

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

To pick or not to pick a bone

Review of Amitav Ghosh’s ‘Ghost-Eye’ (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2026)

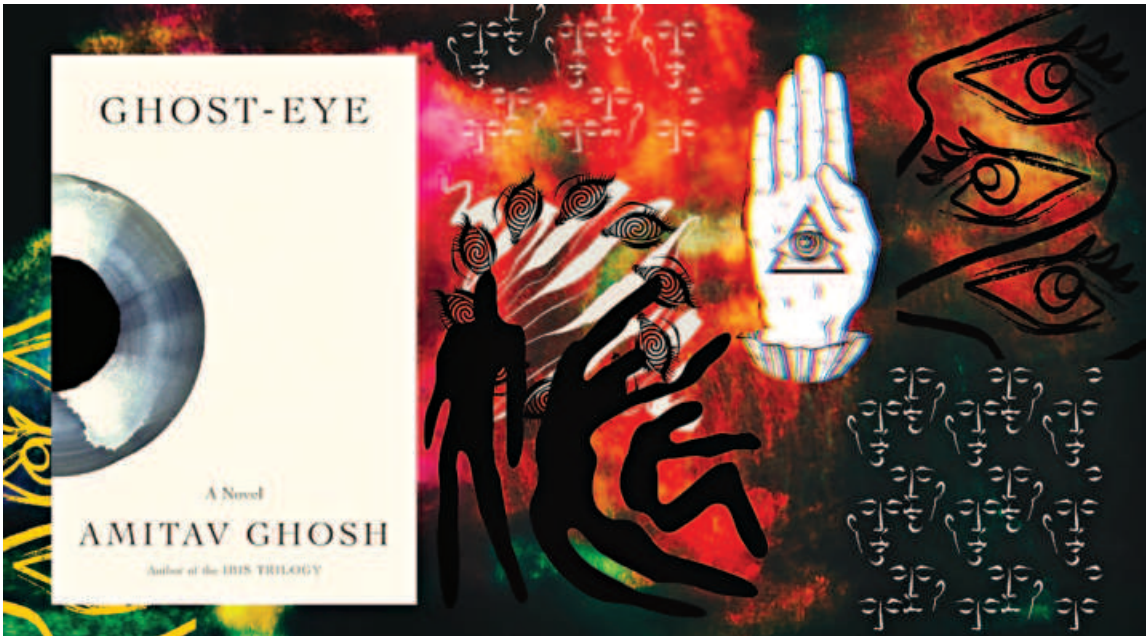


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

IFFAT NAWAZ

Reading *Ghost-Eye* felt similar to casually dating someone whose family and friends are more exciting and fascinating than the person themselves. It reminded me of confused decisions I had made earlier in life, when I stuck to someone longer than necessary for some complacent

comfort and the additional accessories they brought me. There is at least one break up in these sorts of relationships, and true to nature, I, too, had put down *Ghost-Eye* for about a week and then went back to it—not for the sake of the narrator, Dinu, but for all that he was connected to.

To my defense—Ghosh’s too, I suppose—the plot of *Ghost-Eye* is

intriguing. If reincarnation, magic realism, slight spiritual twists, and supernatural woo-woo stuff is your thing, then this book will certainly draw you in. I am into all of the above and that’s why even when too many pages chewed around fishes and their bones I stuck around.

The narrative is non linear and skips between the 1960s and the Covid era. The vivid descriptions of Calcutta and the prose capturing what it felt like to be part of that world in the 1960s and 1970s drew vivid cityscapes in my mind. Occasionally I had to

ignore the narrator’s voice which, at times, appeared to be of an uncle or a grandfather reminiscing the good old days. Some of those sections about growing up in that leftist Bengal with load-shedding and post-colonial fever seemed almost autobiographical.

The Sundarbans, Burma, Calcutta and New York—all the settings of Ghosh’s previous works cropped up and filled the pages. One could wonder if they were leftover notes and characters that didn’t make it to his earlier books which finally found place in this rather character-heavy novel.

I especially found the character of Tipu, a young man who unfortunately spoke in some version of GenZ lingo (the writing by a boomer did no justice), hard to stand. If Tipu was written with normal jargon-free English, I would listen to his messages more seriously—which were driven by spiritual revelation and revolution, as well as that of climate change.

The story was long-winded and the foreshadowing felt too tell-tell at times. But Ghosh after all is a master storyteller, and he left just enough breadcrumbs for me to follow along to find out what happens next.

What I appreciated about the book were the relationships Ghosh tied between people. Whether they were familial like that of Abhay and Varsha Gupta or romantic like Monty

and Shoma’s, Ghosh wrote them with detailed care and compassion, making me yearn for such bonds.

Many of the female characters of the book, Varsha, Shoma, Piya, and Durga were portrayed as independent and strong women doing extraordinary things. The goddess Manasa Devi also takes up a significant space through the book—establishing the power of the feminine and nature.

There were mentions of Bengali folktales, Behula and Lakhindar; names of fishes I had forgotten to spell or the taste of, and nostalgic Bengali words like “shapure” and “bhitte bari” were sprinkled through the book—all of which kept the Bengali in me committed till the end.

Would I recommend *Ghost-Eye*? I would say read it when you need comfort, don’t rush through it, take breaks and read other books in between if you have to. In some ways, the innocence of bygone days and the hope for the future save *Ghost-Eye*—and I guess at this point in time, we are in need of both.

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.

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ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

When ‘Little Women’ turns to murder: Katie Bernet reimagines a classic

Review of ‘Beth Is Dead’ (Sarah Barley Books, 2026) by Katie Bernet

SHABABA IQBAL

What if Beth March in *Little Women* (1868) hadn’t died of scarlet fever, but had been brutally murdered instead?

That chilling premise drives Katie Bernet’s debut novel, *Beth Is Dead*, a sharp, modern reimagining that trades Louisa May Alcott’s gentle domestic warmth for suspicion, secrecy, and a house thick with unease.

While respecting Alcott’s choice to let Beth die, Bernet moves the March family into the present day. The sisters now face peer pressure, toxic relationships, social media scrutiny, and the chaos of sudden fame.

In Bernet’s version, the Marches are already famous before Beth’s death. Their father has written and published *Little Women*, a thinly veiled novel based on his daughters’ real lives. The book controversially ends with Beth dying in a car crash—even though she *actually* survived the accident. Its success thrusts the family into a spotlight and forces the father into hiding.

Then, on New Year’s Day, Beth is found

murdered in the woods. The crime feels both shocking and eerily inevitable, as if violence were less an intrusion than an escalation of the public’s fixation on their private lives. The media frenzy that follows mirrors our current reality: once a personal tragedy goes public, it becomes ‘content’ to be dissected, debated, and consumed.

The story alternates between two timelines. In the present, we follow the three surviving sisters—Meg, Jo, and Amy—as they wrestle with grief and rising paranoia. Flashbacks reunite all four sisters, showing Beth at her piano, her gentle spirit, and her tentative steps toward self-discovery. These tender scenes make her loss hit even harder.

The novel borrows true crime’s investigative, suspicion-fuelled style and weaves it into fiction. Meg, Jo, and Amy actively investigate Beth’s murder, digging up motives and secrets while turning suspicion inward—toward family and close friends. This echoes how true crime audiences and content creators obsess over clues, red herrings, and ‘whodunnit’ theories. The approach

lands especially well with those of us hooked on podcasts and documentaries about real cases. We start reading conversations and memories like clues. The novel shows how quickly suspicion takes over—and how easily vulnerability becomes something to analyse. Though the frequent timeline and viewpoint shifts may feel disorienting at first, they soon build into a gripping, fast-paced rhythm.

At its core, *Beth Is Dead* questions who gets to tell a story. The father’s novel—eerily prefiguring Beth’s death—exposes how easily art can edge into exploitation. The damage it leaves behind shows the cost of making private pain public.

Bernet frames suffering as a form of capital, circulated and consumed. Jo, an aspiring author with a significant online following, understands this all too well. “I’ve written loads of personal essays in my life,” she says, “some light, some dark, and the ones that get compliments, real traction, are the ones about pain, strife.” The novel presses on the uncomfortable truth: once grief is packaged for an audience, it no longer belongs solely to

the bereaved.

If this critique gives the book its intellectual edge, the enduring sisterhood provides its emotional core. Bernet resists idealising the March sisters. They emerge as complex, sometimes unlikeable young women—marked by resentments, jealousies, and long-kept secrets that strain their bonds. Yet their deep love for one another persists, even as suspicion threatens to rip them apart.

While the mystery’s twists may not always shock seasoned thriller readers, the real pleasure comes from watching these iconic characters navigate suspicion and grief while clinging to the same unbreakable bonds that made Alcott’s original timeless. *Beth Is Dead* is both unsettling and unexpectedly satisfying—a reimagining that honours Alcott’s legacy while holding a mirror to our own appetite for spectacle.

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THE SHELF

The quiet grief of becoming ordinary

8 books for people who feel like they wasted their potential

SARA KABIR

There’s a very specific kind of heartbreak that arrives on a random Tuesday—one morning, you simply wake up and realise that the big, successful life you had envisioned for yourself as a child is not quite the same as the quiet life you are leading now. The gifted child who thought they would change the world, the teenager who carried impossible dreams like spare change in their pocket, and the adult who now answers emails, rereads the same sentence three times, and wonders when exactly constant burnout became their default.

Maybe the cruelest thing modern life does is convince people that their worth depends on becoming remarkable. That if your life does not look cinematic, global, productive, or endlessly upward-moving, then you have somehow failed.

But literature has always known better. Some of the most beautiful stories ever written are about people sitting in kitchens. Walking home alone. Remembering old friendships. Starting over quietly. Learning how to live with disappointment without letting it calcify into bitterness.

All The Lovers In The Night
Mieko Kawakami
Europa Editions, 2022

A lonely woman in her thirties drifts through work and routine so quietly that she almost disappears inside it. Kawakami writes loneliness with surgical precision. This

is not a story about dramatic success or failure, but about alienation: from work, from other people, and from yourself. The protagonist’s life looks painfully small on paper, yet the novel insists that interior lives still matter deeply. It understands something many high-achieving people fear: sometimes burnout doesn’t look like collapse. Sometimes it looks like becoming emotionally invisible.

Mrs Dalloway
Virginia Woolf
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002

Following the life of a woman as she prepares for a party while reflecting on her past, her choices, and the life she ultimately ended up living, Woolf captures the terrifying awareness that adulthood is partly built from roads not taken. The people we could have loved. The selves we could have become. Yet the novel also quietly asks whether ordinary moments—flowers, conversation, sunlight, memory—might still contain meaning even without grandeur. On the surface, almost nothing happens in this novel. Internally, everything does. A century later, it still reads like emotional clairvoyance.

This is an excerpt. Read the full list on The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature websites.

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