

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Abandon hope, all ye who enter grad school

Review of R. F. Kuang's 'Katabasis' (HarperCollins, 2025)

Kuang's reimagining of hell is her boldest satire. Pride becomes an infinite library where 'shades'—bodiless souls who are waiting to pass through every court of hell—are forced to define "the good" until they calcify into statues. Desire manifests as a grimy student union room, its prisoners trapped in eternal cycles of compulsive craving.

If Dante Alighieri were a frustrated PhD student with a caffeine addiction and a strong disdain for university bureaucracy, he might have created *Katabasis*, as R.F. Kuang did. This work is a hilariously realistic satire of the voyage through the nine circles of hell, but with a terrifyingly familiar twist: hell is a campus. Forget lakes of fire and forests of suicide; the ultimate pain is an infinite library, a student union of eternal addiction, and the soul-crushing, silt-covered dunes of academic purgatory.

In *Katabasis*, Kuang transforms the ivory tower into a bureaucratic inferno, proving that eternal torment looks suspiciously like graduate school. Consider the fluorescent hum of a never-ending academic library, stacks of manuscripts citing each other into oblivion. It is a novel where the descent into the underworld is indistinguishable from postgraduate life.

At its centre is Alice Law, a postgraduate in Analytic Magick at Cambridge—a discipline where chalk and paradox do what most fantasy novels would leave to swords and spells. Alice embodies the striving scholar: anxious, furious, determined, and painfully aware that the system was never built for her. Alice's future disintegrates when her monstrous yet indispensable advisor, Professor Grimes, dies in an accident that is both her fault and her curse. A career without his glowing recommendation? Impossible. Her solution: descend into hell itself to retrieve his soul. She is unwillingly paired with her rival, Peter Murdoch, the sort of student who can glance at a pentagram and see the theorem hidden within—a golden child whose brilliance is both dazzling and intolerable.



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

Their uneasy partnership is the novel's spine. Alice grinds, Peter glides. She bleeds for her work, he flicks his wrist and triumphs. The friction between them is not romance—thank heavens Kuang avoids that trap—but the raw tension of two minds who know the system will crown one and discard the other. Their descent together into the Eight Courts of Hell is, in effect, a viva stretched across eternity, with the stakes not just careers but souls.

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union room, its prisoners trapped in eternal cycles of compulsive craving. Bureaucracy appears not as a horned demon but as endless paperwork, waiting rooms, and departmental meetings that feel eerily close to real life. The result is both hilarious and horrifying: a hellscape constructed not from fire, but from the lived experience of academia.

And yet, beneath the humour, the novel burns with something darker. It asks what happens to the self when ambition consumes everything else?

Alice's journey is less about saving Professor Grimes and more about

confronting the monstrous truth of a system that feeds on sacrifice—of time,

health, ethics, identity—while offering

nothing in return but the faint shimmer of prestige. In this sense, the novel is less fantasy than mirror: it reflects the institutional cruelties of the ivory tower until the satire feels almost too sharp to laugh at. Kuang's background as a scholar is her secret weapon. The magic system—based on paradox, translation, and linguistic sleight of hand—is as intellectually dense as it is original. Her footnotes, digressions, and mini-lectures on reincarnation or logic are not decorative; they embody the very excesses she lampoons.

At times, the novel seems to become the dissertation it critiques: a text so eager to explain that it risks drowning the reader in theory. But this is part of its design. Hell is boredom. Hell is

bureaucracy. Hell is the endless paper that no one reads.

Still, when the novel moves, it moves like lightning. Kuang skewers the job market, the negligent advisor, the cult of performative suffering, all with razor sharp wit. Alice's internal monologue is a masterpiece of anxious self-sabotage, and Peter's effortless superiority is rendered with just enough vulnerability to prevent him from becoming a caricature. Together, they embody the brutal economics of academia: one climbing endlessly, one born already at the summit, both trapped in a system that values neither fully as human beings.

Finishing *Katabasis* leaves the reader wrung out, as though they, too, have paid half their lifespan to sit through the ordeal. It is exhausting and infuriating in equal measure. The final impression is not despair but recognition—the realisation that the university, for all its grand ideals, too often resembles the inferno more than the paradise it promises.

If one needed a soundtrack to the novel, it would be BTS's "N.O.", with its defiant cry against the treadmill of study, work, repeat. Alice and Peter's journey is precisely that refusal made mythic: a rebellion not against hell, but against the ivory tower itself.

R.F. Kuang has always been a writer of ambition. With *Katabasis*, she proves to herself that this is not escapism. It is satire with teeth, a novel that forces its readers to look up from the chalkboard and ask what their own souls are worth. In the end, hell is not other people. Hell is the campus.

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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

The Indosphere and its discontents

Review of 'The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World' (Bloomsbury, 2024) by William Dalrymple

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In the year 1025, a fleet of warships set sail from the Coromandel Coast of southern India on a mission of conquest. This was the navy of the Chola Emperor Rajendra I, and its target lay across the full, treacherous breadth of the Bay of Bengal—the fabulously wealthy Sumatran empire of Srivijaya. The subsequent campaign was a stunning success, with Indian forces sacking cities across modern day Indonesia and Malaysia. It was a moment of startling aggression, one that sits uncomfortably with the pious modern narrative of a peaceful, eternally non-violent Hindu past. And yet, as William Dalrymple argues in his magnificent book *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*, this singular act of hard power was an aberration. For a thousand years, the true and lasting Indian empire was not one of conquest, but of culture—a 'soft power' imperium built not with the sword, but with the seductive force of its philosophy, religion, art, and language.

If this narrative of a dominant, culturally expansionist India feels unfamiliar, it is because, as Dalrymple shows, the story itself has been a casualty in the long war of historical interpretation. For a generation, colonial French historians, abetted by Indian nationalists in the Greater India

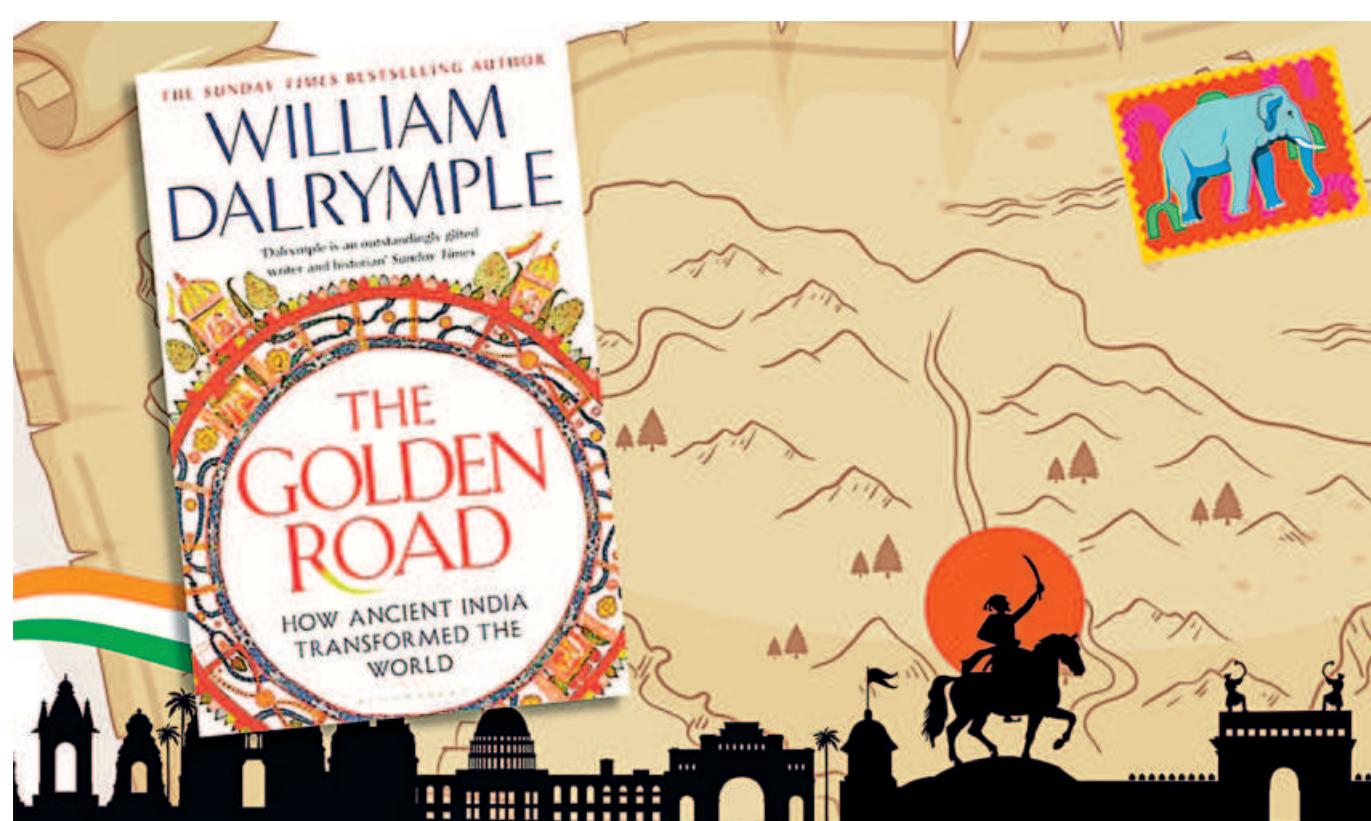


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

William Dalrymple has certainly marshalled a staggering array of evidence—around 200 pages of notes and references drawn from archaeology, epigraphy, art history, and many forgotten texts. Society, saw this ancient expansion as a flattering mirror to their own supposed 'civilising missions', framing it in terms of Ancient Indian Colonies or the Hindu diaspora. But in the wake of decolonisation, scholars from the newly independent

nations of Southeast Asia rightly pushed back against any notion of ancient Indian colonialism—to the point where the very concept of "Indianisation" became almost a dirty word in Southeast Asian university departments. Dalrymple's work is significant for its contrapuntal reading of the historical record, a method that allows him to dismantle two dominant and competing narrative constructions. He simultaneously critiques the hegemonic, orientalist discourse of colonial-era historians while resisting a purely reactive post-colonial framework that might, in its own way, efface the very real agency and cultural power of the pre-colonial Indian state. Having cleared away this intellectual rubble of competing ideologies, Dalrymple reconstructs the machinery of this forgotten empire.

The primary vehicle for this transmission

was Sanskrit, which—reinvented from a sacred tongue into a potent literary and political language—became, across much of Asia, the "Language of the Gods in the World of Men", as he puts it. This resulted not in crude imitation but in a creative synthesis. Dalrymple likens to "the pizza effect": a visiting Brahmin might have recognised a Khmer king's Sanskrit title but found himself before gods carved with Cambodian features. The intellectual hub of this vibrant Indosphere was the great university of Nalanda, whose prestige compelled Xuanzang's six thousand mile pilgrimage, yet which was ultimately decimated by Turkic fanaticism in what Dalrymple notes was a "civilisational catastrophe" rivaling the infamous burning of Alexandria's library.

Dalrymple's otherwise magisterial work of history nonetheless left me yearning for a

more pugnacious engagement with the great counterexample to India's success: China. In recent years, the idea of a land-based "Silk Road" has found its most eloquent champion in Peter Frankopan, whose own achievement has rightly recentered attention on the commercial and cultural highways of Central Asia. Dalrymple's *The Golden Road* stands as a direct challenge to this narrative, dismissing it by suggesting that the very term "Silk Road" was a 19th century invention for a prosaic German railway scheme, now conveniently co-opted by Beijing's propagandists. This is a dubious claim, since Matthias Mertens has shown the term predates Von Richthofen's supposed coinage. Nonetheless, Dalrymple glosses over this by noting that the rival "Sinosphere" was a smaller affair, hampered by the "difficulties presented by the Chinese script." A claim of such weight demands

a full-throated polemic of its own: a more elaborate argument for why one civilisation succeeded in exporting much of its culture while its powerful neighbour could not.

More troublingly, this great work risks being weaponised by the Hindu far right. A narrative of a glorious, world-shaping Hindu-Buddhist past, however scholarly and nuanced, will inevitably risk being stripped of its subtleties and served up as grist for the mill of the burgeoning Hindu nationalist movement.

Arundhati Roy, writing in 1998 about India's nuclear program in *Frontline* magazine, remarked acidly: "Yes, I've heard—the bomb is in the Vedas. It might be, but if you look hard enough, you'll find Coke in the Vedas, too. That's the great thing about all religious texts. You can find anything you want in them as long as you know what you're looking for." And so it is with history. The modern Hindu chauvinist, knowing precisely what they are looking for, will find in the past not what was there, but what they need to be there now: a golden age of monolithic Hindu supremacy. The ultimate and most depressing irony, then, is that a book chronicling a history of syncretism, conversation, and cosmopolitan exchange might just be brandished as a cudgel by those who champion its very opposite.

William Dalrymple has certainly marshalled a staggering array of evidence—around 200 pages of notes and references drawn from archaeology, epigraphy, art history, and many forgotten texts. Yet, having finished the book, I am left to wrestle with a troubling paradox.

In his campaign to correct a Eurocentric (and now Sinocentric) map of the past, has he not simply created a new, Indocentric one? The very concept of an "Indosphere"—that "Sanskritic sun" radiating its beams across a receptive Asia—can feel perilously close to exchanging one form of hegemonic gravity for another. Does it not, in its grand sweep, risk diminishing the very agency and indigenous genius of Khmer and Javanese cultures, casting them as mere adapters of an imported culture?

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