



reflection

Classics of The Century

Not every author can understand what interests the child. But a few have and they remain favourites over the decades.

by Prema Srinivasan

THE term "classic" cuts across all groups and categories and the books which are considered as classics have endured generation after generation. They are characterised by the excellence in style, characterisation or significant themes and universality of appeal. For these reasons they serve as models for new writers. Books like Tom Sawyer or Alice's Adventures in Wonderland are not likely to go out of fashion or what is more important, out of the hands of children. Both Alice and Tom belonged to the 19th century which was said to be the golden age of children's literature.

Our own 20th century witnessed a children's book boom and the books that have survived are those that are still read by children and adults. To put it simply we can quote Ezra Pound who said, "A classic is news that stays news." Frances Hodgson Burnett brought out her last but most important book *The Secret Garden* in 1910 which has endured in children's reading lists mainly because of the author's power of imagination. This story of unfriendly little Mary and a country lad Colin is not only about bringing a garden back in bloom but also restoring Mary's cousin to a happy healthy life. If there are lessons on self reliance and cooperation, it is not premeditated by the author.

Children who love to watch things grow, enjoy this book which stresses on the pleasures of achievement and self worth. A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (1962) books were spectacularly successful when first published not only with children but also with adults. One of the pleasures of parenthood a critic confessed, was reading aloud Pooh the bear's antics for his children. The characters are humanised toys rather than animals and the setting is an ideal place called Hundred Acre Wood presided over by the boy, Christopher Robin, to whom the animals - piglet, Pooh the bear,

donkey Eeyore, and Tigger the tiger - go for help from time to time. The adventures of these comrades have amused readers all over the world and still continue to do so.

Meanwhile we have our own Indian writer R. K. Narayan giving us the fun-filled times in Malgudi, his imaginary locale, where Swamy and Friends grew up. This book published in 1935 was an

instant success because the author's excellent understanding of children creates an immediate rapport with the reader. Narayan is merely narrating a series of incidents in a small town in southern India but still he manages to capture the essence of human nature with all its variety. This book was the first of its kind in Indian English writing and is still subscribed as supplementary reader in schools and junior colleges. Then there is Professor Tolkien who wanted to give children fairy stories which will introduce them side by side to poetry, history and the sciences.

barely 13 when she began writing her private thoughts. Born in a Jewish family she was in hiding from the persecuting Nazis in Amsterdam along with her sister, parents and four others. Two years later they were all captured and sent to concentration camps where Anne died in a typhus epidemic. However her diary survived to tell the world the horrors of the Nazi regime and remains a powerful document of indictment of the infamous Hitler's regime.

E.B. White's *Charlotte Web* (1952) is short but a straight forward story that has weathered the passage of time because of its endearing characterisation - Little pig Wilbur - delighted successive generations of children who still continue to enjoy the craftsmanship of E.B. White. Charlotte the spider who tries to save Wilbur appears almost human; a loyal intelligent, warm, character and

brand of courage and perseverance. The Hobbit has been a prolonged success as a "literary fairy tale" and in the United States you could actually buy, a few years ago, buttons which said Tolkien is Hobbit forming!

The *Diary of Young Girl* (1947) by Anne Frank. This classic non-fiction became the best known personal memoir of the Holocaust years. Anne was

not surprisingly most young readers are tearful when she dies. But life continues through her offspring and the barnyard life goes on gently reminding us that passage of life is inevitable. All things pass and change and childhood itself is only a brief season and the reader is enriched by the truths he or she will learn from this book which is for all seasons.

youthful readers. Rosemary Sutcliffe, British writer for young people, has adroitly handled fictionalised history, particularly the Roman period in Britain and the earlier Dark Ages. She has written a number of very entertaining, informative books set in this era. Dawn Wind (1961) is an outstanding piece of writing which will surely find a permanent niche in the realm of chil-

the run of the mill fantastic stories. Willy Wonka's vast chocolate empire and the four spoilt children are enough inducements for children not to forget this lively book. It is a book which children will choose on their own as Dahl is extremely readable and for a while his name remained synonymous with substantial children's books. Virginia Hamilton, 1975 Newbery award winner, is a black writer whose books touch the reader's heart by the author's straightforward method of story telling.

Her Sweet whispers, *Brother Rush* (1982) is a ghost story with a difference. The ghost element is there only to stress the human relationship factor. The problems of single parenthood, drug abuse and genetically inherited diseases are discussed, but the story is not simply a problem novel. It is a heart warming story of a young girl coming to terms with her life by understanding completely her chequered past. The book proves to be a compelling read and for that reason is likely to stand the test of time. I would like to conclude my list of "Classic for all times from the 20th century" with our own Ruskin Bond's *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* (1991). Autobiographical in nature these tender nostalgic miniatures by Bond have won the Sahitya Academy award for the author. Ruskin Bond recreates his empathy with nature and the poor mountain children in the form of memorable short stories which speaks to the child in everyone.

The appeal of the classic may remain for a surprisingly long time. Certain characteristics like imaginative power, readability and the ability to reach out to the "inner child" are perhaps common to all enduring children's books, including those mentioned. Time, an authentic guide always, will ultimately tell.

Courtesy of The Hindu

fiction

The Birth of a Freedom Fighter

by Mchit Ul Alam

JEEBAN'S face turned red as he contemplated the matter. He knew his consent meant death. Death for himself, for his mother and father, for everybody in the family. Only a while ago he saw his mother at prayer counting the beads on the rosary. She hardly left the prayer-mat nowadays, fearing that harm would befall upon anybody in the family if she did that. Jeeban momentarily recalled that Rafique's mother had no knowledge about his whereabouts when Rafique started disappearing from the house and off long before the crackdown had taken place. That Rafique was not sitting beside him, his round eyes glowing in the dark.

On the table his books lay one upon the other like corpses after a carnage. They were now shoved aside by Belal to create a space where he now put a small grey sack that crouched itself like a giant bug. The grenades peered through the gaping mouth of the sack. But Monju, who came by the same back door as Belal, carefully dug out one from inside the sack for him to see. The grenade was brass-coloured, the size of a custard-apple. The splinters shone in small raised squares. Belal knelt watching for his reactions through his coffee-coloured glass-frame. Monju smiled softly under his thin moustaches. His eyes held out assurance. Rafique, who sat on the edge of his bed, encouraged him: "Take a good look, man, but don't unpin the thing." But he instinctively declined Monju's offer to feel the grenade.

Reading his eyes, Monju said, "It takes only seven seconds to explode when you unpin it." "Can you keep this sack until we come back for the next operation?" Belal asked taking the grenade from Monju and thrusting it back into the sack.

"Not really, I'm afraid my father will come to know about it." The other day, a week after the crackdown, standing under the coconut tree his father told him, "Son, be careful whom you associate with." In the yard a small pool of water had gathered as it had rained the previous night. His mother's ducks surrounded the pool, their small bodies jostled against each other, their gregarious calling filling the air. The chickens were also freely

tottering pecking and crowing, crowing and pecking. The duck-shit and the chicken-shit spotted the whole veranda even by this early morning. And his politician brother-in-law would have sung his protest against the birds if his father-in-law had not been present there.

Jeeban blankly looked out the window. The light from his room fell squarely on a fair portion of the banana grove that almost clung to his window. He does not sleep in this room anymore, but uses it only in the evening for his study. His friends waited for an extra second before they disappeared by the back door like a group of ghosts. From the pile of books on his table he drew one to read only to realise that his mind was not in it. He was too disturbed to concentrate. The letter he received that morning was hand-written in red ink warning him against appearing in the examination under the occupying government. He rued the prospects he would miss by dropping.

The liberation war came at a time when he was not ready for it. It was his first year in college, and he already chosen his dream-girl. She was his classmate, a Hindu girl. Her lips were a touch black, and 'she secretly smoked' as his friends would tease him. Where was she now? He heard that the Punjabi army torched the houses and massacred the people at Pathar Ghata. Even their house at Kazir Dewry was a target. Many Hindu families in their neighbourhood had hurriedly dumped their things in their house before they left for safer places. The great march of the refugees across the border at Ramgarh had already started.

Somebody called to him from the main house for the night meal. He switched off his reading light. It was pitch dark outside in the yard now. He cautiously stepped on the narrow veranda that linked his reading room with the main house. For some architectural miscalculation the foundation of the reading room was laid a foot below that of the main house. Since the time of the crackdown the uneven level of the house had bothered many of his relatives who had come to take shelter in their house. Two of his sisters were the first batch of refugees with their husbands and children. The displacement was a massive shock for

the husbands, and as if finding nothing else to exhaust their anger on, they chose the two-tiered house as the eyecore. His brother-in-law, the one, an engineer at a reputed firm, thought his father had obnoxious taste.

The dining table was crowded. The children were yet to finish their meals. One of his elder sisters who, it was said, combined the prettiness of their mother and the haughtiness of their father, took upon herself the job to marshal the kitchen. White rice and beef were being cooked all the time, with a plentiful serving of dal (lentil soup). The children, having to remain confined indoors, had become voracious eaters. The adults had too. But the war had not yet cut the supply line. Food was not in shortage. However, the dominant sister knew all the tricks of operating the children for not having finished yet. Jeeban and two of his nephews were teenage boys, whose status was undecided. Nevertheless they sat with the grownup members. But when she saw him she squinted her eyes like a pair of blades: "Who were the boys that I saw entering your room?"

The question suddenly alerted the adults who were hanging about the dining room and talking, smelling the food unawares. From their on-going discussion on the whereabouts of Sheikh Mujib, India's role, Pakistan's military strength and many such topics, they shifted to a more immediate concern that involved the very safety of everybody in the house.

"Yes, don't take any wrong step. You safety is our safety, you know," his engineer brother-in-law sermonized.

Jeeban was upset to see his elders forging unity so fast on the point of security. He felt relieved that he refused the grenades. At the same time the courage of Rafique and his peers continued to intimidate him.

The dining table was freshly laid with bowls of cooked rice and beef and dal. It was the men's turn now, the women would eat in the last round. The curfew had been clamped from dusk to dawn everyday, and as the evening fell the whole locality slipped into a noiseless torpor under fear of threat. Jeeban's father's house was a large one, and now too many people were living in it, so absolute silence was not possible. Worrying, they might shut up all at once

at one point or another, then they would hear the footsteps of an occasional pedestrian who passed by the lane in front of their house, braving the curfew. The local graveyard was about a hundred yards away, and the thought about it increased the silence of the night ten times in Jeeban's mind. Some squabbling dogs, however, could also be heard busy scavenging the dustbin near the edge of the graveyard. A single light bulb burnt in the dining room. A yellowish light caught at different angles the faces engrossed in eating.

Fear had sharpened the appetite of the eaters. Their appetite for talking had certainly increased, and as such the dinner was going well when suddenly the women in the kitchen shrieked out in terror and then hushed up as if they had received an invisible warning.

The dominant sister rushed in screaming, "Abba, Abba, the Punjabees are at the gate."

His father, generally a hot-headed man, instantly rose from his chair. Rameej, his eldest son, accompanied him. Fear of death was writ large across all the faces.

Somebody had switched on the veranda light. But the man in the front, who was obviously the leader of the team, waved his hand impetuously. The light was immediately put off. They were four in number.

"Salemalekum" father said.

"Walekumsalam," they chorused.

Fear crept through the adults, but they lined up behind the father, while the dominant sister was most careful to hush up all the children with violent gestures, and she held Jeeban by the neck as a cat holds her puppy and almost had him flown in the air before he found himself locked in the bathroom.

"What danger you've brought in I can't even figure out," she whispered to herself before she bolted the door.

As the soldiers entered the house their khaki dress shone brown, and the dominant sister stationed herself behind the curtain of the kitchen door, as if she would bear witness to what was going to happen in the next few minutes.

The front room where guests were received was small, and under the edgencies of the crackdown all pictures and calendars that would have suggested the slightest notion of begin

an anti-Pakistani had been long ago removed, and replaced by such flat commonplace talismans as "Allahu," and "Pakistan Zindabad." A newspaper picture of Quaid-e-Azam, stuck to the wall, lost its glue and its top edge dropped. The paint of the wall had paled the picture so much that the soldiers didn't even notice it. The father now wished for his dear life that the picture had attracted the soldiers.

There was a pair of double-sofas, facing each other, and a single sofa by the door. The four soldiers occupied the double sofas, and the father sat by himself in the single one, while his sons and sons-in-law stood all around.

The havilder had a hard face with a big moustaches shooting upward at the corners. One of the edge of his upper lip a large black mole displayed itself like an artificial mole, so when he talked it seemed like coming off any moment. Feeling suffocated he took off his green cap exposing a shiny bald under the light. He was a big man, but he felt safe to rest his shot gun comfortably on his lap, his grip clutching it on the ready. The other three soldiers didn't obviously share the same instinct of safety as their leader, but neither did they relax themselves so much as to lean against the sofa. They held their rifles erect, the nozzles threatening the ceiling.

"Have some tea, Khan Sahib," the father offered.

"No need, we'll just leave," the havilder said in pure Punjabi with a voice that was surprisingly soft compared to his burly figure. "We've come to check a few things, Maulana Sahib."

Addressed thus, the father in the beginning did not know what to say, but he slowly raised his hand and caressed his beard, his effort at hiding his nervousness. The local people had asked him to form a peace committee which he declined. Were he to be questioned about that!

The havilder started talking imperiously. "Maulana Sahib, the Awamis are all Hindus, or agents of India, they want to break our dear Pakistan, Sheikh Mujib is now paying badly in a Rawalpindi jail for his treachery..."

There was a hushed silence inside the room as soon as Mujib's name was

mentioned. The elder two sons were standing beside the big sofa near the door, their faces darkened, and they silently spelled out the best chosen slang directed toward the speaker, while the politician son-in-law, who was standing at the entrance of the other door gave out a squeaking sound, which sounded more like an approval, and from which the havilder drew more confidence and said in an aspirated voice that nobody should ever think of breaking Pakistan.

The tea was served with some homemade pithas on a tray. The engineer son-in-law came forward to carefully hand over the cups to each of the sepoys. The havilder and the jawans drank the tea first in quick gulps as if they had come for this. Then they slowly munched at the pithas, without a shade of suspicion going across their faces. The havilder, however, didn't loosen his grip on the shot gun, as he pushed himself forward and brought his mouth close to the father. The father offered his ear in obedience: "Problem is that young people don't understand why Pakistan was born. So, they're turning into guerrillas - what they call Muktibahini."

The words almost came to the father's mouth that Muktibahini was not merely confined to Ake. But instead he kept his patience, caressing his beard.

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To be continued

Errata

Last week's piece *Electra* (should be *Ectetra*) by Nuzhat Amin Mannan under Reflection column gave a weird reading because of some gross oversights. We apologize to the writer for the mistakes. The corrected version will be published in our next Saturday page.

Literary Editor