

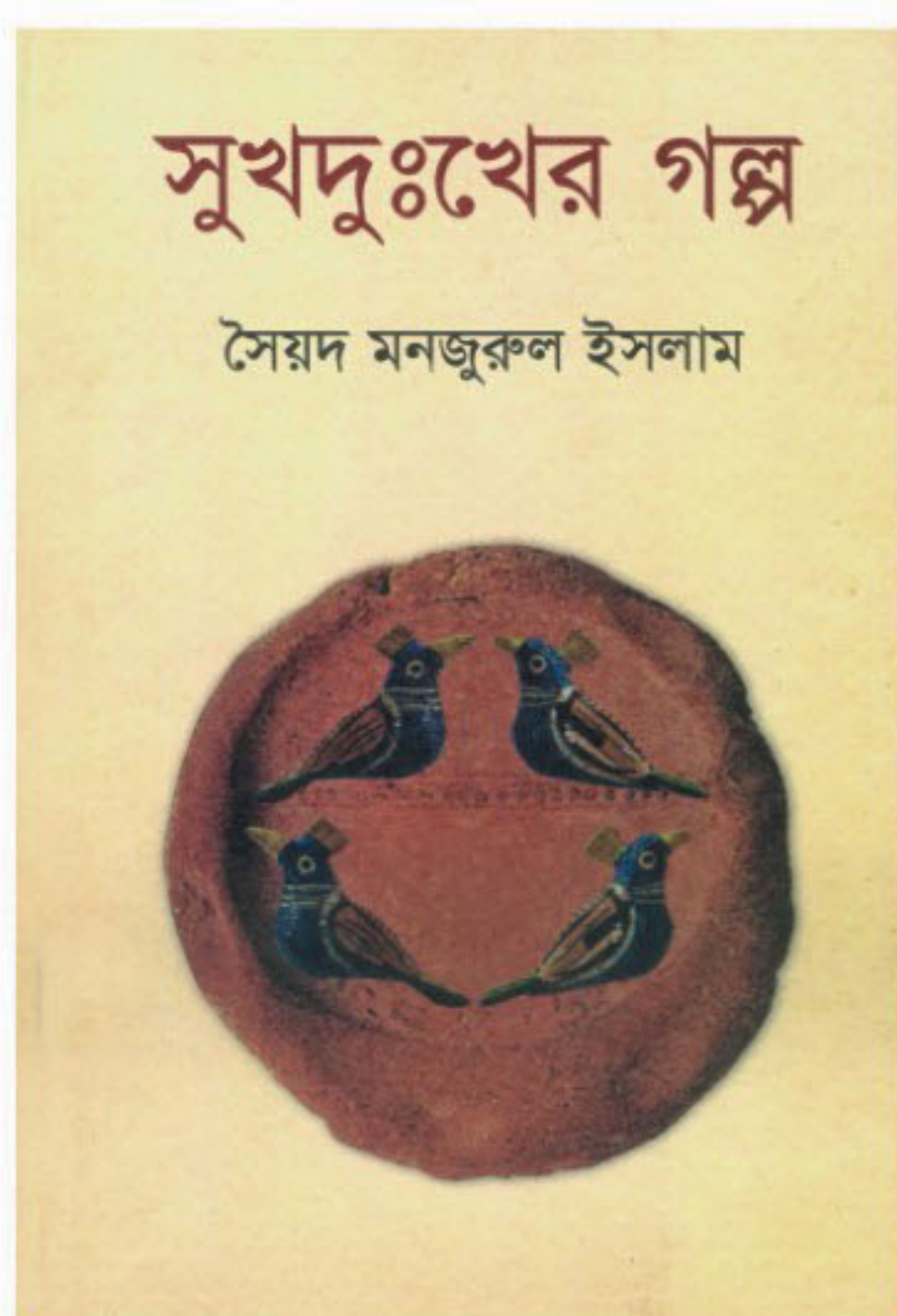
Making the real seem unreal

Rifat Munim enjoys a new work from a telltale writer

While reading Syed Manzoorul Islam's short stories, the first thing that strikes one is the role played by the self-conscious narrator, who is sometimes a part of the story, makes sarcastic remarks about other characters, and remains somewhat unaffected by the major changes and shifts in the plot. More interestingly, Islam's narrator assumes both first and third person points of view. At times his narrator, one is apt to notice, is highly critical of assuming any knowledge of a character's unspoken thoughts as in most of the stories in the book *Kanch Bhangar Rater Galpo*. But then in many of his impeccable stories in *Prem O Prarthonar Galpo* and *Alo O Andhakar Dekhar Galpo*, he adopts a third person narrator and intrudes into the characters' psyche and yet retains the role otherwise played by a self-conscious narrator. However, in his latest volume titled *Shukhdukher Galpo* published at this year's Ekushey Book Fair, readers will find him at the height of his post-modern experimentation with his craftsmanship in both narratorial modes reaching an apotheosis.

A third person or omniscient narrator, as in Rabindranath Tagore's prose fiction, e.g. *Chokher Bali*, *Yogayog*, is privileged to having access to all unspoken thoughts of the characters. So s/he needs no excuse to delve into the characters' minds and give out all their intricate psychological vicissitudes to readers. In sharp contrast, consider Tagore's *Chaturanga* where the narrator himself is an integral part of the story, having access to other characters' thoughts insofar as they are his friends or acquaintances. But Islam's narrator, whether in a first or third person narrative, does a lot more than that. His narrators are very active, and constantly play with readers. Sometimes they influence the plot by making sarcastic comments or imparting some apparently unnecessary information about a character while at some other times they take the liberty of importing magic. Inherent in such a role is the premise that literature is not just an imitation of reality, as a socialist-realist writer would have us believe; it is rather a fabrication whereby the author may as well juxtapose his observed social reality with several imagined ones, ending often in an unreal way but never leaving the reader at ease.

In fact, Islam in his stories is continuously talking to readers, coalescing the playful with the serious, the inevitable outcome of which is the ludicrous effect that leaves one laughing yet pondering uneasily over the queer ending. Islam's endings are complicated, sometimes inconclusive. When readers envisage a sad ending, then he comes up with fantasies that apparently depart



Shukhdukher Galpo
Syed Manzoorul Islam
Nymphaea Publication

from the inevitable consequences of some bleak events in any given context as one will find in stories such as *Passport*, *Ek Shandhya*, *Kannar Eitihash* and *Gachher Bichhana*.

Kannar Eitihash and *Gachher Bichhana* begin with a gradually disintegrating conjugal life of a couple, preparing readers to foresee their divorce. But both the stories end in two different kinds of catastrophe whereby the couple realise that true love lies under the surface distrusts and misunderstandings. In *Ek Shandhya*, the protagonist Russel, who lives with his sister, gullibly becomes part of a gang rape, in which he did not participate but neither did he protest. The victim is a poor garment worker named Aruna, who is then taken to a private clinic where the doctors refuse to admit her to avoid legal complications. Incidentally, Russel's sister, who happens to work as a nurse at the clinic, takes Aruna to her place. Meanwhile, Russel is already shattered by his sense of guilt. So he almost faints when he sees the girl there. Upon Aruna's mother's arrival, when everyone, especially Aruna and her mother, is engulfed by frustration, Russel, all of a sudden, declares that he would take her responsibility by marrying her. Such a dramatic turn indicates an unreal yet happy ending, leaving readers asking if

it is possible at all in a social context where young girls are becoming all the more vulnerable to rape.

On the other hand, when readers expect something happy in the end, Islam will strike the most unexpected event, full of grotesque happenings, as in stories such as *Chungiyajuri'r Math* and *Nolok*. Both are stories of love. While the former is a perfectly composed tale of mutual love, the latter is a poignant tale of how a young woman is first seduced and then brutally tortured and deserted. But what puts them as well as a number of other stories such as *Malinar Ek Ratri* and *Dui Khuni*, among others, on a common ground is the depiction of women as trapped in a male dominated society.

Apart from narratorial techniques, Islam's mastery in importing magical events adds quite a new dimension to the stories. Think of the stories *Kathalkanya* and *Telephone* which again give away two harrowing tales of female repression. But both of them first startle and then occupy readers with totally non-existent happenings which are in fact hallucination of the protagonists' minds. Making the unreal seem real, in the end, appears to be an effective literary device which signifies how much devastated the perpetrators are by their overwhelming sense of guilt. But the most appealing magical import is to be found in the story *Meye* wherein the pregnant wife is threatened to be abandoned if she fails to give birth to a boy. When she is weighed down by such an atmosphere, her mother-in-law pretends to fall sick so as to make her do all the household chores. At such a time, she sees her desire of giving birth to a daughter materialised in the form of a beautiful girl who abruptly appears and finishes all her chores. This is how Islam, with the manipulation of magic, departs from the logical consequence of some previously constructed events.

But this departure, it soon comes out, is not to digress from real problems. Quite the opposite, this is a conscious effort in defiance of literary conventions and social perceptions so as to highlight the raw realities on one hand and reinforce on the other hand the idea that existing social realities should change. If that is not possible in real life, then it can be achieved at least in literature. But Islam does not stop there. With his unique narratorial interventions in the form of occasional comments and so on, he intends to arouse in readers a deep-rooted empathy toward the suppressed, especially women, and resentment toward the perpetrators as well as the system that shelters and nurtures them.

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Upheavals of emotion

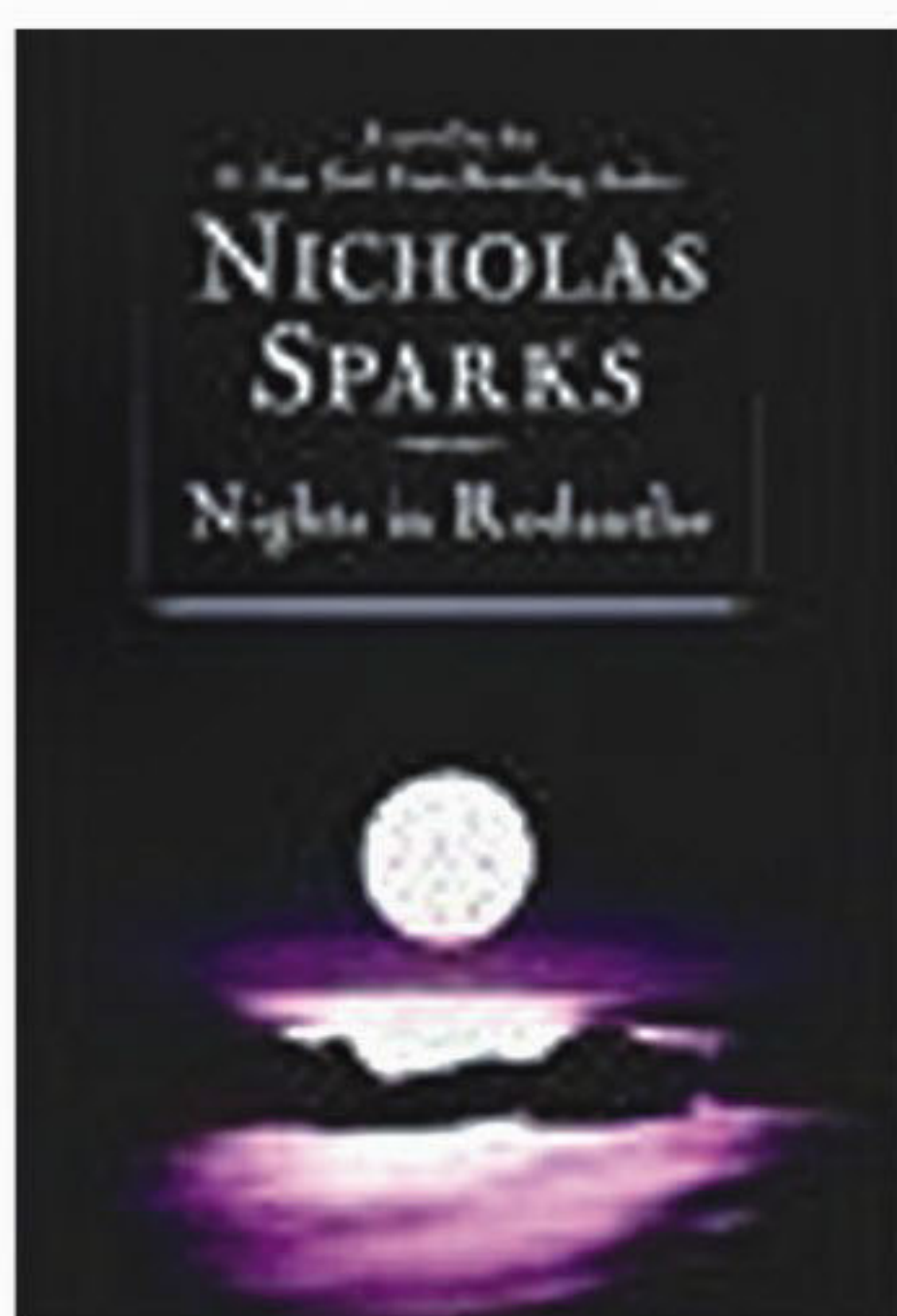
Tulip Chowdhury identifies with two lonely souls

Nicholas Sparks has done it again! He holds the reader captive from the first page to the last in *Nights in Rodanthe*. The book is a real page turner. This is the moving story of Adrienne Willis and Dr. Paul Flanner caught together in emotional upheavals and their discovery of love when they least expected it.

Living in Rocky Mount in North Carolina, USA, Adrienne is reeling with heartache as her husband, Jack breaks up their marriage and leaves for a younger woman. Left to bring up three teenage children on her own Adrienne tries to balance her job and home. When Adrienne stands in front of the mirror she sees herself as an aged woman, who has become unattractive. She is aware of how betrayal can belittle a person. She had been too busy raising the children and taking care of her home and did not notice Jack losing interest in her. Now left alone Adrienne has hard time consoling her three children, Mat, Amanda and Dan. She feels as if she had failed her children for not being able to keep the family together. She tries to add to the family's crippling finances by keeping up the job at the local library. When the world seems to be falling apart her friend Jenny calls from Rodanthe. She wants Adrienne to spend some days at the small coastal town to look after her inn while she attends a wedding in another town. Adrienne agrees thinking that it will give her the tranquility and peace she needs to rethink her life.

Just as Adrienne comes to Rodanthe, a major storm is forecast and a guest, Dr. Paul Flanner, arrives. Paul is a surgeon. He was a workaholic until his wife and son left him because he had been too obsessed with work. He is in Rodanthe to see the husband of a patient who had died after surgery. Adrienne and Paul are caught together with the fierce nor'easter in the way. As they spend the first two days Paul finds Adrienne very attractive with her natural flawless skin, the soft brown curly hair and the hazel eyes. Knowing that Adrienne was divorced Paul does not hesitate to let her know that he is attracted to her. But Adrienne is still very much in shock and refuses to believe that another male may be interested in her. Worst of all she thinks that she is growing old and no one would want her anymore. Jack's rejection of her had left her soul bleeding and she has not found anybody who could console her weary heart. She feigns indifference to Paul's interest in her.

The people of Rodanthe are bracing themselves for the storm. Adrienne asks Paul to help her as they settle in to ride the fierce weather. She hurries out to get some grocery supplies. Meanwhile Paul finds the wooden planks to board the windows. When Adrienne comes back she finds him patiently putting up the boards. She finds his methodical way of doing the work impressing. Adrienne tries to prepare some food



Nights in Rodanthe
Nicholas Sparks

that can be kept in case the electricity is cut off. Paul joins her and lends a hand with the kitchen work. Even in this short time Adrienne finds Paul very accommodative and it seems as though they had known each other for a long time. Added to all these is Paul's desire to be her friend. As they keep working together, suddenly Adrienne is ready to try out a new life. "Why must I keep crying over split milk?" She asks herself. In the evening, after she took her shower she put on some rouge and mascara. Next she put on her white blouse and the black skirt she had brought. And now it seems as though she had known that Paul would be here and some unseen forces had her bring these clothes and cosmetics.

As night came on the wind started raging outside. Thunder and lightning followed and the sea is like a dark, angry mass. Adrienne and Paul, the two lonely souls, are like two pieces of magnets and find themselves growing closer as the night deepened. They find themselves telling each other about the pain of breaking up their families. Paul admits that it was his fault that his wife started to see someone else when he was not there. His son too was gone because of his absence in the boy's life. And he tells Adrienne that he plans to join his son in Ecuador and make it up to him. His honesty and amiable manners make Adrienne open her heart to him.

Adrienne admits that until now, until she had met Paul, she had not wanted to seek out life again. And there Paul takes her in his embrace and holds

her. Adrienne does not try to set herself free. In fact after facing loneliness she is glad that someone is here to hold her and to want her. It is as if destiny had planned that they should find each other on this stormy night. Paul and Adrienne are lost in love, little do they hear the ferocious howling of the wind outside. Both of them feel as if years of bitterness have melted in the tenderness of their love.

Morning finds them sleeping in each other's arms in the bed. They go out and find the devastation that storm has caused. Mercifully the house had stood tight and apart from the broken chimney and few wooden planks coming loose, they were quite safe. Feeling very blissful and in love Paul decides not to go to Ecuador to his son. But Adrienne persists, saying he will not be at peace until he reaches out to his son. And this visit to Ecuador ultimately comes with surprises and troubles like Pandora's box. Adrienne and Paul are in constant touch with each other, dreaming away of the day he will come back and they will settle down; two souls who are together by sheer chance. They find that love is possible at any age, at any time and often comes when one least expects it. But the path of love, though found so suddenly does not come on a smooth road for them for tragedy awaits the two lovers. Adrienne once again finds her soul searching for peace and reasons. The big question for the reader comes, will Adrienne and Paul finally be united, indeed will love take them to show them the way to a new life?

The story of Paul and Adrienne comes with soul seeking questions. Why does a marriage fail? When a family breaks up, who is to be blamed for the pains the children go through? And indeed in the midst of it all if the betrayed spouse finds happiness can she or he embrace it even if means another upheaval for the children? The modern world is witnessing a rise in family breakups. The reasons are varied. But when a family does come apart on account of one spouse getting into to a new relationship, the children and the betrayed spouse suffer the most. In this family saga we witness the humility and sacrifices of Adrienne and the children as the father goes off for another woman. The reader is saddened at the plight of the broken family and is touched again when Adrienne sees light at the end of the tunnel. Indeed the story is woven into real life drama and wakes up the reader with the joys and sorrows of everyday. Adrienne's life is a stark reminder that things can change in life without any warning. The story also brings the message that happiness may be found round the corner if one can seek it out. Nicholas Sparks is a writer to be read and re-read, his stories are to be read and savored into life's many long hours.

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and is a poet

Through the eyes of the young

Choru Hoque appreciates a teen's teen novel

This year a very young novelist has come forth with a novel at the Ekushey Book Fair. The title of the book is *Bochhorta Chhilo JSC-r*, which could be translated into English as 'The Year was of JSC'. The young author is Brotee Das Datta, who is only fourteen years old, a class nine student of Viharunnisa Noon School.

It is a beautiful experience to go through the enchanting story of the 30-page book *Bochhorta Chhilo JSC-r*. We can understand the aspirations and the told and untold desires of teenagers of these times as they reflected in the novel, brought out by a very new publishing house.

The characters of this novel are Nishat, Upama, Arka, Rihaab, Avro and so on. They are students of class eight and preparing themselves for the coming JSC examination, the Junior School Certificate Examination that was held for the first time in 2010. The afore-mentioned characters are going to attend the first public exam in their lives. But during the year many things have occurred. Among them a good number of things have happened and many are beyond expectation. During this one year the main characters like Upama and Nishat have faced frustra-

tion, despair repeatedly. But at last with a lot of hard work and ambition, they all have been able to achieve excellent results in their JSC exam.

In this novel, our young writer has talked about some social problems like eve-teasing, et cetera, and has tried to come up with some solutions that can help us overcome these contemporary social problems. She has also talked about the thinking and lifestyle of teenagers of the present era. To express the true picture of the original lifestyle of the teenagers, Brotee Das Datta has also written about some foreign movie stars and sports persons who are closely linked to the thoughts and lifestyle of modern teenagers. More than that nowadays, the lives of most teenagers are technology related. From an outward view, that might seem less befitting for a Bangla teenage novel, but we must not forget that the school-going author has presented a picture of a kind of city life where people of her age do not get the school field for

physical exercises, not even the school compound, let alone in the localities they live in. It is an age when teenagers have to spend their most leisure days before the television box.

This is a very enjoyable story offered by a promising teenage writer. It is the writer's first book. Like a movie it expresses all the inner storms and feelings of our new generation. The characters here give expression to their dreams and sufferings, joys and expectations, loneliness and inner sobbing, misunderstanding, frustration and finally their great achievements in a greater perspective.

We must hail the arrival of a new house in the publication arena of Bangladesh, and for its decision to invest in a work by a teenage writer. Much appreciation also goes to Biswajit Datta for his cover design which may suit the taste of those in their early teens, free of childhood days but yet to reach adulthood.

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Of glory and flattery

Shahan Haq reads about human ego

It is the ego we are talking about here. You might as well make a correction and say that the ego is what we have always been talking about, indeed have been nurturing throughout the course of human civilisation. And proof of that is what comes through in this gripping little book wherein you once more have cause to meet the famous and the illustrious, but this time with a difference though.

And where do you find the difference? It shines through the heavy praise they heap on themselves. Remember Winston Churchill describing his own luminosity by looking at himself as a glow-worm amidst all the worms around him? That is ego for you. In case you were inclined to think, in the old-fashioned way, that the ego is something to be embarrassed about, observe what John Cassavetes has to say about it: 'It's bullshit when people say that ego is a bad trip. It's the only trip. You are who you are because of your ego; without it nothing counts.'

And there you are. As you flip through the pages of this book, you find experience as also the life you have lived through taking on increasingly stranger hues. Your notions of the human personality change when you have the actor Paul Newman tell Edwin Miller, 'You know, you are privileged to have this interview.' You are aghast. How much more horrible can people be, no matter how lightly you may sometimes observe the workings of the hubristic in them? The boxer Muhammad Ali, never one to shy away from self-praise, comes forth with that in-your-face remark: 'When you're as great as I am, it's hard to be

humble.' What do you make of that? And what happens to the values, one of them being humility, you have grown up with? Not even the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche could hold himself back from self-adulation. Here is how he does it, in his own words: 'I'm not a man --- I'm dynamite.' You fall back, exhausted, on your sofa or bed or floor or wherever you are. Aren't philosophers expected to be meek and mild? Never mind the answer. Just move on. Listen to what the writer Noel Coward says about his own place in the universal scheme of things: 'I am an enormously talented man, after all it's no use pretending that I am not, and I was bound to succeed.' And Jerry Hall about herself? 'I think if I weren't so beautiful, maybe I'd have some more character', says she. Yes, she is beautiful all right, but it is beauty not tempered with the self-effacing. But why blame her? Robert Benchley, whose writings you have always loved reading, takes us by surprise by his view of himself: 'It took me fifteen years to discover I had no talent for writing, but I couldn't give it up because by that time I was already famous.' Maybe that is tongue-in-cheek. But you marvel at the ego just the same. Even Albert Camus had his own contribution to make to the history of the human ego when he noted, 'I conceived at least one great love in my life, of which I was always the object.' Truman Capote is not far behind him. This is how he looks at his enormous talent: 'I'm an alcoholic. I'm a drug addict. I'm homosexual. I'm a genius.' You've got to admit you can't beat that sort of self-assessment.

Pure, unadulterated arrogance is what you collide into when you meet George Bernard Shaw. His hubris was prodigious and legendary. Here is just one instance of it: 'I often quote myself. It adds spice to my conversation.' Remember Charles de Gaulle? Pride was his forte, often for very legitimate reasons. He once said he was, politically, neither on the left nor on the right but above. Here's a little more: 'I respect only those who resist me, but I cannot tolerate them.'

Read on. By the time you are through reading, your head will be in a spin and your emotions in a state of turmoil. Your own ego will have taken a backseat to those of all these people you have been reading about.

Shahan Haq studies comic situations and sometimes writes about them.



The Bedside Book of Bigheads
Edited by William Cole
John Murray, London