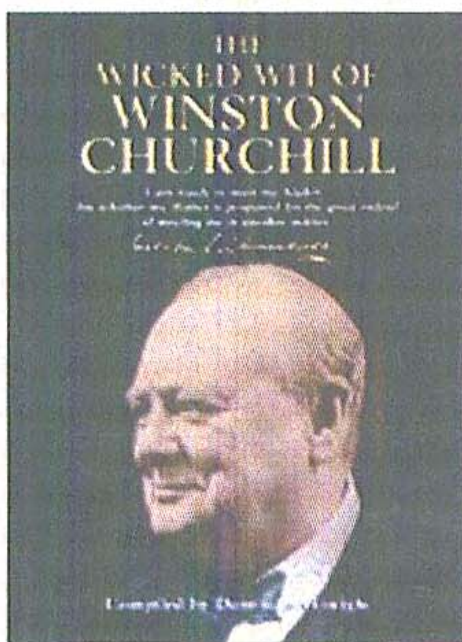


One man, his politics and his humour

Syed Badrul Ahsan goes through a collection of Churchillianisms, laughing all the way

POLITICS without repartee and politicians without wit can often turn out to be an abrasive concoction. And it is especially in these present, some would say mediocre, times that a sense of humour in politicians remains acute by its conspicuous absence. We are rather unfortunate that ours happens to be an age when, for much of the time, we laugh at politicians rather than laugh with them. That is the pity, given that there used to be a time when men like Piloo Mody, Atal Behari Vajpayee, Syed Badruddin, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan injected good doses of humour into their politics and left people feeling pretty light-hearted, even jocular, about conditions that were otherwise quite weighty.

It was such humour, an abundance of it, which shone through Winston Spencer Churchill. Well, he may have been a bad student in school and then, paradoxically, a tough wartime leader for Britain. But he was also a clear thinker and a good writer, as his speeches and his books were to prove so conclusively. What was, however, an even bigger quality in Churchill was his natural ability to lighten up a serious situation through barbs that left everyone around rolling in laughter. Imagine the wit that comes with the ego when he describes himself thus: "We are all worms, but I do believe I am a glow worm." It is such gems of humour that Dominique Enright packs her work with. All too often, the Churchillianisms, if one may so use the term, that come through this collection leave one most amazed at the sheer ability of one individual to produce such a long stream of humour. Think of the time in 1900, when Britain's future prime minister went about seeking votes in an upcoming parliamentary election. As he goes around shaking hands with some constituents, one of them snaps at him: "Vote for you? I would rather vote for the devil." An unfazed Churchill responds, "I know, but if your friend decides not to run, can I count on your support?" Such repartee, you can be sure, will leave even a hardened detractor entertaining second thoughts about his political position.



The Wicked Wit of Winston Churchill
Compiled by Dominique Enright
Michael O'Mara Books Limited

Sometimes there was the obviously rude that came into Churchill's attitude to others. Remember that snide comment on half-naked fakirs when it came to speaking of Mahatma Gandhi? Churchill did not even spare his political contemporaries in Britain. "An empty cab drew up outside 10 Downing Street, and out of it stepped Clement Attlee." That was how he denigrated a foremost politician of his day. Once, as a loud lawmaker was busy talking on the phone, Churchill asked his young aide about the identity of the parliamentarian. The aide shortly returned, to tell him who it was and that he was talking to Scotland. "I know," replied Churchill, "but ask him to use the phone." In one of the more memorable of his wartime speeches, Churchill would

declaim: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills..." As a loud roar of appreciation went up, it is said Churchill muttered to a colleague nearby, "And we'll fight them with the butt ends of broken beer bottles because that's bloody well all we've got."

The rudeness was sometimes of staggering proportions. Asked by a young MP if the maiden speech he had just made in Parliament should have contained more fire in it, Churchill replied coldly, "What you should have done is put the speech into the fire." His opinion of Arthur Balfour was searing: "If you wanted nothing done, Arthur Balfour was the best man for the task. There was no equal to him." The British leader had nothing but intense dislike for France's Charles de Gaulle, who in turn was not willing to be treated as anyone but an equal by other Allied wartime leaders. This is what Churchill said of De Gaulle: "He looks like a female llama who has just been surprised in her bath." He was forever on an assault on Attlee, who to him was "a sheep in sheep's clothing." And he was scathing about Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov: "I have never seen a human being who more perfectly represented the modern concept of a robot." He was also clear about the way he felt about Stafford Cripps, London's ambassador to Moscow in December 1940. Cripps simply was "a lunatic in a country of lunatics." Of US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Churchill came forth with a mere three words, "Dull, Duller, Dulles."

There were of course people, generally individuals at the receiving end of Churchill's attacks or irritated by his wisecracks, who sometimes hit back. One of these was his American ally, President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The US leader once blandly remarked, "Churchill has a hundred ideas a day, of which four are good ideas." Lord Beaverbrook was merciless. Churchill, he stated, "has the habit of breaking the rungs of any ladder he puts his foot on." Aneurin Bevan had this to say about the man: "He is a man suffering from petri-

fied adolescence." Margot Asquith, Herbert Asquith's second wife, was certainly harsh in her view of the wartime prime minister. Churchill, according to her, "would kill his own mother just so he could use her skin to make a drum to beat his own praises."

Despite all the attacks on him, of course in response to his attacks on others, there was no mistaking the natural sense of humour that flowed through Churchill. As a young MP in 1900, he sported a moustache. A woman soon came up to him and told him loudly, "There are two things I don't like about you, Mr. Churchill --- your politics and your moustache." Churchill's satisfying retort must have left the woman floored: "My dear madam, pray do not disturb yourself. You are not likely to come into contact with either." In his advancing years, Churchill was confronted by his young grandson, who wanted to know if he was really the greatest man in the world. And this was the reply: "Of course I am the greatest man in the world. Now buzz off!"

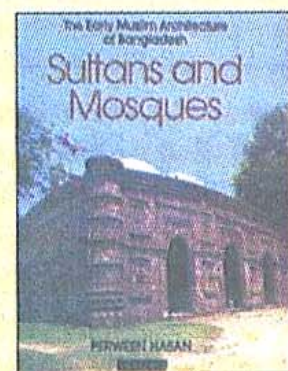
Dominique Enright includes, for good measure, a reasonable number of Churchillian epigrams at the end of the book. They remain proof of the wisdom that once underlined the career of politicians, and not just in Britain. Here, as you might see, are some nuggets of ever brilliant wisdom:

Never trust a man who has not a single redeeming vice. A nation that forgets its past has no future. Never stand so high upon a principle that you cannot lower it to suit the circumstances. You will never get to the end of the journey if you stop to shy a stone at every dog that barks. Perhaps it is better to be irresponsible and right than to be responsible and wrong. Civil servants --- no longer servants, no longer civil.

And there we are, somewhat chastened by thoughts of how men in times past gave vent to their thinking.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

At a glance



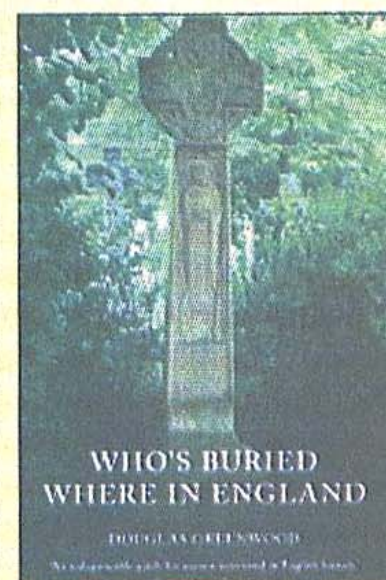
Sultans and Mosques
The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh
Perween Hasan
I.B.Tauris



Witness to Surrender
Siddiq Salik
Oxford University Press

For students of history, this ought to be an immensely satisfying book. Perween Hasan takes readers on a comprehensive journey through an important component of Bangladesh's historical traditions. Her search has been of a broad structure, as the text so clearly reveals. The price of the book is something readers might find difficult to meet.

In this season of remembrance, it is good to go back to some old books. Salik's happens to be one work where the 1971 war is observed from a particular angle. He was media spokesman for the Pakistan military in occupied Bangladesh until the surrender and the transfer of Pakistan's soldiers to POW camps in India. Salik died with Ziaul Huq in 1988. His book lives on.



Who's Buried Where in England
Douglas Greenwood
Constable & Robinson Ltd.



Auschwitz
The Nazis & The Final Solution
Laurence Rees
BBC Books

This is an interesting book on the greatest figures, across the board, in English history. The point of course is one of where these figures, having died down the centuries, lie buried. The many archbishops of Canterbury, royalty, politicians, poets, knights and soldiers, et al, dot the land. With each entry of a burial place, the writer offers a welcome biographical sketch. A sense of history is what this book inspires.

Rees has gone to great lengths to conduct his inquiry into the methods Hitler and his accomplices employed to rid Germany and the countries it occupied of their Jewish populations. It was Auschwitz, in Poland, that was to become known, along with Dachau and Buchenwald, as the symbol of Nazi ferocity. Rees talks to former Nazis and is stunned by the lack of contrition in them.

Stories like an assortment of chocolate

Tulip Chowdhury finds she likes the way some tales taste

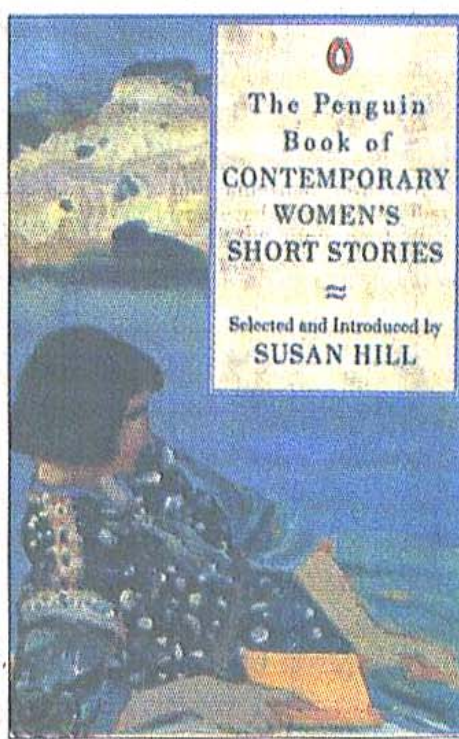
IN this age of feminism, reading a collection of women's short stories is like adding more flowers to a bouquet. In a world where women become stronger everyday, coming up with a collection such as The Penguin Book of Contemporary Women's Short Stories is like another milestone. Master story tellers like Maeve Binchy, Angela Carter, Nadine Gordimer, Mary Lavin and many others have accumulated their tales in this book. The book is like a mountain of treasure waiting to be discovered. In the richly imagined stories the book plunges the reader into the borderland between opposing forces; youth and age, exclusion and privilege, alien and the familiar.

The book opens with the story "Shepherd's Bush" by Maeve Binchy. In this story May, a young lady comes to her friend Celia in London with plans for an abortion of the unborn child inside her womb. She writes "Business" in the card at the airport in the section where it says "Purpose of journey". May is aware that for the first time in her life she is not being honest. She had come to London without informing her family or her boyfriend. She is grateful that her friend Celia has volunteered to help her out. Celia makes arrangements with the doctor. At the hospital she meets Helen who is there for her fourth abortion. May is aware that while her boyfriend knows nothing of her plans, Helen's boyfriend is with her, going through the hassles of the whole procedure. May leaves London feeling sad that her boyfriend has been in the dark about the unborn child whereas she is sacrificing her motherhood for him. While she hides everything she sees how easy things are for other Londoners such as Helen. Maeve Binchy's art of story telling is unpretentious, so believable that the characters' presence seems to linger there long after the story ends.

The celebrated word master Nadine Gordimer

narrates the coolheaded plot of terrorists to blow up an airliner. In her story, "Some are Born to Sweet Delight", the writer very tactfully builds up a climax that leaves the reader gasping. The protagonist is Rad, a foreigner on English soil. He is very gentle and shy. You don't meet too many of such young men these days. His ways are strange. Hence Vera, when she falls in love with him, accepts this strangeness as a part of him. She thinks he is different because he is from a land on the other part of the globe. Even when he takes away her virginity without saying "I love you" even once, she thinks that is how things are done in his country. The love shown between Rad and Vera is very real indeed, leaving the reader in little doubt that they are genuine lovers. When Vera becomes pregnant Rad is a happy father-to-be and decides to send Vera to his parents, promising to get married as soon as she comes back. Like a responsible husband-to-be, he pays her air fare. On the day of the departure, at the last moment Rad places a present for his sister in Vera's hand luggage. But Vera never gets to see his sister, for the airliner blows up in midair. The reader feels almost sorry for Rad and Vera and yet the significance of Rad's part in sending Vera on the very aircraft that is blown up leaves the reader in a state of perplexity. The reader therefore holds his breath and comes to the final twist of the story that leaves one open-mouthed in surprise.

The story "The Thorn" by Mary Gordon is about the pain of losing a loved one. Lucy, a little girl, has lost her father. The kind doctor draws a heart for her, not like Valentine's, but this heart is made of flesh. The doctor tells her that her father's heart was broken. She sees him being put into a wooden box. Her father has never left her and has gone somewhere and so Lucy tries to get inside too. When she is barred from getting inside the wooden box she seems to hear her father



The Penguin Book of
Contemporary Women's Short Stories
Penguin Books

telling her that later on he will come and take her. Lucy is invited to a camping trip. But she refuses to go, saying that she has to stay at home. She cannot tell anybody, not even her sister Trinitas whom she loves, that she has to stay in her room because her father is certainly coming to take her. In Lucy's heart this pang of hope mixed with uncertainty is like a thorn, causing her to twitch

with pain. She remembers her father saying,

"I love you more than anyone will ever love you. I love you more than God loves you."

Lucy wants to tell her mother about the thorn in her heart, but her father had said that he loved her more than anything, even God. And she knows that he had said he loved God very much. And so she must love her more than her mother.

Lucy goes through the year believing firmly that her father is coming to her to take her in the box. And then things seem to grow faint, even people's voices sound far away. She feels as if her heart has grown very thick, like Uncle Ted's boxing gloves. The thorn no longer touches the inside walls of the heart; there are only deep sighs.

Lucy's sadness touches the reader with the helplessness the little girl feels when the person who loved her the most is taken away. She is too young to understand that her hope of having her father back is futile. Neither does she know how to hold on to hopes of a better future. Her world is either black or white. The pain of losing our loved ones makes our hearts cry. Adults have their own ways of dealing with the pain. But Lucy, being too young, is seen accepting the loss of her father in her innocent ways.

Here are the outlines of three stories, namely the beginning, the middle and the end of the book. The stories between the three parts remain for the readers to read and savour. The Penguin Book of Women's Short Stories is like an assortment of chocolates, different in taste but all of which are relishing. All the stories are mesmerising, the difference being that of each one trying to be better than the next. The moments spent with the stories are going to be held on to for their fabulist ideas and different styles. And surely the reader will not put the book down until the last story is read.

Tulip Chowdhury is a teacher and writes fiction.

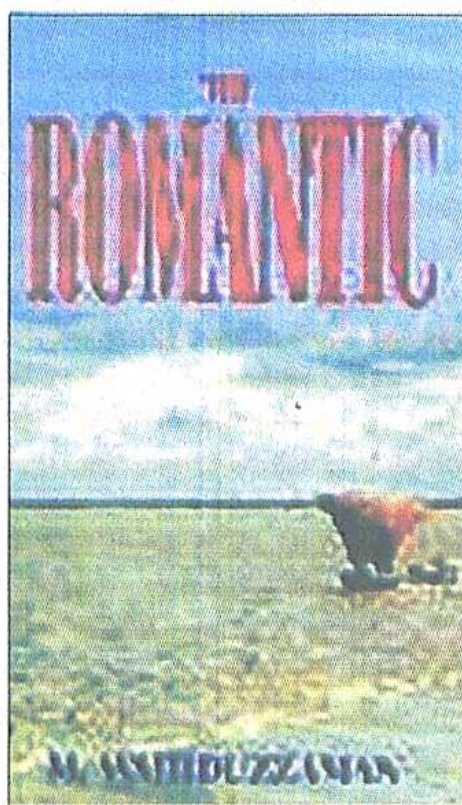
Tales of beauty and travel

Md. Takir Hossain admires a world of dreams and fantasy

THE Romantic is the title of this book. Most of our readers, indeed most people in general, are very familiar with this word. This word carries a meaning, which is that relating to the person who likes to voyage through the imaginative and artistic world which is so far removed from the realistic world. But it is true that romantic people as a rule want to stay in their dream world. One can see that dreams are essentially part of the natural world.

The writer of this book is a dream-driven and fantasy-loving person. Apart from being a visionary, in that broad sense of the meaning, the writer has in this work tried to express the real picture of our rural people; in other words, the deprived people in our country.

The book in question comprises forty stories where the readers will get the chance to enjoy a romantic person's view about many different areas of life. M. Wahiduzzaman has travelled to many parts of the world and his curious, observant eyes have looked through the most naturally beautiful sights. Evidently the writer is a keen observer and wants to see his surrounding ambience and having gone through the experience gives it a dream-enveloped and impressive look in the book. One point that may be mentioned here is that the stories in the collection not only emphasise the beautiful context of the writer's beloved motherland, but also give the reader an opportunity to cast a glance at the world overseas. The writer is greatly enamoured by rural Bengal and its unique beauty.



The Romantic
M. Wahiduzzaman
Crane Books

A reasonably large number of books have been written on the dazzling beauty of this land and its simple and kind-hearted people. But this writer has tried to focus on his beloved motherland in a unique and distinctive way. Readers can take the book as a travelogue. Wahiduzzaman has been fond of travelling since his childhood. His range of travelling has been from district to district, country to country and from one continent to another across the world.

The writer has a soft corner for the deprived people of our country. "Saria Now Rings School Bell" is one of the thought-provoking stories where the writer has tried to highlight a maid-servant's way of life. Their numbers are not small in our society. But nobody tries to hear their pains and agonies. That is the theme emerging from the tale.

"Aimon" is another of the stories in this work. This story is on one of the poor women of rural Bangladesh. Ameer is her husband's name. He has lost his home to the ravages of a river. After that event, Ameer moves to the city of Dhaka with his wife searching for a better life. And they only come by a polythene-roofed shack in the city to live in. For about fifteen years Ameer and Aimon have lived in Dhaka. Their children have also grown up. But the family's way of life has remained the same as before, with nary a change in fortune.

"From Thailand with Love" highlights a composite picture of Thailand, one of the countries acclaimed for their culture and heritage. The

country is also famous for its exquisite natural beauty. Farming is one of the major occupations for the people of Thailand. Of late, though, the Thai people have been adopting Western ways of living. Another piece by the writer, this one on Chiang Mai, is really underpinned by the attractive expressions used in the narration. There are reasons to suppose that the writer has a deep personal attachment to this country.

"The Knights of Dhaka Nights" is one of the delightful stories where the writer has tried to express the beauty of Ramna Park. This park holds a special kind of beauty both during the day and at night. The park is also acknowledged to be a place for a demonstration of the lifestyle of our floating people.

The writer visited Malaysia in 1979 and Sri Lanka in 1984. Wahiduzzaman's "The Joy of Travelling in Malaysia and Sri Lanka" clearly falls in the category of travelogues. From this article, readers will know of the previous socio-economic conditions of the two countries. Wahiduzzaman offers a good, nearly sweeping view of the way life is conducted in Malaysia and Singapore.

The book ought to be appreciated for its lucid and simple language. Readers will quite likely want to finish going through the book in one sitting. The cover image is eye-catching, representing as it does the rivers of Bangladesh. Some black and white photos have enhanced the book's aesthetic quality.

Md. Takir Hossain is a journalist and reviews books.

Experiencing an embryonic narrative voice

Efadul Huq finds a parched date fruit of a story

THE White Castle is a memoir the fictional memoir of a young Venetian scholar with the knowledge of science who is captured by the Turks. His commonsense medicinal skills appear uncommon to the Pasha and this saves his life, though all his companions suffer death. Soon our nameless narrator is offered a position in society if he converts to the public faith. At his refusal to be a convert, he is tormented and one day ordered to be beheaded. This is when a courtier called Hoja, who considers everybody else 'fools', intrudes and saves the narrator's life. Our miserable scholar becomes a slave to Hoja.

The narrator is intimidated by Hoja for the first few days of his slavery. Hoja wishes to learn everything that the young scholar knows. Together they develop fireworks for the infant Sultan which amazes everybody. The narrator even shares his knowledge of astronomy with Hoja. As time passes by, the ice between them thaws, and the slave becomes the master while the master becomes the slave. They fuse into each other's personalities. They look alike. They think alike. They stand in front of a mirror scrutinising each other's bodies to count the similarities only to realise that there is no difference except Hoja's beard. The mysterious relationship between the master and the slave propels the story forward. They start to be inspired by each other. Hoja puts forward several scientific theories but discards them if the narrator disapproves. They want to know more of each other. Hoja beats the narrator in order to hear the narrator's past and vice versa.

Like all the other novels of Orhan Pamuk, at this point, I couldn't help but notice that this is another effort to represent the amalgamation of the East and the West. However, it is not a peaceful fusion. It is indeed an exothermic reaction. Hoja harbours a desire to preserve the dominance of the Ottoman Empire over the Europeans. He compels the narrator to teach him the science of weapon making. But ere he can proceed with his desire, a plague falls upon the kingdom. Death is everywhere.

With the help of statistics and public precautions, Hoja and the narrator prevent many deaths and once again prove their value in the eyes of the Sultan. Hoja selfishly wants to shoulder all the praises himself and to fortify his ground he predicts the future of the Sultan's lion. Events turn out the way he predicted and the royal astrologer is replaced by Hoja.

Finally the time comes for Hoja to make his forgotten desire a reality. He is financed by the Sultan to create a weapon that can be used against the Poles and the eponymous white castle. The unexpected result is up to you to find out.

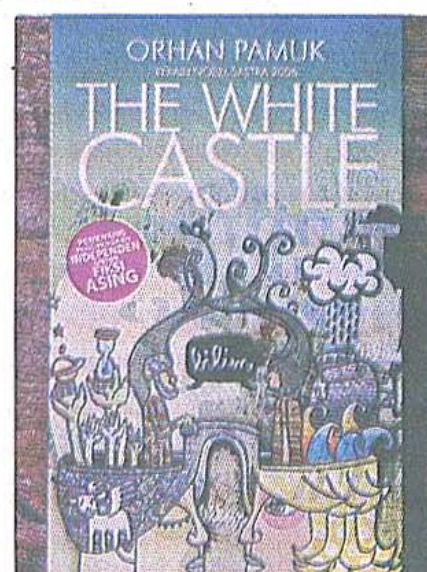
The White Castle is a disappointing novel if compared to the other novels of Pamuk. The

dryness of the Turkish lives here is invoked extremely well by the straightforward plot and perhaps this aridity makes the novel a parched date fruit juiceless but exotic nonetheless. Thematically Pamuk has attempted to preach the failure of modernisation but it is too facile and hardly effective in changing the readers' mindset. However, the one idea that truly came up in the novel is that the Ottomans lost their superiority because they lacked technological progress for which only the people themselves are to be blamed. When the plague arrives, the citizens conclude that it is from God and nobody should try to prevent it. When Hoja emerges with the huge weapon, he is labelled an inauspicious man amidst society. If such be the outlook of the gifted intelligence of human beings, then how can a race withstand the sands of time?

One of the blurbs elevates the novel to the status of Marquez. But in my opinion, that blurb was written by an intoxicated hand! In The White Castle, the reader will find no humour and there is no vivid description of the surroundings or even the characters themselves. What we read is a step by step analysis of the narrator's and Hoja's minds under a chain of unforeseen circumstances and it is unfolded in a serious tone. Since this is Pamuk's first book, I would like to mention that this is just a tiny bit of what he is capable of doing, as he does in Snow or My Name Is Red.

The White Castle is not a must-read but a good read if you are willing to experience Pamuk's embryonic narrative voice.

Efadul Huq is a freelance writer and book reviewer.



The White Castle
Orhan Pamuk
Faber and Faber