

# inVOGUE

EDITED BY ANINDITA GHOSE

SPOTLIGHT

## Mirror, mirror, on the wall

Are memoirists the new literary superstars? At the ZEE Jaipur Literature Festival 2016, *Vogue* whisked away four women who are redefining the memoir to make it a vibrant thing of the 21st century.

By SHAHNAZ SIGANPORIA

As the selfie thrives in pictures, the memoir thrives in words. But going beyond the pout and duckface, the contemporary memoir of self-actualisation is a popular publishing phenomenon today. It isn't exactly new: Julius Caesar immortalised the Gallic Wars circa 50 BC. But it was only in 1996 with the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, that the memoir, as we know it today, made its presence felt. It has metamorphosed into a dynamic form since then. Take, for instance, Lena Dunham and Patti Smith, who have taken the celebrity memoir beyond the juicy tell-all or statesman biography it used to be. Or writers such as Edward St Aubyn, Karl Ove Knausgård and Aatish Taseer who have fictionalised the genre, giving rise to the novel-memoir. As the ZEE Jaipur Literature Festival (January 19-23) was in progress, amidst the verdant gardens and mirrored doors of the Suján Rajmahal Palace, *Vogue* caught up with four memoirists who've reclaimed the classic genre. >

### MEET THE MEMOIRISTS

From left: An artist balancing bohemian and activism while coming of age in New York, Molly Crabapple; a poet piecing together her splintered identity, Abeer Y Hoque; a journalist on the frontlines, Christina Lamb; and a naturalist who examines life and death while taming a bird of prey, Helen Macdonald

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: SAVILEEN MANCHANDA, LOCATION COURTESY: SUJÁN RAJMAHAL PALACE, JAIPUR

Photographed by ANAND GOGOI | Styled by ARADHANA BARUAH

**CHRISTINA LAMB, 50**

**For reporting from the trenches and writing a woman-at-war story**

After around 30 years of reporting from the frontlines of the war in Afghanistan, British journalist Christina Lamb asked herself an apparently simple question: “Was it all worth it?” She searched hard for the right way to tell the messy story of power, politics and war; she attempted telling it through the usual tenets of reportage, from the points of view of the people involved and facts at hand, but soon she figured out why she was stuck. “I realised I was the only person I knew who had lived through what I wanted to write about; everything in this book is what I witnessed,” she says.

Lamb has stayed in Jihadi training camps in Pakistan, travelled from Tora Bora to Samangan in Afghanistan and even visited Bin Laden’s house after he was killed. Her seventh book, *Farewell Kabul*, is a reporter’s memoir, one where the author comes with her unique vantage point with unparalleled access and inputs from key decision makers in Washington, London, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Lamb’s journey began as a naïve 21-year-old reporter in Pakistan, who had up until then imagined her life as a novelist writing away in a garret somewhere. Today, she is regarded as one of Britain’s leading foreign correspondents and was even awarded an OBE by the Queen. She co-authored *I Am Malala*, the autobiography of Nobel Prize-winning Malala Yousafzai in 2013 and is currently the Foreign Affairs Correspondent for the *Sunday Times* but *Farewell Kabul* is in many ways her magnum opus. Devoid of polemics, it becomes a cautionary tale that bravely outs the American claim of success in the war on Afghanistan (examining it into a defeat) and foretells a more dangerous world, suspicious of a nuclear-armed Pakistan. But this isn’t a political and historical analysis alone. It’s a deeply personal tale, one where a journalist through her own experiences humanises what otherwise remains a statistical footnote on collateral damage.



Lamb is a five-time winner of ‘Foreign Correspondent of the Year’ at the British Press Awards

“I believe that you need to eviscerate yourself to understand others”

– MOLLY CRABAPPLE

**MOLLY CRABAPPLE, 32**

**For bringing the world of burlesque and Beirut on the same page**

If millennials are looking for that representational voice of a generation, Molly Crabapple would be the sort to aspire towards. The 32-year-old New York-based artist and writer, in high heels, dark lips and cinched-waist silhouettes, remains close to her formative burlesque dancing days.

Empowered by her sex and sexuality, aware of her half-white privilege (she’s half-Puerto Rican) and openly critical of capitalism, Crabapple never shirks away from telling it as it is. Her personal essays as contributing editor at *Vice.com* range from her

talking about her abortion as the moment when her “politics became personal” to visiting a Doctors Without Borders camp in Iraqi Kurdistan and reporting on some of the individuals who make up the otherwise “flattening word”—refugees.

Her brand of illustrative journalism has taken her from New York’s nightclubs to Guantanamo Bay, but as she illustrated other lives she felt the need to represent herself. “I don’t believe in the objectivity of journalism, I think that cloaks bias. But I believe that you need to eviscerate yourself to understand others,” she says. And so she wrote her memoir *Drawing Blood*, “I still wasn’t sure about putting my life out there but then I heard Chris Abani liked it, well, I didn’t give a f\*\*\* about what anyone else thought about it after that.”

Her memoir, told through art and narrative, juxtaposes her precise sentences with the stylistic tendrils and maximalist styled art. They take us into her world—as the punk rock-loving teen to professional naked model, travelling alone in Morocco, making activist art for Occupy Wall Street (currently in the permanent collection of The Metropolitan Museum Of Art) and emerging into her current self as a political artist reporting from conflict zones. *Drawing Blood* is a classic coming of age, but this time of the young rebel girl turning into a complex woman, artist and intellectual, capturing the zeitgeist of present-day New York. >



Crabapple won a Front Page Award in 2015

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: SAVILEEN MANCHANDA; LOCATION COURTESY: SUJÁN RAJMAHAL PALACE, JAIPUR

**HELEN  
MACDONALD, 45**

**For defying genre, grief and the erstwhile canon**

Most of the canonical nature books are written by Caucasian men wandering the countryside telling readers what things are and how nature works. While Helen Macdonald grew up reading and loving these books, she wanted to do something different. She wanted to introduce newer and diverse voices. In the summer of 2014 she published *H Is For Hawk*. *The Guardian* labelled it “a misery memoir,” and while it is about the author coming to terms with her father’s death as she trains her goshawk, this Samuel Johnson and Costa Award-winning, bestselling book is bigger than that—it is a genre-defying work of narrative non-fiction that combines personal memoir, biography and nature writing.

As a naturalist and academic, she has appeared in a number of radio programmes on birds, and even written a few books on the subject, but this one was different. For Macdonald, the writing took a course of its own that she hadn’t anticipated. “When I started writing, I knew I wanted to write the story of the process of training my goshawk. What an idiot I was to think that the book was just about the bird. I guess I blame it on being too British—we don’t like talking about ourselves too much—but I realised it was the honest thing to do and it poured out,” she says

The book turned into the story of “a miserable woman, a bird and a dead writer.” A shadow narrative, a sort of sympathetic biography of T H White (better known for his Arthurian novels like *The Sword In The Stone*), whose book *The Goshawk* is what sparked Macdonald’s own love for birds of prey, is interwoven into her memoir. “I did not want it to be a dry biography, I wanted to get inside his head because he’s not like me. And when things got very dark for me, he became my respite.”

*H Is For Hawk* doesn’t just play with form, it is also the story of a sort of rite of passage that opens up a dialogue on death of all kinds—



Macdonald spent three years at a falcon breeding centre in Abu Dhabi

“What an idiot I was to think that the book was just about the bird”

—HELEN  
MACDONALD



Hoque has spent the last decade travelling across 30 countries

the death of a loved one, the hope of death in the mercy-killing of captured prey and most of all, the death of ideas.

**ABEER Y HOQUE, 43**  
**For confronting identity and psychiatric wards**

In the middle of a quarter life crisis, Abeer Y Hoque decided to quit her job as a business professional working in a start-up and decided to concentrate on her writing instead. She had always been a poet, scribbling rhyming verse as a child and later using poetry to make sense of the world as an adult. And so she enrolled for an MFA in Poetry and Non Fiction from the University Of San Francisco.

Her first creative writing assignment was to pen a 40-page biography. And that marked the first draft of her recently published memoir *Olive Witch*. The book grew with her over the years, as time passed, chapters were added, documenting the first three decades of her life as a Bangladeshi-American born in Nigeria.

The book begins and ends in Nigeria where Hoque spent most of her childhood, but the bulk of it is based in the US (where she now resides) and Bangladesh. “In 2012, I happened to revisit Nigeria for the first time since I had left. That trip made my journey cyclical and I needed that closure to end this book,” she says. With the changing geographies, Hoque’s authorial voice changes too, each capturing a part of

the formative moments of her life. She explains, “I needed different voices in the book because I was different people in those different phases and places.”

Hoque exposes the multicultural Sofia Coppola-ish world she belongs to, examining the diversity and alienation of her growing up years with incredible lyricism and sensitivity. She also delves into a third-person account of her recovery in a psychiatric ward after a failed suicide attempt caused by the spiralling depression she suffered at age 25. In this very internal memoir, Hoque is unrelenting in her honesty, and exposes her life for what it is. ■