

INTERVIEW

A perfect cup of literary 'saa'

In conversation with Priyanka Taslim



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

NABILAH KHAN

Priyanka Taslim greets me with a gentle smile as we meet over Zoom. She is eloquent and our conversation flows organically, akin to an adda over a cup of saa (cha). Her debut novel, *The Love Match* (Simon and Schuster, 2023) has garnered praise in *Teen Vogue*, *USA Today*, *Pop Culturalist* and more. It was a Junior Library Guild gold standard selection and one of Amazon's best young adult novels of 2023. Despite the recognition, she is grounded in and connected to her roots. Her grace, simplicity and humility shines through her words.

Can you describe your publishing journey as a Bangladeshi-American author debuting with a novel with majorly South Asian characters?

It wasn't until I was an adult that I read a book by a Bangladeshi-American author, so even though I've always been a voracious reader and have long dreamed of being an author, I thought it was a futile hope. Seeing that book, *The Gauntlet* (Salaam Reads, 2017) by Karuna Riazi, rekindled some hope in me, and I finally began seriously pursuing publishing by completing a draft and seeking an agent. It took a long time to get from that point to *The Love Match* (TLM).

I set the book in Paterson where I grew up, and to be authentic to Paterson, there simply weren't a lot of white people around who didn't come in as educators, at least in my experience, so it felt like a good opportunity to explore a realistically diverse cast. I was pleasantly surprised when the book went to auction, but there were still many challenges.

There's a popular trope among YA authors where brown protagonists tend to have white love interests. What made you deviate from this?

Honestly, just to veer away from the cliché of it all! As I mentioned, there

were very few white people I knew while I was a kid in Paterson. It was only in college that I met more people of diverse backgrounds, including class. Paterson is mainly working class black and brown people, and there's a lot of diversity among them. There are many different diasporas. But my world was pretty insular when I was there. So it felt more realistic anyway, since I was writing a "love letter" to Paterson, to have predominantly working class black and brown characters, which is what informed Zahra's friend group and love interests.

At the same time, I was a little tired of the "white guy frees the brown heroine from her backward culture" trope that you see a lot in the media about "desi"/Muslim diaspora characters. In fact, the idea of saving the protagonist is explored quite a bit, because Zahra hates the thought of people trying to do that just because her circumstances are challenging. I wanted her to have a little more agency.

I also feel like one of the appeals of the white love interest is the forbidden romance aspect because so many parents in our communities prefer their children date/marry within the community. On the other hand, this feels flat and lazy to me, because it ignores when relationships are not approved of on the basis of, for example, caste.

There's a generous usage of Sylheti words and phrases in the novel. What was the reaction of your publisher regarding the use of the dialect without a glossary at the end of the book?

My publisher was lovely about it and didn't ever police me when it came to those things! I don't think they ever even brought up a glossary, though they once asked me about my italicising preferences. I did have some trouble during the copy edits stage, because the Sylheti dialect isn't the standard Bangla that you can easily Google

and is practically its own language sometimes.

I got more pushback from certain readers, which I had already been bracing myself for but was still a little disappointed and surprised by, since I hadn't encountered those issues with my publishing team. It's funny because none of my team was Bengali either, so I relied on them to step in when I couldn't see the forest for the trees and have me clarify anything that confused them, but certain readers were upset I didn't translate everything.

I genuinely tried to ensure that things were apparent through context, because as an English teacher, I often taught students how to dissect historical texts or classics set in Europe even if they weren't familiar with every detail they encountered, but unfortunately, as soon as it's a book by an author of colour, people lose the courtesy they'd extend to authors like Dostoyevski or Victor Hugo. I hope that changes someday. Despite this, though, I do generally feel most of my readers of all backgrounds tried to engage with the text respectfully.

Any advice you'd like to provide to emerging writers especially in Bangladesh?

If there's one thing I hope Bangladeshi writers take away from my experience, it's that there's a hunger for Bangladeshi characters with all sorts of experiences. There's a readership out there for you, so don't count yourself out because of your identity or because you're not American.

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

Nabilah Khan was born and raised in Bangladesh and currently resides in Sydney, Australia. After more than a decade working in the global banking and financial services industry, she now works in the Australian public service.

What we are reading this week



SYEDA ERUM NOOR
Intern, Star Books and Literature

FRAGILE THREADS OF POWER Tor Books, 2023

Set to begin after V. E. Schwab's *Shades of Magic* series, this book catapults us back into a world full of magic, now introducing us to new characters and another adventure packed plot. As a fan of the series, I may be biased, but I'm always excited to read about the characters I spent three books falling in love with, their fantastical world, and most importantly, the addicting fight scenes! As always, the book kicks off at a slightly slower pace, but it only helps build suspense and prepares its readers for the inevitably fast paced turn it's about to take.

SHELF LIFE



A classic we want you to revisit this week

To commemorate the birth anniversary of Satyajit Ray, consider reading *Ekei Bole Shooting* (1979), a personal narrative chronicling the auteur's making of his movie masterpiece *Pather Panchali* (1955).

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Should this lost novel have been found?

Review of 'Until August' (Penguin Random House, 2024) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

ZERTAB QUADERI

Articles on Gabriel Garcia Marquez's last novel to be published by his sons against the author's wishes built up my anticipation and I couldn't wait for April to arrive. Thanks to Bookworm, I got my copy the moment they had it in store and I read it twice. It didn't impress me the first time as it was just a string of chapters describing how a promiscuous woman drove herself into the arms of different men on her annual August 16 visits to a Caribbean island.

When I read *Until August* the second time, however, I began to appreciate the mastery of language with which Marquez sketched the characters, and painted the picture of an impoverished Caribbean village with "undaunting pigs and naked children". He brought alive the vibrant island nights filled with the sound of boleros and the beat of salsas, and masterfully but mercilessly carved up the heart and soul of the main character, Ana Magdalena Bach, to reveal human vulnerabilities, insecurities, and deepest thoughts in nuanced, wafer-thin layers. Much credit for that also goes to the English translator, Anne McLean, and the editor of the Spanish version, Cristobal Pera.

Although it's a short and easy read, some reading between the lines is required for a deeper understanding of the characters. What stands out is the strong imagery for the setting and the character descriptions. The blue herons, beaches, the lagoon, and "a large black woman snoozing in a beach chair" set a lazy and surreal tone. The heat from the scorching island sun and the sticky humidity in August are palpable and reflect Ana's sweaty and steamy adventures. Her nocturnal trysts and the dance moves are detailed so that the reader can visualise and sense every touch and twirl, down to the stirrings of the soul.

Ana is a complex woman with a pronounced character arc. In the beginning, she is the perfect picture of a 46-year-old, happily married, confident, and beautiful woman who keeps the spark alive in her marriage and can attract men like moths to a flame. She is



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

uncomfortable experimenting and orders the same food each time she visits the island. She prefers shabby hotels over plush ones. Yet, it's intriguing why she's so adventurous with men, and that too only on one night of the year.

Ana's character transition is triggered when she finds a twenty-dollar bill tucked in the pages of a copy of *Dracula* (Archibald Constable and Company, 1897) on one of her island nights. Egged on by the insult, she is a desperate woman determined to have her way on every night of August 16th. Her escapades ultimately sow the seeds of doubt in her marriage, forcing her to face some hard truths about her husband. Her attempts to cover up her lies create havoc within herself and affect her marriage and relationship with her daughter. By the novel's end, Ana is hitting 50, sad, alone, and stuck in an empty marriage with estranged children.

The short novel offers a vast tapestry and a heaving sea of emotions. Through Ana, we experience her joys and hurt as she plays with her lovers, her discomfort

and relief at the confessional visits to her mother's grave, her desperation to catch someone before the night is over, her calm rage when she forces her husband to recount his one-night affair, and her surprise when she finds out somebody else also places gladioli on her mother's grave.

Music forms a robust backbone of *Until August*, providing the impeccably timed background score with a cadence to match the pace of Ana's story. Even her name is almost the same as Johann Sebastian Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, barring one less 'n' in the first name. References to Western classical music, composers, and literary works are made almost on every page. These are not used in vain but shed more light on the characters and context. A thin thread of religious undertone is detected when Ana unknowingly chooses a hotel run by Mormons, doesn't know until later that one of the men she sleeps with is a bishop, and when her daughter, Micaela, joins the Discalced Carmelites.

The vivid descriptions and references

to books, music, and dance genres are impressive. Page after page of Ana's indulgence in marital infidelity was, however, a low for me. The ending deserves credit as it was quite dramatic - exactly what is expected from Marquez. *Until August* is the swan song of his literary career and was written while he suffered from dementia, and it should not be compared to his Nobel prize-winning magnum opus, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Editorial Sudamericana, 1967). Part of me agrees with the author when he instructed that "it must be destroyed" but another part of me feels that it should be read because of the rich imagery and characteristics that evoke the deepest human emotions we are too embarrassed to own.

Zertab Quaderi is an SEO English content writer and social media marketing consultant by day and a reader of fiction and nonfiction books by night. In between, she travels and dabbles in watercolour painting.