



Title of the book: *Ancient Christianities: The First Five Hundred Years* (Non-fiction)

Language: *English* Author: *Paula Fredriksen* Publisher: *Princeton University Press*

Year of Publication: *2024* Pages: *288*

Ancient Christianities: The First Five Hundred Years

Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari

Indian author and winner of the Crossword Book Award 2024 for his debut novel Chronicle of an Hour and a Half

'Orthodoxy is a successful heresy', said a Huguenot pastor during the French revolution. Every serious student of organized religions knows this to be true. This is true because religions, like other human endeavour, behave and evolve very differently from what their purported founders envisioned them to be. Consider Christianity. It traces itself to a certain Aramaic-speaking Jew named Yeshua about whom there is no broad consensus among historians of Second Temple Judaism except for two 'facts': that he was born in Nazareth in Galilee around 6-4 BC and that around 30 AD, two years into his busy short-lived career as a preacher and healer and miracle worker, following an incident at the Second Temple during the Passover feast in Jerusalem that probably had upset the high priest, he was crucified on the order of Roman emperor Tiberius Caesar's prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate for the specific charge of claiming to be the King of the Jews. Every other claim about him in the New Testament is self or mutually contradictory and hence unreliable but it may be possible to make some healthy speculations on his life and death. That he was poor enough to have been non-literate, even illiterate, and left no writing of his own. That he started his ministry following a baptism by John the Baptist, a cryptic apocalyptic prophet about whom we are handed down very little information but seemed to have been bothering or popular enough to have been executed by Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee. That he most likely claimed to be another messiah in a land where messianic expectations ran high and the arrival of a new claimant was not, in itself, breaking news. That he believed, like his master John the Baptist, the end of the world was nigh, so eschatological expectations, and by extension the resurrection of the dead, were central to his teachings. We don't know what happened after his death but we are led to believe that some three days into his crucifixion—a method of punishment Rome specifically reserved for what it deemed were acts of sedition—some reports about his empty tomb and resurrection had started circulating among his disciples, heightening their doomsday expectations, setting off a movement which slowly began to win more followers among the Gentiles than ethnic Jews. In her book *Ancient Christianities*, one of the great students of Second Temple Judaism, Paula Fredriksen, traces the evolution of Christianity in all its complex varieties, from its beginnings in the Gospels through the first 500 years it took for Christianity to become more or less the Christianity that we know today. This is short, erudite, and accessible book is excellent as any other book she has written on the subject and will benefit anyone who is a serious student of religions.

The Story of the Sea and the Coast

Benyamin

Acclaimed Malayalam novelist and JCB Prize winner, best known for Adujeevitham (Goat Life)

One of the main shortcomings often pointed out in Indian literature—and Malayalam literature in particular—is that despite our extensive coastline, the lives at sea and experiences of coastal communities have not been adequately captured. Apart from a few seminal works—such as Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, Damodar Mauzo’s *Tsunami Simon*, Joe D’Cruz’s *Aazhi Coozh Ulagu* (Ocean-Rimmed World) and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai’s *Chemmeen*—maritime fiction in Indian literature remains largely unexplored. One work that stands out in filling this gap is the Malayalam novel *Pullian*, by Soman Katalur.

The night sea as experienced by a lone fisherman in a canoe is a world apart from the one seen by tourists aboard a cruise ship or a speedboat. No one else can capture the profound loneliness of being stranded in the vast void between sky and sea. That sea, that wilderness, and that profound solitude are beautifully depicted in *Pullian*.

Central to the narrative is Chirukandan, whose lifelong quest to catch a stingray named *Pullian*—therandi—anchors a vivid exploration of coastal existence. Through his eyes, and through a cast of deeply human figures like Uppatti Muthachi, Kumaran, and Moidu Haji—the novel unveils an unseen community shaped by volatile tides, rich folklore, and distinct linguistic traditions. It captures the raw unpredictability of seafaring life with an insider’s nuance, blending traditional fishing lore and local dialects into a profound portrait of coastal survival.

In the climax, Chirukandan’s lifelong dream takes hold: *Pullian*, the legendary stingray, takes his bait, dragging him across the open waters at breakneck speed. Suspended between ambition and mortality, his mind fills with ancestral tales—a powerful reminder that folklore reaches us like a beacon in our most critical hours. In an era dominated by social media and an information explosion, *Pullian* offers a compelling argument for why we still read literature. Beyond mere entertainment or the passive consumption of data, story and craft illuminate our path forward. To read a novel is to embark on a canoe journey into the uncharted continents of the human experience.

If literature’s primary calling is to give voice to the forgotten and marginalized, *Pullian* fulfills that mandate with extraordinary grace. Yet Soman Kadaloor avoids the trap of dry historicism or documentary reportage; instead, he infuses the narrative with rich poetic imagination. By capturing the raw vitality, rhythm, and distinct idiom of coastal speech, Kadaloor crafts a work that can best be summed up in a single line: a prose poem dedicated to the sea and to the lives bound to it.

Title of the book: *Not Quite Family: An Intimate Memoir of Bollywood* (Autobiography)
Language: *English* Author: *Khalid Mohammed* Publisher: *Harper Collins*
Year of publication: *2026* Pages: *320*

Not Quite Family: An Intimate Memoir of Bollywood

Snehith Kumbla

Poet in English and Hindi. Writes on movies, music and books

He was a prominent, witty, and merciless English-language movie critic of Hindi films for many years at *The Times of India*. Impressively, Khalid Mohamed also penned the story and screenplay for Shyam Benegal's acclaimed films *Mammo* (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996) and *Zubeidaa*, and directed three less-discussed films himself.

Billed as *An Intimate Memoir of Bollywood*, this book is Khalid recounting, in a mishmash, his fascinating lineage and life lived — less of his own story, more of explosive, intimate details about movie stars. The chapters on larger-than-life Hindi film stars are market-dictated, and deal with fragile relationships, fleeting or close. The writing is unforgiving, thorny, razor-eyed, speculative to a fault, yet never less than fascinating. It is an insider's unrelenting eye — witty, sometimes compassionate. The few people Khalid claims to 'love to love' are Rishi Kapoor, Anil Kapoor, Sonam Ahuja Kapoor and Tabu. Khalid chronicles the strange, mostly vested-interest-based relationship Hindi film stars and film magazine writers share. Tantrums, egos, arrogance, aloofness, scandals, award politics and conversational scoops make for entertaining popcorn reading. Regrettably, the depth of Khalid's lifelong love for cinema and his grandmother-raised childhood gets lost in the star-gazing. The chapter dedicated to Shyam Benegal is enriching, as are the accounts of Khalid's own harrowing experiences with filmmaking. One wishes this book had been a more grounded memoir with Khalid at centre stage. It is not to be.

We get the scoop on Rakhee Gulzar and Vidya Balan, an endearing chapter on the mercurial Smita Patil, Dilip Kumar's grace, Dev Anand's stubborn evergreen status, and a peek into the worlds of Kishore Kumar, Parveen Babi, Shashi Kapoor, Zeenat Aman, Dharmendra, Amjad Khan, Raaj Kumar, Rajesh Khanna, Salim Khan (of Salim-Javed) and Ashok Kumar, among many others.

The Rekha chapter is the most arresting, despite its nod to speculation and gossip. Jiah Khan's suicide, the contradictions of Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan, and profiles of Kajol, the enigmatic Sridevi and the still-sparkling Madhuri Dixit are all covered. This is a rollercoaster, with stars in endless guest appearances. Objectivity and focus are the prime casualties. We also get the 'Now Generation.' Eventually, *Not Quite Family* becomes a who's who checklist of the Indian film industry, largely stacked with Hindi cinema personalities.

In retrospect, a chronological recall running parallel to Khalid's own career would have felt consistently pulsating, raw and real. The undeniably engaging accounts of trysts with stars have a disjointed, anecdotal feel, instead of being the endearing, unblinking Hindi-cinema non-fiction that *Not Quite Family* could have been. A page-turner for Hindi movie fans, undeniably lavish in star encounters, but lacking depth and strong insights.

History Blended with Mystery in Dr. Chandra's Novel

Dr. Parvathi G. Aithal

Writer, Translator and English Professor (Retd.), Bhandarkars' College, Kundapur, Karnataka

Travelling back in time to examine events that took place thousands of years ago, and exploring their influence on the present, is a challenging task. Dr. Chandra accomplishes this with considerable skill, blending history, mystery, romance and adventure into an engaging narrative that connects the ancient world with the modern.

The novel begins with the ancient events described in the Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*. Readers familiar with the tragic story of Kannagi and Kovalan can easily understand the setting—the unjust execution of Kovalan, Kannagi's fury, the destruction of Madurai and the tragic end of the king and queen. From this familiar background, the author develops an intriguing mystery surrounding the queen's anklet.

The sixty-five-chapter novel moves repeatedly between the past and the present, gradually revealing the connection between the two. The sections set in the Sangam Age vividly portray Madurai and its surroundings—their palaces, royal families, soldiers, markets, wealthy houses and dense forests. These detailed descriptions bring the ancient world vividly to life.

The story of Ilamaran and Aruchelvi adds romance and intrigue. While fleeing from soldiers, Ilamaran is rescued by Aruchelvi, who later reveals that she is a spy working for the neighbouring king Adhiyaman. She discloses that Ilamparithi, the queen's first cousin, had stolen the anklet to give it to his beloved Kuyil Mozhi, daughter of the royal goldsmith Porkai. Aruchelvi also discovers that a silver foil containing information about the anklet's whereabouts is with Kuyil Mozhi. In the present, the connection continues through Murugesan's ancestors, who belonged to the same goldsmith family.

The modern-day investigation becomes increasingly suspenseful. The revelation that Usha—the wife of Gunashekharan's trusted friend, Parthasarathi—was involved in his murder along with Kapur comes as a major shock. The author sustains the suspense effectively until the truth is finally revealed. Eventually, the anklet and the silver foil are handed over to the Archaeological Museum following the court's verdict, allowing these priceless historical objects to be preserved. Another strength is the authentic portrayal of hospital life. The descriptions of doctors, nurses, patients and treatments are convincing, reflecting the author's professional knowledge as a doctor. His attention to clothing, ornaments, food, physical appearance and social customs across different periods further enriches the narrative.

The Prelude, 'From the Ashes' provides useful background about the periods, locations and central mystery, while the detailed glossary at the end helps readers understand unfamiliar terms and references.

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