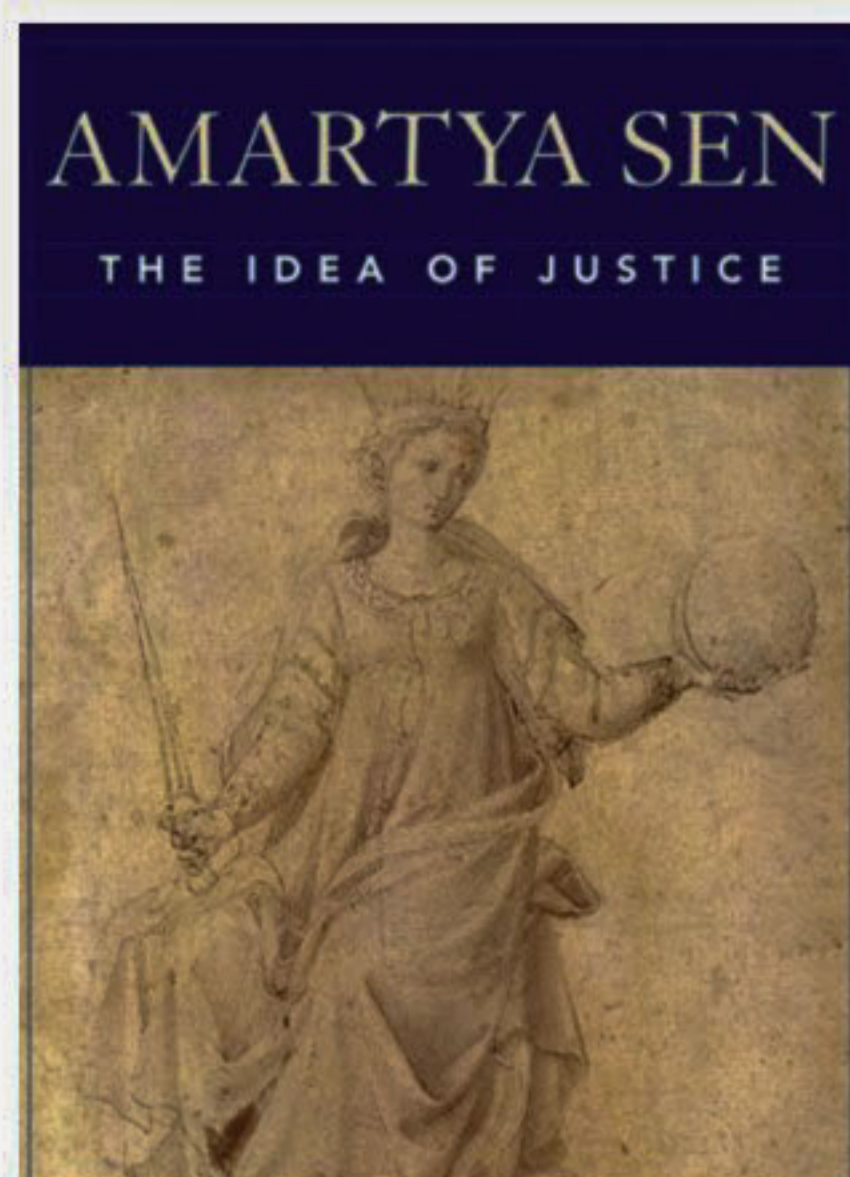


Changing the way you think

Adnan M. S. Fakir is impressed by new economic ideas

I had earlier posted an item about my meeting with Amartya Sen on Facebook. After all, for the past six to seven years of my life I have revered Sen's philosophical ideologies in the manner of a devout one. I also realized that in Bangladesh very few professors actually make excerpts of Sen's writings compulsory, which is a sad occurrence. Within the past year I was lucky enough to be able to meet with Amartya Sen thrice: at a conference, at a discussion and signing of his new book, *The Idea of Justice*, and at a dinner where I was honoured to be able to hold a long discussion with him. Here I will draw on my understanding of him and his subject to give a brief review of his book, *The Idea of Justice*.



The Idea of Justice
Amartya Sen
Harvard University Press

One of the carried misconceptions that I would like to point out in the beginning is that Sen is not a quote-and-quote hard-boiled economist. Rather he is more of a philosopher of economic thought. As such most of his work carries inherent philosophies which can shake off the first-time readers of his works. *The Idea of Justice* is entirely a building of philosophical ideologies as he draws on economic reasoning, current policies, laws and politics. One of the introductory examples Sen provides involves taking three kids and a flute. Anne says the flute should be given to her because she is the only one who knows how to play it. Bob says the flute should be handed to him as he is so poor he has no toys to play with. Carla says the flute is hers because it is the fruit of her own labour. How do we decide between these three legitimate claims?

search for a "just society" as put forth by the English Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Hobbes and followed on by John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and the contemporary most influential figure John Rawls (thereby often being referred to as the Rawlsian project; much of Sen's critique is towards Rawls' 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*), there is no arrangement

that can help us resolve this dispute in a universally accepted just manner. What really enables us to resolve the dispute between the three children is the value we attach to the pursuit of human fulfillment, removal of poverty, and the entitlement to enjoy the products of one's own labor.

As Ziauddin Sarkar summarizes, who gets the flute depends on your philosophy of justice. Bob, the poorest, will have the immediate support of the economic egalitarian. The libertarian would opt for Carla. The utilitarian hedonist will bicker a bit but will eventually settle for Anne because she will get the maximum pleasure, as she can actually play the instrument. While all three decisions are based on rational arguments and are correct within their own perspective, they lead to totally different resolutions.

The current system, Sen argues, revolves around an imaginary "social contract" where we are trying to make ideally just institutions assuming that people will comply with it. Sen identifies two major problems with this "arrangement focused" or "transcendental institutionalism" approach. The first is a feasibility problem of coming to an agreement on the characteristics of a "just society;" the second a redundancy problem of trying to repeatedly identify a "just society."

What Sen proposes is a "realization-focused" approach that "concentrates on the actual behavior of people, rather than presuming compliance by all with ideal behavior." Instead of focusing on an ideally just society which is influencing much of the recent political economy, Sen's alternative focuses more on the removal of manifest

injustice on which we all rationally agree and the advancement of justice from the world as we see it, instead of looking for perfection, which, as Sen points out, can never be attained.

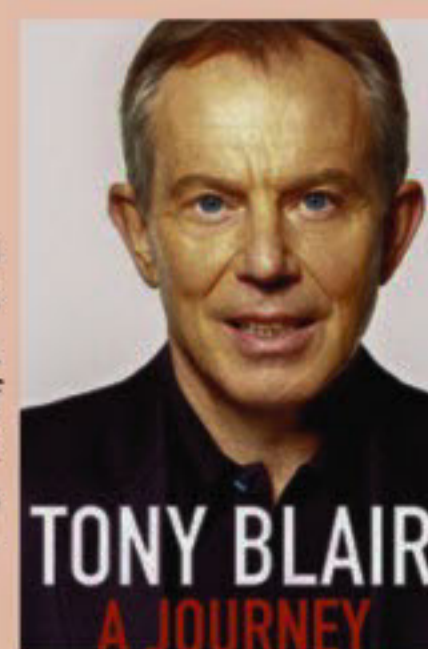
What makes Sen's writing more appealing to me is how he correlates many ideologies with the western approaches, including those of Kautilya, the Indian political economy and strategy writer now claimed to be the Indian Machiavelli (which is funny because Kautilya was from the 4th century BC being compared to Machiavelli from the 15th century) and from early Indian jurisprudence, namely the *niiti* and the *nyaya*, to mention a few. Although Amartya Sen touches on these eastern topics as inspirational matters, I would be more satisfied if he had gone into more detail of their analysis in *The Idea of Justice*.

As vexing at times I found his book, I also found it to be very practically inspiring and not to mention a monumental work. I will urge you to grab a copy and read it for yourself. Although total numbers are not yet out, a friend at Harvard Press told me that so far the book has sold roughly 27,000 only in the UK and 14,000 only in India. If the book seems to be leaping at you out of the blue, I would recommend reading Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* beforehand. But if that's too much reading and patience starts quibbling, just grab a copy and start reading. I promise you, in many ways it will change the way you think.

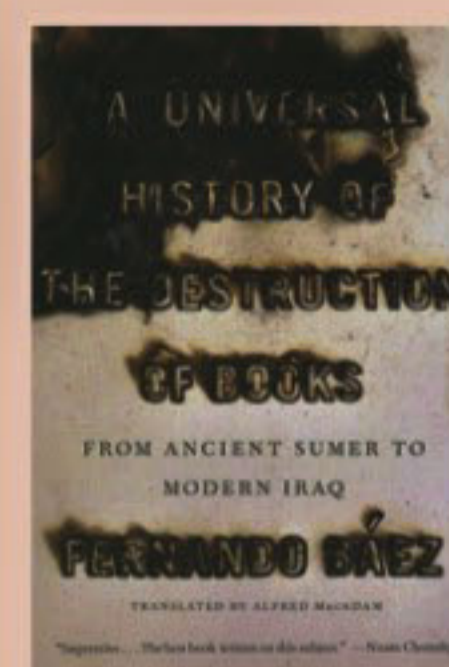
Adnan M.S. Fakir is a critic.

AT A GLANCE

A Journey
Tony Blair
Random House



These memoirs are just out. There is little that is enlightening about them, for Blair remains unrepentant about his politics and his role in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. He talks of Gordon Brown in condescending manner and makes it clear that his successor's ambitions quite undermined New Labour. An unimpressive work.



A Universal History of the Destruction of Books
Fernando Baez
Trans. Alfred MacAdam
Atlas & Co. New York

If you remember the destruction wreaked on libraries in Baghdad and other cities in Iraq right after the Anglo-American invasion of the country in 2003, you will come upon a painful description of that black incident in this work. And then the tale expands, to give you a gripping account of books have been lost and destroyed in history.

Hitler's Private Library
The Books That Shaped his Life
Timothy Ryback
Vintage

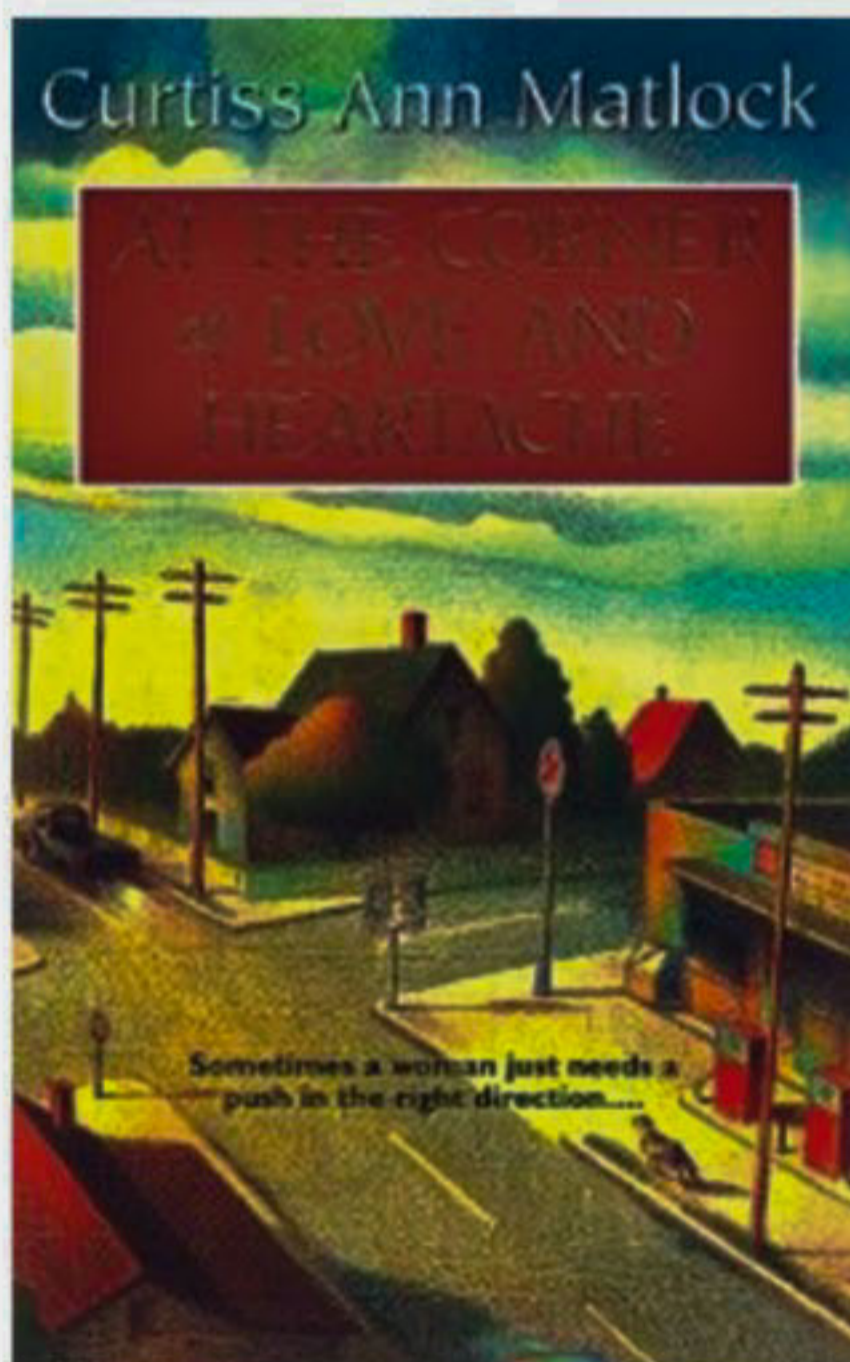


You might find it hard to believe, but the Fuhrer was indeed a bibliophile. His passion for books gathered pace after the First World War and would not stop till the end came for him in 1945. These books shaped his thoughts, especially his reflections on what was then considered the Jewish problem. A gripping read.

Love, loneliness and drama in a small town

Tulip Chowdhury holds her breath and reads

THIS book is a real page-turner. You flip open to the first page and at once you fall in love with the protagonists Marilee Roe James and Tate Briggs Holloway. Both are kind, polite and hardworking folks. In fact, the reasons to like them could go a long way. They have just announced their engagement in the local newspaper, *The Valentine Voice*. Tate is the editor of the newspaper and Marilee the associate editor. The coming wedding is the big bang for the neighbours who have known them for years. Both Tate and Marilee are taking second chances with married life and are looking forward to being happy. They are in anticipation of the "one in a thousand" chance that life is giving them. They are two love-hearts caught in the quiet life of a small town in Oklahoma, USA.



At the Corner of Love and Heartache
Curtiss Ann Matlock
Mira Books

Marilee has a five year old son, Willie Lee. He is a frail little boy who needs special care; and she is also the legal guardian of her sister's ten-year old daughter Corrine. Single and having a full time job, taking care of these two children certainly is not easy for Marilee. In her thirties, Marilee often thinks that when her ex-husband Stuart James left her she was caught in a life drowning her in turmoil. But then she did pick up the threads and take a firm hold over life. This Marilee and the docile wife Stuart left eight years back are not the same person. She is more confident and has learned to take care of life in the outside world. At times it seems as if all she did in her first marriage was to take care of Stuart's clothes because he liked crisp, starched shirts. She has been the perfect wife. But what did she get at the end? The ambitious Stuart grew tired of her and had moved on. He left Marilee to struggle with the two children. But life never stands still and the cruel blow made Marilee focus more on her strengths rather than on her weaknesses. She is now a full time journalist and somebody in town.

long time. When Marilee gives in and agrees to marry him, Tate does not know how to contain his joy. He has the announcement on the front page of his newspaper. He goes about buying bouquets for her almost every day. Tate is a good man and is very affectionate towards Willie Lee and Corrine. However, Tate has his trials and tribulations. His newspaper keeps him on his toes. He cannot find enough time for Marilee. On the other hand, Marilee thinks it may be a part of him that is overlooking their need to be

together more often. He then has to make his decision to adopt Willie Lee. It is needed for the little boy's security in case something should happen to Marilee. And then when his fifteen-year old employee Charlotte decides to leave the paper, Tate has to reach out to Marilee to help him out. Marilee realizes that Tate is no saint and she will have to take his roses along with the thorns.

As the reader becomes engrossed with the lives of Marilee and Tate, life all around the small town of Valentine seems to unfold in the story. The reader seems to get involved with the other characters. There is Charlotte, who has an ailing mother to take care of. There is Sandy, who is eleven years younger than Charlotte but is in love with her and wants to marry her. There is Franny, Tate's fifty-year old mother who still looks as if she is in her thirties and has Davies, the eighty-year old man, dating her. Of Davies, Franny says, "Well, he is not eighty in his heart!"

Then there is Stella Purvis, who leaves her husband Leon Purvis after a fight. Leon calls her and begs her to come back, saying he does not want to spend the rest of his life regretting their marriage. After six hours Stella is back, saying she is tired of the open road anyway.

Anita, Corrine's mother, is a woman with an eccentric nature. She is always in a down the gutter mood and makes empty promises to her daughter. Corrine's father has left her mother, ending an unhappy marriage. Corrine clings to Marilee and would rather not meet her mother. But at times she feels very sad and wishes that she had a normal mother, a father and a home. But she is very possessive about Willie Lee and thinks it is her responsibility to look after him while she lives with Aunt Marilee.

These are people standing at the crossroads. But their life and values are reflected in their southern life. Among them Marilee stands perplexed and is waiting for the push in the right direction. She has very

supportive relatives and friends who are there for her. And that push ironically comes from Stuart, Marilee's ex husband and her son's father. Just when she is about to be married to Tate, Stuart appears and he wants Marilee to be there for him at the most critical time of his life. He discloses that he regrets all his earlier decisions to leave his family, that he is extremely lonely. At this inopportune time he asks Marilee to think long and hard about the road she is taking. But Stuart, with his charm and talent and his own secrets, is exactly what Marilee's heart needs to move into the arms of the right man and into the happiness that is waiting right at the corner. While she debates her dilemma Marilee reasons with her own heart: "Well, I am neither a saint nor a sinner!"

On the other hand, Willie Lee gets a name for curing sick animals just by holding them or touching them. Tate wants to make this news for the people of Valentine. But Marilee knows that this disclosure will only cause havoc to her special-needs son. In the meantime, a tornado tears down Tate's home and leaves him in financial ruin. Here, the wonderful unity of people in dealing with the aftermath of the tornado is a revelation for these small town inhabitants. The drama of life in Valentine is certain to make the reader feel as if he is very much a part of it and give him a push to go on reading the book until it ends with a "catch-your-breath" climax.

Matlock is an interesting "slice of life" author and gives us a good sense of atmosphere and character. She is capable of setting up a good story, a story that holds good on the reader's imagination. Her characters and plot do not seem artificial. The unfolding events come with logic and the narratives and the reader get the feeling that the writer has "lived" in it all. While the book lasts the reader is bound to feel that life was indeed eventful while the reading lasted!

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and is a critic.

Extraordinary, like Zorba the Greek

Charles R. Larson is intrigued by a story of lust

IN Mehrdad Baladi's disturbing novel, *Houri*, there's a brief moment at the beginning that is emblematic of much of the subsequent story. As the narrator returns to his native Iran and the airplane enters Iranian airspace, "Flight attendants hurried to remove wine and whisky from trays. Men rushed to rinse the stink of alcohol from their breath. Women donned dark hejabs to hide their hair and curves, scrubbed makeup from their faces. Passengers were bracing for an inquisition, or something worse. Even from thousands of feet above, and an hour before the plane landed, I caught a sense of the intolerant terrain waiting below."

To a certain extent, that passage tells it all. It's just a few years after the beginning of the Iranian revolution, and Shahed, who has lived in the United States for many years, returns to Tehran for his father's funeral. It isn't long before we learn that his father, whom he calls Baba, spent his entire life skirting the harsher restrictions of Islam. He drank excessively, squandered his money, and lived a flashy life, cheating on his wife and chasing every woman he could find. Even his obsession with American Buick, which he called "The Bride" because his excuse to pick up and seduce women. Among the negative memories Shahed has retained of him was his duty to wash his father's car almost every day in order to keep it looking like the perfect example of Western ostentation.

Baba was a scoundrel. He borrowed money from everyone and his creditors were always shadowing him. He had no job, but lived mostly by selling off parcels of land his father left him. Almost every day, Baba ran off to expensive restaurants, while leaving his wife and two children to fend for themselves. He's an extraordinary character, full of life, a little like Zorba the Greek. But he's darker than Nikos Kazantzakis' memorable rogue, because Baba is also a con-man, a trickster, a shyster, who would even take the food from his children's plates if they ate too slowly. He flouted orthodox Islam and, because most of his life was lived before the Revolution, he was able to get by with his flamboyant and duplicitous lifestyle.

There's very little plot to Baladi's novel. Instead, the story is largely the tension between father and son--no equal playing field because Shahed was still a boy when he fled Iran. It was impossible for him to fight back. The anger that his father engendered in him resulted in part in his son's exile, with little or no intent of returning home and encountering his father again. It was Shahed's mother who gave him the money for his flight from Iran in order that he could escape his father's negative influence.

The plan didn't exactly work. In the United States, Shahed never completed the degree his mother hoped would restore the family name. He dropped out of the university, found it difficult to hold down jobs, and by the time his mother asks him to return for the funeral, Shahed is pumping gas. Worse, like his father, he has difficulty committing to one woman, though the attraction to all women is a constant reminder of his father's philandering.

The title juxtaposes the obsession both men had for beautiful women, the houri promised in heaven, "Nymphs of Paradise." There's an actual woman in Tehran whom Baba chases, and whom everyone calls Hour, though she is married. Before Shahed departs for America, he also lusts after the same woman. In the United States, the one woman Shahed has an on-going relationship with he treats shabbily making the "like father, like son" cliché accurate. Scoundrels both.

The scenes in the story that take place in the United States are rendered mostly as flashbacks, sometimes awkwardly placed in the narrative. Perhaps it is no surprise that both countries take a beating in Shahed's always lively account of his father's and his own shenanigans. As one of Shahed's Iranian friends observes of America, it's a "strange country. Everything costs money here except sex and matches." The remark is ironic, since there's more smoking than sex in the story. The author might best be described as a cultural historian. The details he provides throughout the story describe Iran vividly, even memorably, and when necessary frighteningly. The cultural vigilantes are everywhere on the streets of Tehran, yet there goes Baba again, slipping past them in pursuit of another loose woman.

The ending of *Houri* is a little predictable, perhaps fated to be so. The publisher states of the writer that the story is "based largely on the personal experiences of an Iranian-American..." After coming to the United States as a young man, Baladi himself returned to Iran and worked as a journalist for various international news services until he was banned from working there. During that time, he apparently came to grips with his father's negligence of wife and children.

We observe the movement toward that understanding as the narrative progresses. After a particularly nasty incident, Shahed understands that his father always put himself first, before anyone else even if that meant betrayal of others. The son astutely remarks, "Yet, as such an indication of his deceit and manipulation, this episode reveals his lusty drive to live, unhampered by scruples and fears of being judged. These two are at the root of my ambivalence toward him. How should I really judge my father...based on which trait: his dishonesty or his obstinate zest for life? Should I curse him forever for pulling a fast one on me, or worship him as an earthly prophet?"

I doubt whether this novel will be translated into Farsi.

Charles R. Larson is Professor of Literature at American University, Washington DC.

Principles, grit and communism

Syed Badrul Ahsan reads an old book

FOR 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.



Red Star Over China
Edgar Snow
Grove Press, NY

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 ignorant 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 biter, stretched 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.

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

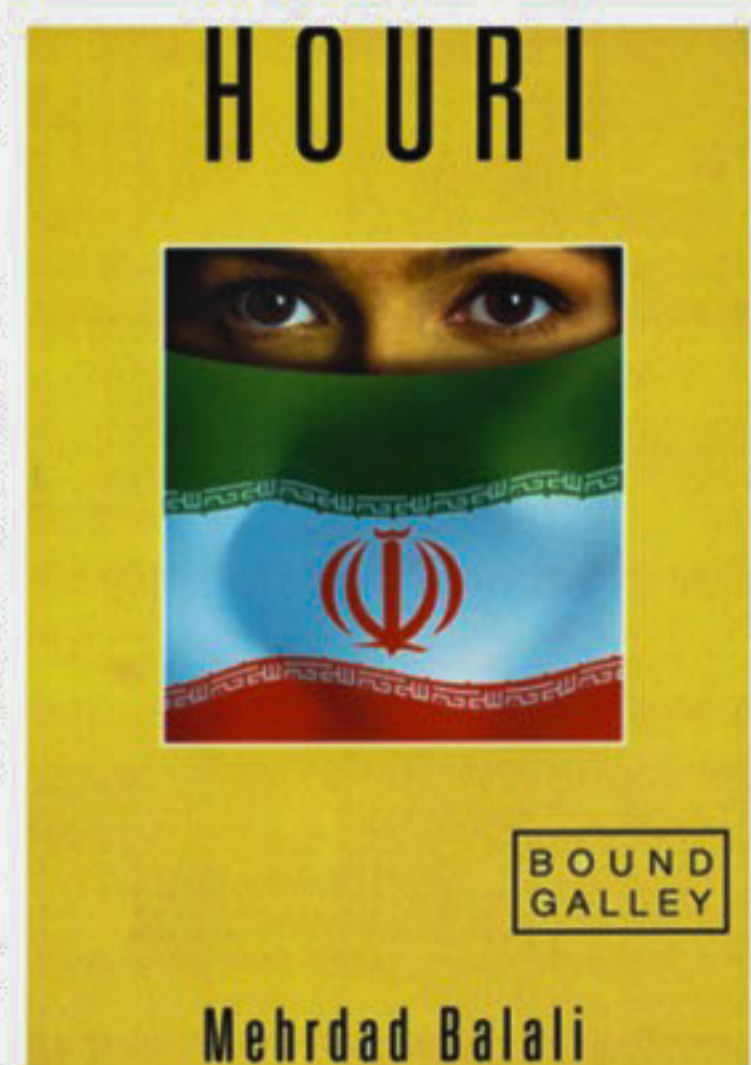
Snow made his initial contacts, discreetly, with the communists. His account of his first meeting with Chou En-lai is revealing. The son of aristocrats and having gone through a spell of education in France, Chou was an intellectual in whom communism found a sort of refinement. He addressed Snow in clear, 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 was 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 to be found in the communist movement. Mao's wife was executed by Chiang Kai-shek, 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, with 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 an 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 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 Tiananmen Square in 1970.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Books Review.



Houri
Mehrdad Baladi
The Permanent Press