

## Book Review

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Title	<i>Jaipur Journals</i>
Author	Namita Gokhale
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“I want to live love, not write about it....Life, not words” voices a character in Namita Gokhale’s delightful tribute to “the largest literary show on earth”, her novel entitled *Jaipur Journals* which unfurls against the backdrop of the ebullient Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF). Amusing and moving, the novel weaves a delightful tapestry of multiple tales of sundry characters whose lives intersect with each other in the Festival premises. Gokhale transports the readers into a world of the complex intricacies of emotions, hope, longing and despair. The exciting ride records the profundity of relentless struggle for recognition, expectation, misery, the persevering battle for acknowledgment, all inflected with jealousy and ultimately pushing for some soul-searching.

Gokhale, as the Founder and Director of JLF, aptly sub-titles the book as ‘A love letter to the greatest literary show on earth’ dedicating it to all the untold stories of the world. The book opens with a child prodigy, Anura, and the object of her observation: the woman on the seat before her, Rudrani Rana, on a train to Jaipur. Anura forgets the face and her own fantasies around the lady only to be guaranteed by Gokhale that she will recollect and recognize the face again. Rudrani, inquisitively discovered by Anura’s novelist mind, carrying a thick sheaf of spiral-bound papers, unseen, unread and unsubmitted for long, comes alive with her impactful aching for acknowledgment. The story follows an absorbing pace when she meets the graphic columnist for *Eye Spye*, Anirban, who is always searching for stories that remain hidden to the more jaded eye.

When in the Festival, Gokhale introduces us to a queer narrator driven insane by the poison pen letters of Rudrani to a burglar *Betaab*, who is passionate about poetry and has connivingly resorted to *jugaad* to publish himself. The musings of his vulnerable heart that keep him oscillating between rhyme and crime, coupled with Anirban’s intense reflections, enhance the poignancy of the mood. The invigorating setting of the lively multi-lingual JLF infuses into the novel a semi-fictional charm with Gokhale providing curious accounts of misfortune, lament, self-questioning, and

fresh starts. The narration keeps shifting to multiple stories focusing on each character but each story is marked by the brooding presence of Rudrani who dominates every page mooning over the fragility of time, carrying her canvas and tote bag. Her bun and bags even make it to the cover of her novel, *Unsubmitted*.

It is Rudrani's powerful aching and Anirban's equally powerful recognition and reflection of it that forms the focal point of the novel and lends equilibrium to its narrative framework. Gokhale comes up with an ultimate insider's view on JLF by recording the poignant rendering of literary ambition and the longing for recognition. The characters are identifiable with the established and budding writers across the globe who throng the Festival venue every year. One just cannot miss the exhilaration of guessing who is who in real time! Zoya Mankotia with her "mélange of accents" and Rudrani with the innocent vulnerabilities of human nature, are characters steeped in intensity. Raju Srivastava aka *Betaab*, whose life of the mind has so far revolved around Javed Akhtar's poetry, manages to channelize the poet within him when his pent-up frustrations find an outlet in the Fest, changing his life drastically and for the better. Quoting from Akhtar's original poetry takes the novel a couple of notches higher. The historian Gayatri, who reunites with a past lover, and Anirban, with a difficult childhood, mirror the deep, inner recesses of an artist's mind that endures much before he/she can give expression to all that is deeply felt. Gokhale's tale of love, longing, yearning and disappointment, thus comes as a refreshing change in terms of her style and treatment.

The book will sound pleasantly familiar to the JLF regulars although they will come upon numerous new spaces never experienced before. Those who have not yet made it to JLF would be tempted to include it in their must visit-list, for the book presents it as a heady cocktail of recognizable and disguised faces. Gokhale successfully demonstrates her almost magical ability to catch the frail foibles of individuals from various walks of life and diverse backgrounds. The landscape of the story is not confined to Jaipur but extends to other quarters of India as well. However, the narrative - though compelling - could have been made more engaging at the hands of a writer of Gokhale's caliber. At a few places, the narration becomes sluggish and parched but the manner in which the characters reclaim their life towards the end of the novel is the tour de force of the novel. In fact, what also makes the novel tick is its playful celebration of literary obsession using the backdrop of the Festival itself. With everything taken into account, *Jaipur Journals* may just become one of the A-list novels of the year for all the right reasons!