

books

This week's essential reading

{ 'Turnaround of India State Could Serve as a Model', by Lydia Polgreen, *New York Times*

A look at how Bihar, one of India's 'failed states', once a byword for poverty and corruption, has become the country's second fastest-growing economy }

Ghost wars

Fatima Bhutto's *Songs of Blood and Sword* should not be read as a work of history, writes Manan Ahmed, rather a deeply personal hagiography of Pakistan's most famous political dynasty

"Pakistan was an ever-present ghost in our house. As was Zia. And Zulfikar. And Shah Nawaz. My father and I carried invisible baggage with us, both loved and feared," Fatima Bhutto writes in *Songs of Blood and Sword*. General Zia ul Haq was the dictator who put to death Pakistan's first elected prime minister – and Fatima's grandfather – Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1979. His son Shah Nawaz was found dead in Paris in 1986. Their ghosts have since been joined by those of Fatima's father, Mir Murtaza Bhutto, killed on the street in front of his home in 1996, and his sister Benazir, assassinated in 2007.

As a young woman, Fatima witnesses the violent and unnatural deaths of her dear uncle and her father. She hears whispers that her own aunt was involved – directly or indirectly – in those deaths. She grows up with the sadness of a family cleaved into factions. She writes to remember, she writes to accuse, she writes to explain. At the heart of this memoir lies the pain of a deep loss. She notes her father's perfume, his laugh, his humour and joy at living, his previous loves, his undergraduate thesis, his college friends, the music he loved, the revolutionaries he admired, the places he lived and people he met. It is an exhaustive remembrance told reverentially, lovingly and at times clumsily – and all the more touching as a result. She writes that she hoped, through this book, to make "my peace with my father... finally honouring my last promise to him – to tell his story – and then, to finally say goodbye."

Her project is a recuperative one: she wants to rescue the memory of her father Murtaza and to claim for him the status of a nation's saviour. She wants to tear away the skein of hagiography that now covers the memory of Benazir Bhutto, to expose her corruption, her culpability, her blind ambition. Above all, she wants to unburden herself of the sorrow of losing her father at the age of 14.

None should deny Fatima Bhutto the right to remember her loss – but that is not all this memoir aspires to. In her preface, she casts a familiar picture of Pakistan aflame, devastated from outside by drones and missiles, plundered from within by cronies and corruptions: "How have we come to this state of affairs?" she asks. This book is her answer. But it is a simplistic, uncritical and benighted one.

The Bhuttos, landed elite from Sindh, can claim a long and checkered history of entanglements with power – first the British colonial administration, then the new post-colonial state. Among "Sindh's largest landowners," they exerted great influence, controlling and directing hundreds of thousands of rural families. Fatima does not linger long on this early history – except to point out how "debonair", "dashing", "handsome", and "beautiful" every one was. Her grandfather, Zulfikar Ali, is soon off to Berkeley, California where someone mistakes him for a Mexican – this awakens in him the spirit of egalitarianism and equity. Or so it is remembered.

Zulfikar Ali's meteoric rise from Sindhi feudal to President of Pakistan is portrayed here either hagiographically or casually: at his better moments Zulfikar Ali is remembered as being destined for greatness; during his weaker moments he is the victim of poor advice. The most egregious omissions concern his political response to Bengali demands for equivalence in East Pakistan (which broke away to become Bangladesh after a civil war in 1971); it was the accord between the military regime of General Yahya and Zulfikar Ali's newly founded political party – the Pakistan People's Party – to disenfranchise the winning Awami League after the 1970 elections that sparked the conflict that led to Pakistan's repartition. Similarly, Fatima puts a naive and benign spin on Zulfikar Ali's pan-Islamic policies – ignoring the 1973 constitution that he promulgated, which deliberately set the country on the path toward Sharia law, dealt a deadly blow to minority rights, and enabled General Zia ul Haq's subsequent Sunnification of Pakistan. Zulfikar Ali's brutal crackdown on Balochistan in 1974 is also excused: then he was merely a pawn of the feudals and the army. The voices of his detractors are not entirely absent, but there is no attempt to engage critically with her grandfather's legacy; true culpability always lies elsewhere.

Zulfikar Ali was deposed by General Zia in 1977; in his 1979 prison tract, *If I Am Assassinated*, he wrote: "My sons will not be my sons if they do not drink the blood of those who dare to shed my blood." After his murder in 1979, his sons Mir Murtaza and Shah Nawaz took up his call, launching a self-avowedly violent resistance against General Zia's regime – while



Sitting in a chair in the study of her family home in Clifton Karachi, Fatima Bhutto holds a poster depicting her murdered father Murtaza and the six aides who died with him in 1996. Alexandra Fazzina

sunning themselves in Russian-occupied Kabul. They called it al Zulfikar (the Sword) and Mir Murtaza rallied the support of Muammer Qadafi and Hafiz al Assad.

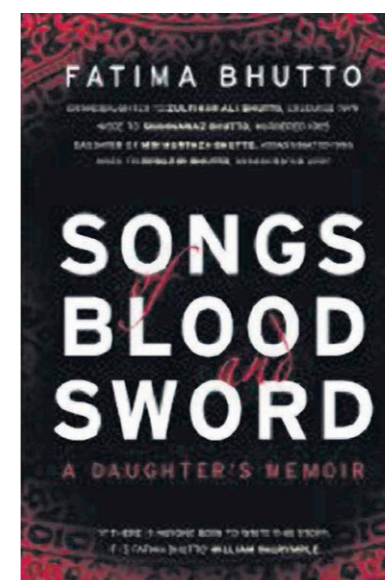
In March 1981, a Pakistan International Airlines flight, PK-326, was hijacked en route to Peshawar from Karachi. It was diverted to Kabul where Mir Murtaza negotiated with the hijackers to release the women and children. The plane was next taken to Damascus where it lingered for another week before the hijackers

gave up. A *New York Times* story dated April 19, 1981 quotes Mir Murtaza saying that members of his organisation were the hijackers and that it was committed to reacting "brutally" against Zia ul Haq's regime. The hijackers murdered a diplomat, Tariq Rahim.

"I feel secretly proud of my father for abandoning the offer of a bland but comfortable exile in London to fight what he believed was an unjust system", Fatima writes. Her pride colours her treatment of this "phase"

in her father's life; contrary to his own admission, she describes the hijackers as not having been members of al Zulfikar, and says that he never admitted as much. Mir Murtaza, in her depiction, preferred the pen to the Kalashnikov – it was the younger Shah Nawaz who took on the trappings of the proto-Mujahideen.

Where Mir Murtaza does no wrong, Benazir does no right. She hovers around the edges of the text, only surfacing to have another bit of blame pinned on her silenced shoulders.



Songs of Blood and Sword
Fatima Bhutto
Jonathan Cape
Dh115

She is held responsible for everything from keeping Fatima away from her father's college friends, to separating her from her cousins, to at least covering up, if not ordering, the murder of Shah Nawaz, to murdering or looking away from the murder of Mir Murtaza. There is little doubt that Benazir's governments were corrupt – and Fatima's summation of the innumerable charges against Benazir and Asif Ali Zardari is masterful. There is also ample evidence that Mir Murtaza's murder was carried out with her approval, or sanctioned on her behalf. But these are matters better adjudicated by persons other than the daughter of the deceased: here the familial, the personal, the conspiratorial and the legal are hopelessly indistinguishable.

The three ghosts examined, Zulfikar, Mir Murtaza and Benazir, we must turn to Pakistan. The book

is, after all, geared to an audience looking to understand Pakistan, or have it explained to them, by this telegraphic representative of a troubled dynasty.

Songs of Blood and Sword can rightly be seen as the latest in a line of memoirs like Benazir's *Daughter of the East* and Pervez Musharraf's *In the Line of Fire* – each of them devoted to uncritical presentations of their authors or their families, made to stand in for the history of an entire nation. The tale of the Bhutto dynasty, from its feudal base to its populist claims and now to the stranger-than-fiction stewardship under Zardari (where else in this world can one bequeath a political party in a will?) still deserves to be told, and told properly.

This is not that book, and it should neither be sold nor judged as such: it is merely another primary document for that unwritten history, alongside the papers of her father, grandfather and aunt – which remain in the family home in Karachi.

In the meantime, however, the book will sell and sell: the author's criticism of Zardari's regime and of his role in her father's murder, her triumphalist Pakistani nationalism and complaints against American imperialism, and her last name are all catnip to the British, American and South Asian media, which have already lavished considerable coverage on the book prior to its release. Fatima has stayed aloof from politics – and for that she should be commended – but this is only one branch of the family business; the perpetuation of a dynasty requires myth-making as much as election victories, and her book, whatever its aims, succeeds only in draping another skein of hagiography around the Bhuttos.

Manan Ahmed is a historian of Pakistan at Freie Universitat Berlin. He blogs at *Chapati Mystery*.

new paperbacks

A troubled family history

The Locust and the Bird tells the true story of Hanan al Shaykh's mother, Kamila, who was born in 1925, secretly betrothed at 11 and married off to a man twice her age at 13.

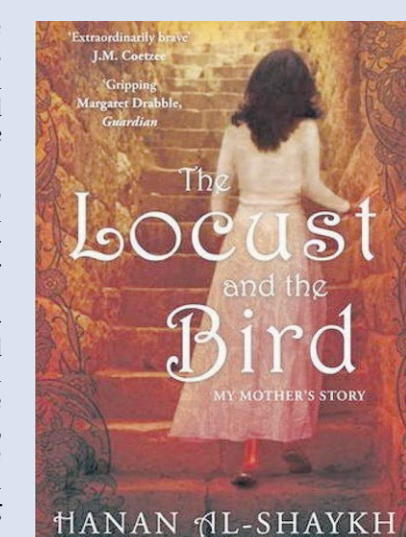
Rebellious and strong-willed, Kamila took a lover, conducted a brazenly public affair, got divorced, remarried and left her children behind.

The action begins with a wedding and ends with a funeral and in between Shaykh sets up an emotional roller-coaster, where murder, abandonment, betrayal, starvation, theft, adultery are mixed with the spectacle of a teenage bride desperately trying to escape a forced marriage.

Except for a prologue and epilogue, Shaykh casts the entirety of *The Locust and the Bird* in her mother's voice and the book is impressively subtle, although Kamila does not always come across as likeable. She is selfish, lazy and obdurate.

Her first husband, Abu Hussein, changes over time, softening from a brute to a humble old man.

Only Muhammad, Kamila's lov-



The Locust and the Bird
Hanan al Shaykh
Bloomsbury Publishing
Dh50

er, remains something of a mystery. A few years after they later marry, Muhammad was killed in a car crash. It's a sign of compassion that Shaykh lets this tragedy rise above all the others, including her own.

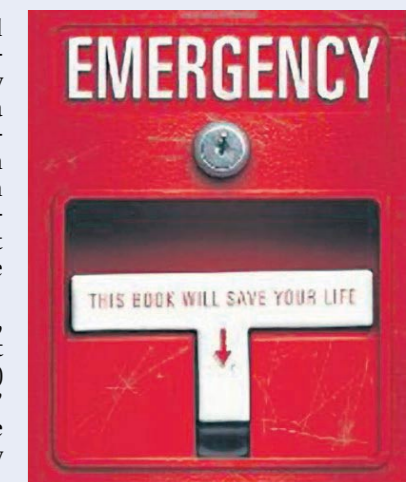
Life, but not as you know it

In *Emergency*, we follow Neil Strauss – whose previous credits include *The Game*, the story of a group of men who devise a quasi-scientific method to seduce women – as he loses faith in the ability of the American system of consumption to nourish him, and prepares for what he believes will be the inevitable collapse of civil order.

When that dark day comes, Strauss tells the reader, "I don't want to be hiding in a cellar (or) fighting old women for bread." The goal, he determines, is "true sovereignty" or self-sufficiency in the face of any eventuality.

By the book's end, Strauss has answered his own fears by learning how to "find water in the desert, extract drinkable fluids from the ocean, deliver a baby, fly a plane, pick locks, hot-wire cars, build homes, set traps, evade bounty hunters ... kill a man with my bare hands and escape across the border with documents identifying me as the citizen of a small island republic."

In Strauss's hands, survivalism



Emergency
Neil Strauss
Canongate Books
Dh65

exposes its great irony: that the individual who survives only for the sake of it will inhabit a ruined world. It was of such people that Herman Kahn, the thermonuclear war theorist, once asked: "Will the survivors envy the dead?"