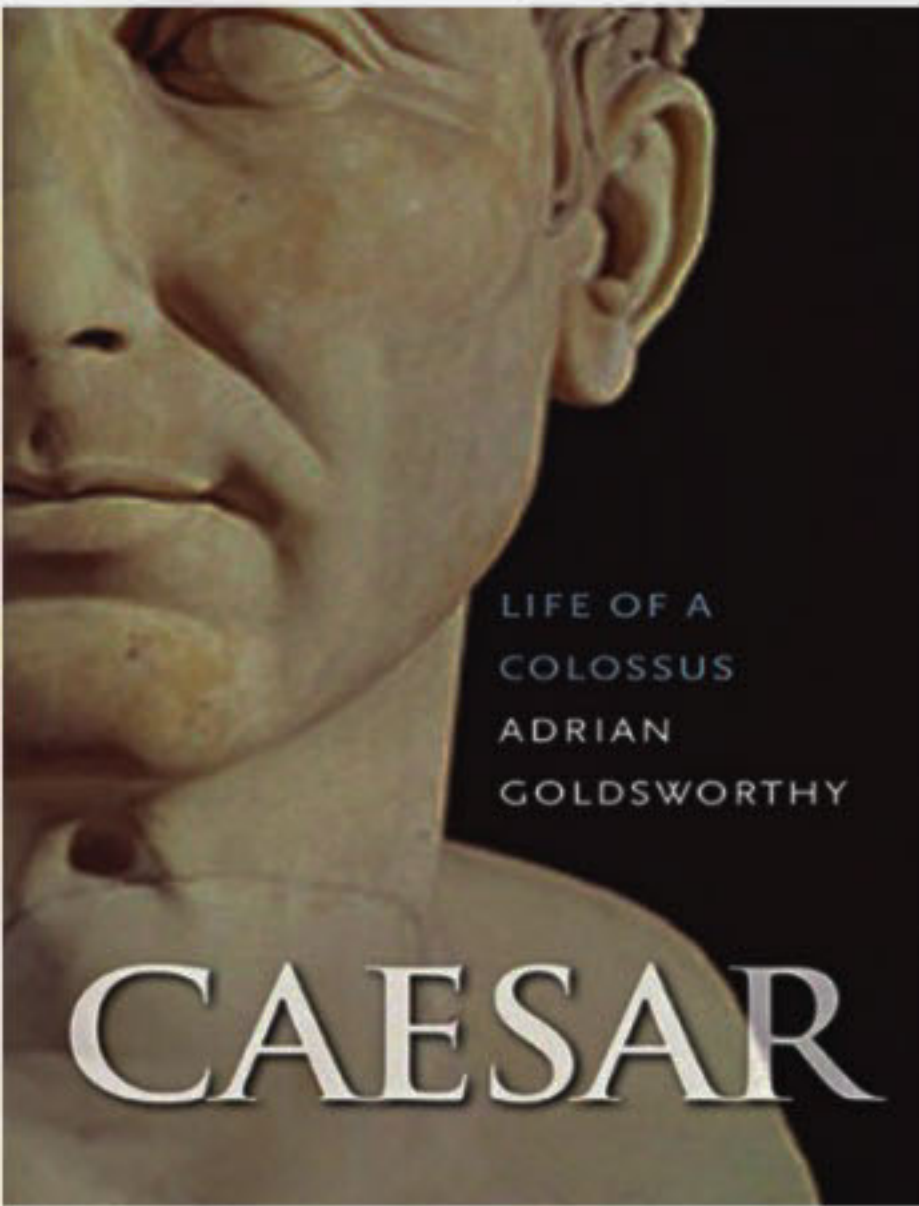


Three reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

## Good soldier, better politician, charming lover

**J**ULIUS Caesar disregarded warnings about the Ides of March. He believed, as Shakespeare would have us know, that he was more dangerous than danger itself. That precisely is what he told his wife Calpurnia when she tried to dissuade him from going to the senate because of the nightmares she had gone through during the preceding night. As he approached the senate, he came across the man who had warned him of the Ides of March. "The Ides of March are come", said Caesar, almost in a triumphant vein. 'Aye, Caesar, but not gone', replied the soothsayer. On his way to the senate, Caesar was handed a scroll by the scholar Artemidorus, who apparently had some inkling of the plot against him. The dictator did not deign to read it. Moments later, he was dead at the foot of Pompey's statue inside the senate building. There were twenty three stab marks on his body. The last one, made by Brutus, was in his groin.

These are the facts that, thanks to Shakespeare, have kept the legend of Julius Caesar alive in history and across lands and time. And now we have an admirable account of the life of Caesar from



Caesar  
The Life of a Colossus  
Adrian Goldsworthy  
Phoenix

Adrian Goldsworthy, who pieces together every detail of the Roman's career from his childhood right up to his death at the age of fifty six in 44 BC. And what emerges is a fascinating account, not merely of the life of Caesar but of the times he lived in as well. The work is, in a very broad sense, an analysis of Roman history as it had been shaped in the years, indeed decades and centuries, before Caesar emerged on the scene. Take the story of Sulla, the dictator who cast a long shadow over every Roman's life and as a matter of fact over Roman politics for a long number of years, until the advent of Julius Caesar. Sulla was an authoritarian as well as authoritative figure, one prone to handing out orders that could not but be obeyed. Those inclined to be dismissive about them inevitably faced Sulla's wrath. And yet, as Goldsworthy notes, it was a young Caesar who refused to divorce his first wife Cornelia as Sulla had demanded. The result was ostracism and exile. Caesar did not relent. He was, more tellingly, extremely fortunate in that he was not put to death by Sulla for his defiance. Contrast Caesar's rebellious streak with the pusillanimity of Pompey who, ordered by Sulla to end his marriage, promptly did so.

In Julius Caesar, beyond the simple tale of his assassination, lived a man in whom politics was the sole defining principle of life. As a soldier, he was incomparable. As an individual, he had great charm. But it was in his understanding of politics that he excelled, to a point where his enemies could never measure his abilities in handling crises. And be it noted that Caesar's enemies were legion. Or you could say that he hardly had a friend as he rose from such positions as aedile

and praetor all the way to proconsul. The civil war that was to engulf him and Pompey in a battle to the death in 49-48 BC was prompted in large measure by Caesar's feeling that the senate, by asking him to abandon command of his armies without asking for similar action from Pompey, was positively being hostile toward him and would like nothing better than to see him emasculated as a man and as a politician. It was deeply disturbing, for both him and Pompey, considering that they had once been allies, along with Crassus, that they now were being forced into a parting of the ways. For Caesar, it was a simple matter of self-esteem. For Pompey, for all his sympathy for Caesar, it was the command of the senate that put him at the head of an army determined to bring Caesar to heel. The results were not to be propitious for Pompey. Even as the politicians in Rome backed him in his efforts to defeat Caesar on the battlefield and thereby uphold the authority of the senate, Caesar played the role that would in modern times be considered populist. His soldiers marched through villages and towns, some thought to be loyal to Pompey, without meeting opposition. In some places, they were cheered on by the local populace.

Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 48 BC. It was a move that stunned his enemies in Rome, for it was a brilliant tactical act that Pompey now scrambled to undo. In the event, Pompey did not succeed. Caesar now dictated conditions, which Pompey declined to entertain. In the inevitable armed hostilities that ensued, Pompey's armies were routed and the general himself was put to flight. Captured by men looking to curry favour with a triumphant Caesar, Pompey was murdered and his severed head was brought before Caesar. But Caesar looked away in disgust. There were, after all, the many and varied memories he associated with Pompey. Always a man in fond of women, Caesar had bedded Pompey's wife Mucia while Pompey was away on his military expeditions. At a later stage, Caesar's daughter had ended up being Pompey's wife. In effect, it was the father-in-law in Caesar, despite his being six years younger than Pompey, who was compelled into putting an end to Pompey's life.

There is little question that Julius Caesar was a charismatic individual. Unlike other Roman politicians and military leaders, he came across as compassionate and was unwilling to do anything that would pit citizens against him. In his moment of triumph over Pompey, he desisted from demonstrating the kind of bizarre spectacle which had characterised men like Sulla, who had the heads of his enemies hoisted on the Rostra in Rome. Caesar entered Rome in the manner of a politician returning from a long exile abroad. In the senate that so brimmed over with his enemies, he displayed little of hostility and indeed appeared to be eager to begin governing in a spirit of reconciliation. That would prove difficult, as the constant hostility of the senators would so amply show. Cicero, Cinna, Brutus and nearly everyone else resented the end of Pompey, for Pompey had been the senate's warrior sent out to quell the rebellious Caesar.

Julius Caesar loved the company of women. Sex was for him, as it was for other powerful men in Rome, an integral part of life's more pleasurable acts. But where he differed from other men was in his obsessive need for sex from women he believed were stimulating not only in conversation but also in bed. He married thrice. Cornelia was followed by Pompeia, whom he subsequently divorced on grounds of adultery! It was Calpurnia who was to outlive him after his assassination. But one woman Caesar loved for a very large part of his life and until the very end was Servilia, the mother of his assassin Brutus. The pair at times seemed to show off their passion in public, as when Servilia sent him a very suggestive note even as he was busy in serious deliberations in the senate. His fellow senators knew he was bedding their wives. They could do little about it.

And then, of course, there was Egypt's Cleopatra, Caesar's other love. On the day

Caesar died, she and her retinue were in Rome, having arrived there months earlier as the dictator's guests. After the assassination, Cleopatra would make her way back to Egypt, where in time she would seduce, or be seduced by, an increasingly diminished Mark Antony.

### ... Principles, grit and communism

**F**OR much of his journalistic career, Edgar Snow was shunned by mainstream America. The reason was simple. He had befriended the Chinese communists long before Mao and his men made their way to power in Peking and had indeed afterward continued his association with them. This was the era of the Cold War; and with Joseph McCarthy in mad pursuit of what he called communists and communist sympathisers in the United States, it was only natural that Snow would come under suspicion. The writer could not, of course, be nailed. But the hostility prevailed, all the way up to his death in February 1972. In one of the great ironies of history, the very communists Snow had eulogised over the years in works such as the one under review were now the same communists Richard Nixon was meeting in Peking.

In what is fundamentally a re-reading of Red Star, what you will be surprised by is the careful attention to detail that Snow brings into his narrative. It is, in an important way, curious that no one in the 1930s or later observed events in China with the foresight and in the analytical manner that Snow did. Just how ignorantly arrogant American statesmen remained about China even after the communist take-over in 1949 was exposed when at the 1954 Geneva conference, John Foster Dulles contemptuously turned away from a smiling Chou En-lai approaching him with outstretched hand. The irony came again eighteen years later when Nixon, an inveterate communist baiter, stretched



Red Star Over China  
Edgar Snow  
Grove Press, NY

out his hand to Chou in Peking. The opening to China was thus made and in the times thereafter, Nixon and Henry Kissinger would refer to it as a seminal point in the formulation and articulation of American foreign policy.

In the late 1930s, when Edgar Snow linked up with Mao, Chu-teh, Chou En-lai and Lin Piao in the mountain fastnesses of China, it was a different world. The Chinese communists were engaged in a

desperate struggle for survival against Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist forces and, with them, the various warlords who saw in a triumph of communism the end of their world. The communists and the nationalist Kuomintang split in 1927 and after that break it was for the nationalists to hunt down the Red bandits, as they called the communists, all over the country. The fact that Japanese aggression was rapidly eating away at China's vitals did not seem to matter to Chiang and his authoritarian government. It was the Red bandits that needed culling. It was in search of these bandits that Snow made his initial contacts, discreetly, with the communists. His account of his first meeting with Chou En-lai is revealing. The son of aristocrats and having gone through a spell of education in France, Chou was an intellectual in whom communism found a sort of refinement. He addressed Snow in clear, impeccable English, in that soft tone that was to be his hallmark in his later role as a steady hand in a China sometimes governed erratically by Mao.

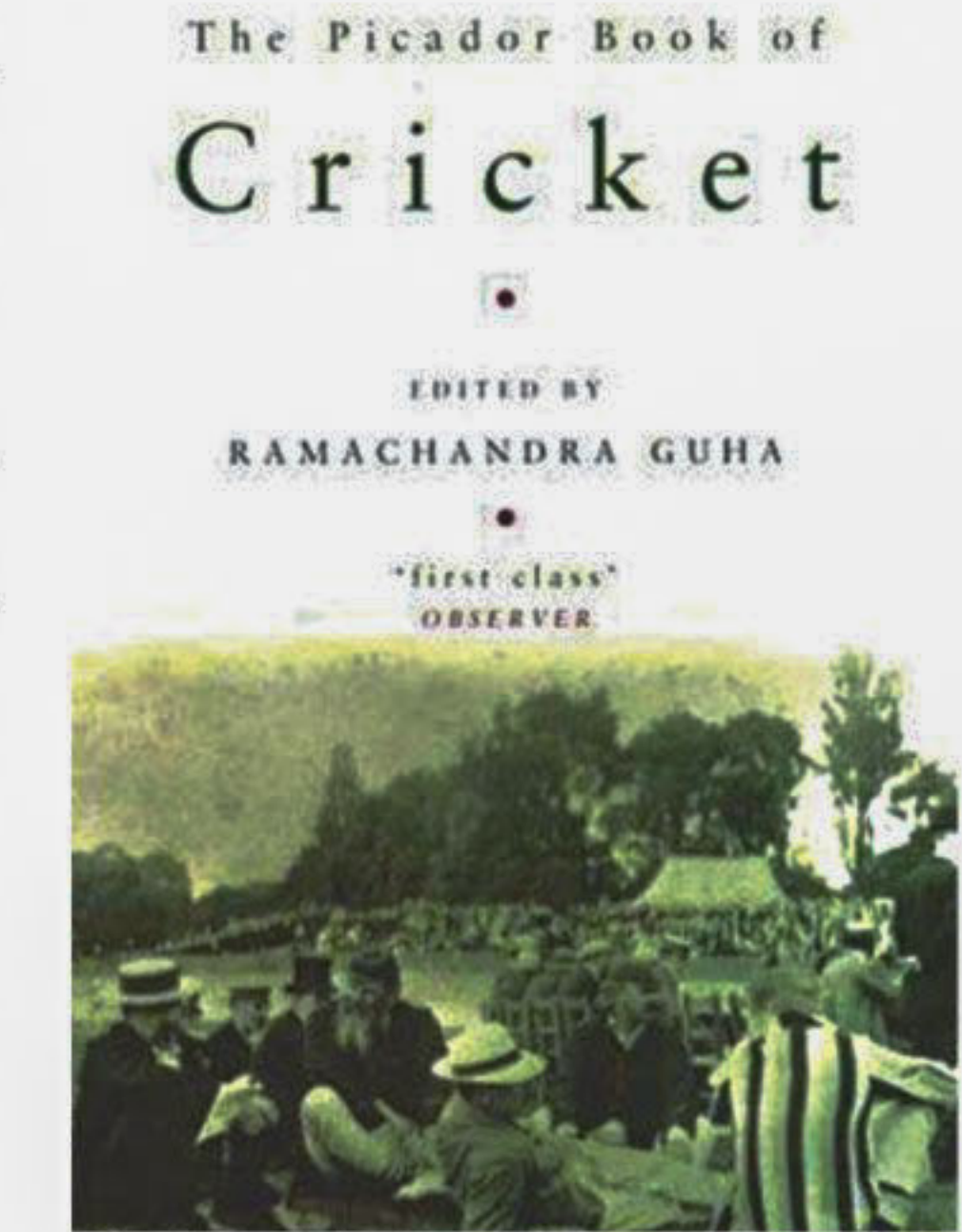
A major portion of Red Star comprises accounts of the many one-on-one sessions Snow had with Mao Tse-tung. Perhaps never before or after has Mao come forth with as many details of his life as he has in his conversations with Snow. There is never any question about the scholarly aspects of the Mao character. A self-made man, the future ruler of China speaks to Snow about his readings in global literature and philosophy. He has the history of civilisation on his fingertips and to an impressed Snow is eminently qualified to interpret the rise and fall of nations with a sense of profundity one rarely spots in western politicians. In his early youth, Mao read Adam Smith's The Wealth of Nations and Darwin's Origin of Species. He covered works by Mill, Rousseau, Spencer and Montesquieu. Poetry and romances were part of his self-education process and with them he combined the tales of ancient Greece and the history and geography of Russia, America, France, England and other countries. You only get to reinforce the feeling in you, as you go through this work, that the most discerning of intellectuals are often to be found in the communist movement. Mao's wife was executed by the Kuomintang, his family was hounded by Chiang Kai-shek and yet his belief in the need to change conditions for his people never wavered. And this was belief common to all his comrades. Lin Piao, only in his twenties, was a formidable chief of the Whampoa military academy that produced the fine guerrillas who would one day seize China from Chiang and remould it under the communist party.

Snow provides a dramatic and graphic account of the Long March that would come to be the foundation of communist resilience in China. Pursued relentlessly by the nationalists and often threatened by warlords and sometimes hostile tribes, Mao and his followers surmounted every obstacle, despite huge casualties in terms of men and materiel, to create for themselves the space that would be their eventual springboard to power. In the course of the Long March, which commenced in Kiangsi on 16 October 1934 with a total strength of 90,000 men, the communists covered altogether 6,000 miles. Statistics show that they fought on average a skirmish a day, while fifteen whole days were given over to pitched battles. Of the 368 days the communists spent on the Long March, 235 were given over to marches by day, with 18 by night. The guerrillas halted for 100 days, but of those days many were spent in skirmishes. In Szechuan, the Reds spent a total of 56 days. In essence, only 44 days were spent in full rest over a long journey of nearly 6,000 miles. The communists crossed 18 mountain ranges, of which five were permanently snow-capped. They crossed 24 rivers, passed through 12 provinces, occupied 62 cities and broke through the armies of at least 10 warlords apart from defeating, eluding or outmanoeuvring Chiang Kai-shek's forces. On 20 October 1935, Mao and the other leaders of the movement sat down with the fewer than 20,000 guerrillas who had survived the Long March to take in the full measure of the huge achievement they had made.

China's respect for Edgar Snow was never to diminish. He was invited to stand beside Mao and other leading communist figures at the anniversary of the revolution at Tienanmen Square in 1970.

### ... Between bat and ball

**R**AMACHANDRA Guha gives you here, not the details of cricket matches in history but the personalities who left indelible impressions on the game. You have here a collage of essays straddling various periods of time, articles that throw up images of a bright past. The surprise is that those who may not understand the nuances of the game, indeed may not have demonstrated much attention to it (include this reviewer in that group of the ignorant) will nevertheless end up admiring the write-ups here. Did it ever occur to you that Hanif Mohammad, the original Little Master, went to a madrasa in Pakistan after his family had migrated from India in the aftermath of Partition? Those of us who went to school in the 1960s recall the splendour he brought to cricket with his quiet handling of the bat. Ah, those were the days of Hanif, Mushtaq, Kardar and so many others. Remember the Ceylonese (today's Sri Lankan) named Michael Tissera, whose batting so



The Picador Book of Cricket  
Ed. Ramachandra Guha  
Picador

impressed the girls in Karachi in 1967 that they all crowed in unison, 'Tissera, Tissera, we want a century'?

In this unputdownable work, you will recall the great player that Victor Trumper was until his death on 28 June 1915 at the age of thirty eight. His bier was borne by eleven Australian cricketers to his grave in Sydney. In distant London, caught up in the First World War, news of his demise made headlines. They reported thus: 'Death of a Great Cricketer.' W.J. O'Reilly speaks of the young Don Bradman, while J.H. Fingleton celebrates him in his article, 'Brightly Fades the Don.' In this work, there are the forgotten names in cricket as also in cricket journalism that you will happily stumble into. Neville Cardus, C.L.R. James, Ray Robinson, Matthew Engel share the stands with the likes of Tendulkar, Kapil Dev, Ranji, Botham, Sobers and a whole line-up of others. And note that V.S. Naipaul and J.B. Priestley too have something to say about cricket.

Guha happily registers the place of cricket in the soul. As sport and spectacle, he notes, cricket is now 'vastly more important in the erstwhile colonies than in the Mother Country' (which of course is England). He goes on, 'Indeed, an obscure town in the Arabian Gulf, Sharjah, hosts matches viewed by millions more people than would view an Ashes Test at Lord's.'

And that is all the more reason why you must commandeer this work, from wherever.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. He also edits Star Books Review.

## Depressing and yet snappy

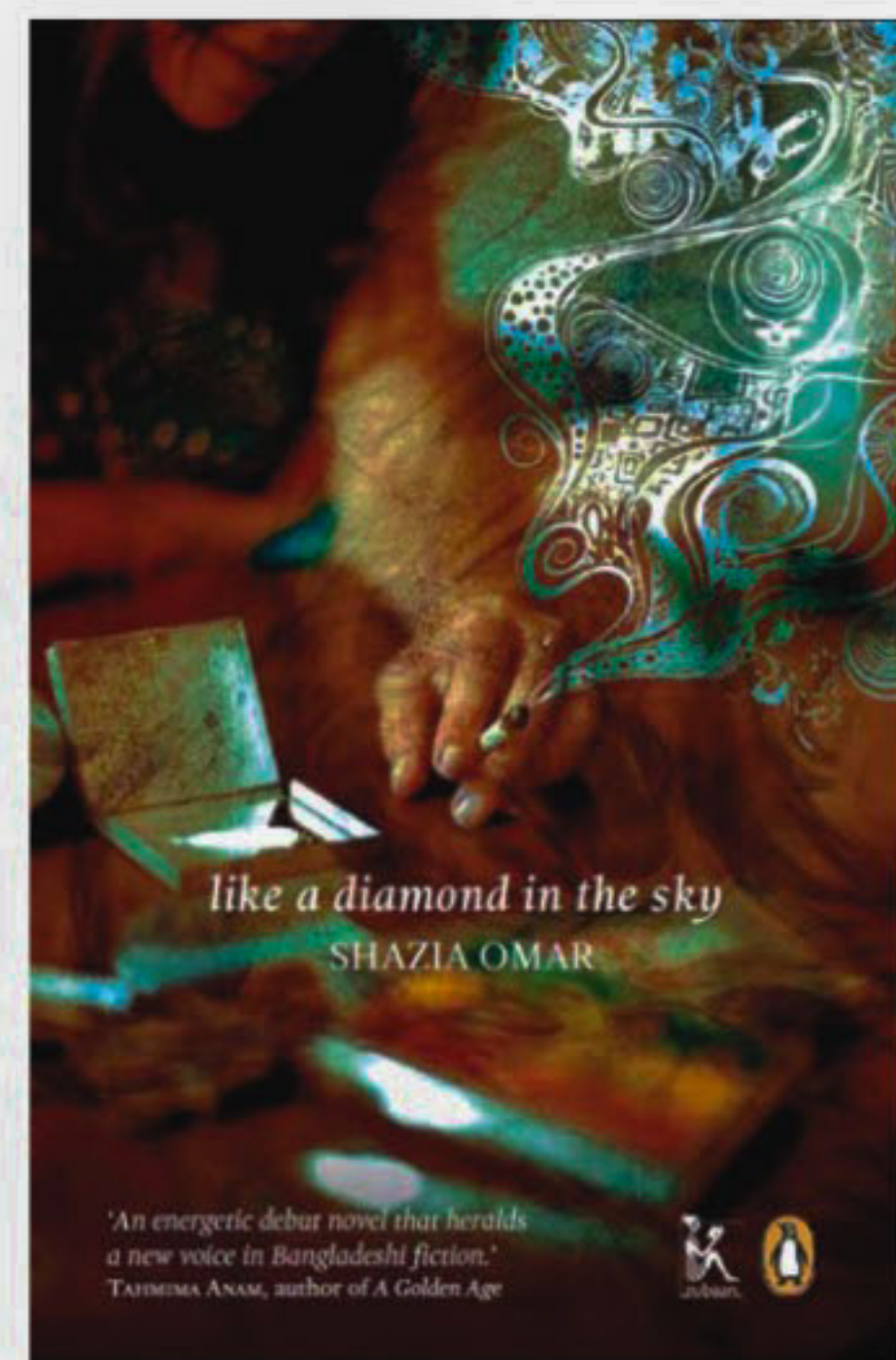
Jessica Mudditt appreciates a debut work

**T**HE debut novel by social psychologist Shazia Omar is a brave depiction of drug addiction in Bangladesh. She approaches the taboo subject with all the rigour you would expect of someone who has spent a month in a rehab centre studying dependence. She seemingly omits nothing from this gritty work of fiction.

As well as being well-researched, Omar's book succeeds because her characters are multi-dimensional and as such they provoke an emotional response. Take the central character, Deen. He is intelligent, handsome and, until relatively recently, he cared deeply about the future of Bangladesh. Before getting hooked on heroin, Deen organised fundraisers and delivered supplies to flood devastated families in villages. He even won an award for a poem he wrote about peace. But as Omar writes, "He carried the weight of the world on his shoulders... until he finally decided it was too much for him." Whilst Deen certainly has his faults, he defies the stereotype of the drug addict as the 'hopeless loser' and thus Omar invites the reader to empathise rather than judge. This is a refreshing approach.

As a 21-year-old addict, Deen's life revolves around partying, stealing money and chasing drugs with his misfit friends in Tongi. Finding the funds for regular hits pushes Deen into the deepest recesses of Dhaka's criminal underbelly. He has virtually given up on his education, having concluded that university itself is a malevolent force, "an instrument in a conspiracy to turn [students] into robots for powerful multinationals to exploit." Deen is trapped in negativity and sees no beauty whatsoever in the world around him. He detests his home city, "Deen was disgusted with Dhaka's state of

disgrace. He longed to feel patriotic but instead he felt betrayed." And he believes that corruption within Bangladesh and a string of misfortunes have broken his nation beyond repair. Yet somehow Deen manages to save the bulk of his loathing for himself. He scornfully dubs his social circle "Club Khor," and he is acutely conscious of his failings, "Disappoint-



Like a Diamond in the Sky  
Shazia Omar  
Penguin

ments churned in his stomach like rotten eggs and bad music." But however much Deen wants to rid himself of his habit, he succumbs to cravings time and time again. Omar skilfully describes the grasping tentacles of addiction: the sweats, the itching skin, and the crushing inability to concentrate on anything other than finding a hit. He struggles to decide whether to give up on giving up.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of Deen's addiction is the lost friendship with his mother. Before Deen became an addict, he spent many evenings playing guitar for her, combing her hair, and discussing films and philosophy. Nowadays their relationship is punctuated by silence, long absences and "face-offs". As Omar writes, "Now only sad emptiness existed between them." Whenever his mother begs him to stop taking drugs, he responds by distancing himself from her both physically and emotionally. Deen must live with the fact that he is ruining his own life as well as hers: "She hardly went out anymore; afraid of what she might hear, unable to defend her son from gossip, weighed down by the stigma of being a junkie's mother."

Another major source of regret for Deen is the demise of his father, for which he feels partly responsible. His father had been an honest and successful businessman -- until it all came crashing down with a change of government. The family were forced to move into a small apartment and they are pushed out of every circle of friendship and influence. Deen's father sends his troubled son to rehab in Kolkata, but the Christian monks are unaware that their charges are simply shooting up without a needle. Deen returns home a bigger addict than he was before he left. On the night his father dies after a short battle with

cancer, Deen is high at a party. By the time he sobers up and reaches the hospital, his father's last breaths have been exhaled. Though these events took place five years ago, Deen is haunted by recurring flashbacks and the knowledge that his mother blames him for his father's broken heart.

Life takes a turn for the better when Deen starts a relationship with fellow student Maria. He is infatuated as soon as he sets eyes on her: "Maria was a crazy diamond. He could tell from the confidence in her swagger and her defiant eyes. She wasn't weak like the other girls." Maria shares Deen's wild streak, and she is also witty and thoughtful. After the break-up of her parents' marriage, she lives independently and Deen quickly becomes a fixture in her life. But despite pretences, Deen realises that Maria is deeply vulnerable. Because she is the only thing that can equal the high Deen gets from drugs, he goes to great lengths to protect her from gnawing insecurities. However he is terrified that he will lose Maria if she discovers he has a drug problem. As the pair become closer and closer, Deen is forced to re-evaluate whether keeping the truth from his street-wise girlfriend is a wise decision.

All this sounds rather depressing; indeed, it is. But the novel's fast pace and snappy dialogue saves it from becoming too heavy for most readers to endure. But if it were, perhaps we ought to ask ourselves how tough the reality must be.

(Like a Diamond in the Sky is available at Omni, Words n' Pages, Jatra, Bittersweet Cafe and Red Shift Café).

Jessica Mudditt is an Australian intern at The Daily Star.

## Book News

### A Tale of Golden Girls launch at Goethe-Institut

Discrimination against women is not limited to a particular geographical area. It is rather a serious problem, appearing with different faces in different societies, says a press release of Goethe-Institut. The book, 'A Tale of Golden Girls', dwells on five exploited girls in Bangladesh who broke out of their cage and caused laughter to permeate their lives through success brought on by will power and determination. It will be launched at the Institut on 8 March.

Md. Abdul Jabbar, holder of a German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) scholarship, was recently honoured by DAAD in Oldenburg for his outstanding academic performance. He will read from his book in Bangla and share his views on the theme with the audience at Goethe-Institut.

At Goethe-Institut, Jabbar's work will be introduced by Asfa Hussain from The Reading Circle (TRC). Noted writer and activist Hasna Hena will be present on the occasion. The book will be introduced in Chittagong on 10 March in cooperation with the Asian University for Women.

Goethe-Institut cordially invites its friends to the launch of 'A Tale of Golden Girls' at 6.00 pm-8.30 pm on 8 March at Goethe-Institut Bangladesh Auditorium, House No. 10, Road 9 (new), Dhanmondi Residential Area, Dhaka.