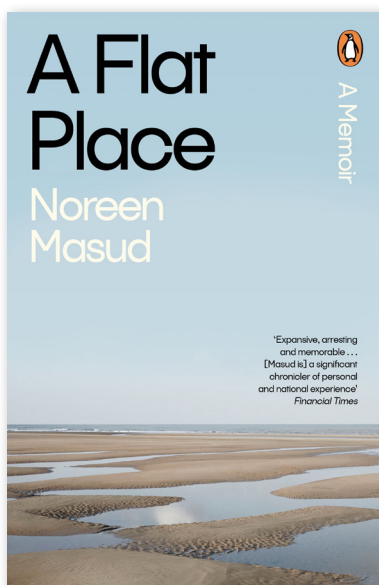


A Flat Place

by Noreen Masud



PLOT SUMMARY

Noreen Masud has always loved flatlands. Her earliest memory is of a wide, flat field glimpsed from the back of her father’s car in Lahore. As an adult in Britain she has discovered many more flat landscapes to love: Orford Ness, the Cambridgeshire fens, Morecambe Bay, Orkney. These bare, haunted expanses remind her of the flat place inside herself: the place created by trauma.

Noreen suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder: the product of a profoundly disrupted and unstable childhood. It flattens her emotions, blanks out parts of her memory and colours her world with anxiety. Seeking solace in the landscapes she loves, in *A Flat Place* she strikes out on a series of walks through Britain’s flatlands, weaving her impressions of the natural world with poetry, folklore and history, and with recollections of her own early life.

Her British-Pakistani heritage makes Noreen a partial outsider in these landscapes: both coloniser and colonised, inheritor and dispossessed. Here violence lies beneath the fantasy of pastoral innocence, and legacies of harm are interwoven with nature’s power to heal. Here, as in her own family history, are many stories that resist the telling. Noreen Masud pursues these paradoxes fearlessly across the flat spaces she loves, rendering a startlingly strange, vivid and intimate account of the land beneath her feet.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *A Flat Place*, Noreen Masud recounts some of her childhood experiences and considers her experience of cPTSD (complex post-traumatic stress disorder) as an adult because of them. Flat landscapes seem to provide her with a kind of comfort and peace, and it’s this emotional relationship to land that she explores in this heartfelt and deeply affecting book.

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Shortlist
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“I love it for its originality and its intelligence. It is revelatory about both people and places.”

KAMILA SHAMSIE, 2024 JUDGE



Flatness is, in Britain, a term that describes an emotional resonance – depressed, low – and Masud notes that is exactly how she feels. cPTSD has cut off access to emotional highs and lows, to joy and delight, and the experience of her early years has denied her the ability to securely emotionally attach to other people. She is flat, and she finds kinship and reassurance in the flat landscapes she explores.

Rather like the mountains she considers at the start of the book, Masud’s childhood experiences are distributed through the considered, careful flatness of her writing in traumatic, mountain-like peaks. As her narrative progresses, Masud shows us some of the horrifying, disruptive events that put her mind and body into a constant state of stress and freeze.

When we witness those moments, we as a reader feel an echo of that trauma. We feel shock and horror at the moments Masud can bear to show us: her father injecting her sister with growth hormone, the unnecessary supplements he makes his daughters take, making them witness open heart surgery on their grandfather, trafficking drugs in his children’s shoes – to say nothing of being imprisoned within two rooms for much of her young life and the terrible lack of stimulation that involved. For instance, Masud notes that her experience of being imprisoned and denied social contact means she has no sense of direction:

‘That part of my brain was warped and foetal and would never get any bigger because I hadn’t been able to stretch it as a child. Nice girls don’t walk in the street where men can see them (p46).

As readers, when we understand what she went through as a child, we can easily empathise with why Masud finds solace in the quiet, unpopulated flat landscapes and the inanimate objects that she does. Masud presents these unpredictable, dangerous and violent events from her young life without judgement or narrative, simply as memories.

But, even if she thinks that ‘nothing happened to her’, we can see that terrible things did. This ‘flat’ method of writing and recounting her memoir represents Masud’s traumatised, frozen frame of mind, but it’s hard for the reader not to feel deeply emotional for her in response. She might find it difficult to sense direction, but we can see the perilous route that she has taken and empathise with her journey.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Masud talks about the human obsession with mountains and describes them as symbols of an urge to adventure and conquer, whereas flat landscapes ask us to tolerate not knowing things (p13). Is there something essentially ‘feminine’ about the mystery of flat landscapes, and

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something 'masculine' about mountains or other more feature-rich land – or is this a reductive take?

Discuss why we might think about land in any kind of gendered terms – are there historical approaches and ideas that might lead us to thinking in this way? What kind of difficulties or restrictions might this lend to the ways we see the world? How do these ideas about land link to patriarchal ideas of ownership, and how does Masud investigate the links between patriarchy, colonialism, land and her own experiences?

QUESTIONS

On page 68, Masud quotes Sara Ahmed on 'the happiness duty' for women. Is there a pressure on women to be happy, and have you experienced this yourself? How, if so?

Masud talks about a racist double standard that she perceived during the Covid-19 lockdown, where British society worried about the effect of isolation and lack of access to education and socialisation on its children. Yet, Masud observed, this was already her childhood experience. How did this make you feel?

Masud explores her relationship with her mother in her account of her trip to Orkney. What did this show about their relationship, and about Masud's mother? Was Masud's mother in any way complicit in her childhood abuse? Or was she a victim of it, like her children?

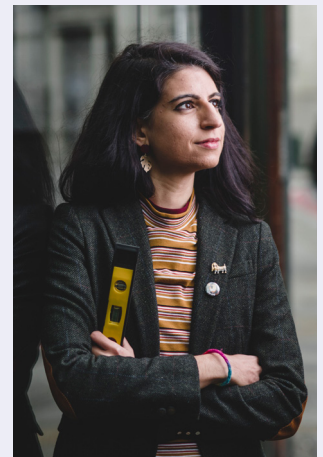
Masud meditates on the Cambridgeshire fens as a place 'rich with fertility and a symbol of death: smooth and perfect, and yet a place where something went very wrong' (p210). How can you relate to this idea of the relationship of love and loss?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noreen Masud is a lecturer in 20th-century literature at the University of Bristol, and an AHRC/ BBC New Generation Thinker.

A Flat Place is her first trade book.



If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

NEXT STEPS

During Noreen's trip to Shingle Street, she discovers a line of white shells that has been created on the beach by two women artists. One of the artists says of the shells, 'Of course they're all a bit broken. We're all a bit broken'.

Using The Shingle Street Shell Line project as inspiration, think about an art project you could do using natural found resources. How might your project somehow represent an element of your life, or make a comment about women's lives, health or mental health?

Masud begins *A Flat Place* by referencing Virginia Woolf's idea of 'a base that life stands upon', remembering the flat, lush fields outside of the centre of Lahore as her version of that base. Can you think of a similar place or memory for yourself, and how has it affected your life? Can you write about the memory in detail, and meditate upon how it has shaped the way you have responded to events and people? ■

If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

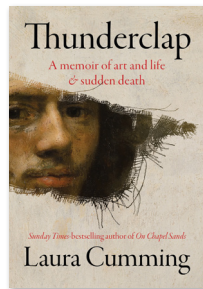
In *The Flow: Rivers, Water and Wildness* by Amy-Jane Beer, a visit to the rapid where she lost a cherished friend unexpectedly reignites Amy-Jane's love of rivers setting her on a journey of natural, cultural and emotional discovery.

In *The Britannias: An Island Quest*, longlisted for the 2024 Women's Prize for Non-Fiction, Alice Albinia looks far back into the past, searching for new meaning about women's status in the world. Boldly upturning established truths about Britain, it pays homage to the islands' beauty, independence and their suppressed or forgotten histories.

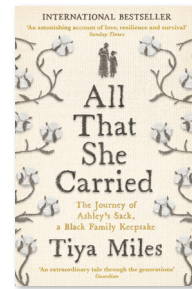
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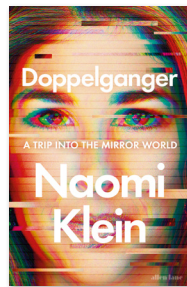
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Art and Life and
Sudden Death**
by Laura Cumming



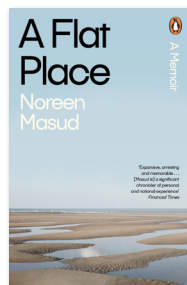
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Keepsake**
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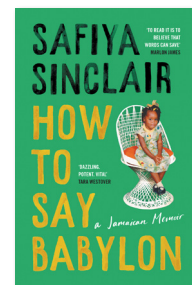
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