INTERVIEW

Silence, faith, and the unseen: Jon Fosse in conversation

AHMED AHSANUZZAMAN



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DESIGN: MAHMUDA EMDAD

In early September, I met Jon Fosse, Nobel Laureate in Literature 2023, at Oslo's Kunstnernes Hus (Artists' House), a cultural landmark situated opposite the Royal Palace gardens. The quiet atmosphere of the building seemed fitting for a writer whose work has become synonymous with silence, repetition, and the unsaid.

Only a short walk away stands Grotten, the honorary residence granted by the Norwegian state to distinguished contributors to national culture and where Fosse now lives. The proximity between the writer's home and the symbolic centre of Norwegian public life reflects the place he occupies in the nation's cultural imagination.

Fosse's relationship with Norwegian theatrical tradition is both intimate and distinct. He has written "Suzannah" (2026), a play centred on Henrik Ibsen's wife, and translated "Peer Gynt" (1867) into Nynorsk for Robert Wilson's acclaimed production. Yet his own dramatic vision differs markedly from Ibsen's. Where Ibsen built drama through conflict and revelation, Fosse creates tension through silence, repetition, waiting, and what remains unspoken. His recent works—*Våim* (2025), *Våim Hotel* (2026), and *The Play* (2025)—continue this trajectory.

I first met Fosse in 2007 while pursuing an MPhil in Ibsen Studies at the University of Oslo. When we met again on September 4 of this year, he surprised me by recalling that encounter. Not the details, as he later explained, but its atmosphere. That distinction between fact and feeling, memory and mood, perhaps offers the clearest insight into Fosse's artistic world.

What follows is an edited excerpt from our hour-long conversation.

Your new work—*Våim*, *Våim Hotel*, and *The Play*—seem to form a progression: origin, transition, and distillation. What binds these books together?

They are connected by a movement toward simplicity. *Våim* is the beginning—not a narrative beginning, but an existential one. It is about the first gesture, the first awareness. *Våim Hotel* is a place of suspension, where characters linger between what they know and what they fear. And *The Play* is the most reduced of the three. It is an attempt to see how little language is needed for something essential to remain.

Silence is central in your writing, but it can also be evasive. In these works, is silence a refuge, a confrontation, or something else entirely?

Silence is not a refuge, and it is not a confrontation. It is a condition. It is the ground from which language emerges. When I write, I listen to the silence first. If the silence is closed, the writing becomes closed. If the silence is open, the writing becomes open. Silence is not passive; it is active. It shapes the rhythm, the breath, the pauses. Silence is the space where truth becomes audible. I listen to silence, to memory, to the unseen.

Some critics argue that your characters are passive—that they wait too much, hesitate too much, endure too much. Do you see them as passive, or is their stillness a form of action?

I don't think they are passive. They are searching. Action is not always movement. Sometimes action is staying, or refusing to leave, or enduring oneself. My characters act through endurance. They confront their fears by remaining with them. That is a kind of courage. Literature often celebrates dramatic action, but human life is mostly made of quiet decisions. I write about those.

You often describe writing as a spiritual practice. But spirituality is a contested word. What does spirituality mean in your work?

Spirituality, for me, is simply the awareness that something exists beyond what can be said. I am not interested in doctrine or theology. I am interested in the experience of the unseen – the sense that something is present even when it cannot be named. Writing is my way of approaching that presence. It is a form of listening. If spirituality appears in my work, it is because I write from that listening.

You have written "Suzannah", a play about Ibsen's wife, and you have engaged with "Peer Gynt". Yet you once said you were reluctant to write anything connected to Ibsen. Could you talk about that reluctance, and how you eventually approached these works? And how do you see yourself in relation to Ibsen and the Norwegian theatrical tradition?

Yes, I was reluctant—very reluctant, actually. When NRK first approached me about writing something related to Ibsen, I said no. I felt Ibsen was too monumental, too established, too present in Norwegian culture. I didn't want to add to the mountain of Ibsen commentary. And I didn't want to be trapped inside his world. I write from a different place. But eventually I agreed, because the challenge itself became interesting. I realised that if I were to write anything about Ibsen, it had to be from an angle that was not Ibsen's own. "Suzannah" is almost absent in the biographies, but she is present in the shadows. I wanted to bring her out of the shadows. I wanted to show Ibsen through her tone, her silence, her endurance. Her refrain, "I am Ibsen"—I had read it in one of the biographies. It struck me because it reveals something essential: she was not only his wife; she was part of his identity. She carried him, supported him, and in some ways, created the conditions for his genius. It stayed with me.

As for "Peer Gynt", I was again reluctant. I didn't want to touch Ibsen's language. But I was asked to translate it into Nynorsk, and the challenge was enormous. I had to strip Ibsen's Danish-Norwegian of its rhymes, its musicality, and yet keep it as close as possible to the original. It was like walking a tightrope: remove the ornamentation, but preserve the soul. That challenge—the difficulty of bringing Ibsen's text into my own linguistic world—was what convinced me to do it.

The Nobel Prize changed your visibility dramatically. Has it changed your writing or your relationship to your work?

No. Recognition is external. Writing is internal. The prize is an honour, but it doesn't enter the silence where the writing happens. That space remains untouched. If I allowed expectations to enter that space, I wouldn't be able to write at all.

You write often about fear—fear of loss, fear of disappearance, fear of the self. Are these your own fears?

Yes, of course. All writers write from their fears. Fear reveals what we care about. I write to understand my fears, not to escape them. Fear is a form of truth. It is a way of seeing.

This September, "Suzannah" will be staged in Bangladesh—translated into Bangla jointly by Subah Binte Ahsan and myself, and directed by me during the Henrik Ibsen–Jon Fosse Festival 2026 at Independent University, Bangladesh. This will be the first staging of a work by Fosse in Bangladesh. Is there anything you would like to say to the production team?

I hope everyone listens to one another—the director, the performers, and the audience—so that the performance comes together.

Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman *is professor of English and Director, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Abbasuddin Ahmed Research & Study Centre at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB). Fosse's play* "Suzannah" *is set to premiere under his direction at IUB on 30 September. He can be reached at: ahsanuzzaman@iub.edu.bd.*

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Chasing myths before midnight

Review of 'Alchemy of Secrets' (Flatiron Books, 2025) by Stephanie Garber

TAHMINA HOSSAIN

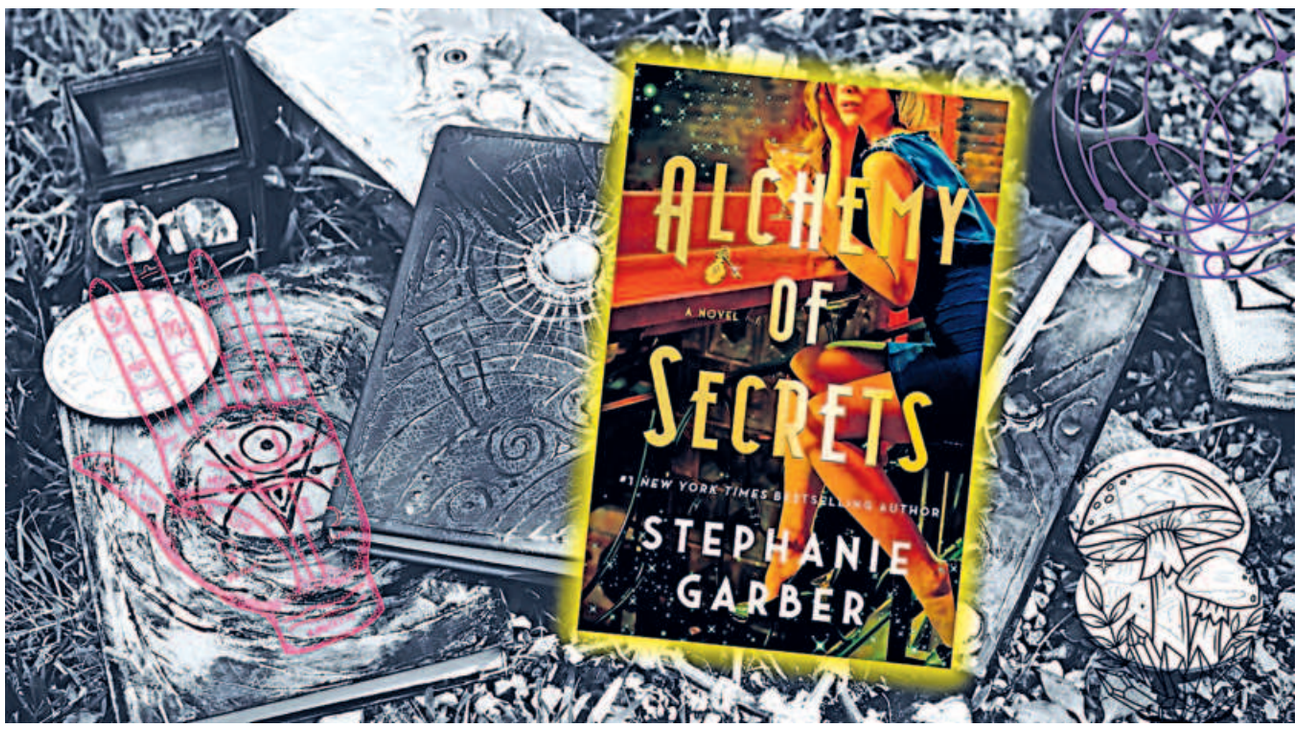


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Alchemy of Secrets is Stephanie Garber's first attempt at adult fantasy. The story follows Holland St. James and her obsession with folklore and magic. The voracious hunger for folklore and mythology compels Holland to enroll in a Folklore course titled Folklore 517: Local Legends and Urban Myths—taken by a woman whom everyone addresses as Professor. Interestingly, the real name of this Professor is not mentioned anywhere in the book. Every student who enrolled in her class is required to follow one rule: never to share the stories with anyone outside this classroom unless they want to end up dead themselves, or bring death to the person they share the stories with. It's a simple yet deeply unsettling rule, which makes many students drop the course immediately, except for a few exceptions. But out of nowhere, the Professor disappears without a trace, putting a stop to classes. And Holland, with her impulsive desire to check the validity of the myths, embarks on a quest to unearth buried truths and comes face-to-face with one of the folklore characters taught by the Professor in the class. This mythical entity is addressed as the Watch Man. According to the myth, the Watch Man tells everyone the time of their death and a way to cheat it. Staying true to the myth, the Watch Man tells Holland that she has 24 hours to live—exactly till 11:59 PM on the day of Halloween—unless she finds an object called the alchemical heart to bypass her untimely death. This is when all hell breaks loose, and the plot takes an accelerated momentum.

The first few chapters are chaotic, as Garber slowly feeds us little tidbits of Holland's past. Sometimes the urgency of the story and Holland's emphasis on the myth feel exaggerated, as Holland's occasional humour undermines many serious situations. Furthermore, the intersection between Holland's intense urgency.

The main character, Holland, is not a conventional main character. She is on a personal quest to uncover the murder mystery of her famous parents—who once used to be prominent stars of Hollywood—and many more loosely and similarly connected mysterious deaths of other Hollywood celebrities. Unfortunately, the murder investigation failed to instill any sense of detecting danger or steering clear of it in Holland. She appears delusional and impulsive, sprinting behind anything that seems mysterious and outlandish. One example of her impulsivity is that Holland rushes towards the mysteries behind the myths and the magic taught in the class, completely disregarding the warning previously pointed out by the Professor. Additionally, Holland is naive too and gets backstabbed multiple times—sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively—by her friends and family. Yet she repeatedly ends up trusting the questionable characters. However, one admirable quality of Holland is her resilience; she never gives up despite the continuous betrayals.

The first few chapters are chaotic, as Garber slowly feeds us little tidbits of Holland's past. Sometimes the urgency of the story and Holland's emphasis on the myth feel exaggerated, as Holland's occasional humour undermines many serious situations. Furthermore, the intersection between Holland's intense urgency and mystery was hard to connect with anything potent. From chapter 4, the novel becomes interesting as Garber—finally—spills substantial plot and connects all the dots. This is when the story adds up, starting a new rollercoaster of an adventure. One of the reasons contributing to the confusion is that Garber frequently switches point of view from second person to third person—in every alternate chapter—for the majority of the book. This creates confusion as the exact reason for the switch remains unaddressed, and Garber never describes why she decides to do so. However, at the end of the story, the readers can get a hint of the possible reasons behind this.

Moreover, the ending is abrupt and incomplete, as the whereabouts of many characters are left unmentioned. It is hard not to ponder about Gabe, Mason, Adam, January, and Chance, and what eventually happens to them. Perhaps Garber does this intentionally, as *Alchemy of Secrets* is part of a series, and wanted the first installment to focus exclusively on solving the murder mystery and how the magical world functioned here.

The story takes place at the heart of Hollywood, California, with all the aesthetics of the film world and glamour of the 1980s. Since the book takes place during Halloween, *Alchemy of Secrets* becomes an ultimate reading treat for anyone looking for a whimsical retreat.

Tahmina Hossain *is first and foremost a reader, a lover of literature, and then a writer. If you enjoy rambling about literature like her, then reach out at: literary.ramblings.by.t@gmail.com.*