

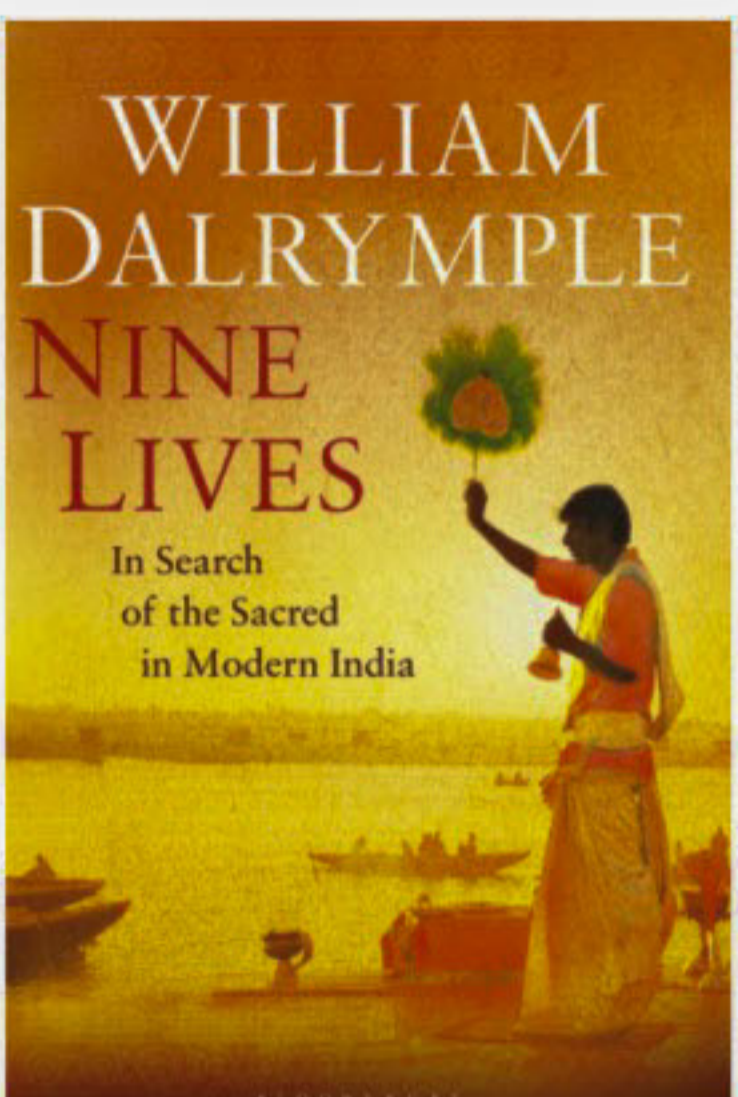
Pukur, godhuli bela and remarkable lives

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque breezes through gripping human experience

WILLIAM Dalrymple, a household name in our part of the world, makes an arduous journey to construct stories taken from life, some of which are bizarre, some heart-rending, some with a blend of political ideology and some others being simple descriptions of occupations handed down from generation to generation where concerns about the changing patterns of life adopted by their offspring threaten the adults' age-old customs and culture. This job of the writer is no less arduous than the treks he makes through the length and breadth of the region. His tenacity in narrating the tales of nine lives has been most rewarding to his readers as it has charted new vistas by unwinding stories hitherto unknown. The protagonists' utterances about their own lives in detail and unreservedly, of course, elicited by the questions of the author, make each story distinctly unique. Here one cannot but appreciate the authenticity inherent in their narratives as they pour their hearts out to the author. And for this, all credit goes to the writer because his total involvement with them not primarily as a writer but as a person with all human qualities helped establish a rapport failing which there would not have been any stories with a human face. In one of the appreciations of this book, Dalrymple has been described as one of the 'greatest storytellers' of 'one of the world's greatest storytelling cultures', that is, India. True, but it would rather have been a more befitting description of him if it had said that he has been a most unusually engaging listener and collector of stories. Storytelling is natural to him because he is a writer who travels a lot and is keen on knowing people in a holistic manner. Rather the people in this book have been marvellous storytellers that in turn made him a seasoned storyteller. In the introduction, the author draws readers' attention to the contrasts in his methodology used in this book with the one that he adopted in both *From the Holy Mountain* and *In Xanadu* where the narrator's role was much more pronounced than those of the people. Dalrymple states that he has reversed this method and by doing so, he has brought the subjects from the background to the fore. And it is precisely this quality in *Nine Lives*

that has made every story glimmer in its own style and content. The first story, *The Nun's Tale*, presents an account of perhaps the most rigorous and harshest of religions ever practised in the world --- Jainism of Mahavira. Prasannanmati Mataji and others like her renounce the world in which they live. Negation of all things, all needs, is the motto of their lives and such denial ascends to such a height that they tend to deny existence in the physical form and choose to give their bodies to death rather than death taking their bodies. Ironically, although there is the toughest teaching and training on suppressing emotions of all kinds, including that of death, yet when Mataji loses her closest friend, she breaks down in tears despite herself as she is bound by her vow and rigid training. Not only that, she also steps out of the monastery all by herself for the first time in since she became a nun to visit holy places and try getting back her peace of life. This shows a dichotomy of principles existing in an otherwise committed person, thus exposing the frailties of human nature. The second story, *The Dancer of Kannur*, reveals the fossilized characteristic of a most repugnant caste system and its duality among the Hindus when, on the one hand, the Dalits are hated like anything, and, on the other, when they play gods during special festivals. Even the Brahmins worship them and touch their feet. The obsession of these people in religious rituals keeps them blinded and somewhat ignorant. Among people where the caste system is so rigid, hatred for some other religion can very much be expected. But then occurs another event that is faith-wise conflicting but convenient otherwise: money earned in Saudi Arabia is spent on holding a thanksgiving festival in distinctly religious fervour. Although Dalrymple refrains from making any value judgments all through these tales, probably for the reason that these are all matters of faith close to the hearts of believers and therefore are too delicate to touch, he nevertheless comments, "There was a nice irony, I thought, in the money of the most puritanical and intolerant of Wahabbis being used to fund such a fabulously and unrepentantly pagan

ceremony." The next story, *The Daughters of Yellamma*, is certainly the most heart-rending tale as the author brings out not only a dire state of poverty but also how this is associated with an entirely primitive kind of belief, fashioned like a religious rite, when daughters are 'dedicated' to temples but who eventually turn out to be nothing but hapless sex workers. It still remains a dark chapter in Indian society in spite of the government's efforts to stamp it out. Dalrymple goes both extensively and intensively into the origin, develop-



Nine Lives
William Dalrymple
Bloomsbury, London

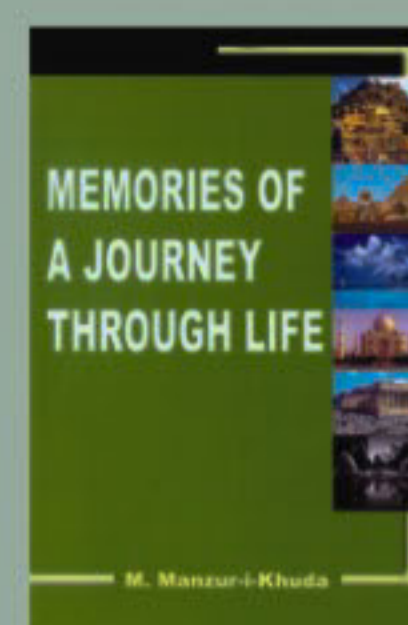
ment and practices of this tradition of *devdasis* and concludes that "..... devotional, metaphysical and the sexual are not regarded as being in any way opposed....."; and, of course, here he is talking about some societies in certain parts of India where this practice still remains malignant in its effect. The next story, *The Singer of Epics*, brings to light a rare observation on the near extinction of oral traditions in the form of a recital of epics. The author refers to researcher Milman Parry, also known as 'the Darwin of oral literature', and his findings in Yugoslavia that oral epic lost its

ground as people became literate! On the basis of this, Dalrymple draws an analogy so poignant that when he says that just as a blind person compensates for his loss of vision in 'a heightened sense of hearing, smell and touch,' it seems that an illiterate person likewise develops a special ability to store things in his memory in a massive way which a literate person does not. This is a beautiful story that takes the readers through a fascinating tour of the landscapes of Asia, the Middle East and Europe tracing the growth, flourishing and gradual waning of oral literature that is a priceless wealth of human culture. *The Red Fairy* is an enigmatic story that tells us about the plight of the female protagonist, the Red Fairy herself, a Muslim who suffers at the hands of Hindus in Bihar, then as a Bihari at the hands of Bengalis at the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and ending up in Sindh in a Sufi shrine. She narrates every episode of her life, her family in graphic details that bares a traumatized soul searching for an abode that is peaceful within her chosen form of spiritual realm. And in her case, it turned out to be the shrine of Lal Shabbaz Qalander. Her comments on the genocide in Bangladesh deserve serious consideration when she utters, "We could just about understand why Hindus might want to kill Muslims, but why would Muslims want to kill Muslims? It seemed as if the whole world was soaked in blood." In this story, Dalrymple has deliberated at length on the clash between the followers of Sufism and the Wahabbis - mullahs that tend to be confounding and disquieting to believers. *The Monk's Tale* encapsulates a string of events beginning with Tashi Passang's becoming a monk, forsaking his vow and becoming a regular soldier in the Indian army for killing Chinese, his transportation to Bangladesh in 1971 to fight the Pakistanis and in the process killing men other than the Pakistanis caused a profound sense of guilt in him and shook his vow of ahimsa, fuelling his yearning to return to Tibet when it is free from occupation. That, of course, has been a distant dream for too many decades. In expiation, Tashi Passang confesses, as an adherent of Buddhist teachings, that

because the Tibetans way back in the seventh century invaded China and oppressed the Chinese, maybe that is the cause for their sufferings at present. Thus he enunciates his philosophy of karma. Of all these nine lives, *The Lady Twilight* can be singled out as the most bizarre, most primitive, animalistic and most sickening to any sensitive mind. Fearsome descriptions of goddesses and repulsive procedures like using skulls for drinking blood from, invoking mercy and help of imaginary protectors, abound in this long tale. Strange as it is, Manisha, having left her husband and infant children at the call of Ma Tara, ends up living together with Tapan Sadhu, a Brahmin who has also left his family behind. Together they pursue their faith in a ghoulish place, that is, the cremation grounds for the dead. Had it not been for the last tale, *The Song of the Blind Minstrel*, a story of the Bauls with many similarities to Sufi life that brings a fresh breath of air, depicts a quiet life ennobled by praise of the wonders of God's creations, it would not be a read giving blissful joy and contentment to one as one finishes reading a book dwelling on a search for the sacred. Very justifiably, Dalrymple places this story right at the end. The rest of the stories convey a feeling of eeriness that is hard to resist. One cannot but be overwhelmed by the meticulousness of the author's observations of very simple things, such as his description of a 'pukur' in Bengal where he draws an analogy thus, "In Bengal, the pukur is to village life what the green was to medieval England..." His mention of 'godhuli bela' --- cow dust time --- touches the heart of a Bengali reader. The author possesses an exceptional quality of turning things commonplace into rare gems and all the nine lives bear witness to this. However, against the backdrop of India's giant leap forward, such devotional pursuits probably seemed incongruous to the writer --- just the way he felt coming across a completely naked young holy man, a 'sanyasi' holding an MBA degree!

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque, music and history buff, is Principal, Radiant International School, Dhaka.

Book Choice



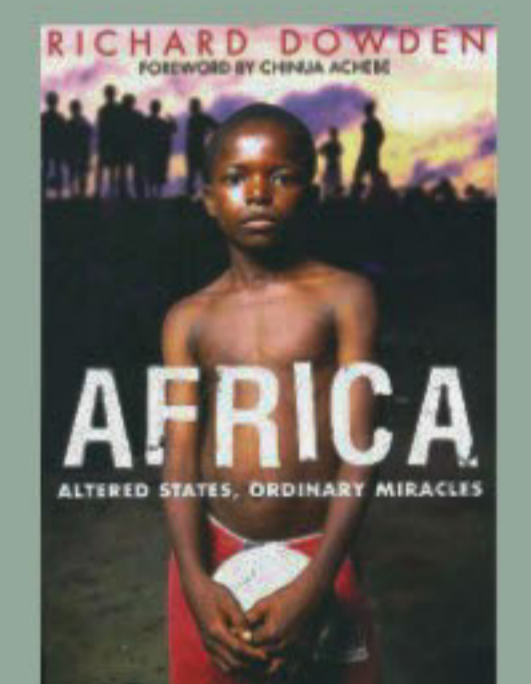
Memories of A Journey Through Life
M. Manzur-I-Khuda
Academic Press & Publishers Library
Tel: 8125394,
06662603254



Amar Gram
Father Marino Rigon
Academic Press & Publishers Library
Tel: 8125394,
06662603254



Civil Society
Dr. Rangalal Sen
Tapan Prokashon
65 Pyari Das Road,
Dhaka



Africa
Altered States,
Ordinary Miracles
Richard Dowden
Portobello Books,
London



Momy O Madhury
Shelly Naz
Magnum Opus
Tel: 01937-277743,
01552-381129

Joler Niche Jolchhaya
Shahabuddin Nagari
Anyaprakash



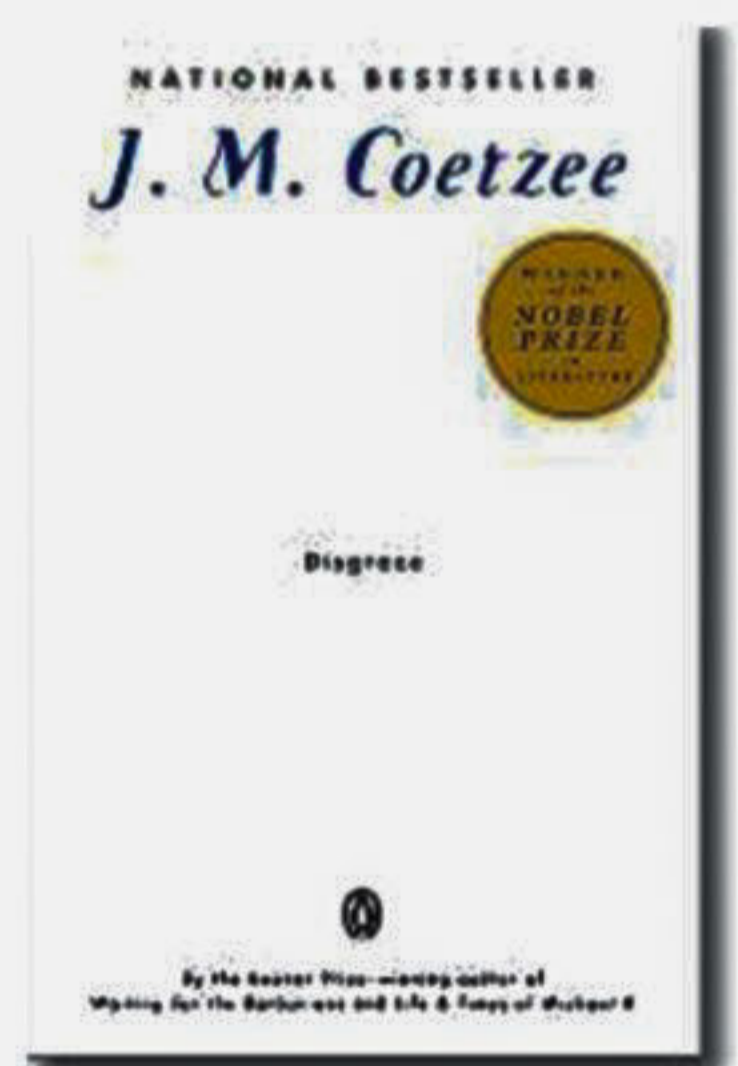
Abir Ebong Jongla Bhai
Muntakim Mannan
Chowdhury
Jagriti Prokashoni
33 Aziz Supermarket, Dhaka

Misery in post-apartheid land

Tulip Chowdhury explores a story of pain

DISGRACE by Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee is the winner of the 1999 Booker Prize. It is a tale of human and animal misery in post-apartheid South Africa. Middle aged and divorced David Lurie, a teacher of Romantic poetry, is reduced to a pathetic figure when his alleged affair with Melanie, one of his students, is revealed. Even the prostitute who used to receive him abandons him. He is humiliated by a group of students who are friends of Melanie. His colleagues start avoiding him. Disgraced and unable to face up to the scandal, he goes away to Lucy, his daughter in the Eastern Cape. Here awaits him a different life of harsh realities. David eventually learns from life on and around Lucy's farm. The stark and beautiful South African countryside is there. Lucy's world revolves around the farm on which she lives. She is an animal lover and shelters abandoned animals. She has a vet who takes care of them. Lucy's life is dedicated to the animals that need help from her. There is Petrus, who

helps Lucy with the farming. David becomes a part of the farm, selling the crops and helping Petrus run the farm. Lucy tells him, "This is the only life there is, which we share with animals." Lucy is a lesbian who avoids other social contacts outside the farm life. This reality depresses David but he is forced to accept this part of his daughter. Petrus, he realizes, is after setting up a farm of his own. Though he works sincerely for Lucy's farm, David discovers that he has already been purchasing land of his own. Helen, Lucy's friend living with her, keeps her distance from David. Apart from farming, Lucy spends most of her time at the Animal Welfare Society. Lucy is especially attentive to the poor who come in with their animals. David is proud of this generous self of his daughter. However, there is a break-in one night. The break-in is by three Afrikanas. They kill three of Lucy's dogs and douse David with spirit and set him on fire. David manages to save himself but Lucy is raped and tied down by the



Disgrace
J.M. Coetzee
Penguin Books

men. Lucy refuses to go into filing a police report. The thugs also steal

David's car, ransack the whole house, destroying David's papers and books. David realizes that though political changes are there individual misery does not change. He reflects, "One gets used to things getting harder; one ceases to be surprised that what used to be as hard can grow harder yet." David feels a parental responsibility towards Lucy despite her repeated reminders that she wants to be on her own. He cannot be firm with his own arguments for somewhere inside his heart rests the shame of his own disgrace. David is sometimes reduced to animal existence and ends up taking care of the dying animals. His outcry for justice to their assault at home leads him nowhere and the criminals are left at large. He is astonished to meet one of the criminals at a party hosted by Petrus. Petrus refuses to comment on it, saying he knows nothing of this man being a member to the break-in. David is very unsure of where justice lies. Eventually David returns to Cape Town, to his own home. He finds his

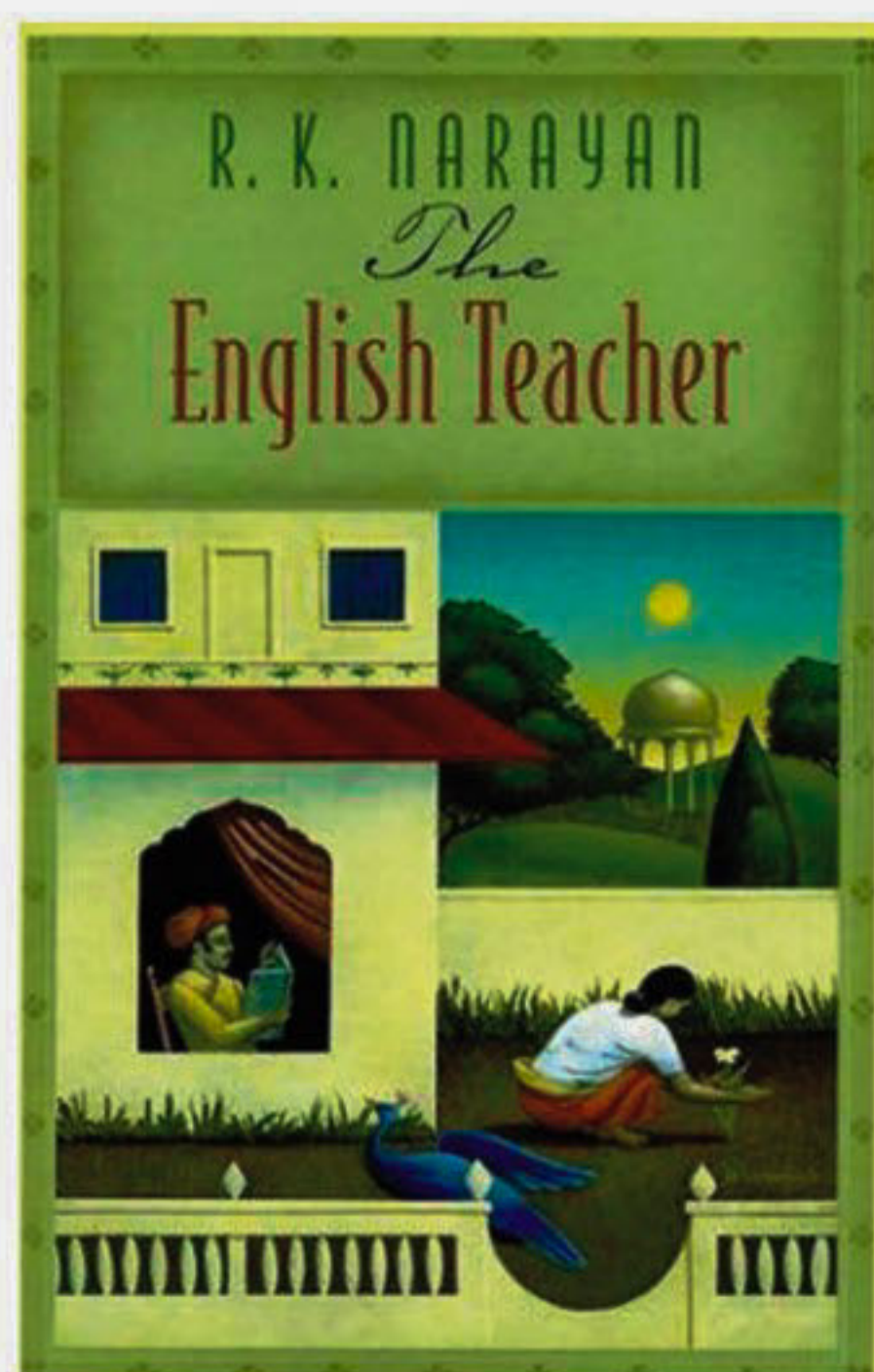
apartment vandalized by unknown assailants. He goes to Melanie's parents and apologizes for ruining their family peace. This is a different David. Previously he had pleaded guilty to the sex offence but had held his opinion that Melanie was very much a partner to the scene. He had been arrogant, stating that Melanie had transformed him even for a few days, that he had become a servant of Eros. He goes back to trying to write his opera on Byron, something he had been working on for the last two years. However, that does not just work out. At the end David reclaims some dignity in life after he gives up on his daughter, his teaching career, his work on Byron and after learning a lesson from the dying animals. He learns that one must love without reservations, without thoughts about one's own self. The book *Disgrace* takes the reader town a path of metaphysical journey from the world of Romantic poetry to the harsh realities of life. Tulip Chowdhury writes short stories and teaches.

RE-READING

Of family values

Joynub Nabila Obayed appreciates an old tale

MOST often what we see as 'the end' of a story does not always draw a proper end. A new journey begins with another story. Similarly, in the novel *The English Teacher*, Krishna, who is the English teacher in the Albert Mission College, goes through a journey of life that does not end with the end of the story. It seems like a very ordinary story but often the extraordinary incidents take birth from the ordinary story. This autobiographical novel written by R. K. Narayan is based on this theme. Author of the famous Indian book *The Malgudi Days*, R. K. Narayan remains, even in death, a person with a wonderful sense of story organization and creativity. He is creative enough to find the extraordinary part within an ordinary life. *The English Teacher* is a very good piece of storytelling that has illustrated his creativity of showing the extraordinary part within the ordinary life of Krishna and creativity in writing. This novel is dedicated to his wife Rajam. Krishna acts as the main character in this novel and teaches English at a college and stays at the college teachers' quarter. His introverted character trait is depicted by the fact that he lived in the college quarters in spite of having his own family. But when he brings his family, including his wife Susila and daughter Leela, from the village to live with him and leaves his quarters to live with his family, his learning from life begins. He learns to be social, he learns to handle his child and love his wife. It is as if life teaches him to love, to become



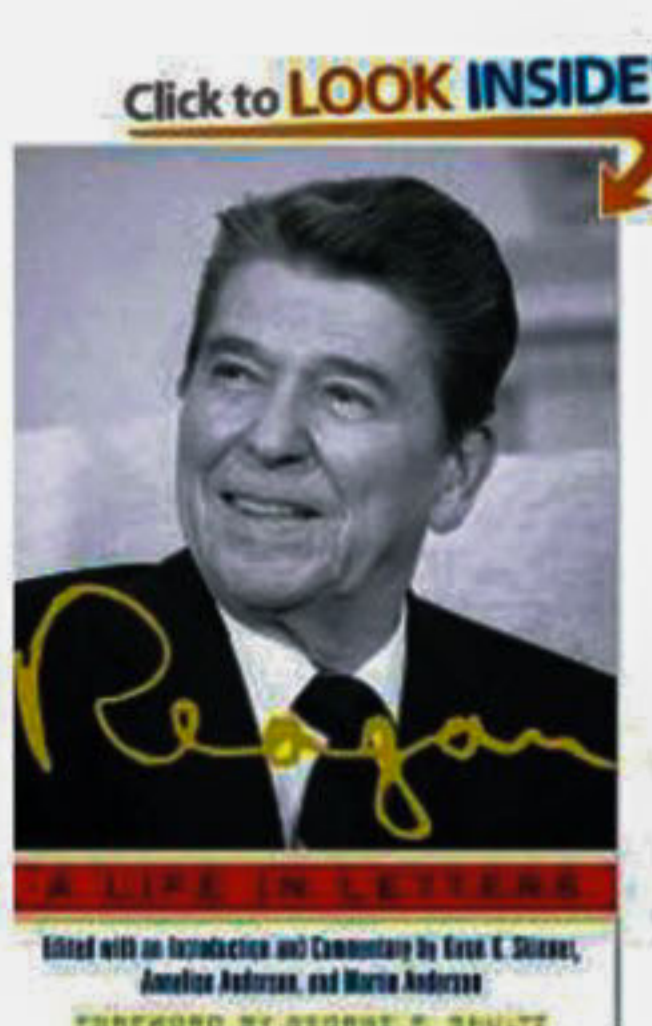
The English Teacher
R.K. Narayan
Michigan State University Press

humane. Although from the surface the novel appears to be telling an ordinary story of a man's journey of life, which journey includes such matters as how he learns the values of life, after reading half of the novel a reader will find his intense love for his wife and family taking centre stage. He slowly discovers that this story is not about his life but about the love of his life, Susila. In the middle of the story, Krishna's loss of his wife shifts the story from one level to another and the extraordinary part of his life starts. On that crucial point his life makes him say, "God has given me some novel situations in life." The proverb goes that love never dies. This novel eventually proves the truth of it by giving physical shape to it, specifically through creating a mystical environment in the novel after the death of Susila. Personally, as a reader, while reading the book I never thought at the beginning or even in the middle of it that the novel could take such a twist before the story ended. One would certainly like readers to read this story because it is a very intense and touching tale that deals with the deep psychology of the human mind and, more importantly, it reveals the fact that the extraordinary thing that a person can find in his or her ordinary life, mental peace, is "a moment of rare, immutable joy --- a moment for which one feels grateful to life and death." Joynub Nabila Obayed is a critic.

A leader's letters

Waliul Arefin likes an epistolary work

RONALD Reagan, the Hollywood actor-turned politician who became one of the powerful presidents of the United States, was an extraordinary correspondent. With over 10,000 letters to his credit in his lifetime, Reagan proved himself to be a brave fighter throughout his life until Alzheimer's knocked him down. The letters, written for family members and friends, politicians and citizens reveal that he had an outstanding skills of communication which earned him the title of Great Communicator. Many historical and political events have been thrown up through some valuable insights from his letters. In fact, the book gives a true account of Ronald Reagan the man in all the years he lived till his death some years ago. The letters demonstrate many facets of his life --- his core beliefs, love for books, sports and drama, early struggling days working as dishwasher man in a girls' dormitory, his life in Eureka College, experience as sports commentator on the radio, love for acting and consequent acting career in Hollywood, penfriendship and finally his life as a politician.



Reagan: A Life in Letters
Eds. Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson
Free Press

Some letters are very insightful for students of American political history. Reagan kept up communication with Richard Nixon, his political co-traveller and a predecessor in the White House, and other Republicans and political heavyweights of America. These letters provide a picture of the political firmament of America as it was during his times --- his switching of allegiance to the Republicans from the Democrats, his governorship, his political campaigns, reverence for military institutions, the Cold War, interest in missile defense and last but not the least his role as leader of one of the two superpowers of the times. These easy-to-read letters of Ronald Reagan place him on the pedestal of some of the most influential and charismatic presidents the United States has ever produced, those who have served full terms with honour and dignity rarely found in American political history. In short, this work is a must read for book lovers in general and for those who take deep interest in American history and politics in particular. Waliul Arefin has interests in history and literature.