

A tale, with graceful epistemological digressions

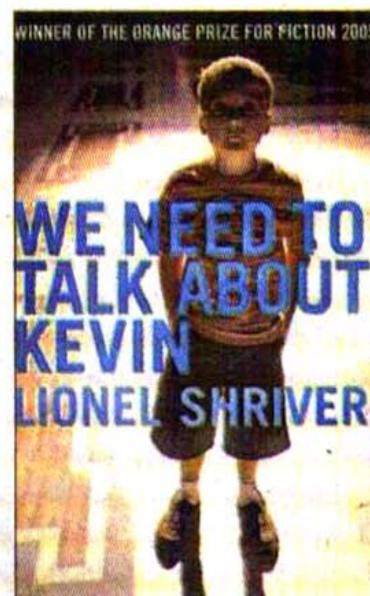
Shabnam Nadiya is drawn to the pains of a mother

TO Eva Khatchadourian, motherhood is "a foreign country". One can hardly ignore the allusion which begs the question: how differently do they do things there?

Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2005. The novel deals with the peculiarly western phenomenon of school shootings. This theme has been dealt with by other writers (DBC Pierre's phenomenally enjoyable *Vernon God Little* immediately springs to mind), but not quite from the perspective that Shriver uses.

The story is told by the mother of the mass murderer, Eva Khatchadourian. The tale unfolds through a series of letters she writes to Frank, her absent husband. We're told early on that Kevin, her teenaged son, is in jail for a school shooting where most of his victims were his schoolmates. The very repetitive triteness of the murders lends focus to other themes that Shriver examines: the dark underbelly of motherhood, the gender imbalance extant in (even) modern parenting roles and the concept of "family" the shining palliative. The glowing picture of the new mother gazing at a mewling infant in rapture is the one we're accustomed to. The confusion, no, utter turmoil that a woman undergoes prior to, during and following childbirth, is not something that any of our cultures want to spend too much time pondering. Shriver herself has spoken of "the emotionally prescriptive nature of motherhood" this is what the novel depicts in a slightly exaggerated and unsavoury fashion.

Eva Khatchadourian examines her life through these letters trying to pinpoint the "mistakes" that led to her son's turning into a monster. Her pre-motherhood life was pretty good: good marriage, good career, what else could she want? The tender comfort of marriage exists for her in that period of her life: "...coming home to deliver the



We Need to Talk about Kevin
Lionel Shriver
Serpent's Tail

narrative curiosities of my day, the way a cat might lay mice at your feet: the small, humble offerings that couples proffer after foraging in separate backyards."

It was Frank who wanted to "take the stake of all we had and place it all on this outrageous gamble of having a child"; Eva merely acquiesced to his need. From the very birth itself, Eva's unsuitability to be a mother, and especially mother to this particular child, is made apparent. There is no love lost between mother and son from birth onwards, Kevin rejects his mother's breast, is so difficult that unable to find a nanny who lasts, Eva is forced to leave her flourishing business and relocate to the suburbs (which she hates) Kevin consumes her life.

All this Eva treats as Kevin's personal vendetta against her. She sees his behaviour from early childhood as psychologically abnormal. She is convinced that Kevin refuses to potty-

train even at six merely to spite her, so that she is forced to the unpleasant task of changing his soiled diapers, that he cut up her business documents on purpose (no innocent childish play is he ever engaged in), as an adolescent he masturbates in front of her and mutilates his own sister out of vengeance and so on. Franklin, on the other hand, seems to belong to the breed of monkeys who neither see, nor hear, nor say any evil. At every point of confrontation he opts to side with his son rather than his wife.

Kevin's aggression, almost from his very birth, seems over the top. Not that there aren't little monsters out there: this is, after all, an age when damaged children walk over the fallen bodies of other children. But Eva's accusations at times seem to border on the hysterical. As an infant, a child and a teenager, Kevin is not allowed a single quality that allows a reader to empathize with him.

Once Eva's daughter is born, an angel child (but then who wouldn't be compared to the devil-spawn that Kevin is?), the Khatchadourian family clearly lines up against each other along the gender divide the girls on one side, the boys on the other.

Things are not helped along by the fact that neither parent attempts to conceal their preferences regarding their offspring. They muddle along their lives (which are interspersed by Kevin's various offences) until one Thursday, Kevin takes a crossbow to school.

The idea presented that 'some women just don't like their children is shocking to a certain extent, fed on the pap of sacred motherhood as we are, but really, does it make monsters of either the mothers or the children? Did Eva's emotional distance from her son create the evil in Kevin?

Although ostensibly examining the root causes, Eva herself seems to accept culpability, egged on by everyone around her. Shunned by commu-

nity (the checkout girl at her supermarket breaks her eggs), abandoned by husband, blamed by her son, she is now being sued by the family of one of Kevin's victims for being a "bad mother" (apparently this actually happened in the wake of the school shootings that seemed to dominate the US media during the 1990s). Eva's letter writing is thus her act of self-flagellation as is her continued harrowing visits to her imprisoned child.

How reliable a narrator is Eva? We are not allowed a point of view other than Eva's, although she generously provides the reader with Franklin's probable responses to her overtures. She is not completely unaware of her side-stepping: "I may be bounded by that why question, but I wonder how hard I've really tried to answer it. I'm not sure that I want to understand Kevin, to find a well within myself so inky that from its depths what he did makes sense. Yet little by little, led kicking and screaming, I grasp the rationality of Thursday." It is these little touches that serve to "humanize" the clinical aridity of the person that Eva is.

In fact, none of the three central characters are much likable. Having likable characters is not a prerequisite for a good novel, of course, but the emotional disconnect that one feels for Eva's self-preoccupied pseudo-analysis, Kevin's sullen dysfunction and Franklin's bluff, uncomprehending bonhomie is unable to be overcome at least for this reader. To be honest: that's also what makes it a powerful book in certain ways.

The problem is not the writing itself: Shriver is a novelist who knows what she's doing. The prose is more than readable and Eva's graceful epistemological digressions pace the novel as the story of what happened gradually unfolds to its inevitable and horrific climax. The problem isn't even that none of the central characters not Eva herself, not Kevin nor his

father Franklin arouse much admiration or even sympathy.

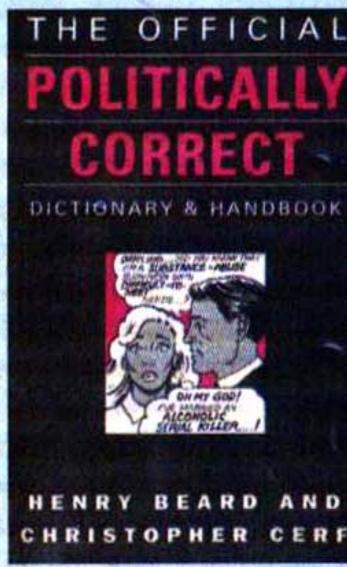
The trouble is that although the book blurb says and Eva herself reiterates that this is a search for why what happened happened, at the end of the book the reader is not left with any answers. Pat answers are not expected, but the exploration of the tragedy leaves a lot to be desired. In the end, it is not the "why" but an engagingly presented description of "how" that the novel settles for.

One limitation of the book I cannot discuss without giving away the secret so zealously guarded throughout the narrative. However, Frank's conspicuous absence in the post-murder fallout that Eva keeps on describing is enough to reveal the horrific "twist" that Shriver hoards so carefully: Kevin also murders his father and sister. To be honest, I found this attempt to create mock suspense somehow dishonest towards the reader, especially coming from a novelist who is gifted enough to make the epistolary novel, what is really a contrived fictional form, credible.

Eva's bleak story is presented in such elegant prose that it serves to conceal these limitations. However, the book is ultimately redeemed by the mother and son visits, Eva religiously going to see Kevin as he serves out his time in prison. Here (especially in the final paragraphs) for the first and final time, Kevin seems credible: no longer a storybook ogre, his heart-weary acquiescence to the inevitability of their bond matches the pertinacity of his mother. Here, through shared and acknowledged vulnerability, they seem to become mother and son. It is in these scenes that the heart is finally engaged, that the reader finally realises that the true victims of the story are Kevin and Eva, victims of motherhood.

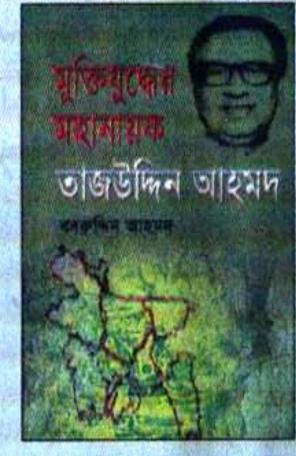
Shabnam Nadiya writes fiction and has translated Bengali short stories into English.

At a glance



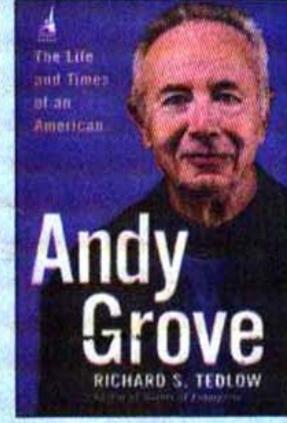
The Official Politically Correct Dictionary & Handbook
Henry Beard, Christopher Cerf
Grafton

In an age where sensibilities matter, this is a work which will leave many issues cleared for readers. Of course, along the way you might stumble quite a few times, before getting up to laugh about it. For there is much that is hilarious here, obviously with a dash of the pretentious in terms of language. You will love it all.



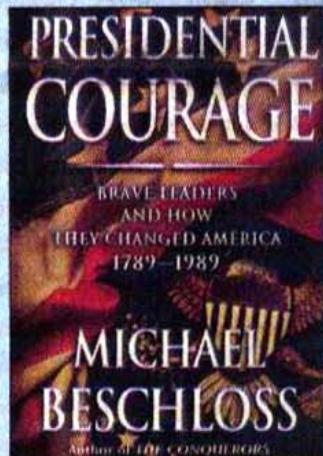
Muktijuddher Mahanayok Tajuddin Ahmad
Badruddin Ahmad
Nauroz Shahitya Shambhar

The author makes known his deep affection and abiding respect for the man who waged a war to free Bangladesh. Tajuddin Ahmad, he feels and so do others with him, was always a victim of intrigue in his party. What hurt even more was that in the end he needed to find his way out of government, thus parting company with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.



The Life and Times of Andy Grove
Richard S. Tedlow
Penguin

This is a story of a great survivor. Grove came out alive from the depredations of the Second World War, never having had any reason to believe he could not rebuild life from scratch. It was plain confidence, in addition to organisational skills, that led him on. And that is how he influenced Intel. It is an inspiring work for ambitious people.



Presidential Courage
Brave Leaders and How They
Changed America 1789-1989
Michael Beschloss
Simon & Schuster

Beschloss has always been fascinated by American history. This work is just one more example of how he has striven to weave the many strands of that history and bring them together. Here he selects a few presidents, zeroes in on their moments of decision and informs the reader why those moments eventually accorded greatness to those men. It is a fascinating read.

Images of an artist's life

Takir Hossain finds much happiness in a biography

HAMIDUZZAMAN KHAN A Modern Sculptor

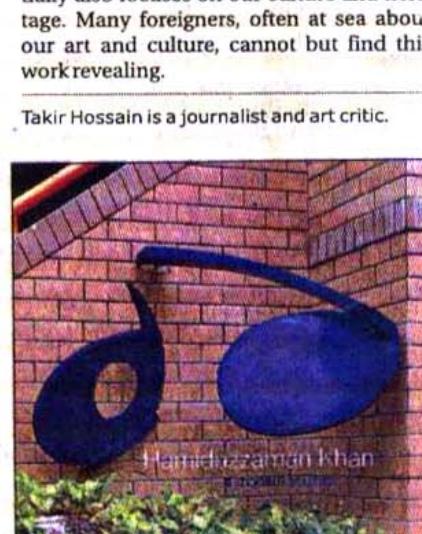
Such kinds of publications are rare in our country. The paper quality is quite up to the standard and the printing is superb. The book has been admirably edited. It is certainly a matter of great satisfaction that such a book has been published in our country.

Eminent art critic Nazrul Islam's worthy article has added a different aesthetic dimension to the book. Nazrul Islam has tried to depict the significant chapters of Hamiduzzaman Khan's life and achievements in his piece. From the sculptor's childhood to his present, all the moments come up in the book gradually and present a mature mind.

A few years ago, Hamiduzzaman planned to publish the book after he had been overseas and had met foreign artists. It was especially when he visited Korea that he felt the need for a book that would introduce others to the kind of work which he had done in Bangladesh. This book not only depicts Hamiduzzaman's works but essentially also focuses on our culture and heritage. Many foreigners, often at sea about our art and culture, cannot but find this work revealing.

Hamiduzzaman Khan is a journalist and art critic.

Takir Hossain is a journalist and art critic.



Hamiduzzaman Khan - A Modern Sculptor
Edited by Akhtar Jahan Ivy, Haradhan Dhar

An accumulation of awakened senses

Tulip Chowdhury falls in love with life's serene aspects

PAULO Coelho, the Brazilian born master storyteller, has done it again: he has presented readers with a piece of a gem. This astonishing, breathtaking book *Like a Flowing River* awakens the reader and rekindles the aesthetic senses. It is an intimate collection of the writer's reflections and short stories. These are tales of the living and the dying. They are tales of life and love, of the choices made in life. Some of the tales are humorous and others are serious. However, they all tell profound tales. The tales delve into human lives and draw out wisdom. Like real life experiences we seem to learn by trial and error as we go through the narratives of the writer.

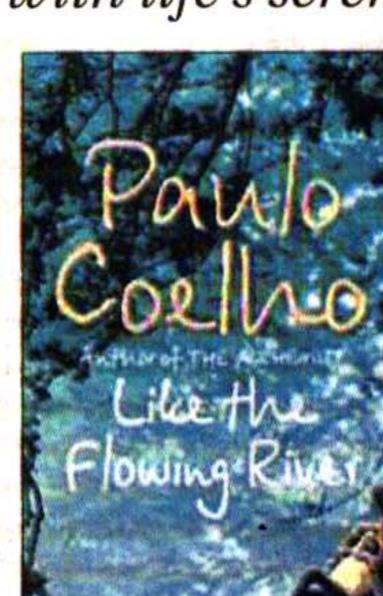
The book is a collection of anecdotes, ideas and autobiographical drafts and represents fascinating observations. Deriving inspiration from work and experience, Coelho offers visions of his own philosophical thoughts. The book is named *Like the Flowing River* for the serene views of life that the writer offers. The stories hold the synopsis of everyday life, stories that throw light on love and the ambiguity of life. The reader often finds himself or herself identifying with the views of the writer. The facts presented are believable and touch the cords of truth.

In *Like the Flowing River* there is a

reflection about "A Day at the Mill". Here the writer sets about clearing up weeds from his garden. At one point he feels sorry for the weeds for they too are life and life of any kind is precious. He is perplexed between the desire to create a beautiful garden and the destruction of the weeds. However, there dawns within him the truth that life will have some undesirable portions. Therefore, he comes up with this lesson: "If something undesirable grows in my soul, I ask God to give me the same courage to mercilessly pluck it out."

In "The Funny Thing About Human Beings", Coelho writes, "We are in such a hurry to grow up and then we long for our lost childhood. We make ourselves ill earning money and then spend all our money on getting well again. We think so much about the future that we neglect the present and thus experience neither the present nor the future. We live as if we were never going to die and die as if we had never lived."

The writer's perceptions on life are revealing and are like a window to our own outlook on life. The ideas involving real life experience are no doubt a realistic approach to life and do not fail to influence the reader into coming up with his or her own life axioms. It is an excellent literary forum for anyone who is looking for one.



Like the Flowing River
Paulo Coelho
HarperCollins

Coelho's writing is beautifully poetic and his messages in the writings are no count. He can make his readers think, can make them sad or make them smile. The pieces recorded in *Like the Flowing River* are life enhancing.

Coelho was a nonconformist and a seeker of the new. When, in the excitement of 1968, the guerilla and hippy movements took hold in a Brazil ruled by a repressive military regime, Coelho embraced progressive politics and joined the peace and love generation. He sought spiritual experiences traveling all over Latin America. *Like the Flowing River* is like a river falling into the sea, it is a culmination of his experiences, an accumulation of all the awakened senses. The observations are at the zenith of his gathering of wisdom in life.

Many of the pieces in *Like the Flowing River* reflect human nature. In one the writer says, "It is part of human nature to judge others very severely and when the wind blows against us, always to find an excuse for our own misdeeds or to blame someone else for our mistakes." There follows a revealing story to justify this point of view, a story that the reader should read.

There are times when Coelho speaks of simple people and yet reveals great truths. He and his wife meet an old woman in Rio de Janeiro. The woman lives on a wheelchair. There are two plastic bags hanging at the back of the wheelchair. She sleeps in shop doorways and lives off handouts. As the writer and his wife watch the old

woman take out two packets of milk from one of the plastic bags and give them to two beggars who stand near her. The old woman explains to Coelho, "People are charitable to me and so I must be charitable to others."

Coelho speaks of the greatest gift humans can give each other and that is love. Love conquers all. He writes, under the title "Remaining Open to Love", about the need for love for everyone. The writer says, "When we can do nothing else, we can still love, without expecting any reward or change or gratitude. When we do this, the energy of love will begin to transform the universe about us."

The writer's insight into people's life is astounding. The book is like a vivid picture of people in different scenarios of life. It is richly authentic in its period details and fresh and contemporary in its style. The stories bounce back and forth presenting unforgettable events. The writer can be called a fabulist of ideas. The tales seem to touch one's heart and shake the senses awake. The book is like a good friend that you return to repeatedly to hear the good words. Once you read the book you will surely keep it near the hand to pick it up again and again.

Tulip Chowdhury teaches, writes fiction and composes poetry.