

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

Humans are innately evil, and other lies we tell ourselves

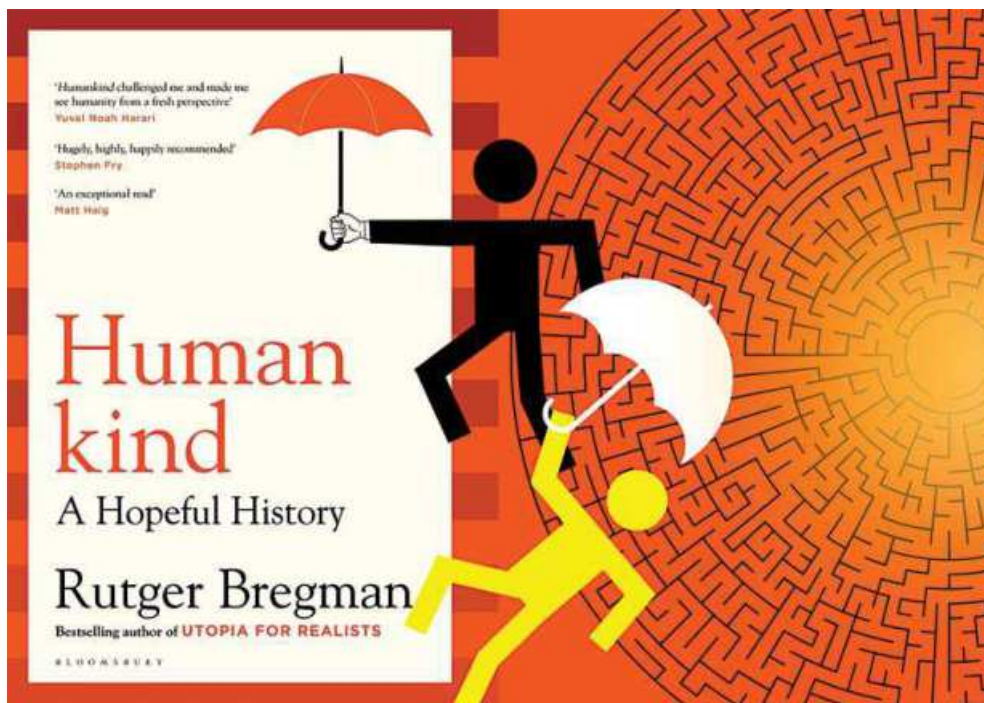
ALIFA MONJUR

At some point in time, we decided cynicism was synonymous with intelligence and wisdom. We praised cynics for their realism and scoffed at those who held onto fairy tales. Taking off the rose-tinted glasses became a coming-of-age milestone. The general consensus says human beings are self-interested by nature, so we embedded this principle everywhere. Too comfortable with it, we refuse to even entertain the radical opposing idea that Dutch historian Rutger Bregman champions in his new book, *Humankind: A Hopeful History* (Bloomsbury UK, 2020).

What is this radical idea, you ask? Well, that deep-down, humans are fairly decent. Anthropology professor Brian Hare tells Bregman that what makes us the kindest species also makes us the cruellest. We are not innately good. After all, we are only human, and history has no doubt proved our capacity for evil—but just as the typical person is no Michelangelo or Shakespeare, they are also no Stalin.

Humankind is exquisitely insightful.

Bregman is expansive across history, anthropology, crime, psychology, and politics, arguing that our exaggerated pessimism is not only misleading but damaging. If we continue to treat others as self-interested, untrustworthy, and dangerous then for protection, we will become the same.



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Bregman is at his most riveting when unpacking human weaknesses, like how foolishly we fall for evil disguised as good—the Holocaust was once disguised as a fight for German greatness by Nazi propaganda. In the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment, volunteers posing as prison guards were increasingly cruel to the prisoner test subjects. Why? Because they believed it was for the greater good of science, Bregman says.

This conniving tactic could be what enables extremist rubbish to manifest as

all-consuming, horrific chapters of human history. Bregman convinces readers not with framing tricks and sweeping claims but with pure research. Only after delivering pages upon pages of evidence does he make a claim. His premise is not crazy, so why are we so resistant?

Is it our obsession with horror and spectacle? Bregman explains: shock value generates the most clicks and so, by simple supply-and-demand, our world is saturated with cynicism. In William Golding's 1954

book, *Lord of the Flies*, civilised British boys turn savage while stranded on an island. Golding's book is a powerful reminder of how fragile civility seemingly is when law and social judgment are out of the picture. Dutch biologist Frans de Waal called it veneer theory, the idea that civility is a thin shell breakable by poor circumstances. As Bregman puts it, "a tweak in our situation" and "out comes the Nazi in each of us". Golding's cautionary tale became a pillar in our view of humankind, despite one tiny detail—*Lord of the Flies* is fiction.

Bregman uncovered the real story: in 1966, twelve years after Golding's book, an Australian captain incidentally found six Tongan schoolboys on the island of 'Ata. They were stranded for 15 months on an island uninhabited since 1863, when its natives were forced into the Pacific slave trade. So, did Golding's prediction play out? Not at all. No one formed rival gangs. No one was murdered. When one boy fell off a cliff and broke his leg, his fellow castaways set his leg with sticks and leaves. They told him to rest while they did his work for him. *Lord of the Flies* would have left him for dead.

Bregman argues that our exaggerated pessimism is not only misleading but damaging. He explains that if we continue to treat others as self-interested, untrustworthy, and dangerous then for protection, we will become the same. What we think of others determines our own conduct. After all, friendly Easter Island natives were killed by Dutchmen who thought they would be attacked.

That is what economics professor Robert

Frank found in the 1990s, when he tested how treating human nature as egotistical might affect his students. Frank's students became what they were taught: the longer they studied economics, the more selfish they became.

Bregman puts some blame on falsified journalism—twisted information that pushes a shock-value narrative. When Kitty Genovese was dying in front of her apartment, the friend who immediately ran out, without questioning if Kitty's murderer remained, was reported as someone who did not want to get involved. They buried the fact that most of Kitty's neighbours thought she was just drunk. A *New York Times* journalist said, "It would have ruined the story". They buried the fact that police were called multiple times but did not come. Instead, the story became: 38 witnesses sat idle as their neighbour was murdered.

Yet Bregman is not tunnel-visioned, he is expansive across history, anthropology, crime, psychology, and politics. Above all, he makes *Humankind* a kaleidoscope of stories. Stories of soldiers repeatedly emptying and refilling rifles to avoid shooting. Stories of German and British soldiers shaking hands during Christmas ceasefires, and Londoners sipping tea as their windows rattled from bombs. Perhaps, it is time we observed human nature with valid evaluation rather than blind cynicism.

Perhaps, as *Humankind* uncovers, the cynics are the ones out of touch.

Alifa Monjur is studying commerce and law in Sydney.

BOOK REVIEW: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

'Ajob Deshe Alice': Alice's adventures now in Bangla

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland (1865) and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) by Lewis Carroll may be two of the finest pieces of juvenile literature to be published in the last 150 years, but it contains deeper waters than that. Carroll's beautiful storytelling allows one to ponder over broader philosophical questions through a 10-year-old child's lens, and this is what has captivated readers of all ages globally. The two novels were adapted into drama by playwright Jason Pizzarello. In February 2020, Professor Abdus Selim translated it into Bangla with illustrations by Sabyasachi Hazra, which was published by the University Press Limited.

Written as a play, *Ajob Deshe Alice* launches straight into action from the first line. It starts with Alice tumbling down a mysterious—now infamous—rabbit hole to enter a strange land where every individual is raving mad. With the help of a Cheshire Cat, an astute Caterpillar, and a righteous Humpty Dumpty, a confused Alice sets on the conquest of finding her way home.

We are given no context for Alice's background, or who Alice even is. This might confuse a young reader unfamiliar with Carroll's original works, but more notably it also creates a sense of delightful suspense to keep the reader going. The mystery unfolds itself gradually throughout the book, putting Alice in bizarre situations involving strange characters. One after another, these weird episodes help Alice connect the dots on a journey of self-discovery.

The intricacy of Carroll's work lies in how beautifully he crafts conversations—they are comic and philosophic; and they play with one's sense of logic as well as the unbounded imagination of a child. Alice's conversations with the Mad Hatter and Tweedledum and Tweedledee would be the finest examples.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee have a philosophy all their own—they oversimplify matters the way they want to, simultaneously confusing Alice and the reader. "There's no possibility of raining under this umbrella," they tell Alice, consistently reminding one of the diversity of thought among individuals. In front of the Duchess' house, Alice is told by the butler, "Knocking would make sense if there was any door between us. If you knocked the door from the inside, I could easily get you out." Such dialogues scattered across the text raise piercing questions about one's perception of reality, while the

undercurrents of colonial sentiments are hard not to miss. Does one ponder over these sayings, or focus on why there are suddenly two Alices in this Wonderland?

Translating all this could be tricky. It involves initiating a new locality of readers into the world of the translated text, and in turn embellishing the text with the accents and quirks of their language (Bangla in this case). Professor Selim does a brilliant job in this regard. The dialogues he writes are simple and easy-to-comprehend for a young audience, and contain the subtleties of Bangla language and culture. Alice addresses certain characters just how a young Bengali would address their elders. And the language incorporates Bangla proverbs to localise the humour in Alice's encounters.

Sabyasachi Hazra's black and white illustrations certainly add to the aesthetics of this story. They are minimalistic yet intricately detailed. What stood out to me is how each characters' emotions are reflected vividly in the sketches, including Alice's wonder and her confusion, the comic elements of the plot, and the whimsy



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

of wonderland. They set just the right atmosphere for storytelling for both a child and an adult reading.

Jason Pizzarello's adaptation reimagines Alice's wonderland experience by ending it with an unexpected twist. Translator Abdus Selim certainly keeps that twist alive in Bangla, making the reading experience smooth and enjoyable for all readers.

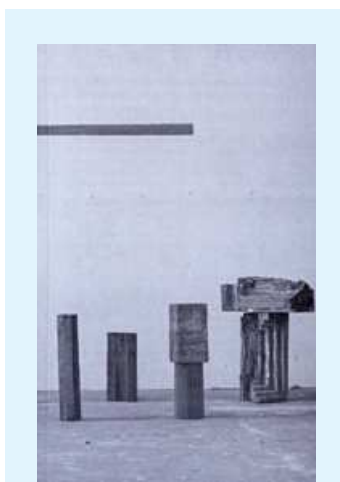
Nahaly Nafisa Khan is a contributor to *Daily Star Books*.

THE SHELF

Must reads out from Bangladesh in 2020

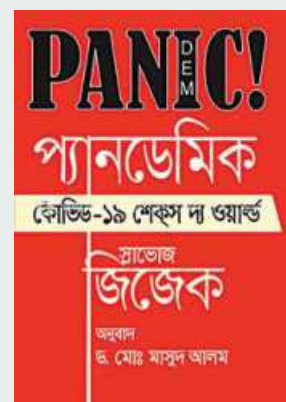
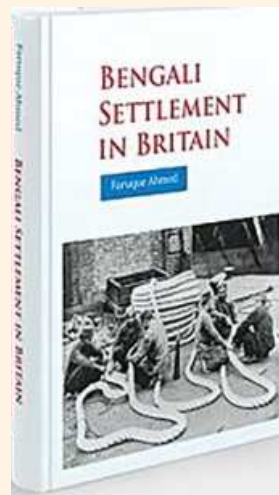
STAR BOOKS DESK

Our shelf today features books from Bangladesh--books that have either been translated into Bangla, books that explore Bengali civilisation over the ages, and books that explore their authors' spiritual journeys through art and poetry, all published in this country in the year 2020.



BENGALI SETTLEMENT IN BRITAIN
(University Press Limited)
Faruque Ahmed
History

Over 100 years before the granting of Bengal's Dewani to the British, Bengalis began taking up jobs as sailors in the British East India Company's ships. The second half of the 19th century saw educated Bengalis travelling to Britain for higher studies. Today, their descendants—British-Bengalis—hold esteemed positions in British business and politics. Ahmed's research traces 400 years of Bengali migration to Britain, and their forgotten stories of triumph and despair.



PANDEMIC! COVID-19 SHAKES THE WORLD
(Oitijjo)
Slavoj Zizek, translated into the Bangla by Dr Muhammad Masud Alam
Non-Fiction

The coronavirus will overturn the foundations of our lives; not only will it bring unbounded misery, but it will also bring about the worst economic catastrophe since the Great Depression. There is no way back—we have to pave a new way forward and make adjustments in our healthcare system. Simply writing it off as a tragedy in our quest to return to normalcy will not do. We must ask: Where were the flaws in our system that we fell into this disaster despite repeated warnings from scientists? More on this in Zizek's book, now available in Bangla.

AL MAHMUD-ER MOHAKABBO: E GOLPER SHESH NEI SHURU O CHILO NAH
(Shorolrekha Prokashon)
Al Mahmud
Poetry

Poet Al Mahmud's epic poem *E Golper Shesh Nei Shuru O Chilo Nah* fills up a large modern-day vacuum in the genre of Bengali epic poetry. With pre-historic stories as his subject, Mahmud explores the creation of the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, their ascent, and Iblis' plot to have them banished from heaven. The book is edited by poet Abid Azam.

