

VIEWPOINTS

Book review: Rudan I: *The Breeze: A Story of Exploration, Art, Love and Faith*. Edinburgh: International Society of Global Health, 2024, pp. 1–112. ISBN 978-1-9999564-6-2.

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Igor Rudan's *The Breeze: A Story of Exploration, Art, Love and Faith* is, on its surface, a compact literary work: twelve short chapters that alternate between autobiographical memory and speculative allegory, moving from New York streets and hospital corridors to a metaphysical archipelago inhabited by “*the dead*”.

However, to read it only as a novel, an aesthetically shaped narrative about adolescence, desire, vocation, and belief, would miss what the book is really doing. *The Breeze* is also a sustained meditation on the epistemology of discovery. It considers how curiosity survives social conditioning; then, how questions are domesticated by authority; from this, it studies how meaning is assembled from fragments of experience; and finally, why the pursuit of the unknown remains a deeply human compulsion, even when it is inconvenient, inefficient, or even socially disapproved.

For a research audience, the latter dimension is the book's most interesting offering. Rudan is not merely telling a story; he is dramatizing the tensions that structure scientific life. He contrasts art and analysis, freedom and conformity, exploration and “*deaden[ing] in silence*”, as he calls it. He also exposes the paradox of institutions that claim to serve truth, while subtly training people not to ask certain questions. This short, deep and allegorical novel becomes a kind of laboratory of ideas about the conditions under which creativity and discovery emerge, and the conditions under which they are extinguished.

The book's opening chapter, “*The Wrong Twin*”, is framed as “*Memories of the year 1988*”. It begins with an unsettlingly precise philosophical problem: when does a human life begin? At the first heartbeat, the first thought, the first words, the first memory, the first love, or the first experience of freedom? This question is not merely a decorative prelude to the rest of the novel. It is the novel's first methodological move: it shows how shifting definitions change what we think we are measuring. Anyone who has spent time in epidemiology, psychology, or social science, as the author surely has done, will recognize the underlying point: that beginnings and endpoints depend on operational choices, and that those choices tend to carry moral weight.

The narrative then anchors itself in the lived texture of adolescence and displacement. The teenage protagonist's scholarship to the United States is described as a gambler's leap: an early act of intellectual risk-taking, motivated by a desire for learning that outweighs fear. That impulse is then embodied in the book's first major symbolic device: the Canadian twins, Cressida and Cordelia, one of whom is right-handed, one left-handed, identical in form, yet radically different in their inner worlds. Cressida, orderly and future-facing, is already set on astrophysics and elite American universities; Cordelia is a painter who lives by metaphor, intuition, and aesthetic compulsion.

The twins are not merely characters in a romantic triangle; they are a model of dual cognition: two modes of apprehending reality that are often partitioned in modern education, as if a person must choose one. Cordelia's most provocative claim: "*You just learned how to be right-handed, but you were born left-handed*", turns the protagonist's childhood conditioning into a metaphor for vocational socialization. It is, in effect, a theory of how scientific identities might be manufactured: through early environmental pressures that reward certain kinds of reasoning and punish others, thereby making a career path feel like "destiny". Cordelia goes further, offering a caricatured, but psychologically resonant typology: right-handedness as science, logic, aggression; left-handedness as art, abstractness, tolerance. Most scientists will recoil at the biological determinism lurking from this simplified interpretation. But in this work of fiction, this is a powerful allegory of institutional shaping, how a system nudges talented adolescents toward standardized excellence and away from eccentric creation. It hits close to home.

This early section also contains one of the book's quietly subversive moments: Rudan allows the protagonist to critique Cordelia's uninformed understanding of cosmology, particularly her belief that the new stars light when beings die, while simultaneously confessing that he "didn't dare tell her" how wrong she was. He remained silent because the experience of her beliefs became valuable in a way that factual correction would have destroyed. For a scientific readership, this scene is less about astronomy than about epistemic humility: the recognition that humans often need meaning more than accuracy, and that dismissing a model because it is wrong can sometimes blind us to what it reveals about motivation, values, and imagination.

In Chapter 2, titled "*Sleeping Mothers and Guardian Angels*", the tone shifts abruptly into clinical realism, recounting the visceral discomfort of witnessing childbirth during medical training. The scene functions as a counterweight to the romantic-mythic atmosphere of Chapter 1. Here, the "breeze" is not a metaphor, but a sensory relief. It is introduced in a form of a faint night air coming through the window that helps the narrator tolerate blood, smells, pain, and the felt anachronism of human reproduction. The key intellectual move is the use of protagonist's squeamishness to provide a sudden systems

critique: if men gave birth, he thinks, childbirth would already have been engineered into something safer, less humiliating, less brutal. This is crude, deliberately provocative, and obviously arguable, but it is also a compact critique of gendered power in innovation priorities: whose suffering is treated as inevitable, and whose becomes a design problem. The second half of this chapter, in which medical students slip into the newborn ward at night, and the narrator experiences “how beautiful the work of a guardian angel truly is”, is not merely a sentimental close of the chapter. It becomes the bridge towards the book’s allegorical architecture that is about to follow. The guardian angel is the scientist’s aspirational self-image: watchful, benevolent, present at the boundary where vulnerability enters the world, wishing “only good things” without full control over what follows. This is what research often feels like: the desire to protect, prevent, and reduce harm to other fellow beings, alongside an awareness that one cannot have control over many downstream consequences.

From Chapter 3 onward, *The Breeze* becomes an unexpected and surprising metaphysical fable. The protagonist is displaced into the perspective of “*the late Sirius*”, a newly dead being who retains consciousness, sensation, thought, and free will, but lacks memory of life. The world of the dead is organized around a coercive theology of gratitude and obedience. An authority figure, “*the Indebted Ruler*”, is portrayed as protector and benefactor, demanding humility and discouraging curiosity as a form of “evil”. The newly dead are trained to repeat slogans: “*We are dead... that is very, very bad... there is nothing good in it*”, followed by a demand to accept teachings without questioning. This allegory could be understood, at one level, as a critique of dogmatic religion. But for scientists, it reads more pointedly as a critique of institutional dogma of any kind, particularly systems that convert uncertainty into a kind of sin, and treat questioning as disruption, rather than as a progress. The late Sirius responds as a researcher responds: he refuses to accept that the provided explanation is sufficient, and he begins to map the environment, count the population, infer rules, and test boundaries. He encounters “*the late Moon*”, another figure who differs from the crowd. The late Moon doesn’t have analytic hunger, but feels an aesthetic discomfort with the omnipresent greyness, and an almost depressive sensitivity to uniformity.

Their partnership is the book’s most important relationship, and it reverses the earlier twin structure. In the first part, “science” and “art” were split into two women and triangulated through protagonist’s desire. In the second part, importantly, those modes become collaborative necessities: Sirius’s inquisitiveness needs Moon’s sensitivity, and Moon’s sadness needs Sirius’s enthusiasm. Their cooperative swimming, alternating effort and rest, becomes a parable of teamwork and endurance in long-horizon discovery. The archipelago structure, grey islands surrounded by a cold black liquid, functions as a model of exploration under constraints. The black liquid is

both threat and possibility, the medium that makes movement possible but exacts a cost. As the pair advances, islands acquire new “colours”, including “orange”, which is a clear echo of Cressida’s orange-dyed curls “for luck”. The recurrence of orange matters, because it suggests that what feels like “pure” intellectual exploration is never detached from memory, desire, and earlier identity formation. The scientist’s work is often propelled by emotional residues that get re-encoded into symbols.

Rudan’s most explicit research-parable arrives late, in the confrontation between the late Sirius and “*the Indebted Ruler*”. The higher being offers answers and a “*beautiful plan*”, but only after Sirius has challenged the rules and become “*interesting*”. Sirius then declines the offer. He does not do this because knowledge is undesirable to him, but because he has “*learned to enjoy the uncertainty, hope and anticipation*”, and because being handed answers cheaply would end the meaningfulness of the search. This is an unusually candid statement about the psychology of research. Many scientists enter their fields for gaining more control over their future careers, because uncertainty is uncomfortable. Yet the deepest creativity often emerges when uncertainty becomes tolerable, even attractive: when the process itself becomes a form of life.

The book then sharpens: the late Sirius declares himself and Moon “*apostles of chaos*”, capable of disappointing and surprising even their creator. Their newly understood role is to generate unpredictability in a system that prefers equilibrium. In scientific terms, they are the disruptive innovators. They introduce variance into overly optimized systems and force adaptation. They are costly, difficult, and sometimes wrong, but essential to true progress.

The Indebted Ruler is not a “villain” character in this story. He is far more complex, portrayed as managing an “*unimaginably fine*” balance in which small deviations can cascade, so he is suddenly forced to “*gamble with the Universe*” because of the two explorers. That detail is surely not incidental: it frames governance, whether divine or institutional, as a problem of risk under uncertainty. The ruler’s predicament resembles that of investors, politicians, or editors: choosing which line of inquiry to “resurrect” into the living world, knowing that the wrong choice may propagate chaos elsewhere. This is where *The Breeze* becomes unexpectedly relevant to research systems, priority-setting, and the sociology of science. It suggests that “*higher beings*” – a likely metaphor for institutions – are not omniscient. They also have to guess, hedge, and reframe their authority after the fact. Scientists, meanwhile, experience those institutional choices as “fate”.

As a novel, *The Breeze* is stylistically intentionally hybrid: part memoir, part philosophical essay, part myth. Its sentences often carry the rhythm of reflective non-fiction rather than dialogue-driven fiction. The narrative often privileges ideas over plot acceleration. That will not be to every reader’s taste. Still, the prose wins over the reader with an unusual sincerity, and the

continuing series of the book's striking images, such as the breeze on skin, hospital neon at 3 a.m., grey islands and black liquid, and many others. They are chosen with an economical precision that makes them linger. The novel's more significant merit, however, lies in the way it reframes scientific vocation. Many novels about scientists treat research as backdrop – there is some lab politics, ethical transgression, or the drama of discovery as a single turning point. Rudan, instead, models discovery as a temperament: a sustained refusal to accept “*that was all*”. The late Sirius's discomfort is not with death, but rather with explanation without understanding. He does not mind any imposed limitation, but he does not accept imposed nature of things. Also, he is not scared of eternal darkness, but of the world that tells him that curiosity is wrong. That portrait is likely to resonate with early-career researchers who are trained, quite explicitly, to “*avoid standing out*”, to “*quietly and obediently accept*” what is told to them, and to internalize the fear that asking naïve questions will mark them as not being serious enough.

In this sense, *The Breeze* functions as a source of inspiration. It legitimises an inner conflict that researchers rarely articulate: the tension between being a compliant professional and being a curious human being. It argues that much of what is called “maturity” in institutions is really a domestication of wonder. It also suggests that the most important skill for a scientist, rather than intelligence or brilliant methodology, might be the capacity to persist in a patient, cooperative, and sometimes playful way, through the “*cold black liquid between unknown islands*”.

The final pages return to lived life, and the recurring theme of freedom: travel, the world as “*a vast playground*”, stories “*writing themselves*”, and deeper meaning and the presence of the higher being not found in “*philosophical books*” or “*mountain summits*”, but rather felt in a “*tenderness of the breeze*”. The novel has a romantic ending, perhaps deliberately so. Still, it also completes the book's central scientific message: that discovery is lot more than a “professional activity”. It is also a way of being in the world, that requires persistence, patience, and faith, in the possibility that seeking itself is meaningful. The meaning of one's existence, as an alive or dead being, can be found in exploration, art, love, and faith, all of them connected by a surprising ability of a conscious mind to appreciate beauty – for which there is very little evolutionary reason to arise.

In “*The Breeze*”, its many allegories occasionally risk over-determining their meanings. The greyness can stand for conformity; the Indebted Ruler for dogma; resurrection for institutional selection; the black liquid for risk. The correspondences are sometimes so available, that they leave less interpretive ambiguity than literary fiction often prefers. But this is also its strength as a book that wants to reach scientists: its metaphors are legitimate, intuitive,

and discussable. One can imagine a graduate seminar using the “*lecture of the dead*” as a prompt to discuss how disciplinary cultures transmit norms, and how those norms can be both protective and suffocating in science.

In sum, *The Breeze* is not a “research novel” in the conventional sense. It contains no laboratories and few explicit scientific arguments. Still, it may be more useful to scientists than many books that nominally depict scientific work, because it speaks to the inner engine that powers research long after novelty fades: the willingness to remain a little dissatisfied with given answers, and to keep moving forward anyway. In a moment when scientific institutions are increasingly optimized for productivity, certainty-signalling, and reputational safety, Rudan’s “*apostles of chaos*” are a timely reminder that progress depends on a minority who are prepared to “*disappoint the Indebted Ruler*”.

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Disclosure of Interest

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