

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# For the 'Twilight' fan who grew up

Review of 'Empire of the Vampire' (first published 2021) series by Jay Kristoff

**This grim setting combines the fact that Kristoff writes some of the most brilliant, no-holds-barred, all-out-gore, goth-centric prose I've read in the last 10 years. Make no mistake, this is not a series meant for the faint-hearted, the young, or the impressionable.**

SARAZEEN SAIF AHANA

I was a *Twilight* girl.

Not one of those teenagers who stalked poor Robert Pattinson to depression, but I had a vested interest in having a beautiful vampire fall in love with me, and then we'd live happily ever after, ideally *not* with CGI children. Unfortunately, the late 2000s passed and I grew up. Literature introduced me to newer, even shinier characters and I fell out of love with Edward Cullen. In modern language, I developed an "ick" for vampires, and never really explored that sub-genre again. *Twilight* became something of a joke for my generation, and I laughed and made fun of everyone who used to be a fan, myself included. But that tiny part of my mind, which retained my day-dreaming, 14-year-old self, still wished for *one* more vampire book, just to close the chapter meaningfully. However, as I'd grown and matured, teen romances did not really hold any attraction for me, so my dream languished.

That was until Jay Kristoff (author of *The Lotus War* and *The Nevernight Chronicle*) penned the stunning *Empire of the Vampire* in 2021, and followed it up with the equally brilliant *Empire of the Damned* in February of this year.

An Australian author, he is celebrated for his dark, goth-inspired worlds and twist-laden stories that blend fantasy, science fiction, and a good dash of horror. Kristoff's signature blend of gothic prose and moral ambiguity takes centre stage in *Empire of the Vampire*, and in my view, it may be his finest work yet. His books are known for their sharp humour, complex characters, and epic scope, drawing readers into worlds where the line between good and evil



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

is rarely clear. However, in my sincerest opinion, *The Empire of the Vampire* series might simply be his best work published so far. A planned trilogy, the final volume is yet to be published, but I find my despair slightly lessened by the fact that his Instagram page recently posted that he has finished writing the book.

*Empire of the Vampire*, the first book in the series, begins with the premise of the sun having been inexplicably darkened, plunging the world into a state of semi-dusk during daylight hours. In response, various creatures of the night, previously extremely sun-sensitive, have emerged into this mediaeval fantasy-inspired world. The most dangerous of these are the immortal, bloodthirsty vampires

who have all but taken over the world. The book has a fantastic frame narrative structure where the first layer consists of Gabriel de Leon, a legendary vampire-hunter and our protagonist, having been mysteriously imprisoned by vampires and forced to recount his life story. The second layer is Gabriel growing up, training to become who he is in the present, and his encounter and subsequent travels with Dior. A sulky but loveable teenager, Dior is believed to be the Holy Grail—the prophesied "chosen one" who will restore the sun to its former brilliance and vanquish the vampires.

This grim setting combines the fact that Kristoff writes some of the most brilliant, no-holds-barred, all-out-gore, goth-centric prose I've read in the last

10 years. Make no mistake, this is not a series meant for the faint-hearted, the young, or the impressionable. This is mature, gory, horrifying, and downright nightmare-inducing in many cases. My beloved Edward Cullen would probably be reduced to ashes in moments in this universe. Kristoff's vampires are hungry, savage, alluring, and nightmare-inducing. With fangs, a fear of water, and even sleeping in coffins and dirt, they retain the classic Stoker flavour but with the added twist of being absolute beasts clothed in beautiful bodies.

The unhinged prose combines with incredibly believable worldbuilding to create a home for characters so compelling that I was reduced to a sobbing mess by the end of

the second book. I languished in a vampire-induced bookish coma for days afterwards, and only rereading the series from the beginning helped jumpstart my broken heart. If the way *Game of Thrones* killed off beloved characters shocked you, *Empire of the Vampire* and *Empire of the Damned* are guaranteed to traumatise softer-hearted readers. The frame narrative style, which was one of the reasons I was attracted to the series in the first place, works brilliantly. Even though we, the audience, know the ending, the suspense is not diminished in the slightest. Every page increases your thirst—hah!—to know how and why the unstoppable, undefeated, world-famous Gabriel became the embittered and disillusioned prisoner he is today.

The words "immersive", "epic", and "unputdownable" have lost all meaning due to overuse when it comes to modern fantasy fiction, but there are no other words strong or evocative enough to describe just how captivating this book series truly is. Kristoff has crafted a true masterpiece, for *Twilight* fans and non-*Twilight* fans alike, and I am beyond thrilled to see the vampire sub-genre getting the refresh it justly deserves. I am eagerly awaiting the release of the third book to see this stunning tale come to a worthy conclusion, and Jay Kristoff has more than proven himself worthy of the awards and accolades he received.

As for this *Twilight* fangirl, her inner teen is finally at peace. Edward has been replaced with a worthy successor, and I am now free to fawn over Gabriel de Leon to my heart's content.

Sarazeen Saif Ahana is an adjunct member of the faculty at Independent University, Bangladesh where she teaches English and dreams of writing as well as some of her favourite authors someday.

THE SHELF

## 5 books posed as literary cannibalism

ISRA KABIR

Literary cannibalism refers to the retellings of Western classics written by colonised or formerly colonised countries. These authors aim to decolonise the mindset of the readers of the popular literary classics. Decolonisation is a violent process, and by comparing this genre with cannibalism it demonstrates the brutality of it. This shift not only enriches our understanding of the original narratives but also highlights the voices that have long been silenced.

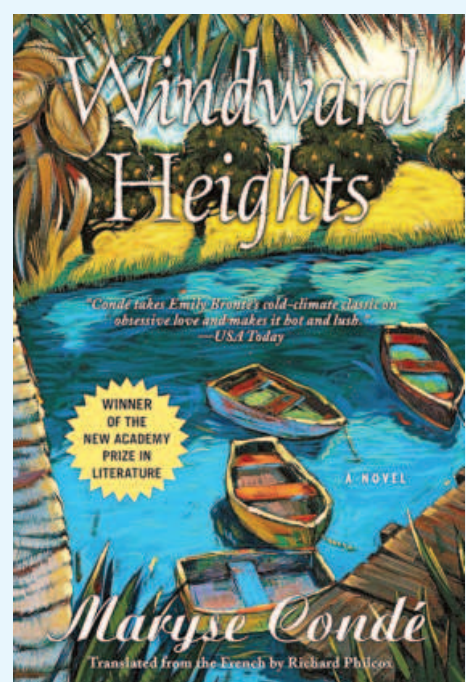


**The Meursault Investigation**  
Kamel Daoud, John Cullen (translator)  
Other Press, 2015  
In *The Stranger*, Albert Camus holds off on humanising the Arab man, whom Meursault kills, by not naming him. *The Meursault Investigation* is told from the perspective of the murdered Arab's brother, Harun. Set in Algeria, it tackles existentialist, colonial, and identity issues, and we see Harun struggling with the aftermath of colonial aggression as well as the aftereffects of his brother's murder. The

author provides a moving contrast to Albert Camus' original work by posing questions about purpose in a society influenced by injustice and absurdity through a combination of personal narrative and critique of society. It is both a captivating work and a provocative statement on the difficulties of postcolonial identity. *The Meursault Investigation* is the antithesis of *The Stranger*.

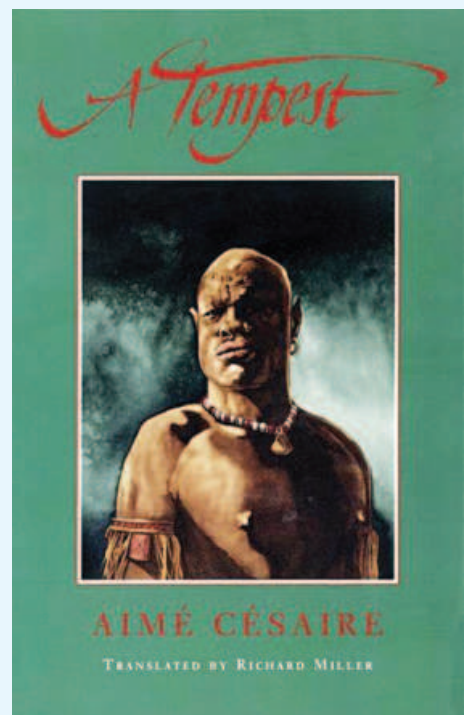
**Windward Heights**  
Maryse Condé  
Soho House, 1999

Set in the Caribbean, this is a gripping adaptation of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Using colonialism as a lens, the book recounts the turbulent tale of Heathcliff and Catherine's love. Against a colourful, lush setting, Condé delves into topics of race, power, and passion. The story combines historical and folkloric themes with an abundance of character complexity to present the original story from a new angle. Condé's work honours Brontë while also pushing readers to think about the nuances of love and yearning in a postcolonial context.



**A Tempest**

Aimé Césaire  
Theater Communication Group, 2002  
This book is a striking rendition of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, reinvented through a postcolonial viewpoint. The tale of Prospero and Caliban is transformed



through Césaire into an in-depth investigation of liberation, identity, and colonisation. The play emphasises the plight of the oppressed and their fight for liberation. The characters, especially Caliban, emerge as a symbol of resistance against colonial dominance. In addition to criticising colonialism, this piece highlights the tenacity of marginalised voices, which makes it a stimulating and thought-provoking work that speaks about contemporary concerns.

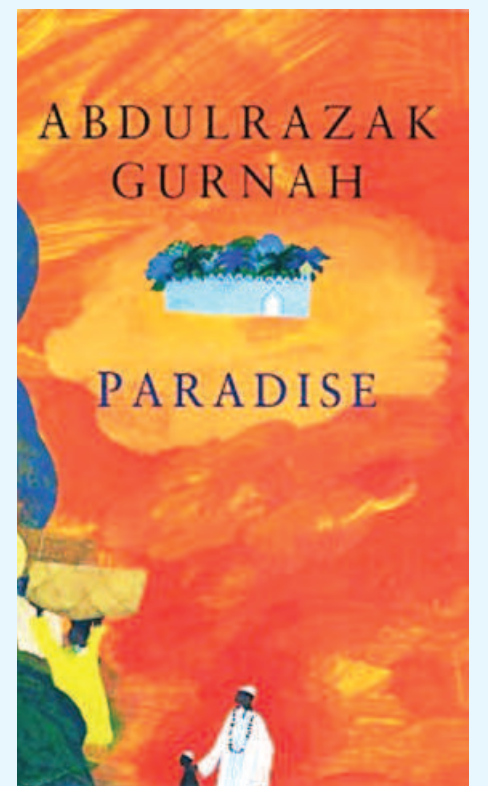
**Foe**  
J.M. Coetzee  
Penguin Books, 1987  
In the reimagining of Daniel Defoe's

*Robinson Crusoe*, *Foe* by J.M. Coetzee reimagines Friday as the main character. The novel addresses the struggle for voice and agency and shows how narrative power is crucial while recounting a story. Coetzee analyses the relationships between colonisers and the colonised, raising issues of historical narrative and historical agency. A deep commentary on oppression and the difficulties of authorship may be seen in the interaction between the characters of *The Silent Friday* and Susan Barton, who tries to present her version of the events. Coetzee's writing is both thought-provoking and beautifully crafted, making *Foe* a compelling exploration of the nature of storytelling itself.



**Paradise**  
Abdulrazak Gurnah  
The New Press, 1995  
Set during the early 20th century East Africa, the story follows Yusuf, a teenage boy whose father falls into debt and sells Yusuf to a wealthy merchant to repay it. Gurnah examines the intricacies of identity

through Yusuf's perspective as he makes his way through a world which is seeing the ravaging effects of colonial enterprise. Through an intricate weaving together of political and personal histories, the novel



illuminates the complexities of human connections as well as the repercussions of colonial authority. This book is a retelling of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, where Gurnah retells the journey from East Africa to the Congo through the lens of a teenage boy. Gurnah's evocative prose and nuanced character development paint a heartbreaking picture of civilisation in flux, transforming *Paradise* into a potent meditation on bereavement, yearning, and the pursuit of identity.

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