of confusion.

As for the characters, I was immediately invested in both their lives. Neither of the women seemed to have a life one could call average, yet they have very real obstacles that can feel very relatable and grounded in a reality that could be true for any one of us.

My parting thought for this read, however, is only about one of these women, who impacted me far more than the other. Josie Fair, the sole existence of whom would oftentimes feel like an attack on privacy.

None of This Is True is a dark, twisted psychological thriller that will have you on the edge of your seat from the first page to the last.

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. Reach her at @syedaerumnoorwrites.



REFLECTIONS

The stories that nonfictions tell

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

Dense textbooks with words more twisted than the shapes my lips could contort themselves into—for the longest time, my perception of non-fiction didn't deviate from this singular image. Perhaps it was the uncanny resemblance to textbooks or the ruthless objectivity these books claimed that deterred me from picking up non-fiction. Or perhaps it was because my brain had become wired in a way that I perceived everything that was not immersive fiction to be monotonous and cold.

A fiction reader by nature, I had trained my overactive imagination to find comfort in fantastical worlds. It was in the iciness of a Fjerding jail and in the bittersweet warmth of District 12 that I found my home. The pedestal on which I placed my perception of fiction made it all the more hard for non-fiction to climb its way to my good graces. Even the idea of reading something rooted in reality felt tedious to me. That is until I read Muhammad Zafar Iqbal's *Obisshashho Shundor*

Prithibi (Kakoli Prokashoni, 2019).

Iqbal's fiction books hadn't really captivated me. Thus, it was with little expectation that I turned the cover of my mother's copy of the pocket-sized, blue book. Chronicling the emotions he experienced after being physically attacked by a student in 2018 and written in astoundingly simple prose, the book felt hauntingly vulnerable. Here was a book, clearly based on real events, that I had come to love. I realised that I was wrong to label non-fiction as cold. Yes, the genre certainly has the capacity to be disconnected from feelings. However, the book made me see how non-fiction can be artfully crafted to portray factual happenings in an almost lyrical fashion. The book could easily have been a drab chronological account; but, with the right literary tools, it morphed into the painful, hopeful, and beautiful musings of a wounded man trying to find his path toward physical and emotional recovery.

To label this incident as a turning point in my reading journey would be inaccurate. It was not a religious



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experience; it did not suddenly convert me into an avid reader of nonfiction. But it opened me to the possibility of exploring the world of nonfiction. I started small, dipping my toes into creative nonfiction. I had just watched a rerun of Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* on HBO and decided to pick up Jon Krakauer's book of the same name. Packed with multiple threads, some weaving through the story of a young man's search for himself and others going into dense tangents on literary

analogies, the book was not an easy read. But I also couldn't put it down. The narrative was tied together with the small personal tidbits the author provided, paralleling their own experiences with that of the subject, and that furnished the book with a strong human touch that made it hard to not keep turning the pages.

Having finally found the brand of nonfiction that I connected with—creative nonfiction or simply any nonfiction with a strong sense of personality—I finally plucked

up the courage to dive deeper into this unknown realm. In Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (Random House, 1966), I discovered the thrill of reading true crime. By laying bare both the gruesome and mundane details of the lives of the victims and perpetrators within the scope of 300 pages, the book expanded my understanding of how horror and tragedy can be crafted into a piece of art. With Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* (Corgi Books, 1996), I saw how a person can channel their anger and frustration to create writing that is devastatingly moving.

As a reader, I shouldn't be burdened with the responsibility of reading anything and everything. To do so would be to make the act of reading a chore. It's hard enough to find a rhythm in a genre that is out of my comfort zone. Thus, I would rather take my time with it, punctuating the experience with easy fiction reads in between.

I see now too, unlike textbooks, I don't need to necessarily remember all the details of the book. A piece of work being filled with information alludes to the idea of needing to

retain that information because it resembles academic text. I had to shed this idea, reminding myself that, unlike academic text, there are no consequences if I don't remember the nitty-gritty of Arundhati Roy's political inclinations in *Azadi* (Penguin Random House India, 2020). I simply need to retain the passion behind her prose and the strength of the feelings I experienced while consuming her words.

I think the main barrier I had with nonfiction was separating it so severely from fiction. Creating that mental hurdle for myself kept me away from giving a whole area of literature a shot. What I should have done from the very beginning was to find the overarching story in every book. I regret not starting with nonfiction sooner, but I am trying to rectify my bias with every new fact-filled tome I read.

Adrita Zaima Islam is a struggling student and writer, and she is trying her best to be the best version of herself. Send her your condolences at zaima2004adrita@gmail.com.