

Foreword

An online search for the name “Rumi” quickly returns tens of millions of results, offering links to a multitude of sites presented in a variety of languages. These sites are devoted to, or focus on, a 13th-century Persian poet whose social-media presence and ever-increasing number of groupies would be the envy of many a celebrity or public figure. The sheer quantity of just the English-language search results stands as a testament to the attraction that Rumi’s philosophy and ecstatic poetry have for his followers and devotees, as well as for those who, in times of strife, seek solace and rectitude in his words and beliefs. When ordinary lives are wrenched apart by unanticipated crises, pandemics, acts of violence, and other disasters brought about by humankind’s actions, more and more people are turning to this Islamic jurist, teacher, scholar, and mystic for guidance and inspiration.

Quotable fragments are routinely drawn from Rumi’s longer narrative poems to become memorable nuggets that are shared and tweeted and uploaded on popular social-media platforms. Even Beyoncé and Jay-Z, arguably the most powerful couple in the world of entertainment, named one of their daughters Rumi—for no more beguiling reason than that he is their favorite poet. So who is this extraordinary figure who, more than 800 years after his birth in Central Asia, continues to be revered? And which country or culture can rightfully claim him as their own?

Born Jalal ad-Din Balkhi, he is known in the West as Rumi, which means “the man from Rum,” a region that lay on the eastern edges of the Byzantine Empire. His devotees, to whom he is known as *Mowlana* (“Our Master”), place his birth in the year 1207 in the northeastern corner of the Perso-Islamic Empire in the province of Vakhsh in modern-day Tajikistan, which is located by one of the tributaries of the magnificent Amu Darya, the River Oxus. The historical cities of his childhood, Samarqand and Balkh, are now located in present-day Uzbekistan and Afghanistan respectively. Yet Rumi’s discourses, poetry, and lyrical songs were written in Persian and he spent most of his adult life in Konya, in modern-day Turkey, where he is buried.

All this leads to the assertion that no country or culture can exclusively claim Rumi’s legacy and heritage as their own. He is truly a universal poet and thinker. Furthermore, the innumerable translations of his works into more than thirty languages, with more in the pipeline, have made it possible for people from widely diverse cultures to enjoy the profundity of his writings and the richness of his imagination. Indeed, readers from across the

globe have forged an affinity with Rumi's evocative reflections on life and faith. Rumi's poetry remains the touchstone for mystical compositions in the Islamic world, and his teachings remain as relevant and captivating today as they were in mediaeval times.

Academic discussions of Rumi's writings and the genesis of his Sufistic philosophy fill innumerable bookshelves in research libraries around the world. They are pored over and debated at conferences, and are the frequent topic of university lectures and courses. But it is thanks to devoted and scholarly translators like Maryam Mafi, who lovingly selects the best and the most life-affirming examples of his work, that Rumi has now become accessible to a wider discerning public. In *The Little Book of Mystical Secrets*, Mafi focused on the teachings and inspirations of Shams of Tabriz, Rumi's teacher, confidant, and soulmate. In *The Book of Rumi: 105 Stories and Fables*, she selected from the six-volume magnum opus the *Masnavi*, the *Spiritual Couplets*. In *Rumi's Little Book of Wisdom*, Mafi has finally turned her attention to a much lesser-known work, the *Fihe-ma-Fih*, a compendium of Rumi's monologues, discussions, and reflections on a life of writing and worship, as recorded by his followers.

There is much debate about the meaning and origins of the title of this work. Although the book is written in Persian, the title—in keeping with the traditions of the time—is an Arabic spiritual expression that means “in it what is in it.” Finding an exact English equivalent for this ambiguous title has been a challenge for many translators over time. While some have opted for “It Is What It Is,” others have simply chosen a generic title like “Discourses of Rumi” that describes the content of the book. Harvard professor Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003), the indomitable German Orientalist and scholar of Islam and Sufism, preferred to interpret the title in its original sense, as a kind of spiritual “potluck”—a meal of simple fare assembled for unexpected or uninvited guests that can be shared in any circumstance or at any time.

Primary authorship of the *Fihe-ma-Fih* is attributed to Rumi's eldest son, Sultan Walad, who was assisted by other unnamed pupils and disciples of the Master. These devoted followers are believed to have faithfully and accurately recorded the reminiscences of their Master, and to have noted all his answers to questions posed at gatherings, as they would the revelations of a saintly figure. What remains today of what must have originally been a much larger volume consists of an Introduction and seventy chapters of anecdotes, exchanges, and amplifications of ideas that date from approximately 1260 until after Rumi's death in 1273.

Professor Badiozzaman Forouzanfar (1904–1970), one of the most prominent Iranian Rumi scholars and editor of the *Fihe-ma-Fih*, believed that the title was, in all likelihood, inspired by a line in Book 5 of the *Masnavi* (lines 2683–2685), where Rumi tells the story of a sage named Shiekh Mohammad Sar-Razi of Ghazni, a city in modern Afghanistan. According to the tale, this Sufi sheikh had fasted for seven years, only breaking his fast once every evening by chewing on some vine leaves. This lengthy period of meditation and abstinence sharpened his senses and powers of perception to such an extent that he claimed he could fathom the might and glory of the Divine as reflected in the minutiae of the natural world. Despite his sense of proximity to the Divine, however, he longed desperately for more, aspiring to see the visage of his Lord.

One day, feeling utterly bereft, the sheikh climbed a mountain and called out to the Lord, begging him to show his face and threatening to throw himself off the mountain in his despair. A voice replied that it was not yet time for him to be in the presence of the Divine, and that he would not die even if he were to jump. Undiscouraged by the reply, the sheikh threw himself off the cliff. As promised, he survived the fall by landing in a deep pool of water. As he picked himself up, he heard the voice once more. It told him: “Break your fast for good and return to the city; devote your life to asking the rich for their gold so that you can give it to the poor.” Rumi explains the meaning of the story like this: “There are many questions and many answers that are exchanged between the Divine and the abstinent ascetic, and the heavens and the earth are illuminated by their intensity, and all that is compiled in the discourses.”

Fihe-ma-Fih, which is written in rather elaborate prose, is a crucial key to deciphering several of the stories that appear in the *Masnavi*. Another remarkable facet of the book is found in the glimpses it offers of the social history of Anatolia in the 13th century, and the dynamics of the relationships between mystics, patrons, and their retinues. The book also provides a fascinating window into the more laid-back side of Rumi—for instance, his reactions when he is cross or exasperated and resorts to profanities common in his childhood homeland of Khorasan.

In *Rumi's Little Book of Wisdom*, Maryam Mafi has captured the subtle humor of Rumi, his unique turn of phrase, and his love of innuendo. This is nowhere more evident than in her selection and translation of stories of everyday life—like the greengrocer who fancies a woman who is above his station in life and pleads with her maid to deliver his passionate message to her mistress. Another anecdote considers the pros and cons of taking a vow of

celibacy like that practiced by Christian monks. And then there is the story of a king who entrusted his son to the best teachers hoping he would return as the smartest of young men. The lesson? That learning by rote does not equate to acquiring knowledge, and that the best instruction cannot compensate for a lack of basic intelligence. The story of the abstemious hermit who has a knack for sensing when a pupil is ravenous for a roast is another favorite

The stories in *Fihe-ma-Fih* further illustrate the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-ethnic world that was inhabited by this extraordinary, larger-than-life character and his circle of devotees and friends. Rumi's own obliquely autobiographical references, which are scattered throughout the pages of the *Masnavi*, as well as the ecstatic lyrical odes collected in the *Divan of Shams*, give us tantalizing and poignant glimpses into his life and attachments. His kinsmen had the good fortune to migrate westward with their families in 1216 and escape the later devastations wrought by the Mongols on the cities of Rumi's childhood. Is there any wonder, then, that we find such poignancy in Rumi's hymns to partings? Is it surprising that his sonorous words still serve as a balm for the wounded souls of migrants and refugees and those who are exiled and wrenched from their homelands? His is the haunting song of the Persian reed flute, whose ethereal sighs were serendipitously entwined with the whispers of the aulos pipes of the eastern edges of the Byzantine Empire, where Rumi and his family, driven from their homeland, finally settled after a journey of some thirteen years. The unimaginable horrors of these experiences, however, did not diminish Rumi's capacity for love or joyousness, nor dampen the spiritual buoyancy that emanates from all his writings.

Rumi's worldview is grounded in the imperative never to lose faith in hope. He reminds us, however, that hope is never far from fear: "Show me a fear without hope, or a hope without fear. The two are inseparable." And these simple words are more potent now than ever as we are assaulted each day by messages of death and doom in our media-saturated lives. We need constant reminders of Rumi's conviction that fear is only subjugated by hope. And this is the message that Maryam Mafi delivers so clearly in *Rumi's Little Book of Wisdom*.

Narguess Farzad

Senior Lecturer in Persian Studies, SOAS, University of London