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Review: The Body by the What's Inside? The Partition Triology Shore by Tabish Khair

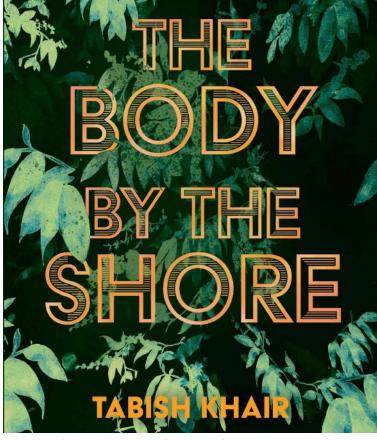
SONALI MUJUMDAR

"The Body by the Shore" by Tabish Khair is a complex sci-fi thriller with elements of Scandinavian noir that explores themes of climate change, racism, abuse of power and science. Set in a quasi-dystopian future, the narrative follows three seemingly unconnected plot lines that converge to examine humankind's place in the cosmos and its ability to wreak systemic havoc on the world and on fellow beings.

Eclectic in thematic scope and narrative style, and with elements of Scandinavian noir, The Body by the Shore is a complex sci-fi thriller. The author Tabish Khair, who is also a poet and academic, is a critical voice in contemporary Indian English writing whose works have been lauded for straddling genres. In his latest work, he explores the darker vagaries of human behaviour

Whatever is eaten and served has to be done according to tradition"

at a macro level, through the prism of science. The scene is set in the quasi-dystopia that prevails in the aftermath of a pandemic, a few years from now: "By 2031, memories of the dread that the virus had evoked in many circles had faded... Many people were simply not interested in these dated ten-year-



The sort of place that Michelle finds herself in. An oil rig in the North Sea.

old stories of suffering. Neither were they interested in connecting pandemics to climate change or human lifestyle." Power terrifyingly rests in the hands of a few: "the accelerating roller-coaster ride of economies, turning entire nations into kingdoms run by oligarchs and corporate robber barons, under the

thin veneer of elected parliaments and free media". Radicalised violence and upheavals persist on the geopolitical front, and greed dominates with the rise of giant corporations. In this milieu, three seemingly unconnected plot lines emerge. Michelle, a beautiful young

an old oil rig in the North Sea. Initially disconcerted by the strangeness of her environs and the suave man she has chosen to follow to a place that gets ever more sinister, her first-person ruminations lend the required impetus to the narrative.

In a parallel story, Jens Erik, a retired police officer in Aarhus, Denmark, living a solitary life spent gazing at birds and amidst plants, grapples with the contentious relationship he shares with his adult daughter. He yearns to be rid of the xenophobic tag she has given him. While Jens Erik works with people of varied ethnicities, he struggles to understand why they can't live where they were born: "he felt that there was something to be said about staying in a place

TODAY, CONSERVATIVE ESTIMATES PLACE MUMBAI'S JEWISH POPULATION AT AROUND 4000. THE NUMBERS ARE DWINDLING, BUT THE COMMUNITY HOLDS ON TO THEIR RELIGIOUS AND KOSHER TRADITIONS.

where you knew which berries to eat and which to avoid, where you could identify a bird hidden in a bush by its trill. It had nothing to do with hating immigrants. Though he did not understand immigrants. Refugees he understood, but he could not understand why anyone would move by choice."

The Partition Triology

With the trilogy, I was trying something very ambitious, which is putting political leaders and the aam aadmi and aurat on the same stage. I want to show how decisions taken in Delhi affect common people. So, in Lahore, in Hyderabad, in Kashmir, and in Delhi, I have Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Lord Mountbatten as my protagonists. I'm writing from inside their heads it's Jawahar speaking, Vallabh speaking, and it is Dickie speaking.

Review: The Song of the Cell by Siddhartha

Siddhartha Mukherjee this atomistic view of the human body and proposes an alternative conception in his latest book, The Song of the Cell. He argues that we need to look at the interconnectedness between the trillions of cells in the body as well as between cells and the environment. In these connections could lie answers to medical mysteries. He arrives at his conclusions through an examination of the cell — the simplest unit of life.

A grand mela of dance, music & culture

The MSLF, which hosted a mela of dance, music, food, literature, crafts, films and theatre from February 3-7 opened my eyes to all the fine riches of the capital of Uttar Pradesh. Most of the events were held at the historically significant Safed Baradari and Salempur House, which are part of the Qaiserbagh palace complex built by Wajid Ali Shah, the last nawab of Awadh, whose flamboyance and pathos was brilliantly captured by Satyajit Ray in Shatranj Ke Khilari.

Review: The Blue Women

Upadhyay Anukrti by

SONALI MUJUMDAR

The reader gets a glimpse of the form at its best in Anukrti Upadhyay's debut collection of short stories — The Blue Women — which delves into the familiar space of real women and their complicated relationships with the world and more importantly, themselves. more importantly, themselves. In 12 stories, Upadhyay creates 12 different worlds of wonder, each not so different from the other, and yet each independent in its own being. In imagining real women charged with realistic issues, she weaves in hints of believable magic realism. The stories intelligently address a

myriad of social issues like violence against women, everyday sexism, and mental health. It is all done in very delicate yet complex narratives. The men in the book are described exactly as how most men are. They want to be better but often end up not being so. Their empathy, their concern is limited and burdened with conditions. They have their best interests in mind, but for some reason, it all falls short. Upadhyay's stories are terrifyingly beautiful with a precise clarity amid the chaos that makes each one extraordinary. With great story telling and every ingredient that a reader looks for in literary fiction, this anthology is a clear winner.

Continuous tradition of resistence to british rule

There was a continuous tradition of popular resistance to British rule throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, culminating in the great anti-colonial upsurge of 1857. In the countryside, this resistance often took the shape of resistance to oppression by dominant landed groups who usually had the support of the colonial state. The large-scale dislocation of itinerant communities and tribal societies resulted in violent confrontations between these people and the repressive machinery of the government.



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Shore by Tabish Khair Mukherjee argues that we need to look at the interconnectedness between the trillions of cells in the body

A fragment of a memory leads him microcosms in Khair's world. The to ponder on the strange case of a rapport that Jens Erik shares with his black body that had washed up on daughter, or Michelle's divulgences the shore, some years before. Did as she converses with her mother he look the other way because the in absentia, are the sensitive notes victim was of a different colour and in There are murkier reasons. Khair country? Restless with the thought, does not shy away from making a he chooses to uncover the mystery. political statement either. The on Khair uses this plot line to examine the world and on fellow beings. themes of immigration and racism, the narrative. Other dispassionate

erased from all records, and is now references

and how stereotypes shape thought. accounts offer fantastic facts, research stories and personal stories In a third thread, Harris Malouf, a of sundry characters. Liberally swan-keeping ex-assassin, whose interspersed with the main narrative erstwhile existence has been are case studies and anecdotal feeding scientific a cognitive anthropologist, is called theories that have microbes at their upon by a shadowy ex-colleague nucleus. There is the leitmotif of the to investigate the aftermath of a symbiotic relationship between 2012 closed-door seminar titled microorganisms, leading to an Mind, Body and Soul: The Cognitive existential interrogation that goes Sciences and Religion that was held as far back as the genesis of our in Aarhus and was attended by planet. Khair attempts a provocative academics with multidisciplinary intellectual discourse while keeping backgrounds. There are multiple with the momentum of a thriller



He succeeds in this though the narrative packs in these and other early chapters are occasionally myriad stories, some that feel like challenging to navigate with they are strands in the wind. Khair characters, situations and theories effectively tackles themes of climate tumbling out fast and furious. A change, racism, abuse of power succinct passage is laid out on the and science. It is evident that some fabled Macrobians, a tall, handsome lives are lesser, and those deemed people capable of leading inferior by dint of their skin colour unusually long lives. An intriguing or their economies, are mostly side character, Kathy, Harris' ex-

SET IN A QUASI-DYSTOPIAN FUTURE, THE NARRATIVE FOLLOWS **SEEMINGLY** UNCONNECTED PLOT LINESTHATCONVERGETO **EXAMINE HUMANKIND'S** by the Shore transcends the label PLACE IN THE COSMOS

on a wonder drug called Crobe and wreak systemic havoc on the wrestles men in private sessions world and on fellow beings for a living. A Japanese nuclear physicist-astronomer is bizarrely A fragment of a memory leads him transformed for the worse when to ponder on the strange case of a he turns towards a fatal mix of black body that had washed up on religious mania and paranoia. And the shore, some years before. Did in a touch of the supernatural, a he look the other way because the beautiful woman in a long flowy victim was of a different colour and dress is seen shadowing certain country? Restless with the thought, characters at crucial junctures. The he chooses to uncover the mystery. intense narrative packs in these and Khair uses this plot line to examine other myriad stories, some that feel themes of immigration and racism. like they are strands in the wind. and how stereotypes shape effectively tackles themes of climate thought. There is the leitmotif of change, racism, abuse of power the symbiotic relationship between

doomed to terrifying lives or fates. The pursuit of science does not presuppose a hallowed purpose. There are murkier reasons. Khair does not shy away from making a political statement either. The writer's forte also lies in suitably adapting the writing according to the tenor of a passage. A darkness sits light or heavy, on each section of the narrative. In the end, The Body of noir fiction set in the bleak near future. It is a study in anthropology that looks at humankind's place colleague and close friend, survives in the cosmos and its ability to

the Review: The Song of the Cell by Siddhartha

SYED SAAD AHMED

Growing up in a family of doctors, fascinated by how they could hold forth about organs and diseases as if they were entities independent of the individual in which they resided. This conception of the human body as an amalgamation has a flip side, which Rajeev Kurapati talks about in his book Physician: "Physicians and biologists use the term 'mechanism' liberally in describing a disease process or an organic function. We describe our bodies as being made up of 'parts' instead of referring to them as 'features'... Treating patients solely like machines, who need to be fixed, forces them to feel just that: like objects to be passed down the conveyor belt." Siddhartha Mukherjee rejects this atomistic view of the human body and proposes an alternative conception in his latest book, The Song of the Cell. He argues that we need to look at the interconnectedness between the trillions of cells in the body as well as between cells and the environment. In these connections could lie answers to medical mysteries. Mukherjee catalogues some of these enigmas in the book: Why do patients who describe their depression as an "existential ennui" typically not respond to deep brain stimulation, while those that describe themselves as "falling into vertical holes" often do? Why do patients with certain neurodegenerative diseases have



lower risk of cancer? When Mukherjee discusses biological concepts through songs and metaphors, there is no woolliness. He arrives at his conclusions through an examination of the cell — the simplest unit of life. His enquiry is not just restricted to what we know today about cells, but also how that knowledge came to be. Take the microscope, which was invented in the late 16th century and enabled the cell's discovery in subsequent decades. Dutch trader Antonie van Leeuwenhoek characterised his microscopic observations thus: "No greater pleasure has yet come to my eye than these spectacle of the thousands of living creatures in a drop of water". Microscopist Nicolaas Hartsoeker inspected spermatozoa and imagined they contained homunculi — miniaturé humans "replete with head, hands, and feet, all tucked origami-like into the sperm's head". There is a popular perception of science as

an eternal truth, which scientists gradually uncover. In the initial days of the Covid-19 pandemic, many people were befuddled by the constantly changing scientific advisories, resulting in them believing that scientists didn't what they were talking about and opting for unproven even dangerous, remedies that charlatans confidently proffered. In a 2020 article in The Guardian physicist Jim Al-Khalili wrote: "People are searching for certainty about coronavirus, and that's the opposite of what leads to scientific breakthroughs... It has never been more important to communicate the way science works. In politics, admitting a mistake is seen as a form of weakness. It's quite the opposite in science, where making mistakes is a cornerstone of knowledge. Replacing old theories and hypotheses with newer, more accurate ones allows us to gain a deeper understanding of a subject.

Manreet Sodhi Someshwar, author, The Trilogy - "We are all villains' **Partition**

SYED SAAD AHMED

The Delhi thread again has Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Dickie Mountbatten, who is now the first Governor-General of India. He's been asked by the leadership to stay on, so he's there for a 12-month assignment. The second thread is not just the common Kashmiris, but also Maharaja Karan Singh of Jammu and Kashmir state. In a sense, Hyderabad and Kashmir are yin and yang. In Hyderabad, it is a Hindu majority state: in Kashmir, it is the opposite. With Hyderabad, we have forgotten the story. In Kashmir, we think we know what happened,

but I feel like we don't know. There are many misconceptions. When we think of Kashmir, we think of the valley. The state is much bigger than the valley. The valley was, of course, Muslim majority. But by the same token. Jammu was Hindu majority. Gilgit Baltistan had a very large population of Shia Muslims, who are, you know, very different from Sunni Muslims. It could be two different religions; the practices are so different. Then, we had Ladakh, which is Buddhist. We never bring these things into the conversation. but they are important. Kashmir is also the state where we go to war. The first Indo-Pak war happens

within two months of Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan. In my novel, I also have protagonists who are Pakistani. think we need to understand Jinnah's fears and what was being done on the ground. Maharajah Hari Singh's soldiers, what they were doing, what was the violence perpetrated on ordinary Kashmiris? How are they responding? Once again, women are front and centre. Kashmiri women, an army, a unit was raised. We never talk about it. These women were ordinary Kashmiri girls. 18-20 years old, who were trained in self defence. I wanted to bring those stories; they are part of Kashmir.





A grand mela of dance, Amar Farooqui: Continuous tradition of music, literature & culture resistance to British rule

CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

What stayed with me was the effort that had gone into making the event inclusive. There was space for bangle sellers and nankhatai vendors alongside people selling kurtas and tote bags. While some were decked in all their finery, others were dressed in simple attire. The fact that a single-day pass cost only ₹40 and a five-day pass cost ₹150 made it possible for people from various socioeconomic backgrounds to participate. Madhavi Kuckreja, who founded MSLF 14 years ago, said, "There are very few spaces left where all communities can gathe and celebrate. We think of diversity not only in terms of Hindus and Muslims but also the Parsi, Christian, Kashmiri Pandit, Sikh, working class and LGBTQ people in Lucknow." Without displaying rainbow flags or shouting from the rooftops about allyship, MSLF was able to create a safe space for LGBTQ people to join in large numbers. Much of the credit for this goes to historian, translator and gay rights activist Saleem Kidwai, who was a mentor to MSLF. Kidwai died in 2021 but his presence could be felt in the festival's curation and programming especially because of the focus on his beloved Begum Akhtar aka Akhtari Bai Faizabadi. Films about the life of the queen of ghazals, who sang the poems of Mirza Ghalib, Mir Taqi Mir, Shakeel



at Safed Baradari, Qaisarbagh Shiniini Kulkarni performing

Dewan's documentary on tawaifs, The Other Song, was also screened at the festival. In his talk titled The Profound and the Profane, singeractivist TM Krishna highlighted the hypocrisy in Carnatic as well as Hindustani classical music traditions that have tried to elevate themselves by sanitizing their violent histories and erasing the numerous contributions made by devadasis and tawaifs. MSLF also offered ticketed heritage walks and car tours to help participants learn about different aspects of Lucknow's history and Awadhi culture. Saman Habib led the Feminists of Awadh car

with this, musicians and dancers from outside Lucknow were also invited to perform. Carnatic classical music by TM Krishna, qawwali by Haider Buksh Warsi and Arshad Hussain Chishti, and a concert by The Aahvaan Project were all part of the mix. Shinjini Kulkarni presented an early morning lecture demonstration called Kathak Ki Katha with dance and storytelling while Arshiya Sethi, Shama Bhate and Shilpa Bhide teamed up for Naman - a homage to Lucknow's legendary Kathak guru Pandit Mohanrao Kallianpurkar. Some of the other highlights at MSLF were Yousuf Saeed's film Khayal Darpan, which examines the development of classical music in Pakistan, and his other film Dastarkhwane-Rampur that throws light on the culinary traditions of UP's Rampur town. Purva Naresh's play Bandish was applauded for its tactful exploration of the tensions between art, commerce and politics at a time when people are required to prove their patriotism. The festival also incorporated visual arts through Monis Khan's photographs featuring the brass bands of Lucknow, and Ayan Bose's photographs documenting Awadh's qawwali traditions. The Raqs-o-Mausiqi exhibition in the tehkhana (basement) of Safed Baradari was a deeply researched and thoughtfully designed experiential space that gave attendees an opportunity to learn about the histories of dance and music in Awadh woven around key individuals and institutions. Apart from photographs, text and musical instruments, it had sound installations and live performances. I came back from Lucknow feeling energized and inspired, with the subtle taste of shakarkand ki kheer on my lips and the serenity of Begum Ákhtar's mazaar in my heart, along with a prayer for Dinesh Prasad Mishra, who passed away while playing the pakhawaj at the festival. His sudden demise plunged the organizers into grief

and they consoled each other with

the thought that few people get to

leave this world doing what they

and regional cultures, we also want



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There was a continuous tradition of popular resistance to British rule throughout the first half of the people from Lucknow to be exposed nineteenth century, culminating to what is happening outside. There should be space for different kinds in the great anti-colonial upsurge of 1857. In the countryside, this of voices to be heard." In keeping resistance often took the shape of resistance to oppression by minant landed groups who usually had the support of the colonial state. The large-scale dislocation of itinerant communities and tribal societies resulted in violent confrontations between these people and the repressive machinery of the government. The colonial state was very hostile in its attitude towards communities. which were located outside or on the margins of settled agrarian society.

In the 1820s and 1830s, the state

MAJID MAQBOOL

The organs of the colonial state

(bureaucracy, army, judiciary)

played a critical role in exercising

control over Indian subjects

ultimately fear and the threat of

violence was the most effective

means of sustaining British power

Whenever required, the state could

spectacularly demonstrate its ability

to unleash violence in order to instil

fear by example, as happened at

Jallianwala Bagh. At the same time

ceremonial and symbolism (eg, the

invented traditions on display at

the three Delhi "darbars") played an

important role in legitimizing British

rule, giving it the appearance of

being benignings.

attempted to discipline wandering and nomadic groups in the areas located between the Chambal and the Narmada. The suppression thugs, or of the practice of "thuggee" (thagi), became a major preoccupation of the colonial officials in central India. In the period following the Second Anglo-Maratha War, and more so after the Third Anglo-Maratha War, the East

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India Company was engaged in consolidating its vastly-expanded empire. The government set up a Thuggee and Dacoity Department in 1830 to stamp out thuggee. WH Sleeman was superintendent of the department from 1835 to 1839. Under him, a reign of terror was let loose in central India to establish the authority of the EIC.



The Kathak Ki Katha performance at Safed Baradari, Qaisarbagh

among others – were screened. These included Nirmal Chander's Zikr Us Parvarish Ka and S Kalidas's Hai Akhtari. Singer Sangita Nerurkar presented a musical tribute called . Naghmat-e-Akhtari to honour the performer who was also skilled in musical forms like the thumri, chaiti, kairi, dadra, hori and baramasa. Saba Dewan, author of Tawaifnama, a book on the role of tawaifs (courtesans) in the sociocultural life of northern India, gave a talk in memory of Kidwai and his writings on Begum Akhtar and other women singers. "At a young age, Saleem became a part of Begum Akhtar's inner circle, and he had a clear idea of the contradictions that made her the person she was," she said.

Badayuni and JigarMoradabadi,

tour that covered places associated with doctor Rasheed Jahan, authors Ourratulain Hyder and Ismat Chughtai, revolutionary Durgavati Devi, educationists Pratibha Nagar and Jairani Devi, and singer Begum Akhtar, among other women pioneers. Noor Khan and Roli Misra led the Husn e Karigari e Awadh walk, which introduced participants to the artisans and crafts persons who live and work in the city's older neighbourhoods. Saméer Kher led the War Chronicles walk at the Residency, a tourist landmark maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India as the ruins here tell the story of the Siege of Lucknow during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Askari Naqvi, co-curator of MSLF said, "While our emphasis is on local



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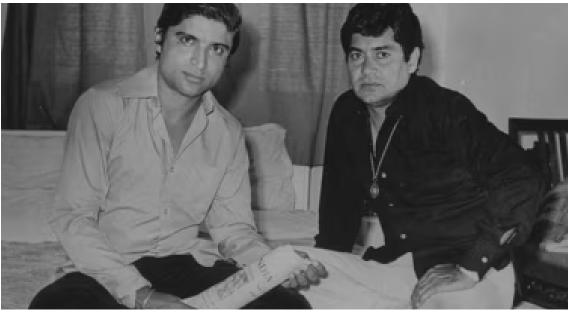
Talking Life; Javed Akhtar In conversation with Nasreen Munni

In this conversational biography, poet, lyricist, and screenplay writer Javed Akhtar looks back at his struggles, mistakes, and penchant for swimming against the tide

LAMAT R HASAN

When poet, lyricist, and screenplay writer Javed Akhtar was born, his father, a diehard Communist, read out the Communist Manifesto to him, instead of reciting the azaan, the Islamic call to prayer, in his ears, as is the tradition. The seeds were sown for an extraordinary journey. Named Jaadu by his professor-writer parents Safia and Jan Nisar Akhtar . (later changed to Javed when he was enrolled at school), life was magical till the day after his eighth birthday, when his mother died, an event that changed the trajectory of his life.n this conversational biography with documentary filmmaker and writer on films Nasreen Munni Kabir, Akhtar looks back with fondness and emotion at his life – his struggles, his mistakes, and his penchant for swimming against the tide."(In my family) I had politics on one side and poetry and literature on the other. It was natural that I'd be influenced by both," he tells Kabir in Talking Life, the final part in the trilogy that includes Talking Films and Talking Songs.Following his mother's death, Akhtar shuffled between Lucknow, Aligarh and Bhopal – largely ignored by his father (who now lived in Bombay), and at the mercy of friends and extended family. There were times when his younger brother Salman

and he had to go hungry for days, and sleep on school benches full of bugs. He revisits these dark chapters of his life in a very matter-of-fact way. There is not a grain of anger always broke, so sometimes he took me to the temple and would apply a teeka to my forehead. I'd ring the temple bell, and then he would pick up a few coins lying in front of to the growing resentment and anger I felt towards him, and our relationship became increasingly negative and strained."His mother's death saddens him to this day.



or shame, or an attempt to gain the reader's sympathy. He narrates these episodes with his biggest weapon – humour. He recalls his teenage years in his inimitable style: "The pujari (in Bhopal) knew we students were

the idol and give them to me."The only time one senses a tinge of bitterness is when he refers to his father. "I wrote to my father, asking him what he was doing. I never got a reply. All these incidents added

He remembers every single detail about her. And what he doesn't, was described by her in beautifully crafted letters to her husband which were published posthumously. His mother had "a great sense of curiosity" and once wrote to her husband: "What is plastic? I keep hearing this word. What is it used for? Can you send some?" When Akhtar arrived in Bombay in 1964, he was 19. He landed at the doorstep of his father, who had remarried, and had another set of children by then. Akhtar's stepmother made it clear that he wasn't welcome. The two years of intense struggle that followed in Bombay – starving and without a roof over his head – is the stuff of Bollywood stories. His first job was as an apprentice at Kamal Amrohi's company, Mahal Pictures. His salary was ₹50."At the entrance of studio floor number one there were some long planks and two wooden crates. They became my property. I took the two wooden crates, put a plank across them, and slept on it at night. I did not have a dhurrie, sheet or pillow. When he was asked by filmmaker Yash Chopra to write songs for Silsila, he initially resisted the idea but then started enjoying that phase of his life. You cannot remain parochial, communal, narrow-minded in art, I positioned this plank-bed in such way that the light coming from floor one fell on me so I could read at night." Kabir presents a hitherto unknown side of Akhtar in this freewheeling candid interview. As for Akhtar, as always, he wins hearts with his honesty.

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Review: Legend of the Snow Queen by Manjiri Prabhu

The latest Re Parkar destination thriller reconciles the conflict between surprise and suspense



ASHWIN SANGHI

Manjiri Prabhu's latest outing, Legend of the Snow Queen, is a destination thriller that deftly weaves three distinct threads into one seamless adventure. These three threads are: the destination (in this case the Lake Starnberg region of the Bavarian Alps), the history (in this instance the German-Austrian narrative) and finally, the mystery.

All three aspects are integral to the story and are judiciously used to create a multidimensional mystery novel. Prabhu's writing style is immersive, allowing the reader to fully appreciate all three strands — destination, history and mystery. Tension and suspense is built steadily throughout the book. Her characters are well-developed and the writing style is engaging and descriptive, making

it easy to visualize each scene and become fully invested in the story. The dialogues are authentic and home-grown to the extent that nowhere does one feel that they are written by an outsider. An important aspect of this subgenre of destination thrillers must necessarily be the historical references on which the novel is based. It is evident that the author has done significant research in crafting the Legend of the Snow Queen and her study shines through. Her attention to detail in the fictional crime investigation is also to be appreciated which ensures that the book's realism quotient remains high.

The story is set around a key event: a five-nation peace treaty being signed to commemorate the 182nd birth anniversary of the Empress Elisabeth of Austria. The five national representatives are complex characters with traits that force the reader to suspect almost everyone. The author still manages to reconcile the conflict between surprise and suspense and provide a resolution that is unpredictable yet satisfying. I have always believed that storytelling is distinct and separate from writing.

A good writer must agonize over her choice of words and expression; a good storyteller should sweat over getting the reader to turn the page. Prabhu uses several clever techniques to achieve this objective including plot twists, red herrings, character flaws, and timing. It is evident that she has honed her skills as a mystery writer over the years. Each chapter reveals new clues and leads one deeper into the mystery. This onion-peel effect ensures that a reader remains invested.