In which shore has my boat moored today?

Why does my boat, on a downstream-drift,

What golden village lies ahead?

Long to move upstream again?

Making Sorrow my helmsman

I had set adrift my broken boat.

Who are you, nymph of dreams,

Snuffing out my room's lamp

Beckoning me on with your eyes?

You called me out that stormy night.

Waiting at the gateway of my song?

Oh golden girl of a golden land

Row my broken boat onwards

Will you be my boat's pilot?

To the Promised Land!

Who could you be, my tune's companion,

IN WHICH SHORE Amar Kon Kule KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM

(translated by Fakrul Alam)

LITERATURE

The old USIS library: searching for a different America

ime to check the shelves, I told myself, back in Dhaka after a longish spell in the United States. Amble down to the USIS library at Dhanmondi Road Number 9, flip through the pages of the New Yorker and Harper's, peer at the spines of books and see if the Yanks were keeping us up with the times, displaying the younger crop of American writers. But a shock awaited me at Number 9. No USIS. As they phrase it in the Big Apple, like, man, nothing, zero, zip, zilch, nada, nyet. Just black metal gates, firmly barred. Khalid's house next to it was there, where twenty-five years back all of us would park our backsides on the dividing wall and watch the movies the American Cultural Center screened for a short while in their backyard. Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, weird documentaries, Steve McQueen on a slow boat in China, couple of whodunits, and once, Stagecoach. Robert Mitchum, large as life, beneath the equally deadpan Dhaka geckos. The field in front was still there, the same rickety clubhouse on the other side. But the USIS lending library had vanished into thin air. I trudged back home through the throng of peanut sellers and lovebirds by the lakeside, disconsolate. All dressed up and nothing to read.

So where's the damn thing, I asked my sister. Oh, I-o-o-o-n-n-g gone, she said. I don't know, she continued, but maybe you could try Adamjee Court. The American embassy moved to Gulshan and I think the library shifted

But nope, not there either.

So when I met Fakrul, Manzoor bhai, and Sudeep a couple nights later I asked the same question: where the hell's the darned thing? Furrowed brows all around, squinty eyes that folks get when they try to recall longdead great-aunts and where they're buried

"Oh, no, no, no," came back the collective answer, "that closed a long time

back

"What do you mean?" "They closed it. There's no USIS library."

"You're kidding me."

"So where do I get American books?"

"Well, they left the collection with the DU library. That's there if you

"But what about a revolving library? What about current stuff?" "No, that you don't get. Not much stuff after the '80s."

And there they left the matter. No USIS, no source of current American fiction/nonfiction, this is Dhaka, live with it. Sorry

When my family first came to Bangladesh in 1972, the USIS library was on the corner of Topkhana Road (appropriately enough, since it was a khana, a place, which housed latter-day topes, or cannons, i.e. books). I have a dim memory of a cavernous, high-ceilinged place where sunligh from big windows fell on the ranks of newspapers to the side. Real wood generous shelves, a hushed air. But before I could really get to know it, Nixon bombed Haiphong harbour (remember the Vietnam war?), and students promptly marched to the USIS and set fire to a few chairs. The police fired on the demonstrators, and free, independent Bangladesh's first civil protest deaths occurred. In the ensuing shock and furor, the Topkhna Road library closed its doors, never to open them again.

But the city, and we who live in it, are diminished by it.

ative writing at Hamilton College in New York.

up he wants to be a map-maker.

It resurrected in Dhanmondi Road Number 9 after almost a year, or maybe a bit more, in a residential house that was bizarrely tiny, cramped and tight in comparison to the old library building. It had just four small rooms on the ground floor for fiction, reference and textbooks, tables, magazines, iournals, blue-cushioned armchairs and library desk. Yet it was recognizably the USIS library. I discovered Kermode and Gore Vidal there, in the pages of New York Review of Books. Pauline Kael's movie reviews. Plath, e e

ERE is an extract from Kamila Shamzie's novel Kartography, one

of the latest Indo-Anglian novels on the market. Shamzie was born

in Karachi in 1973. She is the author of In the City by the Sea--winner

It is 1987. Raheen, the narrator, and Karim, her closest friend, both thir-

teen-year-olds in Rahim Yaar Khan, a town in the Punjab, for the winter holi-

days, staying on lands belonging to their parents' friends, Laila and Asif.

Karim has just announced, much to Raheen's surprise, that when he grows

few months earlier it had been birds. We became buyers of bird books,

spouters of bird-facts ('the hummingbird eats 50 or 60 meals a day,' 'the Gila

woodpecker lives in the desert and never sees wood, only cactus'), imitators

of bird-walks (moving through the world on our toes, heels in the air), though

the fascination with feathered creatures was necessarily short-lived since all

we could see in our gardens were crows and sparrows, and what's the point

of being bird-obsessed if you can't bird-watch. Prior to that, we'd filled ou

lives with disguises. We'd wander under loose shirts, stick black paper over

our teeth, and even collected hair clippings from Auntie Runty's beauty

parlour and attempted to glue straight long tresses to the ends of our own

How each of our obsessions started, and how they ended, and who insti-

gated their beginnings and ends we never remembered or cared about. But I

shelf, the day after we arrived in Rahim Yar Khan, and traced distances and

routes with his index finger, without any regard or concern for my total

'You can't be a map maker anyway,' I said to him one morning when I found him in Uncle Asif's desk poring over a large map of Pakistan with

cared deeply when Karim started pulling atlases out of Uncle Asif's book

We were without obsessions at the time, a rare occurrence in our lives. A

of the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize--and Salt and Saffron. She teaches cre-

Extract: Kamila Shamzie

My Darlings made me forget lunch for a day). Then the Jewish heavyweights: Bellow, Malamud, Mailer, Roth, after which it was time to work backwards, to Faulkner and F. Scott, to Nathaniel West and Pound. Mark Twain on his trip to Kolkata. Madmen's letters and war correspondence. Gertrude Stein and Gregory Corso. The old Esquire magazine, back when it thought nothing of putting Greer, Talese, Tennessee Williams, Mailer, Burroughs and Ginsberg in a single issue. All these and

What's left today of the old USIS library is in Banani. That's right, all the way out there. A retreat, both symbolically and physically, from the daily tugof-war of Topkhana Road, or the hustle of Dhanmondi, far from the reach of the common man. If I was a kid all over again, I couldn't get to it. Not on a regular basis anyway. An American retreat, dictated no doubt by Dhaka's dirt, political passions, overpopulation, their security and budgetary concerns, changes in official policy, plus the fearsome local greed, common sense, caution, staff cuts. Very uncool scene, poor return on investment, too much damn bother, fuss and headaches, so cut your losses and get out while you can.

Understood, well understood, I thought. But still, how could they have heaved the whole thing overboard without so much as a by your leave? The heart of the American cultural presence here had always been the lending library, the whole package really. The building, the books, the shelves, the current stuff, the magazines, the journals, the easy access, in like Flynn, the movies, a waystation where you could also just hang out, or, Dhaka being Dhaka, it was also a place where you could rendezvous with women, put your left ankle on your right knee, watch the wall clock and fume: where is she? Just what is it with women and time?

And once, after I had waited for what had seemed an eternity but could not have been more than fifteen minutes, one of them had turned up. Hair all mussed up, a torn sandal and red shalwar muddy at one knee.

"Good God, what happened?"

The rickshaw had taken a little tumble

And lo and behold, one of the staff got her a glass of water, and had murmured soothingly, "there, there, everything will be all right... And it was

So, what is the American presence here, in Dhaka, the face of United States as Bengalis see it? It is the forbidding official redbrick pile of the US embassy in Gulshan, the mighty USAID people, the consultants, the consultar and visa stuff, the stone-and- mortar visage of American officialdom and power, loaded with all the trappings of red tape and big cars and visa denials and incomprehensible forms and misery and frustration of long lines and neocolonial inequality and the smell of money and attitude that makes you want to grit your teeth and lose faith in divine ordination. Absolutely no human touch anywhere, no hint of the fact that there is a different United States, of books and poetry and authors and thinkers and artists and anti-Establishment academics, a terrain really, like any other with its own narratives and tales of the twisted human heart. Then I discovered, tucked away in the American Embassy website, something called the IRC Information Resource Center. My heart sank. IRC! Sounded like the dank dreamsong of a bureaucrat. As far as you could possibly get from the good old UDID (U Donkey I Donkey, from U Ass I Ass, USIS, get it?) I had grown up with. IRC sounded like a con job, silicone implants, the kind of place one fobbed off on an unsuspecting public, something designed to disguise the absence of a real library. Heap bad medicine, big chief, cold rice, rotten

So I got into my mom's rinky-dink little maypop Suzuki Maruti and went to Banani to check out the joint for myself. A nice enough house, but getting inside was tough. The bereted guards outside were unused to visitors.

creases where it had been folded and re-folded into a neat rectangle. 'Be-

cause all the maps have been made already, right? What are you going to

do? Discover a new continent and map it?' I hoisted myself onto the desk

and sat down in the 'disputed territory' of Jammu and Kashmir. 'Better way to

occupy yourself is to come outside and lose a game of badminton to me. Or

of pulp clung to the inside of the glass and to his upper lip. 'If you had to give

outside. 'I don't know. I'd say, go towards the beach, and when you come to

tions to someone who didn't know the way to the beach. Maybe someone

who'd left Karachi, years ago, and couldn't remember the way there any

I lifted him up by the collar and slammed him against the chair back.

I couldn't help laughing. 'Fine. By the way, map makers are called cartog-

'Cartographers.' He wrote down the word, forming a circle with the letters,

'Go rap her carts,' I suggested, re-arranging letters in my head. 'Strap her

He took the glass of orange juice I held out to him, and gulped it down. Bits

I looked out the window. It was a beautiful day, winter sun beckoning us

'No, idiot.' He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. 'How would you give direc-

'Oh.' I considered this. 'Well, I'd just say, 'don't worry, we'll meet some-

we could walk to the dunes. Or leap around the cotton mountain.

someone directions to Zia's beach hut, what would you say?

I glare back at him. 'There's something you need to know.'

"Who," they bristled, "have you come to meet?"

"Nobody. Just want to see the library."

curry, no cha-cha, no tango...

the turtle sign take a right and..

where and go to the beach together.'

'You hated geography!'

cargo? Crop rag heart?

'What?'

Karim glared at me 'That's not helpful

and we both bent our heads over the paper.

Karim grinned. 'Chop Ra's garter.'

'Yeah, so? Every map maker has his quirks.'

beneath the bo tree.

"Oh, the library. The library, oh, yes."

Yeah, I thought, the library, oh, yeah. Out by the side of a sunny Dhaka street, with sparrows hopping in the dirt and a trio of lean housemaids striding swiftly by, I emptied my pockets of change and keys, spread my arms and was given the once-over by a metal detector. Then a narrow, constricted entrance with a turnstile. Then inside, yet another metal detector. Then finally I am led inside two pleasant, airy rooms with a view of the lawn sparkling out in front, the grass neatly cropped standard American suburban style. But there's nobody home. Except for one kid with headphones on glued to a monitor, the place is absolutely deserted. I looked around, and even the dog was gone.

"So no books?" I asked the superpolite custodian behind the desk, meaning of course fiction, poetry, memoirs, novels, history, biographies, lit crit. You know, the real deal, the sound and light show.

"Of course we have books," he replied, and showed me the reference books neatly arrayed on the wall. Keesing's Archives, Facts on File encyclopedias, dictionaries. All stiff and new, nothing used, nothing dogeared. But no adult material. No Paine, Tocqueville or Dos Passos, no Garry Wills expounding on the Gettysburg Address. No Baldwin or Langston Hughes, or any of the current class of fine African-American writers. Where was Arthur Koestler, his Darkness at Noon, that had raised my hair on a summer day decades ago? Nabokov's Pale Fire? And the women I liked, E. Anne Proulx, Mary McCarthy, Cristina Adam, Rebecca Lee? No Catcher in the Rye or On The Road, Mr. Sammler of Sammler's Planet, or even Alex

"No, no, I mean books," I said again, knowing the answer yet insisting, a Dhaka beggar at a car window, the fates stacked six-deep against me. "Yes, here they are, books," he replied patiently, pointing again at the

I gave up. And smiled. He smiled back.

There were magazines, the Atlantic, the New Yorker, etc. Journals like Current History and Orbis, a fair amount of them. Crosshatched into neat antiseptic rows and columns. Not one out of place. Every cover uncreased. "So what happens to the old issues of the Atlantic and New Yorker?"

The custodian smiled again and leaned forward to click on the intercom, pleased at having to use it. Everything on his desk was perfectly aligned at

enquired, thinking about snagging a supply of discarded volumes

There followed a brief consultation with a tinny voice.

"We ship them to Chittagong," he informed me. And smiled again. For a second I thought of asking if they were going to screen Stagecoach out on the front lawn some evening, but didn't. I walked out into the live hum of the street, amid the dim cries and the paper trash, wishing the Yanks would just rent some beat-up, double-storied house somewhere back in the heart of Dhaka, and stock it like they used to, and there the kids could walk or come in buses and rickshaws, and just waltz in and borrow and read and loaf and flirt like they used to. But I know the Americans won't. Or can't, I guess. Policy is policy, and as the cliché goes, it is a changed world we live in nowadays. And besides, bureaucrats are loath to let go of an acronym, and IRC must be such eye candy on all those memos and dispatches: "Our IRC operation in Dhaka is exceeding expectations. The latest statistics show .00000009 percent attendance on a daily basis...." they must be writing to their bosses back in Washington D.C. But in that expensive, lovely, lifeless IRC house only the ghosts of the dead from Banani graveyard right next door must show up on any kind of regular basis. I got the distinct feeling that it was their kind of club.

Dhaka's mind has shrunk. There is a lot more money than used to be, but a lot less books. There are a lot more shiny cars, but a whole lot less depth to its mental makeup. There are a lot of young people chasing after the English language, but ending up with junk, the utilitarian, monosyllabic English of manuals and self-help tapes, of tone-deaf journalese, an English without nuance or breadth. I feel like telling them: if you guys really want to learn English, sooner or later you have to go to the good stuff? Even cut-rate

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by. Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I

will teach you like nothing else will, while the good Shakespeare:

And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf

will make you tingle. Persist, and soon you will find yourself inhabiting the language from within. But then, we all have to ask, where is the good stuff? Which libraries can they go to? It is the same everywhere in Dhaka. The city has no libraries worth mentioning. They are all either attenuated, bone dry (pages sliced out, dust, humidity and mould choking them) or just plain jokes. And so it is fat times for the English tuition racket. But you can only go so far beneath the dull-eyed gaze of an overworked grammarian. The rest is you, hunger, and a few thumping good libraries.

It may not seem much of a loss, but the effect can be insidious, as over the long term we come to accept an absence of books and well-stocked libraries in our lives as natural, as reading and the slow absorption of ideas give way to MTV, or its Asian variants, to an irreversible appetite for television, film magazines, slickness, gloss, common clutter, car commercials, ludicrous shopping malls, tinsel and glitter. The outside world will of course intrude, inevitably and completely, and it should, but it should come in with books as well as trash, with Ashberry and Auden as well kitsch and neon schlock. These poets and writers, those books, are where we learn about different standards of taste and sensibility, and therefore can successfully redefine and extend our own, and which provide some real guarantees against the corruptions of the soul that lead to the various degradations that are endemic in our public life. When libraries fall, an invisible but necessary social check-and-balance goes. When nobody mourns the absence of books and their decline in peoples' lives it signals a particular kind of a fall, a fall from a place where there exists a certain kind of order, beatitude and sanity. All of us who live here in Dhaka should be keenly aware of it.

And Indo-Anglian fiction by women keep rollin', rollin' on the river...

Shahnaz, a debut novel by Hiro Boga, is being released by Penguin India shortly.

Penguin's blurb describes it as a "mesmerizing tale of madness and migration. Born to a wealthy Parsi family, Shahnaz has endured a life of privilege marred by personal sorrow. Tortured by the hardships of living with her mentally ill mother, Shahnaz gains a new lease on life when she and her husband are offered a life abroad. However, Shahnaz quickly realizes she must adapt to life in a foreign country as well as the marital tensions that come with it. So too must she come to terms with her painful past. As her story unfolds, family secrets are revealed, lessons are learnt and Shahnaz sets out to achieve a life she can truly call

The author was born in Bombay in 1949 and later moved to the west coast of Canada in 1976. She writes poetry, fiction and what Penguin editors curiously call "creative non-fiction." Canadian Literature characterized the novel as "a compelling look at the intricacies of human relationships, and a woman's need to be herself."

Monica Ali's first novel, about a Bangladeshi family living in the UK, will be published later this year. She made

literary news by being chosen as one of Granta's twenty best novelists--previou names have included Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie. Lesser reviewers are already gearing up to call her the new Zadie Smith, the author of the bestseller 'White Teeth' published a couple of years back.

Daily Star literary page wishes her the best

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Black Swan £6.99

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Orion £6.99

HarperCollins

Orion £6.99

(downloaded from Guardian.com)

Black Swan £6.99

Book Bazaar

uninterest in the relationship of one place to another.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO CHILDREN'S BOOKS FROM INDIA

Parents, children, have you heard of the Gavial, who started life in the Ganges as an Abandoned Egg, then started brushing teeth and making friends with humans, thereby getting started on the road to starting a Happy Family? Then there is the "hooman" in the land of Nozrabu who...no? Well, then, read on...

There has been an explosion of children's books in English in India this past year, writes Vijaya Ghose, an editor of children's books in New Delhi. They have been undergoing a sea change over the last few years and the results were apparent over the last year. Gone are the days when Indian publishers were antsy about anything to do with writing for children (unless they were dull, dull textbooks and we all know what that is!), and if they did bother at all with the creative stuff, they produced unattractive, badly-illustrated, black-and-white books printed on poor quality paper. Now they have been putting money and talent in the right amounts and have launched a mini-revolution in terms of content and style. While the leading publisher of children's books continues to be Penguin India, two other publishers, Puffin and Rupa, came on strong last year in terms of

Here is her assessment, which she admits was aided considerably by a group of children aged 7 to 14.

<u>PUFFIN</u>

Maya Dayal's The Puffin Treasury of Modern Indian Tales and Meera Uberoi's Classic Indian Tales for Children head the Puffin collection. Both the volumes excel in choice of stories and qualities of production. The former is a collection of the 48 talesof Dhruva, Bhisma, Ekalavya, Krishnathat form the classical tradition for Indian children, but which has been reshaped by Meena Uberoi's lively style. The illustration in both books add sparkle. An excellent introduction to new readers.

In the same genre, Gita Ramanujam's The Wise Monkey and Other Animal Stories recounts well-known stories. Ajanta Guha Thakurta's exquisite illustrations are a revelation.

Modern Indian Tales is a collection that has been put together with intelligence and wit. It ranges from Premchand, R.K.Narayan and Bhisham Sahni to Satyajit Ray, Ruskin Bond, Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth. The outstanding contribution is Mahasweta Devi's "The Why-Why Girl," about Moina, a young tribal girl who is driven by the passion to know the world's "whys." With cows to tend and siblings to care for, she still finds anwers to her questions. And Vikram Seth's "The Elephant

and the Tragopan" in verse is magical. Both light-hearted and poignant, this story has allegorical overtones. It is about encroachment into animal territory by humans, the attempts to oust them and then rehabilitate them (shades of Narmada Dam!). A must for every school or general library.

R. K. Narayan's Malgudi Schooldays and Anita Desai's Village by the Sea are classics of Indian fiction. Both have sturdily stood the test of time, but teenagers may favour Narayan over Desai. Who can forget the Swami, his comical ups and downs, the swadeshi movement relived with an unbeatable combination of dry humour and sharp observation? Adults will steal it from their children to re-read it.

RUPA

Rupa came out with a strong collection of books for the under-10s. Particularly strong contenders in the fun and humour division are Kalpana Swaminathan's Gavial Avial and Weekday Sisters. Gavial is short for the Gangetic gharial Gavialus gangeticus, an indomitable spirit who mutates from an Abandoned Egg into an Orphan, then befriends humans and finally acquires its own Human Family!

The Weekday Sisters had very busy parents who barely had time to name their six daughters Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Fourteen busy years after the birth of their first daughter, they suddenly realise that they have six children and die of excitement! All that's left in the house are an electric iron and a pile of books. The sisters, with grit and compassion, learn not only to cope but to live happily. Then an adult enters the picture and the story of an extraordinary family starts.

Mani Dixit's Friends Colony is an amusing sendup of all politicians, a tale which can be called a modern fable. It will appeal to children more generally aware of public life, and reveals the workings of a large democracy by comparing human beings with their petty squabbles and egos with animals who show how, by taking turns to be the leader in the jungle, everyone benefits. Even gadhas (donkeys) are useful when the time is right!

Short Short Stories by Anupa Lal states the truth in its title. It is a captivating collection of really short stories, most of them a little over a page,

from all around the world. Nearly all of them gently teach us, with an interplay of wit and wisdom, a thing or two about the excesses of greed and iealousy, as well as the value of time and love for all.

A Long Walk for Bina by Ruskin Bond introduces us to Bina, who with her brother Sonu and their friend Prakash walk several miles to school each day, thereby leading us on a trail of not only the flora and fauna of the Tehri hills, but also the problems of displacement and rehabilitation of people and animals. The story centers around a leopard and the building of the Tehri dam, and carefully pitches controversial issues in an age-

But by far the best of the lot is Antara Ganguli's extraordinary The **Buggles**, written with the 12-and-up group in mind. Antara is simply the best among the new breed of children's writers and she displays imaginative flair and verve. Anjali, the heroine of the story, is visited by Buggles Nobu and Lool, exiles in the underground land of Nozrabu where there is neither sky nor time. Persecuted by the Boils (they are actually a nasty mass of the pollution we dump on earth) who eat them for breakfast, lunch and dinner, they have come to explore the possibility of a "hooman" helping them out. And Anjali is whisked off to the timeless world of Nozrabu...it would be unfair to say anymore. Suffice to say that its environmental theme is relevant and thought-provoking, and the rendition something new in the world of children's stories in India.

I have to add one last note about illustrations. Puffin boasts the superior artwork, with glossy paper and striking colours. Atanu Roy, who did the cover of Modern Indian Stories, is outstanding. Puffin's list of illustratorsSuddhasatwa Basu, Tapas Guha, Sujata Singh, Ajanta Guha Thakurta, Bindia Thapar, Neeta Gangopadhyayis the best talent in the industry. Rupa's black-and-white illustrations do not fall in the same class as Puffin's, but the trade-off is that they are less expensive. It's a trade-off that may be debatable since I do feel that good illustrations hone the visual skills of young readers from an early age. Still, a festive feast of exciting reading for the children till this year's products come on the

SUNSET SONG

BY KAISER HUQ

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8 One for My Baby

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The sun goes down, a luckless balloon. Leaving a spray of gold in the air.

The hottest 10 UK paperbacks: 2002

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Patches of city sward,

6 Five Quarters of the Orange Joanne Harris

Houses, new and old.

Even slums, even the crow jerking homeward Wear a robe of gold

As the sun explodes over the horizon's brink.

Quick, children! Run

Through the ruins of the sun. Catch the gold in your hair;

It's fast fading with the light.

The huge glowing disk will soon shrink And frame in black the window of night.

(from Starting Lines)