

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

When the waters rise and the food disappears

Review of 'A Guardian and A Thief: A Novel' (Random House Large Print), by Megha Majumdar to be released on October 14, 2025

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

"Anything, with sufficient intention, could become a weapon."

—Megha Majumdar, *A Guardian and A Thief*

The quote above seems to capture the heart of this novel set in a near-future dystopian Kolkata rendered uninhabitable by political corruption, inequality, and the ominous package of climate crisis—floods, famine, overheating. In Ma and Dadu's desperate attempts to salvage any morsel of happiness and comfort they can for the two-year-old Mishti, in Boomba's relentless struggle to find a sturdy place in the city for his displaced family, one can see the quote peeking out of almost every scene, which rises from the bedrock of urgency.

Ma and her father, Dadu, are scheduled to move to Michigan with her daughter Mishti. Her husband is a scientist there. Because of that, they were eligible to receive a special type of visa called the climate visa after long months of bureaucratic processing. Their passports, however, go missing as Boomba breaks into the house in the dead of night and steals Ma's purse (which carries the passports) alongside food from their stocked pantry. This event triggers a narrative fueled by endless sleuthing and the breathless energy of Bong Joon Ho's 2025 film



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

The novel also succeeds in writing sentimental scenes without being saccharine. The sentimentality doesn't stem from overdone truisms, though. It's profound and laced with refreshing depth. "Perhaps the true adventure was not only in seeing the world but also in seeing the versions of one's own self that the journey revealed."

Mickey 17. It's a narrative where the stakes are constantly being raised high for the four characters (Ma, Dadu, Boomba, and Mishti). Whenever we see a moment of reprieve, Majumdar is quick to snatch it away. Such a propulsive narrative where the odds are insurmountable seems only right in the context of a South Asian nation ravaged by climate crisis.

As I progressed through the story, I couldn't help but see Dhaka instead of

Kolkata in the pages. Because these cities are similar in many ways, I felt close to home the irascible nature of civilians who are frustrated with the weather and lack of basic things in a hopeless landscape. I certainly hope her portrayal of a depleted and mangled city isn't prescient, although it's hard to not stare at the prescient element if one considers the desolate statistics related to the climate crisis.

One passage particularly stood out to me because of how it conveys a pervasive sense of hunger in this dystopian Kolkata: "Throughout the crematorium grounds, dogs roamed, tongues hanging, ribs sticking to skin, seeking food in the flesh of those who were gone, and it was only when the loved ones of the dead yelled, 'Hut! Hut!' that they retreated."

The novel is rife with passages and scenes like this, not shying away from casting in clear light poignant details of abjection. In doing so, Majumdar's intention of suffusing the pages with nostalgia and longing for a lost time,

a time when all the crises were only looming on the horizon and not a tangible part of everyday life, shines through. Consider, for instance, when Ma and Dadu go to the bazaar and lament the fact that nobody has had real fish and vegetables in a long time because of the intense salinity in the rivers and the uncultivability of large swathes of the country's farmland.

The novel also succeeds in writing sentimental scenes without being saccharine. The sentimentality doesn't stem from overdone truisms, though. It's profound and laced with refreshing depth. "Perhaps the true adventure was not only in seeing the world but also in seeing the versions of one's own self that the journey revealed."

Another strength of the novel is its economical yet lyrical language that never wanes. It sustains the fast-paced story through and through, making the reader face a difficult choice between savouring the language and turning the pages to see what happens next. This dilemma reminded me of the

similar experience I had while reading Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007) earlier this year.

The big question the novel is interested in grappling with is: What part of yourself are you willing to lose to bring comfort to your family? This question is the heaviest on Ma, who harbours a shameful secret that will ultimately change her life trajectory, and Boomba, whose past mistakes are stalking him as he lurches from one obstacle to another as an uneducated man with no social mobility. Another question that arises from this one, and is also relevant to, is: Who is truly a guardian and who is a thief? Of course, the novel provides no clear cut answers.

It creates a whirlwind through these binaries between guardian and thief, good and evil, pushing the reader to a dizzying intersection where it's hard to decide whose choices are more ethical in this strange dystopia where a billionaire is developing cooling products to sell to the heat-stricken masses, most of whom cannot even afford those products. In propping up these questions, the novel doesn't feel allegorical, like it's trying to lay out a manual of how things should be done. It feels organic and woven into a tight and cohesive plot by the characters' unique reasonings and motivations, all borne on the shifty carpet of uncertainty and fear. I cannot gauge how the novel's plot came to be so (Is the author an arduous outliner? Or does she play by the ear?). But nowhere does the author's artifice (of making us believe that the story world is entirely governed by her characters and not herself) crack or falter.

If this novel isn't longlisted for the Booker Prize next year, it would be a terrible shame.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is an MFA candidate and a graduate teaching assistant in Fiction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author of *The Hippo Girl & Other Stories* (Hachette India, 2024).

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

For wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving

A book review of 'White Lilies: An Essay on Grief' (Context, 2025) by Vidya Krishnana

IFFAT NAWAZ

Approximately 105 people die every minute globally. This is nothing but data until in some specific wretched minute, someone dear to us adds a plus one to that digit. When those we love die, their losses dig enormous holes in our beings. Though invisible to the physical eye, these freshly cut hollows ache like any deep wound would, they bleed out more blood than we carry in our veins. A severe soreness spreads over us without any remedies, without offering us a recovery timeline. There is no telling when grieving ends or if it ever actually does.

It is in this unending and often shapeless experience of grief that Vidya Krishnana's *White Lilies* finds its ground. Vidya's nonfiction essay, divided into four parts, explores death and grieving in ways that are at once deeply personal and sharply observational. About a decade ago, she lost her grandmother to old age and her partner to a road accident in Delhi, all in the same life-shattering weekend. Vidya, a journalist and an author, writes about her often blind and at other times illuminated navigation through that dark week, and many weeks, months, and years which followed. She tries to make sense of this grand tragedy as she scrutinises and synthesises her reality along with the world's. And through these years she performs an autopsy of the dead-alive city she blames as the perpetrator—Delhi,

the city of rage and grief, revolution and destruction, old and heavy yet so ready to take on more marks of deaths on her walls.

This focus on the city as a character resonated with me in a particular way. I have a special weakness for books which explore spaces and objects as characters. Perhaps because my birth city Dhaka is a very living and breathing entity for me. A city which is not merely bound by her old rivers and endless traffic jams, Dhaka's pulse is as thick and audible as one wants it to be, as ancient and melancholy as one feels on any given day. In her book, Vidya combs through Delhi's landscape, its wrinkled bloody creases with an unforgiving precision while carrying the heart of the city's most beloved poet, Mirza Ghalib. She digs into Delhi's road rage, mercilessness, injustices, age-old patterns of suffering and violence, making me return to the narratives around my chaotic Dhaka. *White Lilies* left me wondering how our cities can be the reason for our griefs, while grieving with us. A repository of eternal agony, a graveyard of nameless and named martyrs and everyday women and men. Vidya writes

"No story about Delhi is complete without rage turned inwards," and "I believe Delhi hurt him [Mirza Ghalib] into poetry. Delhi remains hurtful still because poetry does not change anything. It simply survives."

From here, my thoughts moved towards a



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

broader reflection: for centuries, poets and writers have penned their versions of grief and grieving, yet there remains a lack of books on the subject. I wonder why it's so. Is it that I have purposely forgotten such narratives on mourning? After all, who wants to remember details of other people's sorrows? Or is it that we don't find a specific balance in storytelling when it comes to grief. Nonfiction narratives on grief can either be too dramatised or around a

individual grief cannot be measured. There are no instruments to document lamentation. It's all a ball of fury and a jumbled up, defeated cry.

Which is why, even though Rumi has become a cliché in recent years, I can't help but repeat his lines when thinking about who should read *White Lilies*. It is here I turn to: "Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving. It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair." If you have known grief personally; if it has lived with you for days or decades; if you come from a place or have left a place where mourning is/was a common element; if you have seen the face of brokenness, in the mirror or around you; if your body has felt chills for bygone shadows, its heaviness or even lightness; if you have not forgiven and don't plan to or you are searching for a reason to forgive—someone, someplace, something; if you want to admit that you are not alone in your grieving; and if you are willing to cry for yourself, and be brave enough to cry for others, then this book is for you.

Iffat Nawaz is a Bangladeshi-American writer based in Pondicherry, India. Her first novel, *Shurjo's Clan*, was published by Penguin India (Vintage) in 2022, and was shortlisted for the "Best First Book" Award by Tata Lit Live/Mumbai Literature Festival in 2023.