

Reviews

Difficult Pleasures Anjum Hasan

Penguin Viking ₹399



Tortured as some of them are, it's a pleasure to slip inside the minds of the characters of Anjum Hasan's fourth book.

In this collection of 13 perfect short stories, Hasan picks moments out of ordinary lives set in Bangalore, Shillong (where she grew up) and farther afield.

Wherever she takes us, Hasan draws a clear yet nuanced picture of place. About Goa, she writes of the "faraway roar and retreat of the waves, the clear-cut conversations... the ecstatic smell of garlic frying in butter, and the great blue-and-white globe of sand, sky and sea in which all of this is sealed to prevent anything like unhappiness from leaking in."

Hasan has the rare ability to provoke a feeling of *déjà vu* about a place. The universality of her characters' landscapes are even more impressive. Hasan excels at walking the thin line between

a person's specific thoughts and the common nature of half-formed thoughts in general. This is especially true of the stories with child protagonists, like "Hanging On like Death", which captures the distress of the loveable Neel, who wants nothing more than for his father to see him acting in his school play. Hasan's older characters teeter between life's inherent loneliness and the intimacy of family and friends. In "Immanuel Kant in Shillong", a professor's grief over his dead wife mixes with his complicated feelings about his work and students. It's an ambitious, stand-out story that touches on the nature of modernity, violence and right and wrong.

Perhaps the best aspect of these stories is their restraint. Hasan is a master of pacing and plot; often the narrative seems headed for disaster but she'll write in an unpredictable, yet true-to-life route. *Difficult Pleasures* is a reminder of what classic short stories are supposed to look like, and that the most eloquent authors let their characters do the talking. **Sonal Shah**

The Flying Man Roopa Farooki

Hachette, ₹499



If Peter Pan were a man he might well be like Roopa Farooki's picaresque hero, who changes identities as casually as other men

change clothes. The only thing that terrifies Maqil Karam is a "perfectly ordinary" life so he chooses to be a rolling stone instead. Farooki takes us through the mercurial transformations of Maqil once he leaves his house in Lahore. Mike, or MSK, as he's known as a student in New York, is a guy with indeterminate roots but undeniable appeal. In Cairo he is Mehmet, a journalist who will go to jail for a story. In Hong Kong he's the elderly Mikhail Lee. Far from

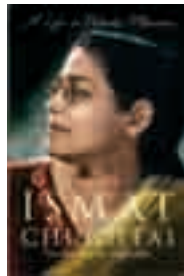
being commitment-phobic, Maqil is all too willing to acquire several wives and children he has no real dedication to keeping.

But devastating charm can take you only so far. Once dashing entrepreneur, daredevil gambler and daring activist, he becomes merely old. He remains, however, resolutely alone to the end, preferring an anonymous death in a cheap Biarritz hotel to a respectable one in the arms of his family in the mother country.

Farooki's prose is flawless as she defends the indefensible with compassion. Maqil may behave like a heel but he also carries on a sweet love affair with Samira, the mother of his children, leaving only when it becomes clear that she's joined the grown-ups. In the end, "It matters that He loved Her. It matters that She loved Him back." **Karishma Attari**

A Life in Words: Memoirs Ismat Chughtai, translated by M Asaduddin

Penguin Classics ₹499



Ismat Chughtai was a pointillist. Each sentence of hers is a colour, deep and exquisitely sketched, hovering

on her canvas, carrying an inner world, an emotional register. This quality of her fiction, to linger where others would walk by, has captivated her readers since that first, tremendous *halt* in Urdu literature – her short story *Lihaaf*. Published in 1942, *Lihaaf* spoke through the eyes of a child, observing a relationship between two women unfolding just out of her understanding. It caused a sensation and resulted in an obscenity trial and life-long notoriety for Chughtai. Many have pondered – and continue to ponder – on the story's gender, religious and class contexts. Let me share just one sentence from it: *Kamray mein ghup andhera aur is andheray mein Begum Jaan ka lihaaf aisay hil raha tha, jaisay is mein hathi band ho* (The room was pitch-black and in that dark, Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking as if there was an elephant caught inside).

Chughtai's Urdu has a lyrical cadence, and its mixture of colloquial and classic remained the hallmark of her fiction. Her stories are told through a particular eye – an intriguing, curious, argumentative "I" which forever asks the next question but keeps the answer inside a bracket of the self. Her non-fiction essays and this newly translated collection of her autobiographical writings expand that "I" by incorporating the many personalities with whom she shared her life. Yet, she is not interested in making you uncomfortable with her reality, or having her art argue for social realism. That would be boring to her, and possibly not a good yarn.

The essays in *A Life in Words: Memoirs* originally appeared between 1979 and 1980 in the Urdu journal *Aaj Kal*, and were published as a collection titled *Kaghazi hai Pairahan* in 1994, three years after her death at the age of 80. The essays revolve largely around her youth, her schooling and the first few years of her teaching career – the vignettes trace out the tension between her inner life and her family, and social and cultural life in pre-war north India. Chughtai's tone remains that of her early fiction – caustic, irreverent, full of pauses and diversions. She has the richest description of the inner life of an upper-class Muslim teenage girl that one could encounter, showing us hostel life ("Aligarh"), friendships ("Return to Bareilly"), courtships ("Under Lock and Key"), politics ("Sujat") and class ("Chewing on Iron").

These essays showcase the best of Chughtai's range and mastery as a writer – they are erudite, self-aware and always probing. This is not, as the introduction notes, a memoir. Akin to Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (*A Berlin Childhood in 1900*), these essays intersect space and interiority, letting the reader discover a highly subjective and original reading of a world that is otherwise saturated by categories like *The Muslim Woman* and thus rendered un-intelligible.

In reading Chughtai's work in English, we have had immense luck – her translators have included Tahira Naqvi, MU Memon, Carlo Coppola and Sayyida Hamid. M Asaduddin, the translator of *A Life in Words: Memoir*, has previously translated Chughtai's fiction, and his work here is nuanced and nimble. However, the glossary is woefully inadequate to the text and readers might need to consult the family tree before embarking on the first essay. For fans of Urdu literature, of urbane and urban lives in twentieth-century India or of biting honest interiority, this collection is highly recommended. **Manan Ahmed**