

Isolation is personal and political in Olivia Laing's 'The Lonely City'

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Ever since social isolation began in an attempt to contain the Corona virus, the internet has flooded with references to the American realist painter Edward Hopper, especially his iconic work, 'Nighthawks' (1942). The altered version removed the four gloomy looking customers and the server from the diner in the original—alluding to the closing of public spaces like bars or restaurants, preventing people from mingling during the pandemic. Anyone familiar with the original would know, none of these estranged people were there socialising; they were suspended in a trance of urban loneliness—times in which we live now.

I was first introduced to Hopper by Olivia Laing's fascinating book, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* (2016), a haunting exploration of the writer's loneliness while stranded in a new city. It had only been a couple of years then since I had moved to Dhaka. The wound that the cold and unflinching urban air inflicts on one by isolating them—physically and emotionally—draining intimacy and life force, was still fresh in me when I found Laing's book. Reading it was being seen and acknowledged in a way that felt cathartic.

Laing attempted to find her agonies reflected in artists who have lived with extreme isolation in the city. Despite being a bit heavy with references to artworks and artists, *The Lonely City* is quite readable even without much prior knowledge. Laing shows great skill in correlating the artists' journeys and the underlying pathognomy of loneliness. It could easily have been a rigorous, jargon-filled flexing of the writer's analytical prowess, but instead Laing has a tender, empathetic book focusing on the undeniable perils of life.

Hopper's haunting—sometimes even voyeuristic—paintings discussed in the book showcase mostly isolated characters caught by the gaze of the passer-by ('Automat' or 'Room in New York'). I feel their loneliness is different than the confinement faced during this

pandemic. Unlike people who hope to return to their previous lives after the lockdown is lifted, someone from a Hopper painting does not see a solution to their constricting state.

Hopper's works have a way of peeping at the suffocating, lonely personal spaces of his subjects; there is a greater sense of alienation in being treated as a social outcast when the society and the state dehumanise the very

artworks and writings shortly before his death in 1973—is a reminder of how society and state build themselves at the expenditure of the marginalised.

Laing emphatically declares near the end of her book, "Loneliness is personal, and it is also political." She allows us to draw certain distinctions—solitude can feel transcendent, but being alone is like a prison, associated



PHOTO: NIGHTHAWKS (1942), EDWARD HOPPER

essence of who you are. Laing similarly portrays the adversarial lives of Andy Warhol, David Wojnarowicz, Peter Hujar, and Klaus Nomi as marginalised artists in New York. Trauma created an emotional deprivation that deeply affected their works and lives, caused by the intense homophobia during the AIDS epidemic in New York. These men, their friends, and loved ones would not only be left to die, they would be utterly dehumanised. Andy Warhol, whose name is synonymous with pop-art, would be ridiculed by Bob Dylan in his song, 'Like a Rolling Stone', have his art rejected from galleries, and be bullied in high school for his accented English as the child of immigrant parents. He would go on to develop a stutter that would trouble him even in adulthood. Yet even before that, at seven years old, Warhol would be confined to bed from rheumatic fever for months, drawing, colouring, and collaging in a way that is comparable to our creative flare ups while stuck at home these days. Revisiting him along with Henry Darger—a janitor whose tiny apartment revealed a staggering number of

with stigma and shame. The desperately lonely aren't the ones like us, dying to have a latte in North End with friends, but the ones deprived of affection or rights by their families, society, or state. Then and now, gentrifications expands through the urban landscape and the mind.

What matters is how we choose to behave with the alienated—with stigma, or with humanity. As recounted by Laing, Valerie Solanas, feminist and author of the SCUM Manifesto who would go on to shoot Warhol, had seen and faced the lowest mutilations her society had to offer. Turning tricks on Times Square, homelessness, abuse, exploitation by random strangers and abandoned by their parents—both Solanas and Wojnarowicz had lived through them all. Even during a pandemic these are the people left out on the streets. Privilege is not there to give them a shade.

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The book allows us to draw distinctions—solitude can feel transcendent; being alone is like a prison, associated with stigma and shame. What matters is what we choose to do with the marginalized and alienated—stigmatize them or show them humane treatment.

THE SHELF

Recommended reading for World Environment Day

As Abida Chowdhury addresses in her piece on *The Great Derangement*, narratives that engage with the natural world are scarce. Here are some books, both fiction and non-fiction, that approach the subject with particular finesse.



HOW I BECAME A TREE, Sumana Roy (2017) Non-Fiction

Rattled by the violence and selfishness of humankind, Sumana Roy finds kinship in the rhythm of trees and their capacity to cope with loneliness. In the process, she explores with the philosophy present in Buddha, Tagore, Shakespeare, D H Lawrence, Indian folklore and Greek mythology.

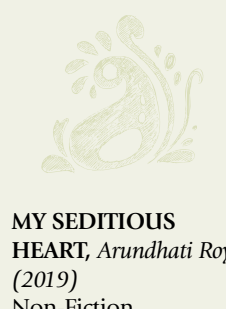
THE OVERSTORY, Richard Powers (2018) Fiction

Nine strangers, scattered across space and time, are impacted by trees before they unite to tackle deforestation. In a narrative form that spirals concentrically—like rings in trees—and prose that bristles with energy, plant life takes centre-stage in the novel, with humans, for a change, serving as side characters.



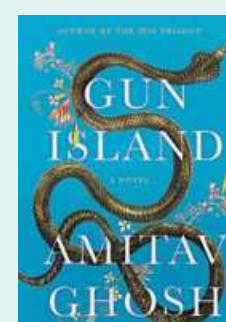
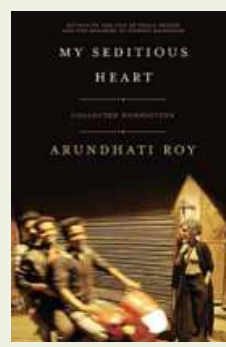
WEATHER, Jenny Offill (2020) Fiction

In short, tight observations, university librarian Lizzie Benson looks out at climate change, healthcare systems, capitalism, and the funny, frustrating intricacies of family life.



MY SEDITIOUS HEART, Arundhati Roy (2019) Non-Fiction

In essays spanning the last 20 years, Arundhati Roy calls out the appropriation of indigenous lands and poverty in India that is fostered by commercialisation, state hypocrisy, and the lingering remnants of imperialism.



GUN ISLAND, Amitav Ghosh (2019) Fiction

Deen Dutta, dealer of rare books, travels from Kolkata to Los Angeles to Venice, uncovering legends of Bengal and raising conversations about displacement and the role of capitalism in climate change.



PHOTO: TOM FISK/ PEXELS

The absence of climate change in fiction and other great derangements

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

I was first introduced to Amitav Ghosh while gulping down *The Hungry Tide* as a freshman Environmental Science student. In that book, Ghosh navigates the Indian side of the Sundarbans, its politics, its histories, and its people. Ghosh initiated my first brush with a fictional conservation scientist working to protect dolphins in the Sundarbans, kicking off a lifelong love affair with the world of conservation. That was sometime in the beginning of the decade.

I picked up Ghosh again this year; a much older release and this time a non-fiction—*The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*—only to be hit with another dose of reality and inspiration. While *The Hungry Tide* made me go looking for wildlife heroes, the latter awoke me to climate change in literary fiction. The book explores our inability at the level of literature, history, and politics to grasp the scale and violence of climate change.

In the part titled "Stories", Ghosh critiques the limitations of the 'literary novel' which often aims to highlight personal adventures. The contemporary novel uses narrow scales of time and space and rarely exceeds more than a human lifespan, failing to factor in climate and the constant change taking place on the sidelines of character development. In "Histories", Ghosh develops a fascinating "genealogy of the carbon economy" extending research in post-colonialism, environmental justice, and modernity. "Politics" laments the lack of collective action, the narrow bandwidth of political concern, and parallels the enduring ideology of capitalist growth with the unsettlingly similar literary impulse to pursue the next avant-garde.

Because it is a work of non-fiction, Ghosh takes liberty with the writing, swerving sometimes towards academic jargon and failing to keep the text approachable. But he also sparkles with insight, especially during his anguish over the absence of climate change in literary fiction.

He questions why climate change

casts a much smaller shadow on literature than it does on the world. If seriousness and relevance were the precursor to great works of literature, then writers should jump on the bandwagon. In this time and space we are living the impacts of climate change,

The contemporary novel uses narrow scales of time and space, ignoring the changes occurring on the sidelines of character development.

yet if one were to pick up a work of contemporary literature dating from the past decade, they would be hard pressed to find relevant references to a changing world. I know I have struggled to find one—one which speaks of climate change outside the nuances of academia. Where are the stories of the Sundarbans, which I have seen change in the span of a few years? Where are the stories of those constantly battling the impacts of nature that is unleashing its fury? Academic journals, news articles, feature stories and all other non-fiction accounts of climate change are fertiliser for stories, for literary fiction. Yet the narratives remain sparse.

Cyclones, tornadoes, wildfires, degrading habitats and dying animals seem to have been relegated to the confines of academic journals, but that fails to touch the heart, invoke any imagination. Ghosh is right: "The great, irreplaceable potentiality of fiction is that it makes possible the imagining of possibilities"; storytelling adds life to even the most deadbeat of subjects. It was author Ben Okri who said it best when he said, "The fact of storytelling hints at a fundamental human unease, hints at human imperfection. Where there is perfection, there is no story to tell."

Abida Rahman Chowdhury is an online journalist at *The Daily Star*, with a background in conservation and environmental science.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Two kinds of spaces are shrinking around us as we speak—one for books and creativity, as it starves from a lack of revenues, and another for our physical existence in the public sphere, caused by the coronavirus. Put them both together, and we open pathways for possibilities. As we remain locked away from the lives we knew, this new weekly page on books comes in an effort to help us travel beyond our physical limitations, to empathise, connect, and educate ourselves in a way that is best done through narratives both real and fictional. We will try to cover the latest in the world of books while also harkening back to what is old but still relevant. For this first issue, an exploration of what it means to be 'alone'—physically and psychologically—in a packed city, seemed fitting under the circumstances; this is accompanied by a piece on the need for climate fiction as we approach World Environment Day on June 5. The reading list on 'The Shelf' recommends books that, over time, have given us a deeper insight into the fraught and at risk natural world. We hope you will enjoy reading with us.

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