

# Images of a vibrant culture

**Jackie Kabir** admires an offering of historical gems

RAZIA Sultana has been teaching Bangla literature since the early 1970s. She has carried out research on many different aspects of Bangla folklore. *Shahitya Bikkhon* is one such book where the author has brought in nine essays which range from women depicted in the Old and Middle Ages in Bangla literature, *baromashi* songs describing the anguish of separation in the lives of rural women and the famous poem *Bidrohi* by Kazi Nazrul Islam. There are essays on the works of giants like Nawazish Khan and Mozammel Haque in Bangla literature. The hard work of the author is visible in the writing. It gives one an insight into the subjects that she deals with.

Women in the Middle Ages were very simple, as the book notes. They hardly used any make up. The only things that were available locally, herbal products, were used for beautification. A special kind of smoke was used to perfume them. The weather also had effects on the mood of Bengali women as it was neither too hot nor too cold and the women around the area were of pleasant temperament. One interesting point to note is that there is no mention of the saree as women's clothing in any of the books. Works coming down from the 16<sup>th</sup> century mention that women wore *potto*, *neth*, *nethlashi* et cetera. Women in those days were very hard working. To save fuel they used either two or four, sometimes six burners. And they almost managed everything about their household affairs.

The second essay deals with the time of Yousuf Zulekha famed Bangla writer Shah Muhammad Shagir. There is a lot of controversy about the time when the famous literature on Yousuf Zulekha was written. As there was mention of Giasuddin Mahmud Shah, it is thought the time could be around the mid-sixteenth century. It must be remembered that the tale of Yousuf Zulekha is not a unique story as it is found in the holy scriptures. It was made into a famous love story by many writers prior to Shah Muhammad Shagir. Among them was the great Persian poet Ferdowsi.

The next essay is about *baromashi*, traditional songs usually sung by women in the rural areas. The songs or poems are mostly descriptions of the anguish of separation from the people they love. As the name suggests, *baromashi* is a song that describes events that go on for twelve months. Each month has a specific problem and the singer describes it in the form of poems or songs. The songs are not written but



Shahitya Bikkhon  
Razia Sultana  
Bangla Academy

spread by word of mouth; they show the collective wisdom of the village people. There are similar seasonal songs or religious songs common to many countries. In some South Asian countries there are about four seasonal songs. What is unique about the *baromashi* in Bangladesh and its neighboring countries is that they project emotions in relation to the surroundings as they happen to be with each passing month. Many modern singers have adopted them in their songs. For example, there is Bhupen Hazarika's song, "maiya bhul bujish na", where the boy just comes forth with excuses not to marry his beloved in any of the Bengali months.

*Gul-e-Bakawli* was written by Nowazish Khan, the seventeenth century writer. It is a story in verse about the love affair of Prince Tajul Mulik and the fairy Bakawli. The writer has gone into extensive research in finding out about the different versions of the story and has tried to place the writer at a given point of time. A comparison

between Mohammad Mukim and Nowazish Khan's version is also presented by the author.

The twelfth century Persian poet Sheikh Saadi's presence in Bangla literature has been discussed by the author in her next essay. Bangla literature has always been influenced by Persian literature. Numerous Persian words are used even today. There were two streams of writing in the Middle Ages, according to Dr. Razia Khan. One was the love stories of famous people and the other which expressed the teachings of great men. Sheikh Saadi was of the latter kind. *Gulistan* or the Rose Garden remains his most famous work. It is in prose form and describes personal anecdotes. It comes in a package of numerous poems, advice and humorous reflections. *Gulistan* has been translated by many different Bengali writers, among whom are Augustine D Silva from Sylhet and poet Akmol. Comparative analyses are the main topic of the essay.

*Bidrohi* by Kazi Nazrul Islam came by a lot of criticism by the establishment when it first appeared before the reading public. Nevertheless it still remains one of the few masterpieces in Bangla Literature. Prof Razia Sultana has collected comments made by various famous editors in their papers in the essay "*Bidrohi: Prashongik Bhavona*." Many parodies were made of the poem and Nazrul was titled as Gazi Abbas Bitkel. The well known writer of the time Mohit Lal claimed that Nazrul wrote *Bidrohi* being influenced by his poem *Ami*.

There is a tradition of *Nayori* in Bangladesh. The meaning is original home but in this country it usually means the girl's parental home where she longs to go on holidays. Many songs and other cultural events surround this *Nayori*. There is a lot of use of *Nayori* in our traditional literature. Professor Razia Sultana aptly describes the event related to *Nayori* and its presence in Bangladesh's culture.

A slim book of some 139 pages, the work is a compilation of various social and cultural events that give substance to Bengali rural life. It will be of interest to readers who want to get a broad picture of the literary history of Bangladesh and its progression. The newer generation, which is oblivious to the literary background of Bengali society, can also use it as a valuable record for research purposes. It will certainly enrich a collector's volume.

Jackie Kabir is a critic, writer and teacher.

# The lives of soulmates

**Tulip Chowdhury** finds pain and good cheer in a tale

SOUL mates are said to be heaven sent. Shudha and Anju are two individuals who have known each other as cousins since they were born. But above it all is the unity of their souls, of how they bond together. They are born on the same day and from that day they have been together. They are like the two wings of a butterfly. They dance, they sing, they eat and they sleep; all of these are done simultaneously, living under the same roof.

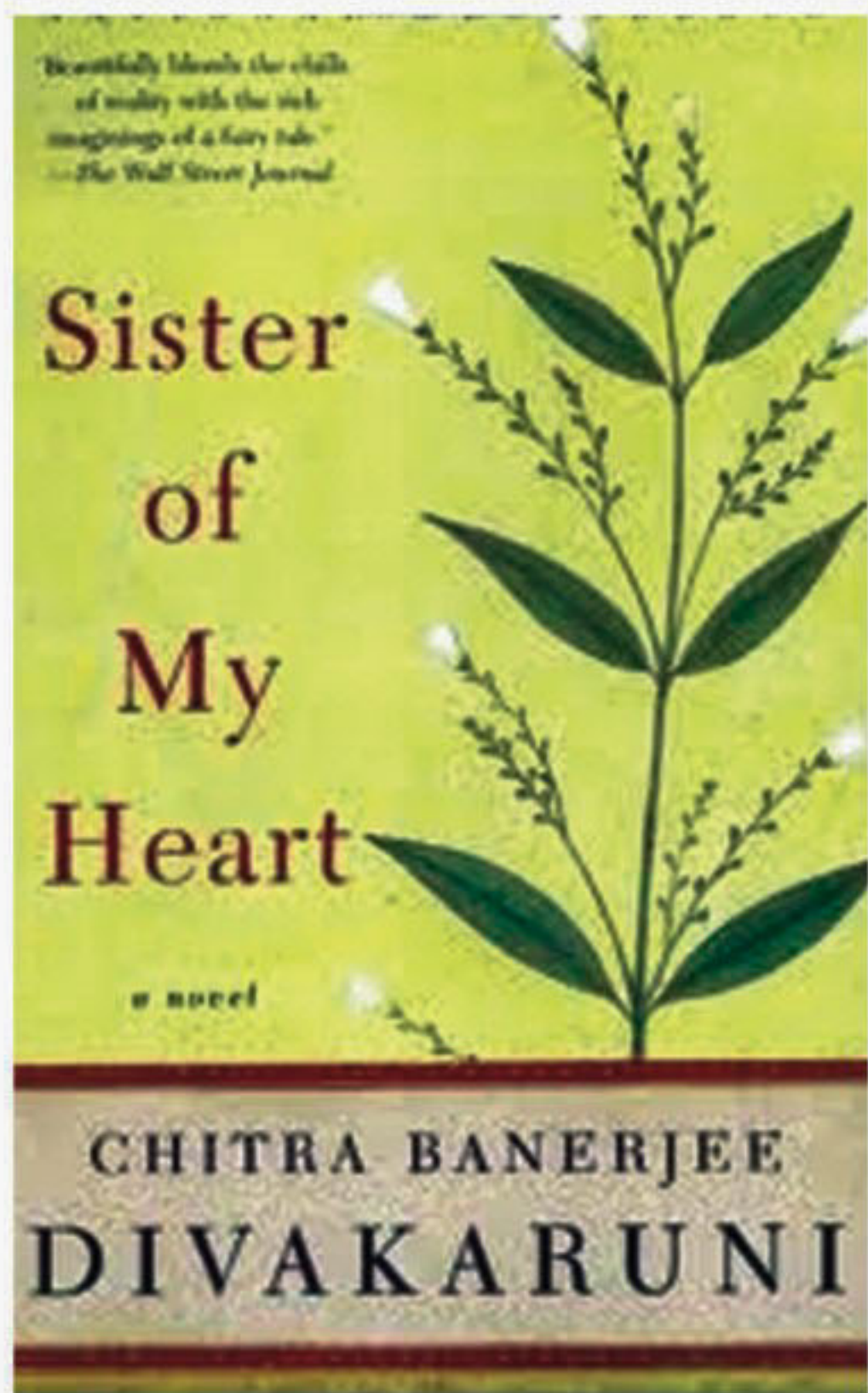
Shudha and Anju live in Kolkata. They go to the same school and same class. Both of them lost their fathers when the two men set out on a hunt for rubies to the distant Sundarbans in Bangladesh. They never came back and were found drowned and bloated beyond recognition. The police find their wallets and are able to identify the two men. Shudha's mother Nalini looks after the household and makes sure that the two girls are taken care of. Anju's mother Gouri runs the bookstore that her husband owned and takes care of the finances. Pishima, the widowed aunt, also lives with them. She is there as the sage, she guides them through the rough rides. It is a household that runs under the supervision of these three women. They are very lucky that Anju's father has left them the large house to live in. They are not rich but they are not poor either; a middle class family, hoping for all the best and yet having to cut the cloth according to the size all through.

Shudha is always the shy one, the one who demonstrates wisdom before taking action. And Anju is hot headed and adventurous. Both are in their late teens. One day Anju plans to skip classes and go to see the cinema that is making waves in the city. After much cajoling Shudha gives in and taking early leave from school they go to watch the movie. Shudha finds herself sitting beside a young man. She is aware that the young man is staring at her instead of following the movie. And when the movie ends, the young man introduces himself as Ashok. Cupid seems to have been waiting right behind them and Shudha and Ashok find themselves in love. However, a neighbor spots the two girls in the in the cinema hall and reports it back home.

Shudha's mother, weighed down with social norms and customs, is flabbergasted. Her daughter, found with a young man? Why, the reputation of the Chatterjee family will be ruined! She stops her daughter's schooling and immediately starts to look for a groom. Anju's mother, liberal in heart, continues with the education of her daughter. In the meantime Ashok is regularly in touch with Shudha through Singhji, the chauffeur. Shudha and Ashok are very much in love. However, as Shudha is very beautiful, soon a wedding is arranged by the mothers. The prospective groom, Ramesh, is an engineer. And like magic, Anjali also is suddenly

in love with a young man. Sunil, who lives and works in the US, steals the girl's heart. The mothers are on cloud nine. They become the gossip of the neighbours. Both the fatherless girls are to wed on the same day.

Ashok's family comes forward seeking the hand of Shudha in marriage. The mothers decline the offer for he is still a student. The only way Shudha and Ashok can marry is by eloping. But Shudha knows that if she elopes Anju will lose her love for Sunil's family will not take in a bride whose cousin has eloped and ruined the family name. And so Shudha gives up her love



Sister of My Heart  
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni  
Anchor Books

and decides to go ahead with her wedding to Ramesh.

From here the story picks up the married life of Anju and Shudha. Living in the USA, Anju is happy and even starts going to college. But Shudha's mother-in-law is a stern woman who has a powerful hold over her son. Shudha's peace of mind is gone when she fails to conceive in the second year of her marriage. Her mother-in-law drags her off to temples. Shudha takes her husband to the doctor secretly for her mother-in-law would not hear of it. Soon Shudha becomes pregnant. There is joy at the in-laws.

And, as it happens, to the two cousins, Anju also becomes pregnant. Both the cousins are happy for both were going to be mothers at the same time. In the meantime Shudha's mother-in-law takes her to the doctor and finds that she is pregnant. She wants Shudha to have a son to be the heir of the family title. And she is dead set against Shudha's pregnancy and wants her to have an abortion. But Shudha too is adamant --- under no circumstance will she kill her baby. Ramesh has nothing to say against the wishes of his mother.

Shudha calls Anju secretly and wants her advice. Both of them agree that Shudha should leave her in-laws-house immediately even if it means the end of her marriage. And so Shudha flees to her mother and has the baby. Ramesh sends the divorce papers with a few days. But Anju lost her baby and started to slip under spells of deep depression. Anju requested her cousin to go over to America and start a new life and be a savior in her loneliness. Ashok comes back to Shudha and tells her that he will wait for her all his life. But Shudha wants to explore the possibility of a new life in the new land. Just before she leaves the real identity of Singhji, the chauffeur, solves a great mystery that has been shrouding their life over the past years. Indeed the reader too sits up with a jolt at the sudden change of events in the story. It seems as though someone has opened a sudden window to reveal hidden secrets of the Chatterjee family and the story itself seems to change its course. The family saga here picks up a little mystery and adds the spice to the already intriguing story.

With Anju's departure for the US the story picks up the two soul mates' life in America but the reader has a feeling that there is so much more to know about Anju and Shudha. And indeed the writer very craftily weaves the story line so that the story ends on a high climax. In fact, the readers are bound to hunt down the book that follows this story with the real-life like drama of the two soul mates. "Vine of Desire", the sequel to "Sister of My Heart" is the book by Divakaruni that opens up another beautiful story about Anju and Shudha's life in America.

Divakaruni is a word master who weaves her story around real life situations. She blends the rich culture of India with the crossroads of change. One gets a crystal clear picture of Indian society with its age old roles and yet she also depicts the changes that the times have wrought. The story she unfolds takes its own steps to climb the peak and the reader is astounded over how the story branches out beneath with its minute details and strong storylines.

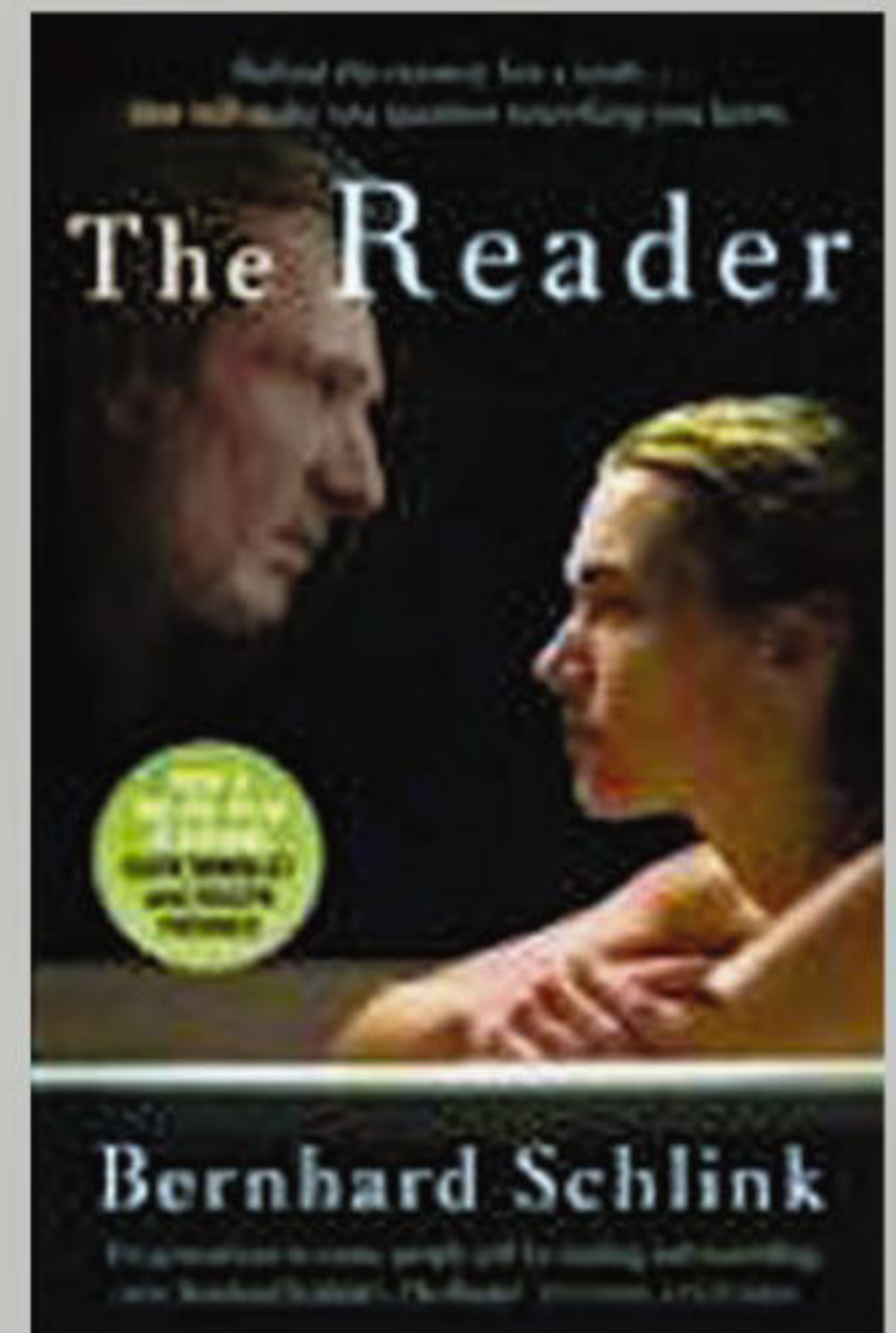
Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and poetry

## ESSAY

# Of books, of contentment

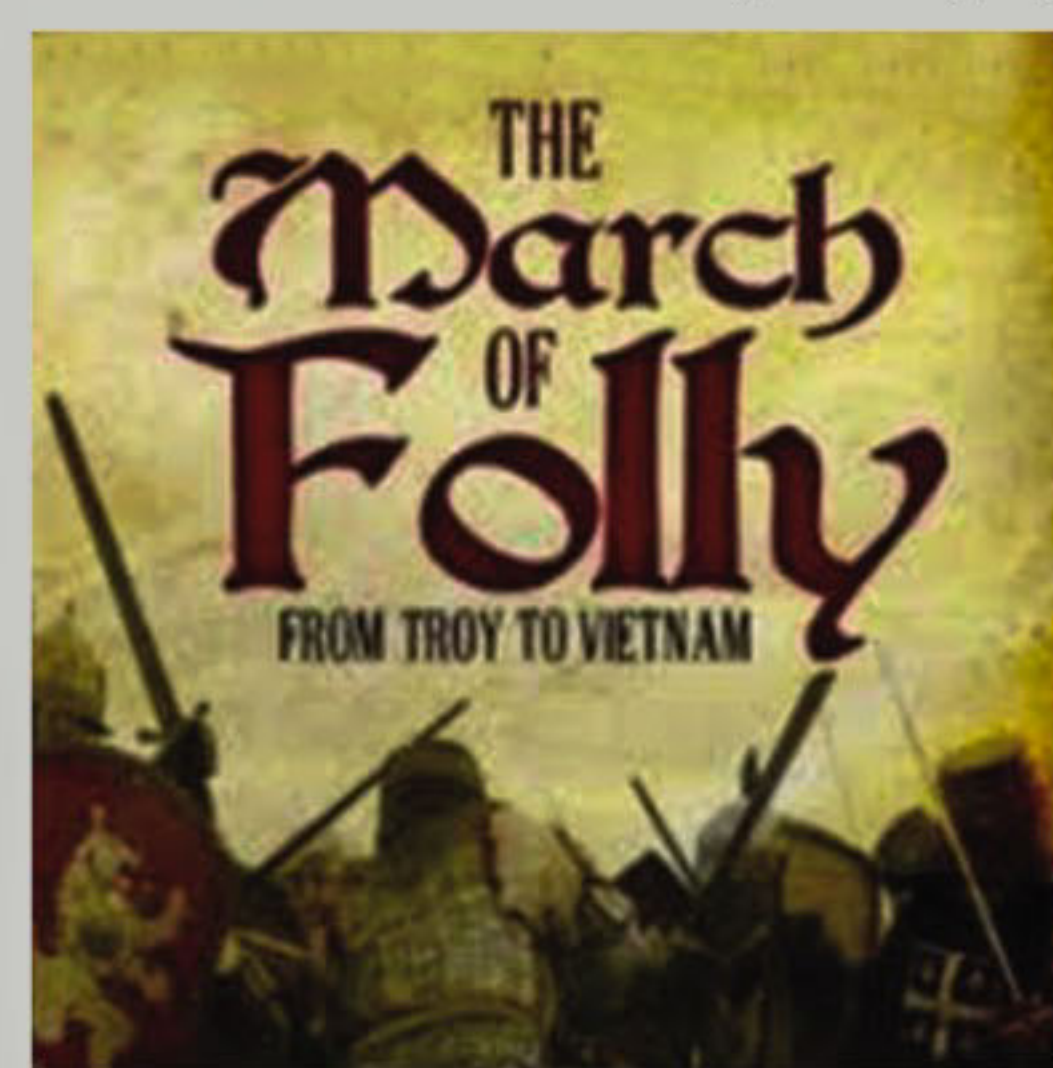
**Syed Badrul Ahsan** speaks of a search for tomes

SEARCHING for books we have always wanted to read is something of a painful pleasure we go through at some point or the other. About a decade ago, I happened to step into a second-hand bookstore somewhere in a small town in Yorkshire. The second-hand books looked rather new to me. That was testimony to the care with which the shop owner had been looking after his goods, if you can call them goods. He was there, obviously convinced that I was a serious enough buyer. He pointed to the various shelves in the store, which in itself was for me a rather agonising affair. After all, you cannot get your hands on all the books in a store, can you? And because you cannot, there is that faint crack somewhere in the



heart to let you know of the spasms of regret you are about to go through.

But in that Yorkshire bookstore on that cold afternoon something of a miracle happened. On one of the shelves stood Barbara Tuchman's much acclaimed *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, a tome I had been looking for over the preceding quarter of a century. I must have begun grinning from ear to ear, for the shop owner, a tall Englishman, stretched his hand out to the shelf, let the book slip between his fingers and then handed it to me. I walked out a truly happy soul. Finding a book you have consistently wanted is something akin to reunion with the one you loved before she went missing. Or put it another way. It is something close to communion with the stars after years of trying to break through the nocturnal monsoon clouds.



Tuchman is now with me. She will be with me until the end, after which someone in my clan will hopefully decide to thumb through it as a way of remembering the ages of man and politics the writer focused on in her reflections in a very distant era. In a similar way, Helene Hanff will be part of my life from here on. Her seminal work, *84 Charing Cross Road*, which by now has taken the shape of a movie, is a

book I have wanted to read for ages. Somehow the opportunity did not present itself, for the book proved pretty elusive for me despite all the bookstores I have walked into in South Asia and elsewhere. But in the final days of December last year, on a trip to Kolkata and in a browse through the bookstore *Crossword* on Elgin Street, I ran into the Hanff book. It is a slim work, a masterpiece which speaks of the twenty-year epistolary correspondence between an American reader and a British bookstore owner on the availability and supply of books desired by the former. No conversation can be higher in quality than one on books. Hanff and the owner of Marks & Co on 84 Charing Cross Road inform you, by taking you on a journey through times when letter writing was an enlightening experience, just what it means to share thoughts on books.

So I have Helene Hanff's book, now resting proudly on the little table beside my bed. It shares space with Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (with that famous image of Kate Winslet on the cover). Since my teacher, Professor Niaz Zaman, a couple of weeks ago gave me that copy, which I must share with another member of The Reading Circle, I have read it with gusto and with alacrity. No, I will not see the movie made of the work, though watching Winslet is always a terrific affair. Truth be told, movies that emerge from famous books do not

always do justice to the written narrative. Years ago, I read Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* and then spent days dreaming of the seductive Bathsheba Everdene as she was in my youthful imagination. And then I saw the movie. The book beat the celluloid version of it by miles. I have lately been in the company of Jawaharlal Nehru yet once again. Shashi Tharoor is to be thanked for it, for it is through *Nehru: The Invention of India* that I have been in a process of rediscovering India's iconic political leader. There was a huge dose of idealism in Nehru. And yet there was turbulence in the man. He was perhaps that rare instance of a politician who would tackle hecklers head on, by jumping off the stage and physically running them out of the compound. And, of course, there was the lover in him. All men endowed with great intellect are fantastic lovers drawn to the sizzling beauty of women. Nehru falls into that category. Tharoor's work whets your appetite about Nehru. The energetic writing he brings into relating the story of his protagonist's life makes this book a new treasure in that old trove you have had for years.

Which reminds me. I should be getting back to Richard Sorabji's account of the life and times of Cornelia Sorabji. And then there is Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals* to catch up with.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Books Review.

