

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

In which Arundhati gives it those ones

A non-book review of 'Mother Mary Comes to Me' (Penguin, 2025) by Arundhati Roy

What I will attempt instead is to list eight things this book might do to you. And in that you might identify yourself as a suitable reader of Roy's memoir, or you might not—not until you are ready to face all the triggers, traumas and truces this memoir will press against you.

BIRONGO

This is not a book review. At least not in the traditional sense where the reviewer recaps the gist of a book, quoting and analyzing parts, drawing or pointing to conclusions. Arundhati Roy's memoir *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is not something to be summarised. I believe if a reviewer tries to do so, they will only come up with much lesser versions of what Roy has already vividly painted in every page of this book of love—sorrow; eccentric, horrifying, strangely warm mother-daughter relationship; the eternal bond of a set of broken siblings; friendships; integrity; politics; injustice; rebellions; deaths; survival; living for one's truths and lies; and healing—the overused yet inescapable word of our century.

What I will attempt instead is to list eight things this book might do to you. And in that you might identify yourself as a suitable reader of Roy's memoir, or you might not—not until you are ready to face all the triggers, traumas and truces this memoir will press against you.

1. *Mother Mary Comes to Me* will confuse you about its actual protagonist. Mary Roy, Arundhati's mother, whom she describes as her "gangster", "shelter and storm", will baffle and enrage you and then strangely make you giggle. In some pages you might even give her a standing ovation for her courage, commitment, and for being an important catalyst of change in children's education and women's rights. Arundhati will turn your heart around about what could have been one of the most insufferable real life characters you have ever read and open you to the complexity of human nature. You will experience both a super-human and a demon in Mary Roy. At times you will wonder about the humour. You will ask yourself if this is a caricature or did this person actually exist? You will be constantly tossing a coin with love and hate, cruelty and kindness, intelligence and incoherence, anger and helplessness



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embossed on opposite sides. You will keep changing your mind and realise life is inconclusive, and people are not squarely decipherable.

2. If you are a woman who has lost your voice, suppressed your needs, or felt guilty for wanting to be different, you will locate your lost power in these pages and reclaim yourself. You will become less apologetic for wanting and needing what is essential for you. You will laugh at the conventions which have tied you to lethargic comforts, social obligations, invisible and visible patriarchy. You will see Arundhati and Mary as women who were ahead of their times, or perhaps they were right on time so that those who came later found the nerve to keep doing what these two ladies did for the first time, a second, third, fourth and hundredth

time and if we are brave, to even go some extra miles.

3. The book will make you cry, laugh, pause, hurt. If you have had strict parents, you will go back to your childhood and reexamine events, motives. You will find new eyes to look at yourself and your vulnerability and those of your parents. If you grew up fatherless, or with a parent who used you as a punching bag, you will find it almost unbearable to continue reading this book. Yet, you will read on. You will weep. And then, who knows, you might even find forgiveness.

4. If you are a fan of *The God of Small Things* (1997), Arundhati's Booker Prize winning novel, you will love all the descriptions that wait for you in the first hundred pages. You will devour again the prose on the village of

Ayemenem in Kerala, the Meenachil river, its fishes and fishermen, the rain, the forest and all the tiny heart-breakingly gorgeous things that the siblings Rahel and Estha lived amongst. The inspirations behind characters of Velutha, Chacko, Baby Kochamma will come alive. You will understand from where Arundhati picked up the themes of oppression, Naxal movement, intellectuals, elites, and outcasts.

5. You might stop labeling yourself according to the larger society's definitions. You might pick up a pen and write down your confessions even if it is for your eyes only.

6. You will learn about a woman, Arundhati to be specific, who has an extraordinary capacity to love. Like her protagonist Anjum, from her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost*

Happiness (2017) who builds a guest house in a graveyard and where each room contains a grave, you will see how—through her activism and life—Arundhati, too, has experienced the deaths of many close and important individuals. Individuals whose causes and sacrifices Arundhati believed in—unheard and mistreated individuals who came to her to be heard or to whom she ran to understand, witness and fight for the injustices they faced. Many of these individuals embraced deaths, some were forcefully killed. You will get a glimpse of the chambers holding each of their graves in Arundhati's heart.

7. As the book wraps up and Mary Roy passes away, you will read a prolific description of her funeral and all that followed, including how and where her ashes were spread. And then suddenly you will look down at your hands and notice the book you are holding, *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, and recognise that this spectacularly designed red-almost-velvety covered book is also Mary's ashes. Arundhati, in her most fantastic of ways, has given you a part of her mother. These thousands of copies now floating around various continents, in our hands are all but fragments of Mary Roy. We too now hold a piece of thorny love, thoroughly lived life, a thoughtful song, and triumphant celebration. Like that, you will touch what is most precious to the author and she will dig a new hole in your being and fill it with emotions that will make you feel drugged. You will want to be silent after you fathom all these.

8. You will walk away with these lines: (A) Anything Can Happen to Anyone. (B) It's Best to Be Prepared.

Just like Arundhati Roy's *Rahel from The God of Small Things*, and *Anjum from The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, who lived with Roy as she wrote them out, *Birongo* is a vivid entity who lives with her author until she has her own complete novel to reside in, hopefully in thousands of prints around continents.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

AT THE NEOLIBERAL TABLE: Who eats and who gets eaten in 'Carnivore'

Review of 'Carnivore' (HarperCollins, 2025) by K. Anis Ahmed

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

K. Anis Ahmed's *Carnivore* serves up a daring and disturbing literary dish. The novel is part crime thriller, part immigrant narrative, and part sociopolitical allegory. The author dares to mix genres to pursue a culinary metaphor: the best way to get to someone's heart is through their palate. The same can be said for a migrant trying to win the hearts of the members of his adopted country. But what if, in an age of overconsumption, the palate craves more—meat from the grey zone? The desire to have a taste of the taboo can test humans (pun intended) and form the basis of this transgressive noir.

The plot sizzles with the American dream of a Bangladeshi immigrant who shoves up in New York with a fake Diversity Visa. The protagonist, Kash, moves from the memory-haunted alleys of Dhaka's Dhanmondi to the glitzy eateries of New York as the author weaves a braided narrative of daring ambition and desperate gambits. Along the way, he also explores the psychological complexity of a diverse range of immigrants. He does so through his signature style of



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

layering flashbacks, parallel settings, and moments of lyrical reflection. He crosses borders, both geographical and emotional, with the ease of a cosmopolitan man and urbane wit. From the very *Breaking Bad* kind of start, *Carnivore* proves to be an intoxicating novel that grips the reader by the throat and doesn't let go.

The protagonist has a rather normal childhood in Dhanmondi that belies family dysfunction and sexual taboos. The surface normalcy is fractured when we get to know his carnal secrets: thwarted love at 15 but twisted further by an unexpected—or unknown—sexual rivalry with, of all

people, his father. The older brother turns to humble entrepreneurship with a tehari shop, while Kash prepares to leave it all behind.

The American Dream is tickled first by American TV shows, a Cold War era largesse, but blossoms more due to an English teacher who is a rare evangelist for America in a time when it was more in vogue to be left-leaning. The "secondhand Americana" is achieved through forged documents. The hidden support structure of the deshi community in Queens, NY, helps him settle down and eventually enter the restaurant business. But his rejection of

his deshi community is evident in his desire to go beyond curry-in-a-hurry to a much more exotic menu for the upscale New Yorkers. He partners with a friend whom he assumes comes from old money.

To keep the business afloat, Kash borrows from an East European loanshark, misses payment schedules, and becomes a prey to the predatory lender. The social cannibalism turns out to be literal as Kash loses his pinky finger as a punishment. The mortal wound, or rather the severed pinky, inspires a sick epiphany—Kash cooks up a plot. And soon after this injury, he learns of a secretive billionaires' dining club which

becomes his potential ticket out from his debt burden.

His partner in crime is his life partner, Helen: a blonde former model who, like Kash, is an outsider to the swankier world of New York, and brings her own darkness to the table. She is not simply a sidekick or love interest but recalls a lost Wild Wild West which resonates with Kash—they feed each others' yearning for recognition, and revenge. Together, they become a new kind of Bonnie and Clyde: Bangladeshi grit, American depravity or vice versa.

Ahmed doesn't simply tell a crime story. He interrogates capitalism, hedonism, identity, and consumption. *Carnivore* is about who gets to eat and who gets eaten. Ahmed gives examples from myths from different cultures to reflect on the price of assimilation. There are stories of the grotesque lengths they go to belong. The bitter irony in America, it turns out, is that sometimes the immigrant must serve himself up to survive.

To say Ahmed is fearless in his style is an understatement. His prose switches from the nostalgic past of Dhaka childhood to the well-researched gourmet culture of New York's high-end kitchens. His cultural commentary refuses to look away from class betrayal or moral decay.

The novel has all the elements of joining the streaming era; *Carnivore* begs for a Netflix adaptation to join the ranks of *Hannibal*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The White Lotus*. But even without the screen, the story sears itself into your memory with its visceral, unflinching cost-benefits of the American Dream seen through Bangladeshi eyes.

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