ESSAY

The case for reading, however it begins

NAYER SULTANA

The modern book has become strangely overqualified for a job that once involved only pages. You could keep a book face-down beside the bed, stain a page with tea, or lose the dust jacket and nobody expected it to explain the person who owned it. But now the book has become more industrious. It travels under an arm with its title facing outward, gathers coloured tabs like tiny flags of emotional damage, and waits patiently while a phone negotiates with the morning light. *The Bell Jar (*Heinemann, 1963) is especially good at this. Nothing says emotional stability quite like Plath beside iced latte sweating more than its reader. A book can suggest seriousness, curiosity, melancholy, or simple, very good taste in cover design, all without opening its mouth. Somewhere along the way, carrying a book stopped being merely practical and became part of how a reader enters a room.

The internet naturally gave the habit a name; "performative reading." It sounds rather grand for an activity usually involving bad posture and a bookmark. Goodreads turned leisure into number and annual targets, creating the deeply relaxing experience of falling behind on reading for pleasure. Then came Bookstagram, the book loving corner of Instagram where reviews began sharing space with carefully arranged shelves, attractive covers and the occasional strategically placed cup of coffee. BookTok grew inside TikTok and was less interested in keeping still. Books moved through short videos, emotional reactions, recommendations and trends, sometimes sending years old novels back onto bestseller lists.

Reese Witherspoon, the Oscar-winning actor and producer, built a media company around women's stories, and sisterhood turned out to have excellent market value. Hello Sunshine, the women-centered company she founded in 2016, houses Reese's Book Club alongside its film and television business. In 2021, a majority stake was sold to what became Candle Media, backed by investment giant Blackstone. So the cheerful little book-club sticker sits inside a fairly serious business. In her 2024 study, "Reese Witherspoon's Popular Feminism: Adaptation and Authorship in *Big Little Lies,*" Sarah Louise Smyth argues that this kind of "popular feminism" gives women's stories plenty of visibility while also fitting rather comfortably inside branding, selling and entertainment. The feminist message may be sincere, capitalism has simply learned the vocabulary. Hello Sunshine reportedly considers more than a thousand books, scripts and other pieces of intellectual property a year, and its 2021 deal valued the company at roughly USD 900 million, a figure some Hollywood executives questioned. Money may not buy a Reese's Book Club slot directly, but larger advances, stronger publisher backing and better industry access can make sure some books begin the journey considerably closer to Reese's desk than others.

That uneven road into Reese's orbit is where Marx begins to feel less like an unexpected guest and more like someone who arrived early. Commodity fetishism fits rather neatly into a world where a small tag on a book can carry the weight of celebrity taste, publisher backing, marketing budgets and the possibility of a screen adaptation. None of that makes the book less literary, of course. Reese has helped selected titles travel farther and become harder to ignore, and that matters. The book rains a book. It has simply acquired a marketing department. Still, once recommendation starts flirting with retail power, bestseller status and Hollywood, "Reese's Pieces" begins to sound less like a candy joke and more like a publishing strategy.

South Asian books have found a glossier route into public conversation. Canadian comedian and Media personality Lilly Singh launched Lilly's Library to spotlight South Asian writers, while Indian author and former Bollywood actor Twinkle Khanna curates books through Tweak India, her digital media platform for women in partnership with Crossword, one of India's major bookstore chains. A famous recommendation can carry a novel far beyond the shelf where it began. Celebrities benefit too, of course; fame rarely agrees to sit quietly in the corner. But the reach can also make room for writers who might otherwise wait much longer to be noticed. The old tastemakers had review pages. The newer ones sometimes have millions of followers and excellent hair.

February has been doing that work for decades. Ekushey Boi Mela is reading mixed with adda, wandering, and buying one book too many before pretending the bad is not heavy. There are photographs too.

British Albanian pop star Dua Lips makes celebrity book culture a little harder to dismiss. Her Service95 Book Club, part of her wider cultural platform, launched in 2023 with Douglas Stuart's Booker Prize winning debut novel, *Shuggie Bain* (Grove Press, 2020). Lipa did more than post the cover; she later interviewed Stuart at Hay Festival in Wales, and regularly speaks with other writers about their work. Compared with Reese Witherspoon's more commercially connected book-to-screen world and Twinkle Khanna's broader lifestyle platform, Lipa stays unusually close to the reading itself. Service95 is still a brand; global pop stars rarely misplace those. But here the book seems to get more room than the machinery around it. At least the book still gets invited to the meeting.

American singer and flute player Lizzo takes the idea of performative reading almost charmingly literally. Her first children's picture book, *Lil Lizzo Meets Sasha B Flootin'* (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2026), grows from her own history with the flute; she has played since childhood, and Sasha Flute is the name of her real instrument. The book even includes a QR code reader to an original flute composition. Story time had suddenly acquired a soundtrack. If books now have to compete for a child's attention, Lizzo has chosen the least subtle strategy available. She brought a flute.

Bangladesh hardly needed the internet to teach books how to leave the house. February has been doing that work for decades. Ekushey Boi Mela is reading mixed with adda, wandering, and buying one book too many before pretending the bad is not heavy. There are photographs too. A 2024 report noted visitors lifting books from stalls for a quick picture and returning them is a remarkably brief literary relationship, but a relationship nonetheless. Yet, the fair is larger than the joke. Mosharraf Karim, one of the country's most familiar actors, has spoken about carrying books to outdoor shoots and making time to read between work. Dhaka Lit Fest had already shown how happily literature could live among crowds—conversations spilling beyond stages, while newly bought books disappeared into bags. Here, reading has rarely been a sealed-room habit. Books come outside. They acquire company.



ILLUSTRATION: **MAISHA SYEDA**

Jhumpa Lahiri once said in an interview, "But reading is fundamental. A book is a life jacket." The cover cannot tell us why someone reached for it or what stayed with them after the page was closed. Books are slightly indiscreet that way. They reveal just enough to invite imagination and then refuse to explain the rest. That is where performative reading becomes most interesting. A book can be held where everyone can see it and still contain something meant for one reader alone. The pose may last a minute; the sentence may stay for years. Somewhere between being seen with a book and being quietly altered by it, someone still turns the page.

There is something particularly strange about calling reading performative at a time when educators are already trying to persuade students to read anything that does not arrive as a slide, a summary, or a conveniently highlighted PDF. A student finally walks into class carrying a novel and somehow the cultural response is to wonder whether the novel is there for decoration. Even if it began that way, so what? Habits sometimes arrive through embarrassingly shallow doors. Someone may first pick up a book for reasons that would deeply disappoint the literary police, a beautiful cover, a trend, a recommendation. A few chapters in, we can assume that the cover has already done its job and the story has taken over. Soon enough, the accessory has opinions about their life. A book posed neatly for a photograph may be mocked, shared, saved, searched for, and eventually read. If that is performance, it is at least performance with excellent side effects.

The best answer to all this anxiety happened to be lying on an office desk. *Once, A Little Life* (Doubleday, 2015) by Hanya Yanagihara was lying face-up on my boss's desk. The title was visible, which, according to current internet logic, already puts the book dangerously close to having an agenda. Instead, it produced one question; "Do you like what you're reading?" She said, "Yes, absolutely." "This book beautifully traumatised me," came the reply. My boss answered, "We love a good trauma book." That was the entire scandal. A book cover created a conversation. It gave two people a small point of recognition that had existed 30 seconds earlier. Perhaps "know thyself" is unnecessarily ambitious; knowing the title on the desk did perfectly well. Books have always done this. They sit in rooms, on desks, under arms, and quietly offer strangers or colleagues a reason to speak. If that now counts as performative reading, the performance seems almost disappointingly wholesome.

What worries me more is the embarrassment we are beginning to attach to being seen with books at all. There is another small comedy here. Calling someone a "performative reader" can become its own performance of taste, a way of announcing that one is sufficiently serious about books to identify who is carrying them incorrectly. One person carries a novel everyone seems to be reading; another decides that being seen with it must be the whole point. The novel remains impressively uninvolved. Perhaps reading does not need this much purity. Nobody asks whether a beautiful ring is loved for its craftsmanship or because it looks good on the hand. Both can be true without civilisation collapsing. A book can work the same way. It can be beautiful, social, fashionable, deeply loved, half-read, reread, or still waiting patiently on a shelf. Life is untidy in the nicest way, and sometimes admiration begins with the cover and stays for the pages.

Nayer Sultana *connects bridges between poetry and prose. When she's not being her lecturer-self at North South University, she's stitching together a non-fiction memoir that refuses to stay in one genre. Her work wanders through belonging, becoming, and the shifting idea of home.*



ILLUSTRATION: **MAISHA SYEDA**

POETRY

The last load of laundry

RANIA FATEMA TUI

If I pass away today,
please let me finish the laundry.
Which would be inconvenient,
mostly because I have laundry in the machine.
I know.
Of all the things to worry about—
death,
the afterlife,
who gets my books—
I am thinking about a washing machine.
But there is a load in there
that has been sitting too long,
and I cannot bear the thought
of my clothes becoming
someone else's problem.
So let me rinse the last shirt.
Let me hang everything in the sun.
Let me turn pockets inside out
and discover the usual evidence
of my life:
a receipt,
two coins,
a hair tie,
some ridiculous little thing
I was sure I would need.
Let me fold your shirt, too.
The one I kept stealing
because it smelled like you.
Let me leave the house
looking like I was only
temporarily interrupted.
The bed was made.
The cup in the sink.
The laundry folded.
Nothing dramatic
except the fact
that I won't be coming back for it.
Maybe that is the cruelest thing
about laundry—
how ordinary it is.
How the body leaves
but its smell doesn't.
For a little while,
my clothes will still know me.
My pillow will still remember my hair.
A sweater will still hold
the shape of my shoulders.
And one day,
you will find one of them
at the bottom of a drawer.
You will hold it to your face
without meaning to.
And there I will be—
not quite a person anymore,
just a little soap,
skin,
perfume,
and memory
caught in the fabric.
And you will wonder:
When am I supposed to wash this away?
Please don't make yourself
find the right answer.
There isn't one.
I don't want you
measuring grief
in laundry cycles.
Wash it tomorrow.
Or don't.
Let it smell like me
until it doesn't.
I don't want you standing
over a washing machine,
grieving and wondering
if enough time has passed
to put me on a normal cycle.
There is no appropriate time
to wash someone's scent away.
Do it when keeping it
starts to hurt more
than losing it.
And when you finally press
that little button,
I hope you don't think
you are washing me away.
You're only washing a shirt.
I'm not in there anymore.
And, eventually,
neither is my smell.
That is the part
I want you to survive.

Rania Fatema Tui *is a writer and master of making simple tasks complicated. Powered by iced coffee and last-minute panic, she spends 10% of her time typing, 90% staring at a blank screen, and re-reading text messages five times before sending them.*