

REVIEW

Fantasy meets reality

The Reckless Oath We Made
Bryn Greenwood
Putnam

BETHANNE PATRICK

Everyone wants to be loved, even a tough and tall red-head with a wonky hip from a motorcycle accident who has a lot of family issues. Like, a lot of family issues: Kansas born-and-bred Zhorzha (Zee) Trego has an obese, hoarder mom to care for and a very young nephew in her charge, because her sister LaReigne Trego-Gill has been kidnapped by a pair of inmates escaped from the local prison.

When Zee encounters the besotted Gentry Frank after a physical therapy appointment, she slowly, reluctantly accepts his help. Gentry, 24 and on the autism spectrum, lives mainly in a gentle world of his own creation, where he is a chivalric knight who speaks what he thinks is a form of Middle English — and is really modern English with a lot of flourishes.

Gentry has a job at an airplane factory and an adoptive, multiracial family whose compassion for his challenges is greater than their irritation over his idiosyncrasies. While Zee rolls her eyes at Gentry's behaviour, eventually she realizes it allows him to interact with a world at best confusing and at worst hostile to his mind and spirit. Then, slowly and reluctantly, she falls in love with him, too.

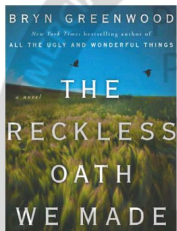
Hold that arrow, Cupid. We're still ruled by the realities of a complicated world. Because Zee refuses to leave LaReigne's five-year-old son, Marcus, alone, she winds up bringing him along on a drug haul involving a suitcase full of pot carried across state lines.

That's right. You thought you were reading about a sweet, quirky family caper, and what you're really reading is... a sweet, quirky family caper about a drug dealer who witnesses a sword fight to save LaReigne, who actually wants to be a white supremacist's moll.

You may not wind up loving LaReigne. (Even Marcus has a tough time loving his mother.) But you'll love Zee, who fights for the people she loves with every ounce of strength she has left after her double shifts waitressing and occasional afternoons on THC. Zee's life is no fairy tale, but there's something moving about the way she lets Gentry live in his version of one. Everyone needs a form of escape, she knows.

Real life hurts, but human interactions can work miracles — to some extent. As the fantasy elements of Bryn Greenwood's *The Reckless Oath We Made* dissolve, hard work replaces the promise of a magic potion. Someone has to meet with lawyers, sign agreements and make prison visits. That someone is usually Zee, and as she sobers up, literally and figuratively, she turns out to be the hero of her own story.

The Washington Post



Kia Abdullah's third novel, *Take It Back*, has experienced some backlash because of its controversial content. But the author is quick to defend her right to tell the story she wants. *HARPERCOLLINS*

INSPIRED BY ANNE

L.M. Montgomery's classic helped author Abdullah realize the importance of making her own choices

Take It Back
Kia Abdullah
HarperCollins

JAMIE PORTMAN

LONDON If you ask Kia Abdullah about the journey that led her to write an explosive new courtroom thriller about four Muslim youths charged with the rape of a 16-year-old classmate, she will at some point start talking about Anne of Green Gables.

For Abdullah, 37, daughter of immigrant Bangladeshi parents, the discovery of L.M. Montgomery's intrepid red-haired heroine was a seminal childhood moment.

"That novel, *Anne of Green Gables* — I don't think it's an overstatement to say that it changed the course of my life," says Abdullah, who grew up in the poor East London area of Tower Hamlets and found release from a strict family environment in her weekly visits to the local library.

"It's a very deprived area — about 33 per cent immigrant population and the U.K.'s worst for child poverty," says Abdullah, one of eight children. "The first generation of children has to bootstrap, in a way. The first time I really learned English was when I started school. That's why libraries and reading are so important. The reason I'm here and am a professional now is because my siblings took me to the library every weekend. Every Saturday I would pick up six books."

That's how she discovered Anne. "Anne was expected to be a polite young girl who was very well-mannered, yet she could be a tear-away who did what she wanted. That resonated with me because from a very young age, I was tightly scripted: I was to go to school and go to college and then get married and have children. Those were not necessarily things I wanted to do myself — so when I read Anne of Green Gables at a very young age, I realized that you don't always have to do what people tell you to do." All this helps explain the character of Zara Kaleel, the central figure in Abdullah's acclaimed new novel, *Take It Back*. She's a brilliant young London barrister who shatters the expectations of her Muslim family by abandoning a promising career at the bar to work with victims of sexual assault. She takes up the cause of Jodie, who claims four Muslim youths raped her. In so doing, Zara finds herself further estranged from her own Muslim community.

"People have asked how much of



there in her relationships with her family and some of the things she struggles with — follow the Muslim example, be quiet, be docile, learn to fall into line."

Abdullah remembers what happened in her own life with the onset of puberty.

"I was treated like a delicate flower, who needed to be protected. That changed my perception not only of my community but also of myself. You learn to hide your body, you learn to shroud yourself, you're meant to be embarrassed — all the wrong things to teach young women."

Furthermore, like the fictional Zara, the real-life Kia fled an arranged marriage.

"It was 13 years ago when I was 24. It wasn't forced but it involved persuasion: You have the right to decide, but you have had 15 suitors, your dad is ill and wants you to be happy and secure. All this peripheral persuasion made me agree... but I definitely would say it was not wanted. It lasted only a few days. The family reacted very badly — so much money spent on the wedding, so many people invited..."

Today, Abdullah lives far from London, with her photographer boyfriend in Yorkshire. A former writer for the Rough Guide travel series, she juggles her fiction with her duties as founding editor of the popular outdoor travel blog Atlas & Boots. Petite and outgoing, with an endless curiosity about the world around her, she has settled contentedly into the countryside with its "better quality of life."

But London in all its facets remains an indelible part of her experience as she looks back on the turbulence of those earlier years with both affection and sadness. The pain of causing grief to those she loved remains with her, even though time has healed the estrangements of the past.

those who may have preconceived notions about the cultures it examines.

Abdullah remains protective of her Muslim heritage even while rebelling against aspects of it. She was driven to write the novel by the increasing media focus on so-called "grooming" cases where older Asian men prey sexually on younger white women. She's concerned that the notoriety of these incidents has led to blanket judgments about Muslim culture — "that their men are bred to believe that women are there for the taking."

She bristles at that kind of tabloid mindset. "In my own circumstance, I've never experienced anything like that," she says. "Men I know don't have these attitudes."

Yet, her protagonist in the novel is a Muslim welfare worker taking the side of 16-year-old Jodie, who insists four Muslim teens raped her. Readers would be wise to withhold judgment about where the story is going to go. This is a novel about secrets and lies, evasions and assumptions — one that punctures preconceived notions about Britain's criminal justice system and race. One key device is to force the reader to take a closer look at the four accused — to present them as individuals, not as a collective cultural monstrosity.

"They all have distinctive personalities, distinctive desires and distinctive family units," she says. "That they are of the same age and of the same religion doesn't mean they are all alike. I wanted to present them as individuals who make individual choices and are capable of good or bad actions."

Furthermore, she says, "I wanted readers to keep switching allegiances between the girl and the boys as the story progressed. I wanted to create three-dimensional characters all of whom were capable of earning the sympathies of readers."

"I think that's the crux of the novel — that we do good or bad things because we choose to do them as individuals, not because of the colour of our skin, not because of what our faith or gender might be."

But will that message get through? Recently, during discussion of the book at a literary festival, a young Muslim woman in the audience challenged Abdullah.

"She said she would never read the novel because it was perpetuating another negative narrative about Muslims... To me, that sort of thing is as dangerous as what the tabloids do, because what I was being told was that I can't act as an individual and tell the story I want

BOOKS

REVIEW

Lost in the mists of time

The Hollywood Book Club
Steven Rea
Chronicle Books

ANGELA HAUPT

There's James Dean, perfect hair and a smirk — cigarette in one hand, *The Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley* in the other. Audrey Hepburn, a classics connoisseur, is cross-legged on a shag carpet, eyes fixed on the open book in front of her. And Orson Welles is supine, smoking a pipe and focused on a weathered copy of *A History of Technology, Vol. III: From the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution*.

Stars, they're just like us! Provided you consume your reading material while draped in a silk robe and posed seductively.

In *The Hollywood Book Club*, photo archivist Steven Rea curates 55 photographs of classic film stars "with literature (or not), in their hands — or on their laps, or in the general vicinity." The full-page images are black and white, and they're stunning: Rita Hayworth and Ginger Rogers are otherworldly; 25-year-old Marlon Brando's gaze is so smouldering, one worries about the flammable book he's holding. Each photo is accompanied by just a few lines of text, a simplicity that keeps the focus where it belongs: on the images.

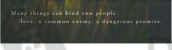
Rea groups the photos into categories, including the stars luxuriating in their personal libraries; reading to their kids; studying source material for film interpretations; and passing time on set.

An eclectic taste in reading is apparently timeless: Sammy Davis Jr. relaxes with a paperback edition of Lloyd C. Douglas's biblical epic *The Robe*, and Lauren Bacall peruses a pictorial history of 20th-century conflict. John Cassavetes and Gena Rowlands read *Baby Animals*, a picture book by Garth Williams, to their son, Nick, who grew up to be an actor and a director. Some were notably voracious readers. In a 1951 photo, Marilyn Monroe is curled up on a sofa bed, wearing a silk bathrobe and sultry expression while reading *The Poetry and Prose of Heinrich Heine*. Books are stacked on every nearby surface, too — Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flats*.

Bette Davis's reading habits became the subject of national attention in 1938, when *The New York Times* reported that her husband wanted a divorce because she read "to an unnecessary degree." Her fellow stars, one imagines, would disagree.

The Washington Post





Zara's life is based on mine, and I try to give a clear answer – about 60 per cent," Abdullah says. "It's

Take It Back is her third novel, and has some dramatic surprises in store for readers – especially

to tell – that I should necessarily be telling a positive story because of my identity."

