

SHORT STORY

Buying Books

SYED MUJTABA ALI
 (translated by Asrar Chowdhury)

No matter how much we joke about a time-wasting clerk, any observant person will agree what a difficult task it is to catch a fly. No matter from which angle you try to catch the fly, it will inevitably fly away at the right moment. Because from research, it's been found that a fly's business isn't confined to only two eyes; numerous eyes are located throughout its entire head. We can only see the front side, but the fly can see the whole world because its eyes are set circularly throughout its head.

The talented and wise Anatole France thus once repented, "Alas! If only there were eyes fixed around my entire head, then I would have been able to see the whole beauty of this world in one sight."

You can easily realise that this is true if you close your eyes and think about it a little bit. And once you realise this, then repentance is the only thing you can do. But this is where France differs from normal people. France said in consolation, "but the eyes of my mind are not just one or even two. It's completely in my control to increase the number of eyes of my mind. The more of the arts and crafts one grasps, the more an eye of the mind opens."

Whereas all the civilised nations of the world are busy trying to increase the eyes of their minds, we make faces at the mention of increasing the eyes of our minds like the one-eyed Cyclops from the Arabian Nights.

What is the way to increase your eyes? First, to read books, and for that to develop the habit of buying books.

There's another reason for increasing the eyes of one's mind. Bertrand Russell once said, "The main way to be relieve oneself of the problems of this world is to create as many worlds as possible in one's own mind and then to submerge in them in times of distress. The person who can make as many worlds as possible would be able to develop the power to avoid distress ever more."

In other words, if there's no solace in literature then philosophy; if philosophy fails to keep up then history; if history fails then geography--and heaven knows what more!

But one question, how do we create all these numerous worlds? By reading books. By travelling nations. However, not everybody has the health and wealth to travel, so in the end books remain. Keeping this in mind, may be this is why Umar Khayyam said:

Here with a loaf of bread
 beneath the bough
 A flask of wine, a book of
 verse and thou,

Beside me singing in the wilderness
 And wilderness is paradise enow

The loaf of bread and wine will finish; the dark black eyes of the beloved will gradually become obscure; but the book will remain ever youthful if it is that kind of a book. This is why I think that Khayyam didn't forget to put *Kitabs* on the list of his heavenly items.

And Khayyam was a Muslim. In the number one book of the Muslims, the first message that *MisterXXXX* Muhammad received was "Allama Bil Kalam"; in other words, Allah has educated men with the help of the pen; and books are the embodiment of the pen.

The meaning of the Bible is book, book par excellence, the Greatest Book, "The Book." The God whose name we have to take at the beginning of all good deeds, it is He Himself who took the responsibility on His own shoulders of writing our big book. The leader of man, "Gana," in other words, the god of the people. If the people fail to respect books, they become God-depraved.

But Bengalis don't listen to civil religious conviction. There's only one thing in their lips, "Baba, do we have enough cash to buy books Baba?"

There is a certain degree of truth hidden in this statement, a very slight degree. It is this much: That one does need money to buy books--that's all. Nothing more than that!

If the price of books could be lowered, then no doubt more books would sell. If it's mentioned to the publisher, "Reduce the price of books," then he snorts back, "If a good number of books don't sell, how will I lower the price of books?"

"Why Mashai, if one looks at numbers then Bangla is the sixth or seventh language in the world. Let's take French, for example. Fewer people speak in that language compared to Bangla. Whereas, prior to the War, any good book would cost twelve annas, fourteen annas, maximum a Taka and four annas. Why can't you do so as well?"

"Yes, a French publisher can suddenly publish twenty thousand copies of any good book confidently. We experience a death rattle if we publish two thousand; do you want us to go bankrupt by publishing more?"

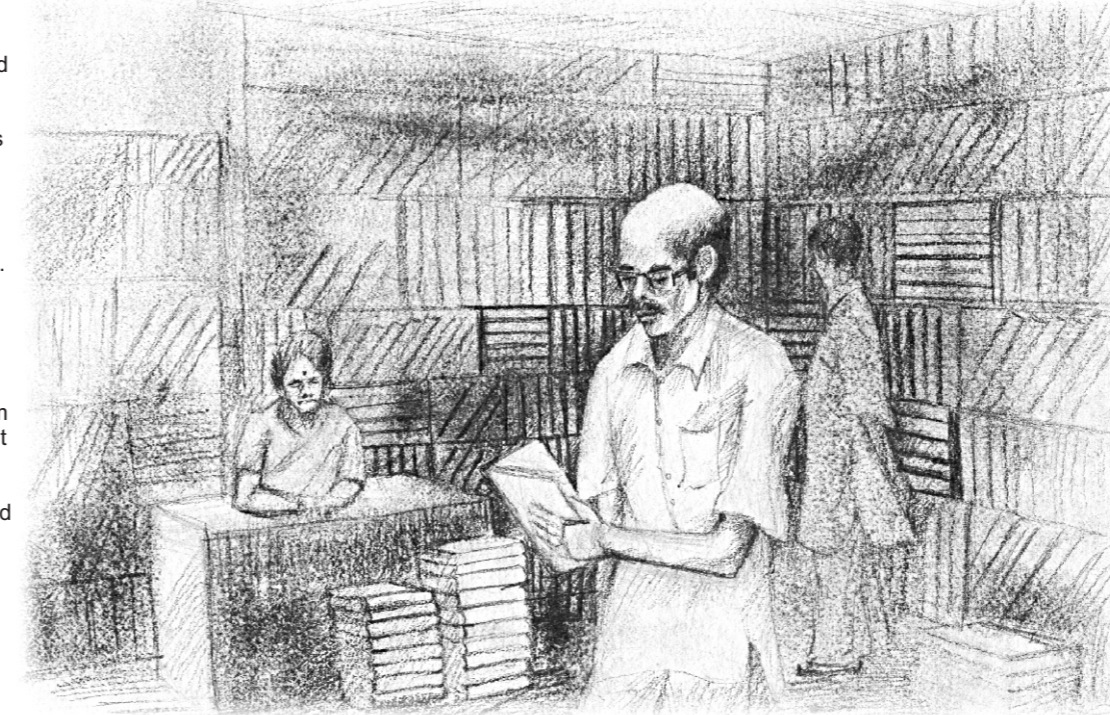
And thus this vicious circle. People don't buy books because they're not cheap, and at the same time books aren't cheap because people don't buy them.

This vicious circle has to be broken. But who's going to do it? The publisher or the buyer? It would be difficult for the publisher to break the circle, because he has to earn his bread from this trade. For fear of bankruptcy, he won't be willing to take the risk, not willing to experiment.

But nobody has ever gone bankrupt from buying books. Even if you increase your budget allocation for books by three times, there's still no possibility of going bankrupt. Rather, in the process, there's the possibility that you'll gain many eyes like France's fly; create numerous universes like Russell.

Only the man with worldly interests buys books carefully calculating all ends...

What do I do? At the same time I am both the producer and consumer. By making tobacco mixture I, myself, am the producer and by smoking it on my own, I, myself, am the consumer; do I have to say more? I have produced one book. Nobody buys the book, so I, myself, buy a copy once in a while.



Pundit.

The Pundit wrote, "The rich say that the most difficult task in this world is to earn money. But the wise say, NO, the most difficult task of all is the pursuit of knowledge. Now the question that arises is, whose claim is correct, the rich man's or the wise man's? I, myself, travel in the pursuit of knowledge; therefore it would be difficult for me to remain neutral. However, I have noticed one thing, which I would like to bring to the attention of the judicious. Money is the fruit of a rich man's hard work. If somebody puts that fruit into the hands of a wise man, then he can use it delightfully, and not only this, in most cases it's observed that wise men can spend money in excellent ways, in much better ways than can rich men. On the other hand, the product of knowledge accumulates in books and even if we put that product in the hands of the rich they don't know how to use it--they can't read books."

The Arab Pundit therefore finished his argument with Q.E.D. "So it is proved that pursuit of knowledge is superior to that of money."

Real people therefore gladly spend money to acquire books, the medium of knowledge. Except only in Bangladesh.

When I expressed my grief about this matter the other day a friend of mine told a story. A drawing-room addict went to the market to buy a gift for her husband on his birthday. The shopkeeper showed her this, made her smell that, she touched this, snatched at that, but nothing could make the proud rich woman fix her mind. Everything was already in her husband's coffers. In the end, the shopkeeper dejectedly said, "In that case, why not present a good book?" The proud dame wrinkled her nose and said, "He has one of those as well."

Like husband, like wife. One book is enough for both of them.

Nonetheless, France really knows how to pay their dues to books. Even when they want to hit a terrible insulting blow to somebody they do it with books. Say for example, your greatest love is for your country. If somebody really wants to embarrass you, then they would embarrass your country. You would probably be able to tolerate self-embarrassment up to fifty times, but insult of your country will bit you for a long time.

Andre Gide had many friends--most of them were famous people.

On his return from Russia, he published a fatal book against Soviet Russia. The Stalinists of Paris then went against Gide--they made his life a hell by speaking of him in abusive terms. To his amazement, most of his writer friends remained silent, they didn't speak out on his behalf. This dented Gide's heart--he decided that he would teach them a lesson.

An advertisement came out in the newspaper. Gide had decided to auction off his library. At first, the whole of Paris fainted at this news, but the very moment they returned back to their senses, they hurried off to the auction.

After going there and observing the scenario, everybody was transfixed. Gide put on auction only the autographed books of those author friends who didn't fight in his favour. Gide was in fact getting rid of rubbish.

I heard the loud laughter of the Parisians from the middle of the Mediterranean on a ship--because calculating the gravity of the entire matter. Reuters broadcasted the news on the wireless--they published with pleasure the news in the daily hundred-line typed ship's newspaper. The insulted authors bought their own books at double, triple prices as quickly as possible--the fewer people knew of this auction, the better (It's been heard that tickets once sold like this in Bangladesh).

I hear that those authors never forgave Gide.

How much more do I have to say? Won't Bengalis ever come to their senses?

I would have understood if Bengalis didn't have a thirst for knowledge. That's where my sorrows lie. I wouldn't have had any regrets if Bengalis were idiots. I haven't observed such a bizarre mixture in the entire Indian sub-continent. Their thirst for knowledge is enormous, but when it comes to buying books they are pathetic. Again, some shamelessly say, "Bengalis don't have money." True? Where is this man standing while making this statement? In front of a football field or in the ticket queue of a cinema?

All right, all right. Please don't make me angry for nothing. It's a rainy day today. I took the pen with the hope of writing an amusing story. Let me finish this writing in such a frame of mind. Everybody knows the story, but it was only yesterday that I managed to understand the inherent meaning of the story. A story from the Arabian Nights:

A King once had his Hakim killed because he failed to get hold of one of his books in spite of repeated attempts. The book came into the hands of the King. The King lost his senses and started reading the book. The King became so much involved in reading the book that he was putting his fingers in his mouth and watering them while turning the leaves of the book. In the meantime, the Hakim had been so well prepared for his death that he took the necessary measures. He put a deadly poison on the corner of each page. The King's fingers were soaked in the poison and entered his mouth.

The Hakim wrote about this counter-measure in the last page of the book. After reading this, the King collapsed at the flow of the poisonous punch.

Looking at the distaste of the Bengalis towards reading books, it seems that they know the story, and for the fear of death they have given up on reading books, buying books.

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Letter from TORONTO

Letter from Toronto: Of Global Warming and Polar Bears

Rebecca Sultana

As I was reading through the online version of *The Daily Star*, I was struck by the news that Bangladesh was on the cover of the *Time* magazine. I squinted at the picture of our prime minister, serenely looking out the plane window. How could I have missed that? Granted I was dreadfully busy and was not able to read the last few issues of the magazine as I usually am wont to do, as I unwind after a day's work; I still felt sorry to have missed the cover. Quickly sorting out through the rising pile of newspapers and magazines on the floor, I found out the April 3 issue. Surely it couldn't have been the same one. The Canadian issue of the *Time* had a picture of a polar bear on a broken floe of ice deeply contemplating stepping on the next slab of floating ice that seemed too far away to be safely maneuvered. The title of the cover story read in bold capitals: BE WORRIED. BE VERY WORRIED, with the "very" in bright red.

A tad disappointed at not finding Bangladesh on the cover, I caught myself just in time. It was about Bangladesh after all! Only last year, back in Dhaka, as I was listening to the BBC on one of those rare occasions when I had the TV to myself, before my little one came and snatched the remote away to watch the endless re-runs of cartoons, I had managed to catch a piece of news. Within the next hundred years, Bangladesh and some other low lying areas would be under water. The news had caused me great anguish.

In my first year English class, I had mentioned it to the students. One of them queried me about the time frame again. A hundred years from now? He shrugged. "I won't be here," he said. I was aghast. "Your descendants will be," I tried to reason. He shrugged some more. "They can take care of themselves," he replied. Kids! They can be so self-centered these days! Sitting down with the *Time*, I skimmed through the pages where the worst hit places should be

named. Just as I had thought, Bangladesh was mentioned there. So was Florida. I just had to smirk.

The effect of global warming is most felt in places where winter is supposed to be extreme--in Canada, for example. Before coming here, having had heard about the severity of the climate of these parts, we came prepared with our heaviest jackets in tow. Mentally, we had talked ourselves into gritting our teeth through the most inclement of weathers. We should not have worried. As winters go in Canada, this year's was one of the mildest in years. Our heavier jackets remained in the closets unused. Unless we plan to make a trip to the Yukon province or to Nunavut, I don't anticipate wearing those in the near future. There has hardly been any significant snowfall either. It did snow sometimes and because of below-freezing temperatures, piles of snow had remained accumulated besides the sidewalks or car parks. But my vision of wading through knee deep snow has remained unfulfilled.

A few months back, Global TV news showed people playing golf in Calgary in the middle of winter. In "normal" weather Calgary would have been buried under feet of snow. Idle snowmobile and trucks stayed parked as City employees took their salaries doing nothing. "Where has winter gone?" asked the news reader. To other places where it's not supposed to, it seems. The whole eco system has, apparently, skewed up. While Canada, known as the Great White North, wonders what's up with the weather, places in Europe, such as France and Russia, had to set up cold shelters for people caught off guard by the vagaries of nature.

How does Bangladesh figure into all these? It all starts with the polar bear. The picture of the sad looking polar bear is eerily significant. As big chunks of ice melt, polar bears cannot walk from one floating floe to another as gaps increase and cause the bears to fall off into the water and subsequently drown. This is the perfect example of how man-

made menaces disrupt the delicate balance of nature. From the ever widening hole in the ozone layer, to tsunamis, to tidal waves and to melting glaciers, all disasters point to the gradual destruction of Mother Earth. The culprit? Man. More precisely, industrialized man. Unfairly, the more un-industrialized ones are having to pay the price as they don't have the economic strength or the technological know-how to deal with the colossal problem. The other unfortunate victims are the creatures of the animal kingdom as they gradually die out while unable to cope with the rapid transformation of their delicate eco-system.

One look at rush hour traffic in industrialized countries is enough to provide us with a rough estimate of the amount of pollution being generated. One long winded sentence in a *Time*'s article sums up the situation well: "The U.S. however, which is home to less than 5% of earth's population but produces 25% of CO₂ emissions, remains intransigent." The reference was, of course, to the U.S. refusal to sign the Kyoto treaty, which was otherwise signed by 141 countries. The people of the U.S., however, seem to be more concerned than their government is. Even though President Bush refused to sign the treaty, cities in the U.S., through the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, are doing good work in cutting down greenhouse emissions in a bid to meet or beat Kyoto's original target. Frustrated by the lack of national leadership, city mayors have taken upon themselves to cut emissions, build light railways, construct energy efficient housing and even create regional bikeways. If only the mayors could take similar stance in disagreeing with the President on issues of foreign policy...

Canadians, for their part, are taking their environment much more seriously as climate change directly affects fishing, farming, forestry, lakes, rivers, coastal communities and the North. The Inuits (formerly known as Eskimos) being a hunting, fishing and gathering people, depend on

the ice and snow for their survival. But while the rest of Canadians can be thankful for the balmy winters, for the Inuits "if ice is too thin to ride over and too thick to take a boat through, it is as if someone closed all the roads to the Inuits' grocery stores." Not to mention the havoc that is taking place among the arctic animals and fish as their food supply dwindle with the melting snow. The other long-term predicament anticipated is the possibility of an entire lifestyle change for the Inuits.

As our planet continues to get more sick, all the countries of the world have been meeting every year since the signing of the Kyoto Protocol to define the operational rules of the treaty, yet no country that has taken on a target has as yet ratified the Protocol. The new Stephen Harper Government of Canada, though committed to cutting greenhouse gas emissions, also realistically enough recognizes that it cannot yet reach the Kyoto target by 2012. Nevertheless, Canadians themselves are very aware of the dangers they face.

Can Bangladeshis contribute to the saving of the environment? I am sure they could. Our scientists need to chalk out ways for the ordinary people to follow that would lessen waste, produce more greenery and eliminate pollution. As Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels says: "If it's not going to happen from the top down, let's make it happen from the bottom up." We do, however, need to act immediately; otherwise, it will be a dismal future for our great, great grandchildren. If there is some consolation in the thought though, it is that we will take Florida down with us when we sink.

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TRAVEL WRITING

Notes on Dublin



ABEER HOQUE

Don't fly into Dublin at 5:30am on a shoestring budget. The city centre buses don't start running till 8:45am, and so first you'll stand outside for a good half hour, stamping your feet in the April chill, finally read the fine print on the schedule, and then spend the next two hours nodding off in the airport lounge.

Do take your laptop or book to the beautifully remodeled National Library of Ireland on Kildare Street. The reading room upstairs has a cathedral ceiling and wide tables outfitted with curiously but conveniently dented cushions that will comfortably cradle your inanimates.

Don't eat alone at the vegetarian



restaurant, Cornucopia, on Wickham Street, because their servings of sweet potato daal, brown rice, and two salads are so large that you won't be able to finish, though you'll want to.

Do take the tour of the Chester Beatty Library at the Clock Tower of Dublin Castle (yes, that's its actual address). The little old Irish woman giving the tour will tell you about the two Buddhist monks who spent six weeks in the library, sitting in their orange robes, cross legged and barefoot, moulding a spiritual structure out of sand, taking breaks only to smoke cigarettes outside in their Nike trainers (to show everyone they were normal human beings), and finishing by carrying the painstakingly

created sculpture to the Liffey River and pitching it in (to show that everything in life is transient). Spend some time on the top floor gallery, which gorgeously honours three great religions (Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity), through the lens of religious art. Sir Beatty did not use his hard and cleverly earned wealth to acquire first edition copies of Shakespeare or Beckett. He was interested in beauty, first and foremost, and his stunning collection spans multiple religions and cultures.

Don't throw your crime evidence into a bog because as the Museum of Archeology and History will tell you, the anaerobic and acidic conditions of peat bogs help preserve many natural elements. This beautiful pale blue

Victorian museum has (among many other riveting exhibits) a whole section devoted to items that have been recovered from bogs, including clothes, which rarely survive the test of time. Do eat alone at the ritzy Clarendon on Chatham Street. It's a splurge but sit on the first floor landing at sunset where you can watch all the Grafton Street shoppers and bikers head home while you eat soya fried squid.

Don't take any vehicular form of transport, other than to/from the airport. Dublin is imminently walkable, and on sunny days, the stone and brick city is quaint and glowing. Do splurge 7 Euros to visit the Writers Museum, unless you're really

not interested in writing. The sophisticated audio tour offers a detailed and fascinating history of Irish literati (who all seemed to have attended Trinity College), all of it carefully arranged in a wrought Georgian mansion on Parnell Square North. And when you're done, you can stroll across the street and sit in the tranquil Garden of Remembrance with its tumult of tulips and rippling mosaic pools.

Don't leave the third floor of the Museum of Natural History, AKA "The Dead Zoo," for last. If you're pressed for time, quickly peruse the stuffed versions of Irish fauna on the ground floor, the stuffed mammals of the world on the first floor, and the vertebrate animals on the second floor. But then climb up to the third floor balcony and immerse your creepy crawly self in the invertebrate section, which displays 10,000 different insects and crustaceans (out of a collection of more than 2 million!), many reproduced faithfully out of glass (because their soft bodies cannot be stuffed).

Do stop by Moore Street Market for all your fresh veggie, fruit, and flower needs. The vibrant displays alone will make your eyes happy, and you can ward off an attack of winter scurvy with their luscious citrus selection.

Don't bother going to the Museum of Decorative Arts and History, even if it is free (like every other National Museum of Ireland!). Unless you're into old coins, silverware, and period furniture and dress, housed in a plain stone castle, you'll find it terribly boring.

Do stay at the Ashfield Hostel on D'Olier Street for 13 Euros a night and free WiFi in the lobby. Their location is central, their bathrooms clean, their bunk beds firm, and their staff brisk and cheerful. Plus the guy at reception will offer you coffee and breakfast at 4am while you write travel stories.

Abeer Hoque won the Tanenbaum Award for nonfiction (San Francisco) in 2005.