

## OPINION

## Shelves of deceit

A reader takes himself and the world to trial

MURSALIN MOSADDEQUE

When the lockdown was enforced and we were all confined to our homes, I began organising my bookshelf and no longer had stray paperbacks all over the house. I could finally spread my legs while taking a nap. This was received with great enthusiasm and approval of my mother, and confused glares of my cat.

This exercise, however, allowed me to reflect over a few things that I would not have acknowledged otherwise. Most of the books I own were penned by popular and well-regarded writers, peddled by literary circles, anointed by the Booker or the Nobel prize to enjoy commercial success. As much as I have felt good and have had faith in my taste in literature all these years, it now seems not much of it was under my control. I have conformed unknowingly to a role marketed to me.

This culture has turned mortal humans into automatons with very little scope for individuality in terms of reading habits. Once we get assimilated, we are barely capable of hearing what our heart desires enjoy, what our faculties process. No wonder the writers we read are mostly straight males from big cities who belong to the majority ethnic or religious group. Is resistance to this system futile?

If we surrender our literary senses to the system, we inevitably become complicit in the silencing and extinction of voices that the privileged class have deemed unworthy or intentionally want to suppress. We are much more likely to pick up a book these days because we see them everywhere: our social media feeds, sources that are not always attentive to which voices they are helping to disseminate.

Goodreads, labelled as the 'Facebook with books', has been acquired or rather, devoured by the disreputable giant Amazon. To be at the mercy of the Goodreads algorithm seems like a horrifying prospect; the unsuspecting reader becomes a pawn in the battle to dominate the market, while our inquisitiveness undergoes a silent death.

BookTube too—the part of YouTube dedicated to discussing books—relies heavily on following trends in the publishing world and keeping abreast of literary awards. The relatively bigger channels cater mostly to commercial genres produced with a target demographic in mind.

Despite being so susceptible to the parables of the market, however, there are many channels that promote engaging conversation on books and attempt to reflect on their reading habits. The Reading Women challenge for instance is a great initiative. But in some ways it is still falling short since the conversation only tends to include a few selected women writers.

Bookstagram has its niche community for books too, although the dimensions for hosting conversations and intelligent engagement can

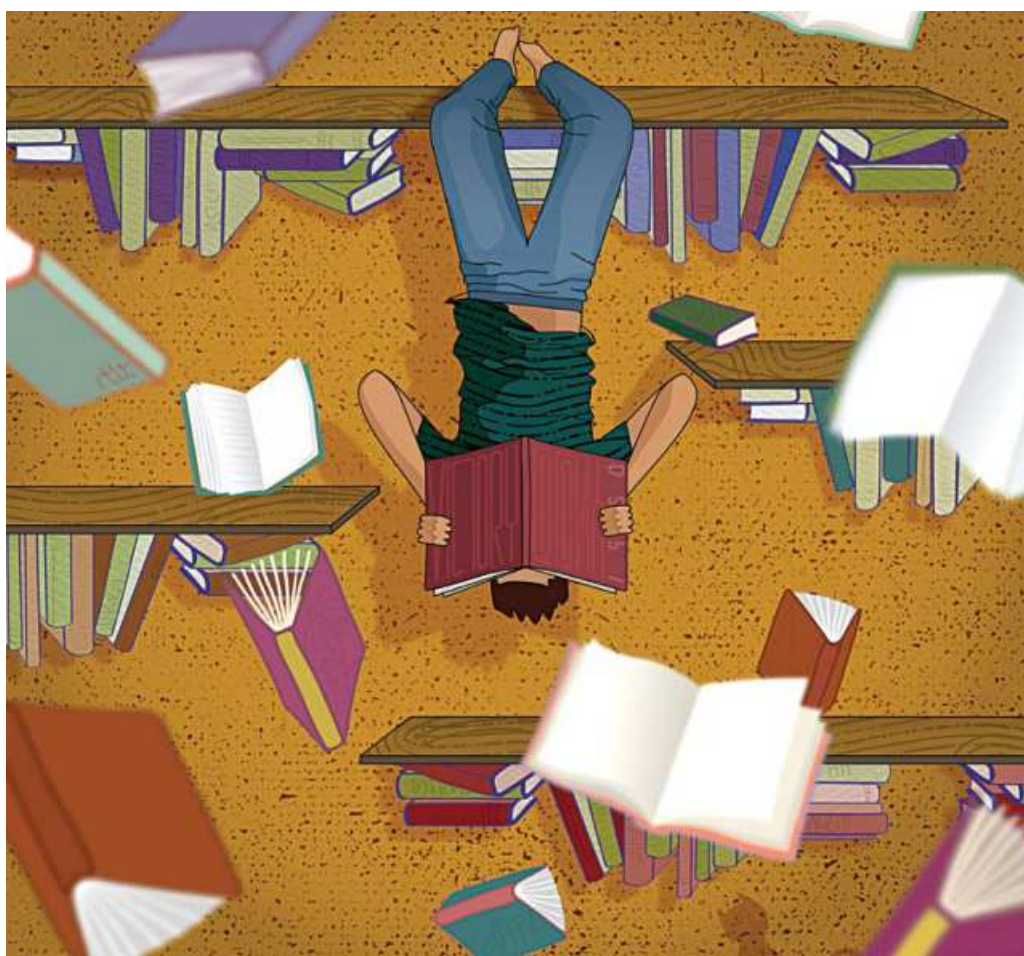


ILLUSTRATION: TANIMA UDDIN

feel a bit restrained here.

Instagram is flooded with images that employ books as only a visual prop. It also tends to showcase a lifestyle that is more about "refinement of taste" centred on books. This curation of an "aesthetic" persona may seem grand at first, but it simply showcases some common and popular books with very little indication to what they contain and mean to the "influencers". One wonders how rejuvenating such discourse can be when the books in question are picked primarily for maintaining social graces.

It is not unreasonable to be distrustful of a culture that treats literature this way. I have very little to say to many around me for whom the act of reading is merely a medium of entertainment. But what about the rest of us, who hold literature as dearly as our own lives?

One name that comes to my mind is that of Michael Orthofer, who single-handedly runs the literary website complete-review.com which, in addition to being an excellent source for literature from across the world, is also a testament to Michael's efforts as a reader

to find great literary works overlooked by the Anglophone world.

Now that I am in my mid-twenties, how a book reaches me is quite different from how I would get in touch with one a decade ago. During those teen years, I would stumble upon a book as though by accident. It would fill me with astonishing delights and joys of surprise. Those days are behind me. I have moved from a suburban town to the capital city and have experienced the advent or rather intrusion of the internet in every aspect of our lives. I have been exposed to other people who read and the cultural landscape around me. All these have exponentially increased the ways in which I come in contact with a book. But the innocent joy of finding something new and unexplored is lost for good. By borrowing from the tongue of this mechanical age, the sensor for detecting wonder has gone offline. I have become numb.

Can we not do any better?

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## PAGES TO PIXELS

## Enola Holmes: The book behind the film

FAHIMA ISLAM LIRA

Sherlock Holmes, the famous detective of 221B Baker Street, has a sister. Her name is Enola Holmes, and despite being much younger than him, she shows powers of deductive reasoning that foretell her advent into the world of mystery and intrigue.

In the new and trending Netflix adaptation, *Enola Holmes* is first and foremost a tale of adventure—young Enola wakes up on the morning of her 16th birthday to find her mother missing. Her brothers, Mycroft and Sherlock, come to the estate to take care of things, but to the uptight, well-paid government official that is Mycroft (Sam Claflin), Enola appears to be an ungoverned, assertive "wild" child. Sherlock (Henry Cavill) is unhelpful, but not unbothered. And Enola, in the wake of this rather perturbing situation, finds herself completely alone, confused and seemingly destined for the well-bred high-society tedium of finishing school. But a puzzling coded message left by her mother sends Enola off to London. There, she meets a boy and a mystery, both vying for her attention.

There are six Enola Holmes stories written by Nancy Springer and the Netflix film starring Millie Bobby Brown is based on the first book of the series: *The Case of the Missing Marquess* (2006).

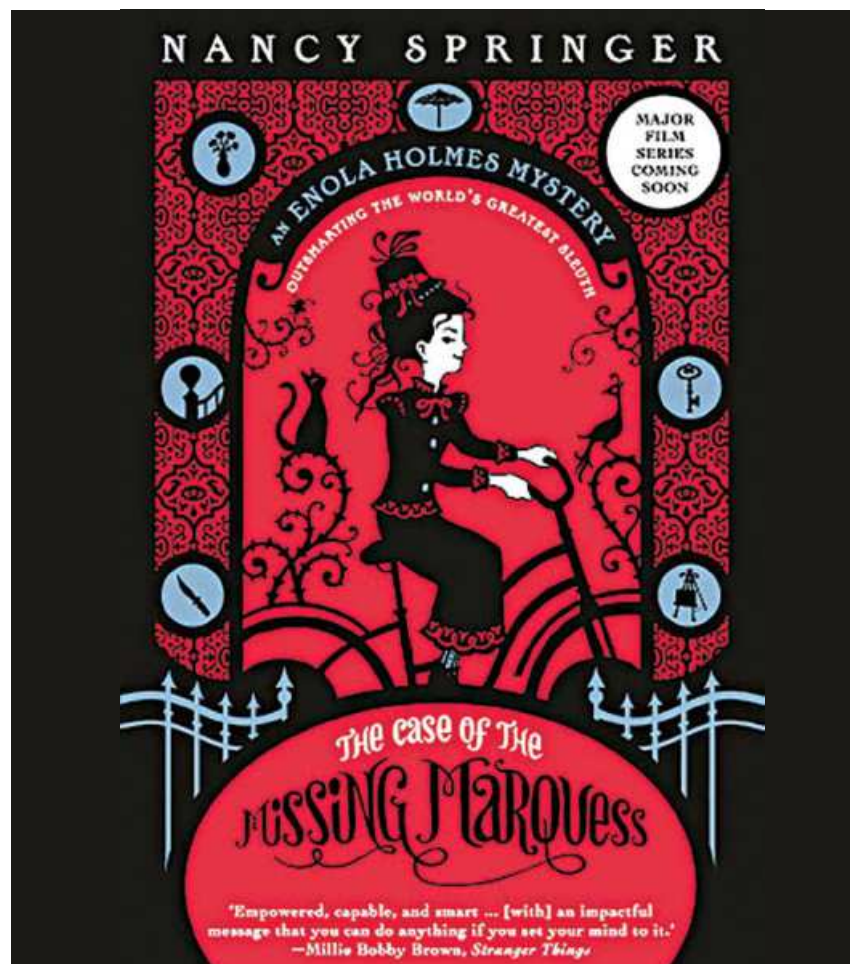
The adaptation shows a decent enough spin-off of the case of the Marquess which Enola tries to solve, but that of Enola herself is vastly different

her to the one terrible weakness of her sex—irrationality. Mycroft, being the sole proprietor of the estate, feels it within his rights to govern their mother's life much in the same way that he tries to govern Enola's in the film.

But for better or worse, these days are to end and Enola is soon to find herself in the putrid dark streets of London surrounded by diseased people crawling on the streets for want of sustenance. Stranger to the city, she finds her way around using her astute observation.

These details which added dimension and texture to Enola's experiences are simplified in the film. Whereas 14-year-old Enola and 12-year-old Tewksbury are just two kids trying to escape danger together in the book, Enola Holmes spikes their friendship with lingering delicate looks and a "cutesy" teen romance. No longer does a wounded, bloody Enola escape a captor boat purely by acting in the moment. No longer does the eccentric, red-haired Madame Leila offer one of the best reveals of the story—instead she has been left out of the adaptation completely.

Springer's book is solemn compared to the colourful and upbeat *Enola Holmes* we find on the screen. But it gives Enola a nuanced character without the ideological upbringing of an enigmatic mother and the burden of living in the shadow of a famous detective brother. Springer's Enola feels more like a real person who learns to carve her own path



from Springer's book.

The book contains a different Enola entirely. One who doesn't run around the grounds of Ferndell alongside her mother in cocooned joy, but instead hides in the nook of a tree branch and walks among the wild rose bushes alone. Since birth she has been weighed down by the burden of being born too late, to a mother too old for childbirth. Her brothers are contemptible, Sherlock the worse among the two. Both sons disapprove of their mother and reduce

in the world despite odds.

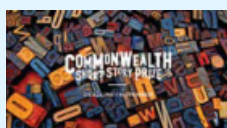
The film presents a light-hearted story that might make you cringe (at the fourth wall breaks especially), but will, at the same time, allow you to escape reality for about 2 hours. It's definitely a fun watch but not something you would recommend to your friends with anything more than a shrug and an implied nod.

Fahima Islam Lira is a contributor to DS Books.

## THE SHELF

## Publishing platforms for South Asian writers

If you're an aspiring writer looking for avenues that will feature your work free of cost, following are some platforms currently taking in writing submissions—some from South Asia, others from around the world!



## The Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2021

Unpublished short stories of between 2,000-5,000 words written in English, Bangla, Chinese, French, Greek, Turkish and several other languages can be submitted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize until November 1, 2020! The competition is open for all commonwealth nationals aged 18 and above; the winning entry will be awarded 5,000 pounds, regional winners will receive 2,500 pounds each, and top submissions will be published online on *Granta* magazine.

## My City, My Home

UK-based Sampad Arts and Heritage organisation are seeking original fiction, poetry, non-fiction, diary entries, and any other form of creative writing from women across Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Birmingham until December 30, 2020. Write ups have to be within 1,000 words in English, Bangla, or Urdu, and focus on the female writer's relationship with their city—be it creative, political, or psychological. The ongoing series will also include writing workshops with Selina Hossain and other eminent writers, and winning entries will be published in a book launched in Dhaka in 2021.



## Kitaab magazine

Throughout the year, Singapore-based South Asian magazine *Kitaab* take in submissions in the form of unpublished short story or novel excerpts (3,000 words), literary criticism, essays, travelogues, and book reviews. Once a year, they also take in submissions for a short story anthology published by the Kitaab press.



## The Aleph Review

A Pakistan-based journal, *The Aleph Review* welcomes essays, short fiction, interviews, art, photography, and poetry in English from all over the world, all of which is published on their online platform. Once a year, they also publish a print anthology comprising all of the above.



## Critical Muslim

An outpost of London's Hurst Publishers, the *Critical Muslim* quarterly journal publishes essays and articles (4,000-8,000 words), and reviews (2,500-3,000 words) exploring the issues and experiences of contemporary Muslim communities.

## EVENTS

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STAR BOOKS DESK

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