

POCKET DIARY BOOK CLUB

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

YEAR 2024

21/04/2024 03:00 PM

Edition No. : 33

Venue: Akshat Drama Group Studio

Facilitators: Nirali & Nija

Written by: Aswathy

Edited by: Nija



Deviating from tradition and familiarity, this edition of PDBC relied on throwing people into the deep end. People knew only the genres of the texts that others were reading, and no other specifics of the work. There was a lot of talk about death and about languages—the two things that define humanity—and in our coming together to share stories, we were playing out a third defining characteristic of humanity: storytelling. We had the holy trinity.

We began with the picking of lots. 'Mythological retelling' was the first chosen one, and yours truly was the only candidate.

Aswathy: *Girl Meets Boy*, Ali Smith

A (post)modernist queer retelling of the myth of Iphis and Ianthe, this story is set in 2010s London. In the section that was read out, the narrator contemplates the love and death of her grandparents.

The reading ends with what I believe is a striking sentence: *"I wished that my own bones were unbound, I wished they were mingling, picked clean by fish, with the bones of another body, a body my bones and heart and soul had loved with unfathomable certainty for decades, and both of us down deep now, lost to everything but the fact of bare bones on a dark seabed."*



At this point, Nija and Nirali announce that we had not decided who would take down the minutes of the meeting. An awkward silence follows. Then Prashant says, 'Let the one who read first take down the minutes' throwing me into the deep end too. I agree to do it, but only because part of me has always wanted to take down the minutes.

And so, we proceed.

The next genre category is 'Memoir'. We have ~~three~~ four contenders.

Sambhav: *From Heaven Lake*, Vikram Seth

The colours are what stood out. The “beige”, “ochre”, and “white”, the “red strip of soil”, and, delightfully, the “nude dunes”. This book resurrected everybody’s wanderlust, and we talked about travelling, seeing the world, and seeing China. Some passing comments about ‘Wonder why no one talks about Chinese tourism’ floated around the room. Then, conversation drifted to languages, about authors writing in other languages, whether Vikram Seth knows Mandarin (yes, he does), and about Jhumpa Lahiri’s determination to write in Italian.



Smit: *Khushwantnama*, Khushwant Singh

Reflections on a life that regularly featured single-malt whiskey and gossip. It was affirming to know that even Khushwant Singh enjoyed a gabfest. There was yet again talk of languages. The parts where the author wrote about drinking in India could very well have been PR for small and medium enterprises in the alcohol industry. Then there was poetry, with excerpts from Ghalib and Faiz. Talk of death resurfaced. Another striking sentence: *“I rarely attended weddings but made it a point to attend funerals.”*

Aishwarya: *When Breath Becomes Air*, Paul Kalanithi

A reconciliation with death (yet again) and of shifting identities, primarily from doctor to patient. It’s a heavy read. There is talk of acceptance of one’s reality, and crude jokes about the physiological aspect of breath becoming air, which only goes to show that we have the capacity to hold both grief and humour within ourselves simultaneously.

Ruchi: *Daisy Jones & the Six*, Taylor Jenkins Reid

This one is distinctly *not* a memoir. We have background music for this one. The passage confronts love and separation. The band’s performance is described vividly; it makes you feel as if you were right there, on stage with them, watching their emotions flit over their faces. A few striking sentences: *“Truth lies unclaimed in the middle”* and *“We appreciate people more when they are fleeting.”* The discussion after the reading centred around audiobooks, to which Rajesh says, ‘Hum apni hi nahi sunte, dusre ki kya sunenge?’

And then it’s time for tea, and Nirali regales us with a reading from John Berger’s “From A to X”.

The next section was ‘Poetry’.

Anushree: *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath

Immediately terrified of all that Plath will bring. But the shifting image of the tulips is a lasting one. The discussion is a discussion of Sylvia Plath’s life and death, her husband (no thanks, Ted Hughes), and



finally, how ‘She was the right person in the wrong hands.’ The greatest reconciliation with death so far.

Then, onto ‘Crime’.

Sharvil: *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky

Sharvil called this the anxiety genre, to widespread agreement. A remarkable moment is finding out, in the discussion afterwards, that Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s *Saawariya* is based on Dostoevsky’s short story “White Nights”. Who would have thought.

Prashant: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut

War, after all, is the greatest crime of humanity. A brief examination of the mundane lives of people in the midst of war. Questions about bravery and the experiences of war come up in the discussion. The book’s satirising of war provokes Rajesh to remark that everything is satirical from afar: ‘Apna ghar door se dekho toh imarat hi lagti hai.’

Shanker: *My Name is Red*, Orhan Pamuk

The most uncharacteristic of murder mysteries, which may as well have belonged to the poetry category. So evocative, the text bringing the colour to aggressive life. There is talk again of death. The book is a murder camouflaged as art.

Meanwhile, Millee sits under the dripping AC, catching the water in her hands, vividly resembling the bodhisattva Tara.

Rajesh: *Gunslinger*, Stephen King

An evocative plot description from Rajesh, who prepares us for the ‘chota-mota pyaar’ and the background bang-bang in the book. For clarification, the bang-bang is strictly limited to gunshots. Many innuendos follow. The biggest banger was this line: “*Not out of ammo, but fresh out of mercy.*” In the discussion afterwards, everyone agrees that the premise reminds them of an American Western. Some are reminded of *Sholay*. I have watched neither, so I stay silent.



At this point, I stopped keeping track of the genres because I was distracted by the crochet flowers that decorated Prashant. I am reminded of John O'Donohue saying that if we hold only one thing of beauty in our minds throughout the day, it would be enough. The yellow crochet rose becomes that thing of beauty for me that Sunday.

Bhavita: *Madhukar*

A gorgeous old Gujarati book printed in 1909, which contained advertisements and stories of people’s lives. The focus is on a *jagirdar*, who is about to marry a second time following the death of his first wife. Everyone is scandalised, for the new wife is 14 years old whereas the *jagirdar* himself is 55. Again, the reading ends with death, following by many simultaneous discussions. I managed to sneak a sniff of the book. Unsurprisingly, it smelled wonderful.

Nidhi: *Whereabouts*, Jhumpa Lahiri

Vignettes, in translation. Funny little coincidence that an initial discussion mentioned Jhumpa Lahiri and now we read Jhumpa Lahiri. The text talks extensively about solitude and loneliness, making a case for detachment. The discussions follow along the exploration of what it means to be alone vs. what it means to be lonely. One sentence stands out: "*Burdened by the passage of time.*"



Millee: *Rituals of Happy Souls*, Deepanshu Giri

In keeping with her bodhisattva image, Millee reads from a book that recommends working on one's thoughts before directing that energy outwards. The book promotes a balancing of the five elements in order to achieve a complete balance. Note that, by this time, Millee has moved out from under the dripping AC. A kettle has replaced her as the receptacle of the water.

Samir: *The Psychology of a Young Thief*, Ruskin Bond

Ruskin Bond brings a sort of lightness to everything, and this was evident as we closed with a short story written by him. An examination of the transformations that sincere love and care can bring. For me, each Ruskin Bond story is a restoration of faith in humankind. This story is no different. On the sides, Prashant and Nidhi are discussing the dustbins of Landour which, admittedly, are quite sensational.

We closed with some incredible chocolates that Smit had brought from his trip to Europe, and then finally, with the reading of the minutes.

The picture on the right is an original, artist: Pra5hant, with a sunflower.



Fin.