

INTERVIEW

THE STORIES WE WANT TO TELL: In conversation with Gemini Wahhaj



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

When I used the title 'Children of Madness,' I thought they were literally the children of the mad guy! But you are right about the poem. The poem is about Iraqis, and I think the lines are saying that so much history of war and suffering has come before us; we are the children of this madness—but it is up to us what choices we make about how we live.

USRAAT FAHMIDAH

In Gemini Wahhaj's debut novel, *The Children of This Madness* (7.13 Books, 2023), the follow the lives of engineering professor Nasir Uddin and his daughter Beena, an aspiring PhD candidate living in the US. Nasir Uddin rises from humble beginnings to become an engineering professor amidst the backdrop of the '47 Partition and the Bangladesh Liberation War, while Beena chooses to pursue literature and begins her PhD journey in the US. This isn't your conventional immigrant story. Told through the altering voices of a father and daughter, it's a book about aspirations, the weight of the past, and the journeys we take.

During our conversation, Wahhaj shares insights into the narrative style of her book, the emergence of her protagonist's voice, inspiration that led her to write about the children of madness, her experience publishing with small presses, and more.

It's intriguing to learn that there were initially no chapters dedicated to Beena, especially considering that she and her father, Nasir Uddin, emerge as the primary characters in the final manuscript. Can you elaborate on when Beena's voice started to take shape within your story and ultimately became the

central focus?

In the original manuscript, Beena had no story. She is simply an unsuccessful daughter lamenting, "How did this happen? My brother isn't successful, I'm not successful, and my parents are a mess", while everyone else thrives. For me, that impulse and question is authentic—because I'm not successful, my parents died young; my husband and I aren't successful in the traditional sense. It's a quintessentially Bangali question to pursue success, no matter how idealistic you are. You aspire to win. I believe that's a significant aspect of the middle-class Bangali identity, even though we may not perceive it that way.

I had to live in America for 20 years to find out Beena's story. Her narrative revolves around securing her immigration status because when you arrive in America, your primary focus becomes security. You view yourself in terms of your immigration status and employment. When I see young people who have just arrived in America and see how much they have to get in place, I'm both surprised and reminded of when I first arrived. They are preoccupied with their job, their OPT, and the expiration of their F-1 visa. They inhabit an entirely different realm. That was Beena's story, that she was desperate to secure her position.

When Beena was not part of the story, when she was simply a bookend, I could portray her as a flawless, innocent character who observes the other Bangladeshi immigrants and asks, "Why are they so corrupt?" But when she became part of the story, she had to become more like the other characters. That's why I had to write her in the third person, as she gradually mirrors the people she questions. It was challenging to write her as an innocent character because ultimately, she chooses to pursue citizenship and assimilate into that lifestyle.

You start your novel with an epigraph from a poem by Saadi Youssef, and the novel's title is also derived from it. Talking about the characters, the protagonist Beena witnesses the invasion of Iraq, and also her life is somewhat uprooted when her mother and brother are killed in a blast in Dhaka. There's also Nasir, whose life is completely different from that of Beena's. He has had a rough childhood and survived the 1971 war. They are born out of madness in their different ways. The central theme of the book is about the lives of people caught between a war and its aftershocks. What drew you to write about these children of this madness?

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Madness, I thought they were literally the children of the mad guy! But you are right about the poem. The poem is about Iraqis, and I think the lines are saying that so much history of war and suffering has come before us; we are the children of this madness—but it is up to us what choices we make about how we live.

For me, one compulsion for the novel was the Iraq war in 2003. When I was writing the novel, it was right after the Iraq war had started in 2003. Throughout my teenage and adult years in the US, Iraq was a constant presence—Bush Senior's war in 1991, the weapon inspections in the 90s, bombings of Baghdad during Bill Clinton's presidency, and then the invasion of 2003. I was witnessing the buildup of this political tension throughout my entire conscious life. There was always a sense that it wouldn't happen, until it did in 2003. So, it was really the shock of the Iraq war.

Also, in America, there aren't many novels about the Iraq war. There are numerous narratives about it, but they're mostly from the American perspective—focused on veterans who served there, the devastation experienced by their families, and the PTSD they endure. It's all seen through an American lens. Yet, there's a notable absence of narratives from the Iraqi perspective. I'm not Iraqi, so I couldn't write that novel either. But I wanted to write about how it feels to just helplessly watch the Iraq war unfold.

And the other impulse was to write about the Bangladeshis who are settled in America. Who do you become when you decide to settle in America? I'm not criticising that, but the Bangladeshi characters in America are primarily focused on their own concerns—like getting a house, citizenship, and a job. They become almost divorced from society, uninterested in American culture or the people around them, and indifferent to conflicts like the Iraq war. Your whole identity shifts. I don't feel like the same person I was when I first arrived here. Bangladesh has receded in my memory. I'm now much more engrossed in the politics and issues here. But the Bangladeshi immigrants I've encountered in Houston seem very divorced from society. They were not concerned that there was a war going on in Iraq.

The Bangladeshis I know are deeply entrenched in capitalism and tied to the corporations that employ them. They hold a narrow view of success, which revolves around earning a lot of money and possessing power. When I first arrived here, I wanted to be a part of the Bangladeshi community.

However, I soon realised that we have completely different values. When I first came here, I was still deeply rooted in my Bangladeshi identity. But I've changed so much, just by becoming an American, by deciding to become an American citizen. I was interested in exploring what that is—not to pass judgement, but to explore what identity is, and how it intersects with citizenship.

Can you share a bit more about the publication process? What was it like for you, from initial submission to seeing your work in print?

I didn't have an agent. To get published with a small press, you have to send your manuscript. Most small presses have submissions open at certain times of the year. Sometimes there are contests for you to send your manuscript. So, I did that. That's how I was published. It takes about a year from there. It's accepted, and then they send you editorial feedback. Then, there are rounds and rounds of detailed editing, fact-checking, and proofreading.

It was exciting to see it progress closer to becoming a book, but then I would have to read it again. And as you get closer, you have to make sure it's good. I had my publisher and editor read the manuscript. So, there were multiple sets of eyes on it which made me feel secure. When I was editing the book, my entire focus was on the manuscript. I had little capacity for anything else. I couldn't move in the world. I had an accident one time backing out of a parking lot! I just wasn't interested in daily activities. All I could think about was getting back to my manuscript.

What's the next thing on your plate?

When you say "next", it's kind of hard [to map out]! I have a short story collection that will be released next January. Right now, I'm working on revising and completing a manuscript—a novel based in Sylhet. I also have another manuscript in mind that I'm eager to write—it's my immigrant story. I'm particularly interested in exploring the experiences of immigrant women living in America who are also mothers and delving into their feelings of being lost and confused. Initially, I attempted to write it as a memoir, but it felt too personal and traumatic, so I decided to approach it as fiction. And I'm getting together new stories for another short-story manuscript.

This is an excerpt. Find the full interview on DS Books and The Daily Star's websites.

Usraat Fahmidah is a freelance journalist & writer. You can find them on X @ usraatfahmidah.

THE SHELF

6 Books to add to your summer reading list



As summer rolls around and our lifestyle changes to adjust to the heat, so do a lot of our books! So here are a few books that might make a good addition to this year's summer reading list.

SYEDA ERUM NOOR

ARANYAK
Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay
Mitra & Ghosh Pvt Ltd, 1976

Aranyak follows the story of Satyacharan, who, on account of his new job, moves from his urban life to one revolving around a jungle. Him and his partner, Jugalprasad, find a mutual fondness for the nature they are surrounded by. Problems arise when Satyacharan's job requires him to destroy the creation of the forest-Goddess against his own will in order for him to distribute amongst the people. As he grapples with the consequences, readers can find

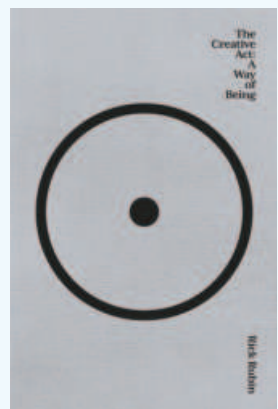


solace in the setting, which acts almost as an escape for all of us from the heat of this summer.

THE GUEST
Emma Cline
Penguin Random House, 2023

Emma Cline's *The Guest* revolves around Alex, a con artist who is down on her luck. After breaking up with her boyfriend, she ends up stranded in Long Island where she goes on to spend the final days of summer. Here, moving from summer home to summer home, Alex finds herself causing all kinds of shenanigans for upper-class people on their summer vacations.

THE CREATIVE ACT: A WAY OF BEING

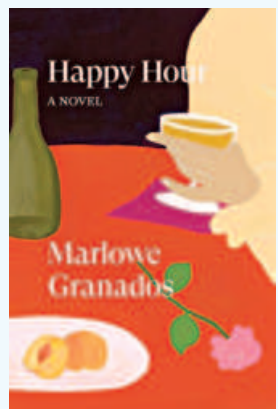


Rick Rubin
Penguin Press, 2023

For a lot of us, summer is when we like to ponder, reflect and educate. *The Creative Act* tries to help encapsulate what it is to be an artist and to dabble in creativity. The book tries to navigate the mysteries of the art of creation while explaining how we can access and utilise this creativity through commitment and practice. The book dares its readers to surpass any and all limitations that the world presents and ride the wave of creativity to an otherworldly experience.

HAPPY HOUR
Marlowe Grandos
Flying Books, 2020

This novel is written in the



format of a diary written by Isa. The entries revolve around her and her friend Gala, detailing their travels and their adventures through New York City over the summer. With little to no money, readers get to see this pair's friendship and life evolve with their time spent in the city. As we watch them go progressively broke, we also get to see how that is not something that's going to stop either one of them.

KOBI
Humayun Ahmed
Kakali Prakashani, June 1996

In this heat, when everything feels hazy from humidity and the glaring sun, *Kobi* offers us a tiny pathway into a world that is wistful and mystical instead.



Through the protagonist Atahar's struggle to find himself, his poetic voice, and his place in this uncompromising city, the author invites the reader along for a poignant, painful ride. As a perennially cash strapped Atahar walks endlessly across the city in characteristic Ahmed fashion (walking is a preoccupation another one of Ahmed's famous characters, Himu, shares), the month of Chaitra, its obdurate heat, the smell of burnt road and sweat—all gather together to weave a tale that accurately captures the relentlessness of summer.

LITTLE WOMEN
Louisa May Alcott
Roberts Brothers, 1868



Personally, this classic has always felt like the perfect read for a warm summer day. Perhaps it's nostalgia or personal preference but something about flipping through the warm, wholesome life of the March family feels like the perfect escape as we try to beat the heat. So sit back, and turn on your fans as you get to laugh, smile and cry through the evolution of the characters and their relationships.

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 on Instagram at @syedaerumnoorwrites.