

ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

When death is a performance

A review of Kaveh Akbar’s ‘Martyr!’ (Knopf, 2024)

The reader realises soon that ‘Martyr!’ becomes vibrant and unforgettable only when the story rewinds to Tehran and Arash.

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Kaveh Akbar’s *Martyr!* is unruly and endearing. Akbar’s years as a poet has given his debut novel an honesty that shines through the book’s arduous structure. And for all of *Martyr!*’s exhilarating tone and emotional trek, the difficulties of writing a novel on addiction, martyrdom, death, and meaning is evident when one reads it. Cyrus Shams, the main character of *Martyr!*, is not a complete stand-in for Akbar, but the author lends much of his personality to his creation. They both have moved to the USA from Iran as a toddler, both have suffered from addiction and subsequently found in poetry a strength that aids their recovery.

Yet the strongest moments of

Martyr! are those set in an Iran Cyrus would have no recollection of, where his uncle Arash, a soldier during the Iran-Iraq war, rode a horse through the battlefield with a flashlight at night. “He was meant to look like an angel. He was meant to inspire the dying men to die with dignity, conviction. To keep them from suicide.” By comparison, the America where Cyrus is raised and goes to university is unremarkable. Here Cyrus dreams of a suicide that would be meaningful. He plans to write a book of martyrs (snatches of poetry from this work-in-progress pepper throughout *Martyr!* and often tend to outshine the novel proper). Akbar spends pages to paint Cyrus’s university life as one of jolly bohemia full of open-

mics at college-town cafes and casual experimentation of drugs and literary styles, yet it is those images of Arash before, comforting soldiers as an angel of death that I could not shake away long after finishing the book. Briefly after Cyrus is born in Tehran, the Americans missile down an Iranian passenger flight, killing 290 people on board. Cyrus loses his mother Roya, who was to visit Arash in Dubai. Cyrus’s father, overwhelmed with grief, soon immigrates to the very country that has killed his wife—an America where the father works at a chicken farm day in and out, where the library launches Cyrus into a world of imagination and creativity. “You’re the most American kid I know,” his sponsor, Gabe, tells him after an AA meeting. His only connection to Iran

now being an annual birthday phone-call to his uncle back home. The reader realises soon that *Martyr!* becomes vibrant and unforgettable only when the story rewinds to Tehran and Arash. Much of *Martyr!* however takes place over four days in Brooklyn, New York, where Cyrus is enamoured with an Iranian performance artist documenting herself dying from cancer in the form of an art exhibition. Cyrus believes she holds some needed insight into his obsession with martyrs, one that would surely benefit his book. Though in my experience, poets often tend to write mediocre novels, Kaveh Akbar’s *Martyr!* is too heartfelt to be brushed aside. His prose reminds one of Turgenev, where absences of a tighter plot cannot subdue the

intelligence and magnanimity of the all too real characters. As Cyrus and Orkideh, the dying artist, confer on the nature of a meaningful death, Kaveh Akbar cites Hamlet, the ambassador of death himself. “He felt like Hamlet,” Cyrus thinks, “just moping around waiting for the world to assuage his grief...” but as Orkideh prepares to die after shocking Cyrus to his core, one sees that Cyrus may feel like Hamlet, but as he eagerly and passively witnesses the performance of dying, he really is Horatio. He lives to tell the tale. Shahriar Shaams has written for Dhaka Tribune, The Business Standard, and The Daily Star. Find him on instagram: @shahriar.shaams.



QUOTE OF THE DAY

“Every Trump voter is certainly not a white supremacist, just as every white person in the Jim Crow South was not a white supremacist. But every Trump voter felt it was acceptable to hand the fate of the country over to one.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

When fiction and nonfiction create a literary supernova

Review of ‘The House of Doors’ (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023) by Tan Twan Eng

ZERTAB QUADERI

When a book mentions one of my favourite authors, W. Somerset Maugham, and the short description suggests betrayal, intrigue, secret affairs, political uprisings, failed marriages, and a whodunnit, there’s little I can do but take it. Longlisted for The Booker Prize 2023, *The House of Doors* by the Malaysian author, Tan Twan Eng, is a masterfully crafted literary work of fictional and nonfictional characters in a smudged sphere of fact and fiction. It shows Eng’s length and depth of research and his imaginative prowess. Besides having Maugham somewhat in the centre stage, the author uses other real characters, real events, and characters from Maugham’s novels and plays to create a story that spans over 30-odd years. Flashbacks of flashbacks with parallel plots, sprinkled with suspense and thrill are the ingredients for this unputdownable read. Immaculately structured with neat chapter divisions that mention the character from whose point of view the story is told, the year, and the location, the book ensures we don’t get lost in the temporal and spatial maze.

Maugham, in the book, is the catalyst that leads the main character, Lesley Hamlyn, to spill the beans from her past and present, forming the bulk of the novel. The story begins and ends with Lesley in two different countries and continents. Maugham plays second fiddle and shares glimpses of his life—his sexual orientation, financial and marital straits, emotional dependence on an exploitative “secretary” who travels the world with him, and his special knack for sniffing out dark secrets and scandals which he turns into popular novels, short stories, and plays that keep him from falling into financial ruin. Reeking of British colonialism, we see the white society in Malaya in the earlier decades of the 20th century living in the lap of luxury. Lesley and her lawyer husband, Robert, live in a mansion and are waited upon hand and foot by the natives. The short but powerful sketches of the nanny, rickshaw pullers, gardeners, and other house staff and those working in Penang sharply contrast their white masters and shed light on the vivid difference between the coloniser and the colonised. However, there is an undercurrent of rising

consciousness against imperialism when Chinese revolutionary, Sun Yat Sen, is introduced. Lesley joins a clandestine group and lends help to the cause of breaking free from the current dynasty, signalling a desire to minimise class differences. During these meetings, she falls for Arthur, a fellow member and a Chinese, and carries on her affair in the eponymous house. The doors in *The House of Doors* lead Lesley to find peace, love, and refuge from her farcical marriage. The theme of masks is explored through the characters and objects, most notably the doors. A door

is synonymous with a mask and shows the outside world something that may be the opposite of what is concealed beyond it. In *The House of Doors*, we see it in the failed marriages of both Maugham and Robert. Both men are homosexuals, yet, they and their wives wear masks and are forced to pretend everything is fine to avoid societal judgments and ostracisation. Similarly, under the cover of The Philomatic Society, Sun Yat Sen carried on his revolutionary meetings and activities at a place with nondescript doors. And, finally, the slightly modified Chinese ideogram of a door

inscribed on a Maugham book cover comes to Lesley in the guise of a letter and sets her on her path to reuniting with Arthur in Penang after 40 long years. Letters also play a big role in *The House of Doors*. Through Lesley, Maugham gets the fodder and inspiration to write ‘The Letter’, a short story and play based on the true events of a murder case against Ethel Proudlock in 1911. Among other things, the book explores the fragility and strength of relationships, human resilience and frailties, and the duality within us and the larger society. The atmospheric novel depicts the multicultural heritage of Malaya and its tropical and coastal landscape. It’s loaded with Eastern symbolism and social, cultural, political, historical, and personal events, making it a fascinating read. A cerebral exercise in connecting the dots, I immensely enjoyed straddling the blurred boundaries of fact and fiction. 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.

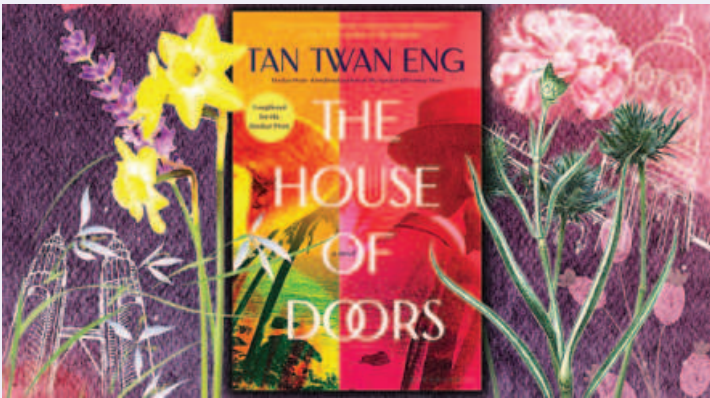


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