

# This Red Line Goes Straight to Your Heart: A Roundtable on Intergenerational Storytelling | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

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This is a text transcript for the recorded event “This Red Line Goes Straight to Your Heart: A Roundtable on Intergenerational Storytelling” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. The panel discussion was recorded on January 21, 2021. The guest speakers were Madhur Anand, Mariam Pirbhai, Nurjehan Aziz, Soraya Peerbaye, and Bela Ravi.

## Sharada Srinivasan:

Okay, welcome everybody, I am Sharada Srinivasan, the director of the Canada India Research Center for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). CIRCLE was established last year in February just before, or just as the pandemic was unfolding, so one of the things that we have been able to do fairly well is run a series of webinars.

You're welcome to learn more about CIRCLE and the sort of webinars and other events that we are running through our website, [canadaindiaresearch.ca](http://canadaindiaresearch.ca). So, CIRCLE is intended to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting-edge research on India and the Indian diaspora to showcase, advocate, catalyze and foster an equitable respectful and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex and emerging and sometimes unexplored topics related to sustainability and social and economic well-being.

Like I said, you are welcome to learn more about CIRCLE at our website [canadaindiaresearch.ca](http://canadaindiaresearch.ca). Before I hand over to Mariam Pirbhai, who will facilitate today's excellent roundtable conversation on intergenerational aspects, inspired by Madhur Anand's book, *This Red Line Goes Straight to Your Heart*, there's only one little thing I would request all of you to do. Please switch off turn off your videos so it's only the speakers will have their videos on and probably mute and unmute at their convenience.

At a later point during the Q&A if you are if you would like to speak your question you're welcome to unmute but at all other times please turn off your videos and stay muted and that would allow for an uninterrupted conversation and an uninterrupted event. Thank you very much over to you Mariam.

## Mariam Pirbhai:

Thank you very much for this invitation and thank you Madhur Anand for this lovely invitation today. Hello and welcome everyone to, This Red Line Goes Straight to Your Heart: a roundtable on Intergenerational Storytelling, hosted by the Canada India Research Center for learning and engagement and DESI News.

My name is Mariam Pirbhai, I'm a full professor of English at Wilfrid Laurier University, where I specialize in the literatures of the South Asian diaspora, post-colonial studies and creative writing, and I also recently completed my tenure as the president of CACLALS, which is the Canadian Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, Canada's longest running post-colonial studies association.

I was delighted to accept Madhur's invitation to moderate this panel on intergenerational storytelling today as it's inspired of course by her brilliant book, *This Red Line Goes Straight to Your Heart: A Memoir in Halves*. A book I read by the way not in halves, but with my whole and undivided attention.

Indeed, Madhur's book inspires us on so many levels I would say for it's ingenuity, its experimentation its poetry and elegant prose, its effortless movement from the right to left hemisphere of the brain, it's bridging of science and art, it's moving excavations of diasporic histories and family chronicles, especially as they pertain to South Asian peoples and their diaspora and all the symmetries and asymmetries of the human heart, that it steps in motion and as one critic notes, "releases in an electrical storm of a book."

Indeed, the book has also received advanced praise by literary figures and artists alike, a notable one being Deepa Mehta, of course the filmmaker whose reputation precedes her, who notes the different perspectives in Madhur's book are "truly poetic and at times heartbreaking, playing with time is so difficult and I'm happy to say in *This Red Line* it soars." Another notable critic and author, Heather O'Neill, author of *Lullabies for Little Criminals* and the *Lonely Hearts Hotel* calls the book "a beautiful experiment that free falls through metaphors and anecdotes and delivers us truths that are rare like butterflies."

It's my very special privilege then to introduce you to the esteemed members of this panel including of course Madhur Anand herself, Nurjehan Aziz, Soraya Peerbaye, and Bela Ravi. Permit me to begin with an introduction to our author Madhur Anand.

As you may know Dr. Anand is a full Professor of Ecology and Sustainability Science at the University of Guelph, and serves as the inaugural director of the New Guelph Institute for Environmental Research. She's the author of a debut book of poems titled *A New Index for Predicting Catastrophes* published by McClelland & Stewart, which was the finalist for the Trillium Book Award in 2015 and hailed by CBC as one of the 10 trailblazing Canadian poetry collections to read. That same year, CBC also listed Madhur Anand as a writer to watch.

*This Red Line Goes Straight to Your Heart* is her debut work of creative non-fiction, published by Strange Light which is an imprint, the newest imprint in fact, with the boundary pushing books from Penguin Random House Canada. I'm also delighted to introduce you to our panelists, including Nurjehan Aziz, the recipient of the 2020 Ivy Award for her contributions to publishing in Canada. She is the publisher of Mawenzi House, hailed as a press that has come to "change our understanding of the Canadian literary landscape through its innovative publications."

It's also my very great pleasure to introduce Soraya Peerbaye, who currently works as a program advisor for dance at the Ontario Arts Council. She's the author of two collections of poetry, notably *Poems for the Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names* and *Tell: poems for a girlhood*, winner of the Trillium Book Award for poetry in 2016.

And finally it's my pleasure to introduce Bela Ravi who is the Chancellor of Huntington University which is a division of the Laurentian Federation. Bela Ravi has received numerous awards for her dedication in the sectors of education and community service.

Again, it's with great pleasure that I welcome all of our panelists here today as we are inspired by Madhur Anand's wonderful book *This Red Line Goes Straight to Your Heart*, and also to welcome you, our audience, to what I'm sure is going to be a lively and thought-provoking conversation.

Now the format for today for today's round table is essentially that we are going to be hearing from each of our panelists who have selected a short section of the book, for a short reading, a brief reading that each of them will give, and then speak to why this particular section of the book may have been a source of inspiration for them, or what particular cord that section of the book may have struck for them. After which we will open things up to a Q & A so we welcome your questions.

And I'd like to perhaps pause now at this moment and begin by turning to each of our panelists and invite them to do a brief reading which we're very looking forward to hearing. So, Nurjehan, I would love to invite you to begin, thank you and welcome Nurjehan.

### Nurjehan Aziz:

Thank you, thank you for inviting me to participate on this panel and thank you Madhur for sending me this book. Congratulations on its publication. I found it a fascinating read with an unusual structure, an intergenerational story told from the viewpoints of each of the parents in the first half and then Madhur's own meditations and attempts at bridging the gaps in memory, at constructing the family history with the fragments she has been handed in the second half. It's a wonderful book.

Early on in the book, we are told that Madhur's father, afflicted with polio from birth which causes him to walk with a limp, comes to the realization that he must use his knowledge of physics to understand his world. And so, I will read my selection now, it's page 36.

"Maybe it was because of my limp that I tried to understand the world through asymmetry." And then I'm moving on down, "I took control, I willed myself to walk. No psychic apparatus could sufficiently measure my life. I needed other kinds of apparatuses. I needed physics, a certain kind of physics. All this to say that I learned everything I could about spontaneous symmetry breaking. I would find this to occur everywhere I looked, in particle physics, in condensed metaphysics, in general relativity, in ferromagnetics and in superconductors."

And then it moves on, as I approached now the father is arriving in Canada. "As I approached the new continent by plane, the Himalayan mountains were already permanently fixed in my consciousness but the rest of my memories of India, the *Chaiwala*, the *Kitewala*, the *Rickshawala*, began a slow retreat back into the deep sea of my unconscious. In December 1967, the year of Canada's centennial, I slipped on the tarmac at the Montreal airport and did not even curse even though *benchod* bubbled to the surface. I did not utter a single word out loud.

"This ensured I would not say the wrong thing, to upset the microcosmos as it was forming newly around me. I gazed deeply into the symmetrical six-pointed structure of each snowflake, as it was still falling from the sky, as it landed on my bare hands. I realized then that my consciousness, like the 500-million-year-old Himalayas, like the 500 millions of snow flakes that still managed to be different, was not singular. It was just as Schrodinger, founding father of quantum physics, had written in 'What is Life?', which I had read in university. I am the person if any who controls the motion of the atoms, according to the laws of nature. I am the person, I control my destiny."

No, I did not pick this excerpt for the swear word. This section for me sets the tone for how the world is to be understood for the rest of the book. The physical world, random events, love, and other emotions using metaphors, notes, and poetry in the pursuit of truth. Even as Mr. Anand is on the ground, presumably hurting from the fall, what he is thinking about is the wonderment of the falling snow and his scientific mind is seeing the symmetrical six-pointed structure and using quantum physics to understand his situation.

While it is her father who deploys physics in making sense of his world, the family history in India, immigration to Canada, the change in landscapes and life in the new world, the author also is using signs to explain, to explain her world to herself. We see it in her use of such concepts as asymmetry and symmetry breaking, space and time, wave and particle, chirality, entropy and more. I found my experience of reading the book so much more elevated because of my understanding of these concepts. Thank you.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Thank you very much Nurjehan. I'd like to invite Soraya Peerbaye to read and speak to Madhur's book.

**Soraya Peerbaye:**

Thank you so much. I'm not sure if you can see me, I'm receiving a message that says that I'm unable to start the video. Oh no. Now can you see me? Yes. Excellent thank you. I just want to say thank you for inviting me to be a part of this, Madhur it's such a pleasure. I love this book so much and it's also so lovely to be in the company of friends and whose work I admire so much, as well as people I'm meeting for the first time.

I also just wanted to say how much I love the way that you have organized this panel and I also feel like this should be a way of having readings always. I wondered if you know, the form of this reading is kind of echoing for me the form of the book, in the way that it sort of invites other voices into them to take up the story that you've written. I was also just struck Nurjehan, as you were introducing us and you said page 36, and I realized I just needed to do that thing with the book, of like, which page 36? Which I really loved so I wanted to read from, okay wait now, I can find it again.

It's the chapter called Alpha Decay Office, and it's page 65 from this side. And I'll just, if it's okay I'll just read it straight from the beginning, because I think that introduction is so telling also. "Alpha Decay Office Hours. It has hitherto been necessary to postulate some special arbitrary instability of the nucleus, but in the following note it has pointed out that disintegration is a natural consequence of the laws of quantum mechanics without any special hypothesis.

"Much has been written of the explosive violence with which a particle is hurled from its place in the nucleus, but from the process pictured above one would rather say that the particle almost slips away, unnoticed (Gurney and Condon).

"I arrive at the Montreal office half an hour before office hours begin. He arrives at the same time from the opposite direction. I say hello, and my name. He unlocks the door. I'm here early, I start. He enters, puts down the briefcase, removes an Indian style fur hat, fox, I think. He hangs the hat and his brown sheepskin coat on the coat rack. I mimic him, taking off my own coat, but putting it on the chair beside me. He sits down behind his desk. Only then does he speak, 'let's start,' but I cannot start like that.

"It is too late to offer a handshake or a hug or other formalities or niceties. Still, I muster up a half-hearted namaste, putting my hands together, the only thing left for me to do, which is strange because I never namaste. Maybe he sees that. I reiterate my project goals and ask him to start by remembering 1967, the year he met my father. He does so naturally, his memory in this matter intact. An alpha particle decay, but in reverse.

"Dr. Sharma confirms that he told my father, who wanted to join the department as a graduate student when he first arrived as an immigrant to Canada, to go to a better university. But he then tells me a few things that do not match my father's story. That he was never the supervisor of my father's PhD research, that he was never my father's mentor, that my father only went to two or three classes in his courses and never returned, that he hardly had any interactions with him. It was instead a Jewish professor my father worked for who was a supervisor.

"The things that do not match what my father remembers do not seem to matter in and of themselves and yet I have stumbled onto a problem I cannot apply the scientific method to. What do you do when you know something is untrue, but you cannot prove it? How can you tell the difference between a failing memory and a delusion? Which facts belong to whom? The electromagnetic forces become stronger than the nuclear forces. The alpha particle escapes through a tunnel and joins another nucleus. The truth slips away unnoticed."

And I'll echo Nurjehan again, it seems to me like there's so much awareness, there's such a heightened awareness throughout this book that it feels to me like almost any passage we choose is commenting on the way that you're writing at the same time as you're writing, which I find really remarkable. But I really love this passage, I think it spoke to me because of some of the ways that I've approached writing too in the past, or think of approaching it.

You know for future projects, but that role of the scientist, or that role of the archivist. The formality of it, and the way that also that formality is so awkward when you are coming into natural history, or when you're coming into family history, and so just that tension between

you and this the person you're speaking with, and then how quickly everything comes undone, do you know, in terms of your understanding of truth, like that expectation that the what we're going to uncover is going to be singular and that all the stories are going to converge that they're going to solidify, and instead that's not at all what happens.

So, yeah, I think just all the tropes of what it is to try to record, and how complex it is and how precarious it is, I really love that. There's a phrase that just hit me as I was reading, "an alpha particle decay but in reverse" and I also think that's another thing that just runs through the book like just the reversibility of processes or like the change of direction, which I, and again, like how swiftly and often unexpectedly that happens too.

### Mariam Pirbhai:

Thank you so much Soraya, I mean I'm picking, I think you're so bright when you say the way that this panel has been organized, it's so reflective of the way the book invites us in fact to look at the parts as well as the whole, the resonances, personal, familial, historical, and I noticed that Nurjehan's reading sort of speaks to some of the architecture, that wonderful architecture of this book, I mean she was speaking to the randomness of events but also taking stopping taking that moment to look, to really look, the wonder that she describes in Mr. Anand looking up to the snowflakes and the symmetry, the beautiful symmetry of the snowflake.

And in your reading Soraya, yeah, I noticed you know, that emphasis almost on the memoirist, I mean after all this is a memoir. It is an experimental memoir one that's pouring through the archives, familial and other and encountering all of those gaps, those gaps in memory, the partial provisional nature of memory as well that this book so brilliantly explores.

So, I would like to turn to our third panelist, Bela Ravi to provide her reading as well and after which, there's several things that I would love to pick up on to begin a conversation. So, thank you Bela.

### Bela Ravi:

First of all I want to thank Madhur for including me in this. This was a pleasant surprise and just, I'm a storyteller, I connect to stories and things that pull to my heart strings, so I picked something that that reminded me of some good times, and I'm on page 134 of this side.

“Against my nature I throw a party to celebrate the 70th birthday of my father. I'm living in Sudbury, it's summer 2004. I invite the many local Indian families who've taken me under their wing, doctors psychiatrists, professors, engineers, some who have already retired. In Sudbury, the Indian community is small and everyone is friends with everyone; Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Punjabis, Gujaratis, Indians from south. I've never seen that before. In the Greater Toronto Area there are so many Indians that only Punjabis interact with the Punjabis and so on.

After dinner the guests take turns singing in my small living room and I, against my nature, sing a couple of lines of a gazal, 'what is the heart take my life.' I learned the song from the 1981 Bollywood interpretation of *Umrao Jaan*. I watched the film with my parents on VHS.” Then I'm going to go down to the second paragraph on the next page. “For the birthday party I wear the red silk Sari with triangle pattern gold border a friend has brought back from India for me. I called him a friend, but he feels differently.

“He's south Indian and single and everyone in the community notices when we converse at social events. We go out for Chinese food once or to an oriental restaurant, he cooks a South Indian meal in his apartment for me once, Sambar rice. My mother tells me he's Brahmin and there's a sacred thread, a Yajnopavita across his chest under his shirt. Someone must have told her about it, some other mother. Then a few weeks later, his mother, who still lives in India, sends two Saris, one red and one blue for me. We have not even held hands but I break his heart when I tell him I've decided to marry my now husband.”

There are so many excerpts in this book that I related to, and there were so many perils that I could see between my life coming here with my parents in 1973 and something like slipping on the ice. I remember it so clearly because we came to Montreal in February of '73 and I fell, so I laughed out loud when and when I saw that part. And there were some parts that were too personal that I was not too keen to talk about and some were some were sad with the aunties, haunting memories, things that are still hard to talk about.

But at these times I wanted to reflect on the good. We've had a tough year and this just brought memories of laughter and singing and what life used to be, and along that again, you know to be with family, to be with friends, to laugh out loud, sing those songs and go back to those times and also remember people who are not here anymore, that was such so precious to me in my life and mother's life.

So, this just stood out with me and just the way it was put, and just connected with me in what life is all about and what simple things in life that we don't realize are gone until they are. Thank you.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Thank you so much Bela and thank you to each of the panelists. Of course there's so much to pick up on here and we should certainly have the time to do so, but for now I'd like to invite Madhur to speak and perhaps say a few words about, or reflect on, some of the observations made by our panelists.

Madhur Anand:

Thank you, thank you everybody for being here. Thank you to all of you for accepting the invitation to do this event, indeed I really did think about what it should look like and each of you for different reasons bring such richness to this discussion, so thank you for that. Gosh, I think I would like to sort of, well let's see. I'm going to start off by saying that Bela, I'll maybe work in reverse order with your readings. Bela were there that day at that party? You were.

Bela Ravi:

Yes I was yeah, I remember it clearly, yeah.

Madhur Anand:

So, I don't think everybody here realizes that so you were, you were there, which is neat. I didn't remember that aspect and I also think it's you know astounding that you told that anecdote about falling on the ice in Montreal. Sometimes it's amazing how those details which you feel are so specific to a life, are so universal and you know I certainly hoped that that would be the case in my use of details in the book.

But that to me is an example of what I call 'apophenia' in the book, I don't know if you guys remember that term from reading it, but it's where you, it's a term that just means, I'm a little obsessed with it, it's where you see causal relationships between two events when there's no causal relationship, it's coincidental so, I actually find it a very, very fascinating and enriching phenomenon as a writer. So, yet one more example of apophenia.

So, let's see, Bela I also think that you are actually literally in the book, but I could be wrong. So you mentioned the story about the aunties, and we don't have to read it or talk about it but there is a section entitled 'Five Aunties' and I give very brief vignettes about five real women who are aunties and because of course we are brought up to call pretty much you know, any elder Indian woman in the community an auntie. But in the very in one of them I'm speaking about somebody in Sudbury, and I believe you spoke at the funeral Bela.

Bela Ravi:

So, I related to that, yes.

Madhur Anand:

Those are your words in fact, in quotes at the very end of your speech, so this is a very tragic story about somebody who was murdered, but this case is still unsolved in Sudbury. At the very end, I have in quotes, Bela, something you said, "try your best, that's all you can do" and you know you're speaking to this group of Sudbury community members, including the daughters of



this woman, and well there you are, you're in the book *Bela*, and probably in other parts too, probably in other parts too, because it's quite a bit of, I lived in Sudbury for six years, so.

Now, Soraya, I wanted everybody here to know a little bit about your book and perhaps give, if you would agree to just speak a little bit more about something that, well first of all tell them what the book is that you wrote and what it's about, but also and I'm referring to 'Tell: Poems for a Girlhood' and specifically something that you said in an interview that I read afterwards recently, when I was considering asking you to join this panel.

And you know and it was something that struck me at the time, this is a book that was published in 2015 so when I read it at the time I had no idea I would be writing this book, but what I found so, one of the many things I found amazing about your book was your decision, and of course the way you did it, of adding your voice, quite directly and your own life experiences, directly into the telling of someone else's story. Which is, you know, at a very basic level something that our books do have in common.

So, you said that, I'll just read out what you said in terms of your choice to do that because one doesn't always have to do that. You said, "In the end I recognized without this section [referring to the section of your own childhood, and your own life] the work would be dishonest, I think we need to say who we are when we claim the position of witness." So, I wonder if you would just say something about that?

**Soraya Peerbaye:**

Sure. Might be worth saying I think I glimpsed Beth Follett's name in the people in attendance and Beth was the publisher of *Tell* and it's definitely worth saying that Beth pushed me to write that section. Okay and I don't know that, I mean, I had tried to on many occasions and I kept failing and I felt extremely self-conscious about it, and I think it's really the conversations with Beth that, you know really showed me, in a way, how it also functioned as a heart of the book.

I think, and it's funny to hear you say this Madhur, because I think there's a difference, I mean for me I was writing about someone who was, so *Tell* is the story of, or is a response to the many stories around the murder of Reena Virk, who was a young South Asian woman living in British Columbia who was lured and assaulted and ultimately drowned by her peers in a place called the Gorge Waterway.

And it was a story I think, that struck many of us as Brown women just in terms of this, you know our own experiences of what it was like to grow up Brown in Canada and experiences of exclusion or social aggression. But I was writing about something that was very far from my experience and I know, I don't think I had this particular language at the time, but I really did not want to just appropriate her story and her suffering,

And so it's interesting to hear you reflect on that when you're talking about your family, where in some way I think one would feel there's a kind of right to inhabit those stories and it's funny

that you're expressing something about, well of course those questions still come into play no matter how intimate we think we are, it's never intimate enough.

So, I mean I think that comment around witnessing, like for me, there's something about not only witness as a position but witnessing as an act, and I think for me there was a sense that there's a very, there's a whole tradition of you know, the poetry of witness, and I think I was wary of a kind of romanization of that and a feeling that because we're doing this, you know, that somehow, it sort of, it heightens you know, the work or its relevance and I think for me there was just a real consciousness of thinking there's a process to doing that and it's not comfortable, and trying to be that or to do that is a process that teaches you also what your distance is you know, from that subject matter.

And so I think for me it was that sense of just not only that it would be dishonest to claim the position of witness, but it would be dishonest to sort of describe the process of witnessing as something that is clean or something that has a kind of natural methodology to it. I think there was a process of constant questioning and constant you know, how to piece this together in a way that just shows not only how things are connected but how fraught those connections are, which I think is something I pick up a lot in your book.

### Mariam Anand:

Yeah, I think it's amazing because it's true, you had even more physical distance between your subject matter than I did, but I think once I started to attempt to tell those stories, and I think I knew this from the very beginning, even though they're my parents the distance was huge, both physical and emotional, and of course that's because we're speaking of geographies and generations and many other things, so yeah.

I think that's a really difficult thing when writing intergenerational stories, is that at the one time on the one hand distance can be a way in to telling the stories you know, from myself as both a scientist and a poet, I really play with that subject object divide and I'm very conscious of it all the time, and so that was certainly something that was never quite, it's a tension that was never quite resolved throughout the whole book.

But I guess what I wanted to say is that the distance can be on the one hand attractive because it allows you to discover and learn and you know take that that that lens but then it's also, it also can be quite repulsive at times as well because of the things that you were mentioning and this idea of right to tell these stories and tell them on behalf of someone else, in a way. And in my case I took the first person point of view to tell my parents stories, I became them so that, that is that additional layer or level or step of you know, imagining their voices, very imaginable.

### Soraya Peerbaye:

Glad you mentioned that, because I found that shocking, you know when I was reading that, it was like, oh how can you do that, how do you feel so sure?

## Madhur Anand:

Well oddly enough, perhaps paradoxically, I did it because I wasn't sure. I find that writing in the third person, I found that while trying to write their stories in the third person, I was very uncertain about what I was writing, so oddly by taking on, because in taking on the first person I also allowed, and I hope that the reader will also feel this way, is that I did insert myself directly into the story, even though was telling their stories, so it was, that was how I solved that problem of being both, of doing both. Don't mute myself again.

Nurjehan, thank you so much for that lovely, lovely reading in that selection, and we don't know each other very well, but I was hoping that you could tell us a little bit of your years of publishing stories from the diaspora, and well many intergenerational books. If, you know, where you feel we're at, and perhaps you know, because one of the things that I did struggle with from the outset of this book was you know, the immigrant narrative or the immigrant story, and you know, various tropes that one sees in storytelling and wanting to you know, issue some of the clichés around those stories.

And I wondered if you could just perhaps give us some of your own thoughts about why we need to keep telling these stories, and perhaps if there's others out there who are interested in working on this themselves, if you have, you've noticed that there are any sets of stories, or kinds of stories that are missing in Canadian literature, in publishing?

## Nurjehan Aziz:

Yeah, so I guess there is always a need to you know, learn about stories especially when you immigrate. You come to a new country, and in our case this is what happened we came here in the 80s, early 80s, and you know, being book lovers we would go into bookstores to check up on literature and find that there were no novels or stories that tell, that dealt with where we came from, or that talked to our culture.

It was mostly you know, books of the euro-American coming from euro-American traditions and you know, you want to learn, you know, I think it's a natural instinct that you want to know about other backgrounds also your own stories reflected in the works that are available in the stores.

So, this is how we actually got started with first, a literary magazine and then with book publishing. And then you found out when publishing the literary magazine, that there were so many writers of our backgrounds, South Asians for instance, in the 80s working in different corners of the country, even in the US who were so you know, were so happy to have an outlet for their stories.

And one of our men, you know, one of our key things in our mandate is that when we immigrate, when we come to Canada, we bring our stories with us and they become Canadian stories and so those stories have to be written down and told and become part of the Canadian literature.

And so that has been our aim, you know, our focus is to bring out different stories from you know, people from South Asian backgrounds, African backgrounds, stories from the Caribbean and they are stories that are handed down to the next generation because immigration means so much is lost, you know, by just you know, getting involved with the day-to-day life, our culture is what gets lost.

And so, you know, putting them down is really a service for the next generations, and they could do whatever they wished with it you know they could just discard it and move on and create their own stories but you know, for them it's available if they want it. I'm not sure if that answers your question.

**Mariam Anand:**

Yeah, I mean it was open-ended so whatever you wish to talk about. Can I pass it back to you Mariam?

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Yes sure, thank you. Someone just had a question about, Nurjehan was speaking to the magazine that she and M.G. Vassanji founded when they first came here, and I just wanted to confirm that that was the Toronto South Asian Review, Nurjehan, that you were speaking to?

**Nurjehan Aziz:**

Yes right, and which later became the Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Right, right. Yeah, thank you, thank you Madhur, and thank you to all of the panelists. There are a lot of, of course, a lot of things that so resonate with me in terms of you know, everything each of you has pointed out and of course as they are drawn from Madhur's book.

One of the things that perhaps I would love to pick up on is this idea of intergenerational storytelling and one of the things that I think is particularly ground-breaking in Madhur's book and actually, I have to say also in Soraya Peerbaye's *Tell: poems for a girlhood*, is that there's a real, a very self-conscious and critical I would say, reckoning with questions of land and belonging in a way that is very new I would say, or at least is starting to find a platform and a voice and I think publishing houses are also, I hope, turning a corner and challenging themselves to move away from what Madhur was describing as some of the sort of, more conventional tropes of immigration.

And perhaps what I'm speaking to here is, you know, perhaps we need an anecdote from Madhur's own book because one of the things that really struck me was of course going back to Bela, Bela's point about you know, how she grew up or how she has lived in Sudbury and so

much of her memory, her personal memory, her family memory, is linked to Sudbury and we see, you know, much of this exploration of relationship.

South Asian Diasporic relationships and community relationships to land and to place in Canada specifically, from these multi-generational perspectives. Yeah, going back to my earlier point I think this is this kind of mapping of the South Asian Diaspora in these terms outside the conventional tropes of being the new immigrant, being settled in metropolitan centers, being largely urban beings who are confined by, you know, perhaps the business of survival, etc.

I think that Madhur's book does so expertly, tells us so expertly, calls our attention to the multi-generational histories of South Asian Peoples in Canada, this is a diaspora that is now over a hundred years old in Canada, has over a hundred year presence in Canada, and the way, you know, you have this intersection between first and second generation perspectives.

And there's an awareness, there's a kind of mapping, there's an interlacing of perspective and experience that is both uniquely South Asian, drawing on diasporic histories and memory, but also, you know, something that has connected peoples to other parts of Canada, the rural, you know, the hamlets, the towns, even those areas that are considered remote. And so, one of the things that I really was thinking through was exactly those habitations, those habitations that Madhur describes in her father and mother's mapping of places like Sudbury.

So, perhaps my question to our panelists before we turn to our audience, one of my questions is, how might intergenerational storytelling be seen as a mode of mapping ourselves onto this land, onto this land? And I say that also I think you know we are starting to think through also our own relationship to the land, as it pertains to our own role as immigrant settlers, immigrant settlers in relationship to Indigenous peoples and Indigenous rights as well, so we are just yet another kind of community of settlers?

I was wondering, you know, how might this be seen as a kind of engagement with place, as much as with memory, and how, how does this take on our particular significance into diaspora, mapping ourselves onto the new land inhabiting that space in multiple senses of the term? How does our own sense of place in diaspora or as immigrants in particular change or deepen through intergenerational or even ancestral memory, that many of us can speak to now in Canada as part of a diasporic community in Canada?

I wonder if I can ask this question generally to our panelists, even invite audience members to speak to this shift, I mean, I really see it as a kind of paradigm shift, this kind of mapping of the diaspora onto the land through filters of self, I would say, of awareness of our role, as well as other kinds of settlers perhaps too. Madhur, maybe I can start with you, since I'm drawing so much of this from your book as well.

**Madhur Anand:**

Sure, I mean that's such a rich, rich question and an excellent question that, I think comes through in my writing but is not one that I was particularly conscious of. Maybe what I can say

about that is that it did strike me, you know, going back and so maybe just to start, my father immigrated, when he immigrated he landed in Montreal and he spent

a year there. My mother came a year later and then basically the day that she arrived they took a train up to Geraldton, Ontario which is a tiny little mining town in Northern Ontario.

And, that's where they started their life, and that's where they started, you know, to have children and so on. I was born and then they moved to Thunder Bay in the 60s and early 70s, and I was born in Thunder Bay. And so, I have this part of my life that is, you know, linked to these and I think I, in wanting to understand my parents histories and lives, these little towns in remote areas were things I had to explore, and because many, many, many years later, coincidentally I ended up living in Sudbury, which of course, you know, would have changed in many decades.

All of these northern towns will have, well, some of them will have changed dramatically. I started to get a feel for their lives, what they would have seen and felt, what they would have seen, because Sudbury, Northern Ontario is a very, for those who don't know it, the Canadian Shield is a very special land, and you know, dominated by this, you know, billions of years old geological formation.

And you know, rock, trees, and lake is really the three things I think of when I think of Northern Ontario, and I fell in love with it, but I also felt like, you know, it was part of my history somehow as well because it was where my parents first lived, and you know, where I was born, oddly. So, I didn't end up going to Sudbury and living there until I was in my, you know, 20s, mine was my first professor position, but I hadn't really been up there since, well, I've never been around in those parts.

So, I guess, what I want to say, and so you know, the thing about these small towns is, of course, at that time in the 60s and 70s, and I think other people would, you know, Bella might be able to speak more to this, or Nurjehan, or maybe someone in the audience here. You were really a minority, right, and so even in the cities, even in the cities, but especially so in these small villages, but almost to the point of where because life was just so, so difficult, there were commonalities that we could also share with those around you.

So, I mean, Geraldton, when my parents moved there, it was just, it was a gold mining town and was just on the end of a boom cycle it was entering into a bust. And so it was a very, very hard place and you know, my father when he got his first job teaching high school there, he you know, he was telling me, and I didn't know this until I started to interview him for the book, that, you know, his students were either children of miners, of gold miners, or children of foresters.

And here's my father coming in, trying to teach them physics and mathematics, so to me, I mean that whole, yeah, it just set a certain challenge to and necessity of, really linking their stories to who they were interacting with, and who was there, and of course because I'm also an ecologist I, you know, those things speak to me very directly.

I work on ecosystem recovery from mining, and I work on, I work with forestry companies to look at sustainable forestry, and this is where, you know, I wanted to really bridge, I don't know if bridge is the right word, but the intergenerational aspect of the storytelling comes in and, you know, where one generation can really, you know, speak to another generation, but perhaps through a different language or different languages, and that's partly why I used the languages of science in my book.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Thank you, yeah Soraya, did you...

**Soraya Peerbaye:**

Oh, I just had a thought. Okay, I know you sent us that question in advance Mariam, and I've been thinking about it and I'm so glad you brought this up, and then I'm so glad to hear all of these comments from Madhur, but I was wondering about the word mapping, in part, because I think mapping suggests that we know where we are in some way.

And I think for me, one of the things that I sense in your book, and I think that was, that has been very present for me in the process of writing, or just in the process of reading is just understanding how little I knew about where I was. And, you know, whether that for me, you know, having no sense at all of Indigenous people as a living People.

Having a very self-centred, community-centred, understanding of racism and certainly, you know, being drawn to conversations around social justice but not making any relationship to, you know, the experience of Black people in Toronto, or, you know, that like, there was such a...

I don't think I really knew where I was, and I think part of, and I feel some of your recovery of those stories when you're writing about everything from the German prisoners, was it in Geraldton?

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

[Nods]

**Soraya Peerbaye:**

Yeah, you know, all of the stories of the encounters with Eabametoong First Nation and Fort Hope, the meaning of people with the last name Yesno, and like, the consideration of the relationship to the word Yesno, and treaties and, you know, what it is for us to be here as settlers, what it is for us to be here as Brown people, with sometimes a very isolated perception of, you know, what the racism in the culture we were living in was.

And so, I wondered about, you know, words like re-situating or re-inhabiting but then I also feel like when you're talking about ecosystem recovery, that to me is what's really happening. That, it's not even mapping, which you could say is also a colonial process. But maybe, I don't know maybe, you'd have comments on colonialism and ecosystem recovery too, but that ecosystem recovery feels to me like it's a re-building of relationship of self to place.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Yeah, thank you Soraya, I mean, I think that's why, that the kinds of connections that Madhur makes both as scientist/ecologist and the sort of intersections between ecology as a relationship to land, alongside familial and then again geographic kinds of relationships, diasporic relationships to land, is such an important intervention here. I invite other panelists as well, is there something that you would like to pick up on here?

**Madhur Anand:**

Mariam, may I just suggest, you know certainly, I would love to hear more from panelists too, but we do have a few questions from the audience in the chat.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Yeah.

**Madhur Anand:**

I don't know, because we're going to 12:30, just to keep that in mind, yeah.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Oh yes, okay I do see the thread of questions here, thank you for pointing that out. I see a question here from Saar Golshan, Saar notes, can you speak about your process of playing with time in this intergenerational tale?

**Madhur Anand:**

Yeah, and I mean, certainly we can weave in the mapping question because it's all so spatial/temporal, it's all interrelated. So, let me just have a look at the question again. Yeah so, it's hard to write a book in a non-linear fashion, it is, and playing with time in this intergenerational tale...

So, I mean, it's hard to write a book in a non-linear fashion, but, you know I would say it was hard for me to write it in a linear fashion. It would have been harder to write it in a linear fashion if not impossible, simply because once you start to get into things, you realize that



there are gaps, in what people would like to talk about, there are just simply gaps in memory that you can't control, that is just how the process of memory is, it's non-linear.

There were pieces, I had to piece it together and my, you know, yeah, linear structures are just, we're never really my aim here. So, one of the, you know, conceits and I think this does, I think answers of one of the other questions and one approach to at least creating one kind of structure in the book was indeed separating out my parents side from my side.

The two "I's" in the book right so that was a very deliberate thing and that does create a kind of break in the moral structure at least, to keep the two sides somewhat separated. But even then, as you start, you know, each side it should be read in relation to the other. So, even there, there's a big non-linearity actually in the book. In terms of, so yeah. So, though they didn't have a particular process except to honour the fact, honour the gaps, and honour the missing parts, and also the difficulty of, of actually getting all those data points that just don't exist and working with the ones that I had.

And as a scientist, frankly, you know, we say this all the time that, there's in fact, I'm pretty sure I heard it just this week in a talk I gave or a talk I was listening to, that there's almost no perfectly linear structures in nature, so why should we attempt that? Yeah.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Thank you Madhur, yeah, there are some lovely questions here, and I was wondering if any of the members of our audience want to just unmute, and perhaps ask the questions for themselves. I see a question from Brandi, hello Brandi, and Manahil, hello Manahil, and Elisa Cooper. Brandi, would you like to pose your question, unmuted?

**Brandi Estey-Burtt:**

I will, unmute, but I won't turn my camera on.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Yes, that's okay, yes that's good thanks.

**Brandi Estey-Burtt:**

I'm just stuffing lunch in. Thank you very much for this discussion, I loved the way you had to flip the book over in a material way, I really like that approach to changing the actual physical structure of the book, so I was just curious if, if that was a decision you made early in the writing process, to actually engineer the physical part of the book in that way, and was it really a challenge to get that published, or were your publishers fairly supportive of that choice?

## Madhur Anand:

Okay, thank you so much for that question, because it gives me a chance to say something nice about the publisher and my editor, which, you know, is much deserved. So, it is some, it is structure that came quite late in the process, the book, when it was accepted for publication was not entirely written, I had written pieces of it and there was a leap of faith on their part for me to write the rest.

Also, I had originally only intended to write my parents stories, similar to what, it was interesting to hear what Soraya said about her experience of her own book. And knowing fully that I would be introducing my voice into theirs, but I didn't plan on having this entire other section based on stories from my own life.

And I don't think it was necessarily something that my publisher required or asked, but, you know, what sort of eventually happened is that I found myself writing some other stories just for myself, of my own life, and then I showed a couple of them to my editor and then we sort of decided that we would have, that we would try to include both sides, both voices. But we had originally thought, there were alternate structures, like, I thought of interspersing my parents voices with my own, but that was still when I think I was writing in the third person, in my parents stories in the third person, and when I decided I was not comfortable doing that, oh my gosh, and also, I was writing my own stories also in the third person.

Sometimes I would write stories of my own life and put a totally different name there, like I was calling myself Anita or something, just because I had a bit of an aversion to writing my own stories, and I at one point all my stories were written in the third person. I was discussing them with my editor and she said, you know what, I think you can change them to the first person now, I think you can just call yourself "I," everybody knows it's you, I think you could just do it.

But it was funny how that point of view and perspective was really a conscious, became a very important thing. So, and then when we had the idea for the flip, I said, okay well I'm gonna have a set of stories in my parents voice, a set of stories in my own voice, I want them all to be in the first person, it's gonna be too confusing if I, it's not, you know, it might be already confusing enough because I alternate my parents voices, to throw in my own, perhaps, it could have been done, but we decided to do the split that way.

And then the flip was just an idea that also then emerged instead of presenting things in a series, in a part one, part two, a linear fashion, the non-linearity of that intergenerational shift, I felt, I didn't realize it at the time but I think now, is absolutely essential to have, to have that physical switch.

## Mariam Pirbhai:

I see a, thank you so much Brandi, for your question. I see another question here that actually I would love for Madhur to answer because it picks up on the poetry of the book, which I don't think we've had a chance to explore yet, and Elisa, I believe this question comes from you, so

again, I invite you to unmute if you'd like to, or I'd be very happy to read out the question on my own. Oh there you are Elisa.

### Elisa Cooper:

Yes, so just, first of all, thank you so much for this beautiful piece of work, and I really, really enjoyed reading it, and I actually have been reading it with all of my family members, I've been getting everybody to read. You've all been talking about it, and thank you to the panelists also, for sharing your reflections on this work. And I was wondering if you could speak to the contrast between the two halves?

It was very interesting, like, I got to the end of your parents half, and then I flipped it over and I started reading, and I felt like I almost had to reset, and it felt like both are filled with this beautiful poetry, but I felt a lot more in the parents half, like it's following this narrative that's unfolding, of course, with this playing with time but still, you can sort of easily follow the sequence of events.

And then your half, it felt like it was much more wrapped in that beauty and mystery of poetry, and there was a lot more, it felt more guided by, I guess, the inner reflections that you were having, and the events seem to be almost sort of secondary, or sort of, yeah, adding to that, but it felt a lot more guided by like, an inner reflection on life and relationships.

And so I was wondering if you could just speak to that as an author, and whether that was, there were conscious choices you made about how to weave in poetry in different ways in the two parts, or if it just very naturally emerged in that way, and how you approach the tone and the flow and the structure in these two different halves to achieve this, very interesting contrast, but also a harmony and similarity between them at the same time?

### Madhur Anand:

Yeah, thank you for that question, and noticing that, and interpreting it as you do. So, I think there's a, maybe a couple of things I might say and one of them was that indeed, I felt that the material of my parents lives, the stories of my parents lives, of those places, it felt a lot more like the work of memoir.

And I felt that I had to impose some sort of structure in my attempt to get them to fill in stories that they've been telling me all their life, but to fill it in a little bit more, and indeed my use of structure, there was time and place. So that's why I think it feels for the reader a little bit more grounded because there are references to times and to specific places, but for me, that was an entry point into filling out, or having them complete to some extent stories that they had been telling me.

So, it was a structuring thing, and that's why I think it reads a little bit more narratively. Then with my side, I think there's a couple of things going on. One of them is that I don't have a

narrative of my life, I don't have one yet, I'm in the middle of my life, and I just don't think I'm able to look at my life that way in the way that I'm looking back on my parents lives.

And secondly, you know, I think the secondary thing, you know, the events being secondary that you find, is indeed like how it felt to me, again because I don't feel the events of my life are particularly important. I mean certainly there are things in my life that are important, but I actually don't talk about many of them in the book.

The purpose of that second side, I guess, was to yeah, explore some of the ideas that were brought up with my interrogation of my parents lives and histories and everything around that from my perspective as a poet and a scientist. And from the perspective of poetry and science because, you know, the science is everybody's, and out there belongs to everybody, and so does poetry. So, I really wanted to investigate the universal aspects of their stories on my side.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

Thank you Madhur. I see we have another question, from Manahil, hello Manahil and it goes back to questions of land and ecology, Manahil, would you like to speak to the question?

**Manahil:**

Yeah definitely, I mean, I had Dr. Pirbhai as my Professor and we talked a lot about land and ecology, especially with Soraya Peerbaye's book, *Tell: poems for girlhood*, so it's nice to see that resonance of community and family as connected to the land that Madhur, you were talking about, especially in how you bring your scientific background to the writing.

I guess, like, this is the question for Madhur and Soraya, is how you write, especially as people who move across land, and then negotiating relationships with this new land, that either we or kind of our parents, or grandparents come to? Negotiating this relationship as settlers, and how you write the relationships to the land while keeping that in mind?

**Madhur Anand:**

Do you want to go first, Soraya?

**Soraya Peerbaye:**

I mean, I'm not sure that I have anything to offer except just the response to your work in that way, I think, I mean, I think one of the reasons I'm really moved by your book, you know I love your scientist self, you know, and I love how whole that person is who comes into the book and who writes from that perspective, and I think, for me, I mean certainly, ecosystem now that I'm thinking about it ecosystem recovery was very much a concern for me in the writing of my own book.

But I also think a kind of relearning of processes that make a place, whether those are colonial processes, or historical processes, processes of naming. In a way for me, I feel like it's, you know, when you were talking about distance earlier, like, I feel that way that sometimes the entry point of another way of looking at things allows you to get closer, like maybe in a way, I have wanted to write about my childhood all my life and I still have not fully done it, and I keep coming close to it through other stories, and I keep coming close to it through lenses of history, through lenses of ecology.

Like it is a place that is so, and I think you find this, like your language around science is so expansive metaphorically. I'm drifting a little bit away from the question but I think it's only to say that, like that notion of ecological recovery, I just think is such rich ground, that I think it's one of those things that it gifts back a great deal.

### Madhur Anand:

What I will say, I mean, you know, because I do study, I work in the area of restoration ecology, though I must say that most of my work on that in the past has been from the perspective of plants, and species, and biodiversity. You know, the human aspects are evident in that process always, always, whether it's defining what it is that you're trying to recover, or yeah, just figuring out that the process through which to do it, it's not a purely scientific question.

And, you know, rarely are our ecological problems, you know, uniquely scientific, so these are human environment systems, that's the term that I use for the work that I do now, and yet, I think that, you know understanding nature and understanding these other species and the broader ecosystem in which we work, can shed light on our lives and everything about them.

When it comes to specifically reclaiming older stories, I mean, these are these are ecosystem recovery, is an old story right, I mean, generally speaking, right, it takes a forest, depending on where you are, hundreds of years to come back to a place when it's been destroyed, right?

So, it's a long process, and I was thinking a lot about, you know, that the story my book starts with, the partition of India in 1947. And this is an event that is still not very well known, known and understood for a variety of reasons, but it was in 2017, was the 70th anniversary, so 70 years.

We're sort of approaching the timescale of ecological recovery for that, for that event, for that catastrophic event, the partition of India, and sometimes that's the time it takes to start to understand a process, the consequences, and yeah, even just to even begin to think about reclaiming certain things.

A lot of the history of that event is contained in oral history, which is rich, but is being lost, and so there is a need for us to document and record those. And just very personally speaking, you know, my parents birthplaces are ones that they've never been back to because my mother left her childhood home in what's now Pakistan, and for many, many years, until only very recently Indians were not able to very easily travel there.

I have this story, but I don't want to, it's already 12:30 and we're almost done, but I was so close to going back to my mother's birthplace, hometown, like where she was born and grew up, so close. I, this is maybe full circle, I got invited as an ecologist, as a scientist, I was invited by somebody at the University of Haripur to give a talk at a conference that was being held on ecology and sustainability, who, you know, and they had no idea, you know, really that my that my mother was born there.

And I was invited and I was all set to go, and well there's a few reasons why I couldn't end up going, part of which was... so, all to say that, you know, there are still lands and species and places that I yearn to see and go back to, I wish I could go back there with my parents, but my mother has described them, she has. I have made a map, literally I have drawn a map of where her house is in this town, and what trees are around, and markings, and really do hope to go back still. I don't know Mariam, I think we're at 12:30.

**Mariam Pirbhai:**

I think yes, I think we've reached 12:30. I know some people have to leave for meetings and other events, so I wonder if we can maybe pause here, I'd like to give Nurjehan and Bela an opportunity to say a last word or two if they still wish. Nurjehan, Bela?

**Nurjehan Aziz:**

Yeah, I could just, I just wanted to add regarding the question you posed earlier, Mariam, regarding multi-generational storytelling, I can just answer to that observationally, and that is, you know, you see a lot of memoirs being written now, or by people who immigrated for instance when they were young, who are now in their 70s and 80s and decide to write memoirs. And specifically they have their grandchildren in mind, you know, so when they are writing the memoir, they are addressing their grandchildren hoping to share their stories with them.

And of course, you know, with the passage of time a lot of the memories are lost or maybe there is embellishment or leaving out deliberately so the story changes over time, and then those are the stories that are received by the younger generation of that community, or of that family. So, you know, there is a change in the stories, but then it's up to receivers, the younger generation, to make what they will of the stories. So, there is this interesting, morphing of the stories.

**Mariam Pirbbhai:**

Yeah thank you.

## Nurjehan Aziz:

You see a lot of that now, coming out, you know, as publishers, we see a lot of memoirs, such memoirs.

## Mariam Pirbhai:

Yeah, thank you so much Nurjehan. I mean, I see, you know, just thinking through sort of, some of the obstacles when you're writing a memoir for someone like Madhur, those of us who come from histories of partition and other kinds of ruptures, rights, enforced kinds of displacement, that having this kind of intergenerational memory, having the artifact, the memoir, the telling, through ancestral memory, becomes all the more significant for the recipient, for those grandchildren. So, thank you for that, Bela, would you like to say a last word, or?

## Bela Ravi:

Well thank you for having me as a part of this, and thank you Madhur, I after reading the book, I started having these, my father's now passed, but I've started having conversations with my mom and just like your mom, she's giving me, you know, little bits and parts of her. She was also born in Pakistani and partition came to India and has a lot of memories, so, and thank you, thank you for having me reconnect to my mom and my roots, and this has been great, thank you.

## Mariam Pirbhai:

Yeah, I'd just like to add to that very briefly, there was one passage in Madhur's book where, I think it's your mother Madhur, who is trying to draw a map of her childhood home, and that, that really was really, really moving because I too am, you know, I'm the child of parents of partition, my parents went from India to Pakistan when they were children, and this idea that, you know, how do we, how do we recover, how do we excavate, how do we recuperate things that are not in the archives, and too, are so far disrupted by those layers of history? I just wanted to say that that was such a moving passage for me.

So, I think we should probably take this time, even though I know we can carry on this conversation for hours, but I think we should probably draw the discussion to a conclusion. And by way of thank you, again I want to first start by thanking the CIRCLE, and of course our wonderful panelists, thank you for so thoughtfully putting together your passages and speaking to the various resonances of this book.

Thank you so very much to our audience for their wonderful questions, thoughtful questions, and thought-provoking questions, and their careful reading of Madhur's book. And of course, thank you so much to you Madhur, your book, you know as a writer and is as is a lesson in craft and it's also so inspiring in the way that it chronicles the family through these various echo

chambers of the heart. And thank you Madhur, thank you for inviting us here today and bringing us together.

**Sharada Srinivasan:**

And thanks Mariam for facilitating this discussion so beautifully, thank you, thanks to all.

[Various participants and panelists saying thank you].

[End of Transcript]