

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

REDISCOVERING READING

How ‘Fragments of Riversong’ helped me heal

Review of the 10th anniversary edition of ‘Fragments of a Riversong’ (Nymphaea, 2024) by Farah Ghuznavi

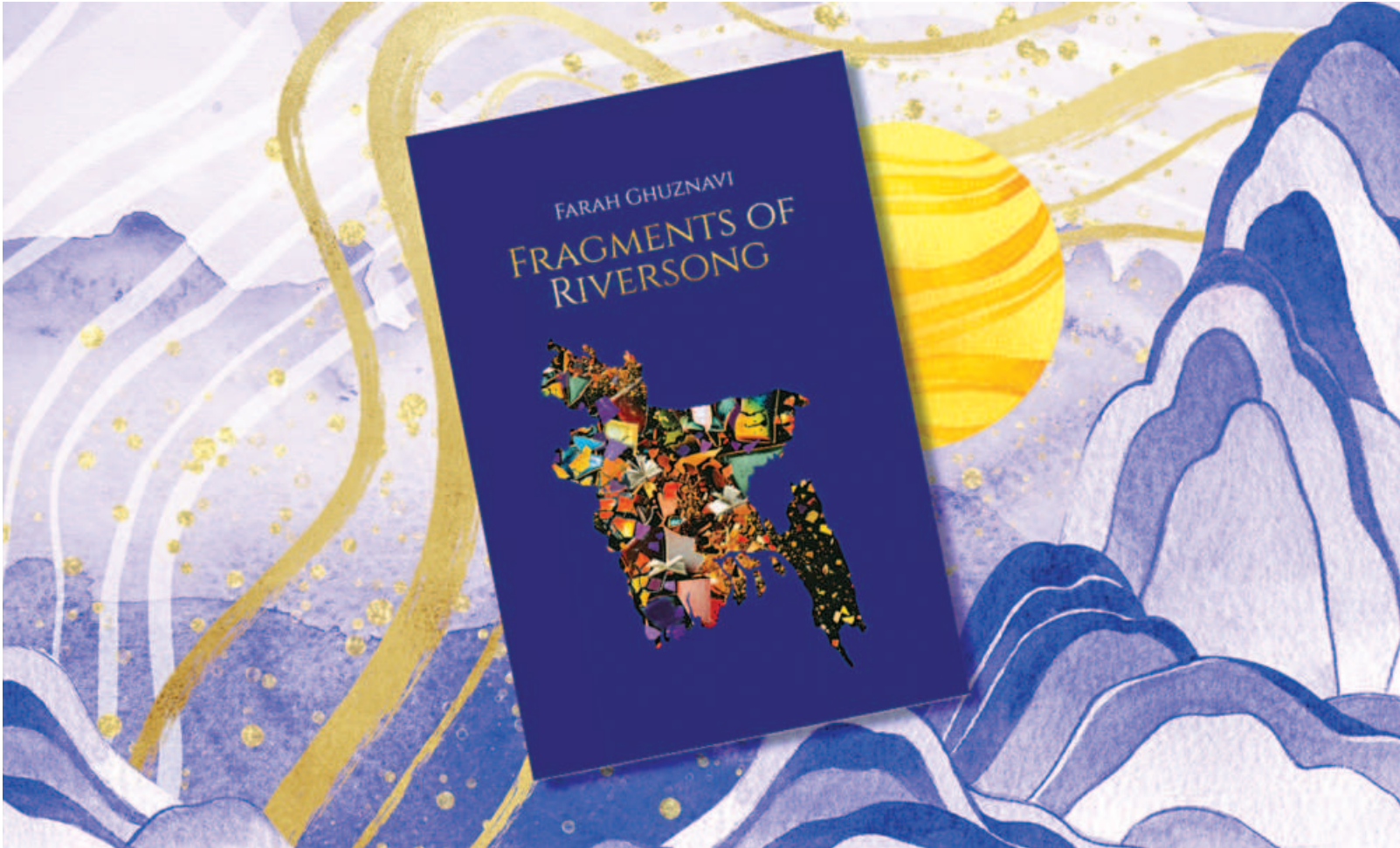


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

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SARAH SHEHABUDDIN

Harvard killed my love for reading. When my advisor took me out for a celebratory dinner an hour after my doctoral defense in July 2012, I struggled to read the menu. My brain had apparently gone on strike. A month later, when I moved to Bangladesh to begin my dream job at the Asian University for Women, I still found it difficult to focus on reading anything other than what I needed for teaching. I wistfully thought of the piles of books I would carry home from the library to read as a teenager. Although I occasionally savoured books such as Maria Chaudhuri’s haunting memoir *Beloved Strangers* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2014) and Zia Haider Rahman’s perplexingly

brilliant *In the Light of What We Know* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), the number of books I began reading and gave up on kept growing. Had I lost my love for reading?

On April 15, 2015, my father suddenly passed away and I found myself in what seemed to be an unanticipated script for my life. My friend Seuty Sabur remarked that people often imagine grief as days and days of crying in bed, but in reality, finding the time and space to grieve is often next to impossible with the countless responsibilities—predictable and unpredictable—that compete for attention when we lose a loved one. Mentally and physically exhausted, I struggled to manage my grief and an ever-growing to-do list that came with a steep learning curve.

It was in this context that I first read *Fragments of Riversong* (originally published by Daily Star Books, 2013). It was the first book I read after losing my father and as such holds a special place in my heart. After months of struggling to focus on anything, I found myself drawn into story after story. Reading the book cover to cover gave me a much-needed sense of relief and accomplishment. For the first time in a while, I had managed to do something I wanted to do, rather than something I had to do. Last month, I was delighted to hear that Nymphaea Publication had brought out a special 10th anniversary edition of *Fragments of Riversong*.

In addition to a glowing foreword by Madhulika Liddle, the anniversary edition offers a total of 26 stories. This

includes 14 stories that were not in the original edition—two short stories and 12 “fiction bites” in a dopamine-packed flash-fiction section. One of the flash fiction pieces is a soul-soothing tribute to the author’s parents who passed away. Telling a story in under 550 words is no easy feat, and each of the flash fiction pieces manages to make you think about it long after the few minutes it takes to read it. The seven pages of praise for Ghuznavi’s writing by a diverse set of acclaimed writers are a testament to her skill and reach, and a wonderful means to highlight her significant contribution to literature.

Thankfully for me, Ghuznavi’s writing is accessible to readers who are not anywhere near the top of their reading game due to burn-out, grief, stress, or any other reason. In recent years, I have found that many friends and students struggle to find the motivation, time, and patience to read. *Fragments of Riversong* is a rewarding gateway book for those who want to discover or find their way back to the joys of reading. Amidst all the stress my addled brain has dealt with over the past few years, the (often deceptive) simplicity of Ghuznavi’s prose makes her stories enjoyable to read—with nuanced plots and messages that stay with the reader. She seems to do her best to make it as easy as possible for readers to immerse themselves in her stories without getting lost or frustrated. Stories such as “Losing Bindu” and “Escaping the Mirror” are a testament to the author’s ability to navigate even sensitive and emotionally challenging themes with enviable poise.

Fragments of Riversong offers readers the opportunity to meet a wide array of refreshingly unconventional characters. In addition to many inspiring girls and women, there are what we might call “aspirational” characters, for example, non-toxic brothers who strive to actually understand and support their sisters. Ghuznavi’s characters are so well developed and believable that you want to find out what they did next. Through her diverse cast of characters, she provides tremendous insight into the rich tapestry of people, interests,

and socio-political dynamics that constitute Bangladesh.

The compassion the author shows for her readers and characters infuses many of her stories as a theme. My favorite story is “Waiting”, in which a relatively simple act majestically disrupts a scene that plays out countless times across a world riddled with inequality—a scene many readers will be familiar with. It invites us to consider what would happen if, even once in a while, we defied the conditioning and calculations that stop us from helping others as much as we easily could. What struck me in some of the other stories such as “Getting There”, however, is the recognition that compassion is not always “natural.” Many of the characters choose to act with compassion and assume unexpected responsibilities only after battling their reservations and anxieties. If anything, that makes their compassion all the more meaningful.

My doctoral advisor once told me “life is what it is,” and all we can do is try our best to manage the challenges that come our way, including the unexpected ones. This is one of the strongest undercurrents in Farah Ghuznavi’s work. Her stories offer readers much-needed solidarity in a world in which life often goes off-script and we struggle to figure out how to balance our aspirations and sense of self with reality.

The anniversary edition of *Fragments of Riversong* is beautifully designed and makes for—as I can vouch from the dozen copies I gleefully bought for the purpose—an ideal gift, especially for those interested in understanding Bangladesh in all its complexity. It is available from Baatighar, Bookworm, and Rokomari. During the Ekushey Boi Mela, Nymphaea’s stall will offer the book at a discount of 25% off the cover price of BDT 660.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Murakami and the limits of an artist’s imagination

Review of Haruki Murakami’s ‘The City and Its Uncertain Walls’ (Harvill Secker, 2024) by Haruki Murakami

The new world itself seems exemplary of the isolation Murakami is intent to represent. It is self-protective, the townspeople are avoidant of harm, shielded by a large wall, and mutually uninterested in the personalities which populate their small polity.

THEODORE GRIFFIN

Haruki Murakami’s *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*, its English translation published last November, plunges the reader into a kind of metaphysical vertigo that never reaches a concluding synthesis.

It’s never particularly inspiring for literary types to tackle the unromantic issue of creation’s upper limits. Where exactly do they lie, and are all writers doomed to merely rehash a finite number of original sources of inspiration? Haruki Murakami, the much acclaimed Japanese novelist, sought to address this in the afterword of his most recent novel. A self-declared possessor of a “limited pallet of motifs”, the writer appears calmly resigned to the notion that he is destined to spin but a “limited number of stories”. Accordingly, this newest release is a reconstitution of an earlier short story Murakami had published in a Japanese literary magazine in the 1980s. The novel’s reflective tone is manifold, therefore; it is a pensive study on isolation, dreams, and young love, as well as the creative adventure of the Japanese literary titan.

The eponymous short story also served as a well of inspiration of the earlier novel, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (first published in 1985). It shares with *The City* a simple yet immersive structure. There are two worlds, separated by some form of spiritual, metaphysical barrier. The discovery of one imparts a sense of faded solidity to the other, as newer, more complex dimensions are spun into the tale. For the curious reader, it demands a kind of synthesis. As Murakami unveils yet more disjunctions from the banal,

there builds an expectative crescendo. What does all this mean? Upon which event will these two worlds be reconciled? Frustratingly, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* provides no such release. Rather, the tale fades out into a kind of washed-out and ungratifying opaqueness.

That is not to say that the story doesn’t have its moments of startling beauty. The isolation of its protagonist, who begins the novel as a 17-year-old boy in love with a 16-year-old girl from a nearby town, permeates the novel as a kind of estrangement. It’s an estrangement from the people around him, who appear as distant, half-understood faces, but also his material reality, which the author bends and reconstructs with little protest or surprise from his characters. Murakami relates a worldview, or rather a faith in his representation of the world, through gentle gestures of description, rather than with the vulgarities of an essayist. When the 17-year-old narrator’s girlfriend disappears, he is plunged into a kind of nihilism. Living through dreams and books and making little effort to engage with his immediate world, he discovers that the girl was a mere shadow of a truer individual contained in a mysterious town placed within a second realm. After a lonely and semi-engaged life in the real world, the narrator finds himself in this strange other world, face to face with the second identity of the young girl.

The new world itself seems exemplary of the isolation Murakami is intent to represent. It is self-protective, the townspeople are avoidant of harm, shielded by a large wall, and mutually uninterested in the personalities which populate



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

their small polity. Through the unusual mechanics of this alternative town, its creatures and unique physics, Murakami imparts a sense of profundity which goes unaccounted for. While one could speculate about the meaning of the story’s furniture, it’s likely this is a dead end; it is most probably creation for creation’s sake, with a whiff of insinuation that lends the tale a sense of depth.

The two worlds are softly blended into one after the narrator quits his job in Tokyo to work as a head librarian in a small rural town in the Japanese countryside. Here, he encounters a babble of unique characters who provide a little insight into the strange occurrences, abating his lonely existence. Murakami’s

depiction of the previous librarian spins further little universes which the reader can enjoy, appearing often as small odes to eccentricity. The other townspeople, existing blinkered by incuriosity, are often those which seem the weirdest. In this respect, *The City* is a charming work.

The symbolism Murakami evokes often points towards a kind of allegorical significance. It’s unclear, without wanting to delve into a discussion on the purpose of art, whether *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* is incomplete without one. As a piece of page-turning and enjoyable literature, the book certainly delivers. Its lack of pretension, while this has brought Murakami the scathing ire of snobbish-minded critics over the

years, makes it a comfortable and convincing read. The author’s soft-spoken charm conceals his gifts as a giant of contemporary literature.

Scattered with references to high-culture, literature, both Japanese and Western, and jazz—Murakami’s great passion—the novel spells out much of the interior of the ageing writer’s mind. It is a pleasant, though often melancholy, world to inhabit. For those new to Murakami’s books, or well-seasoned devotees (he has many the world over) there is much to be gleaned from his newest novel.

Theodore Griffin, a student of philosophy, languages, and politics, splits his time between France and Scotland.