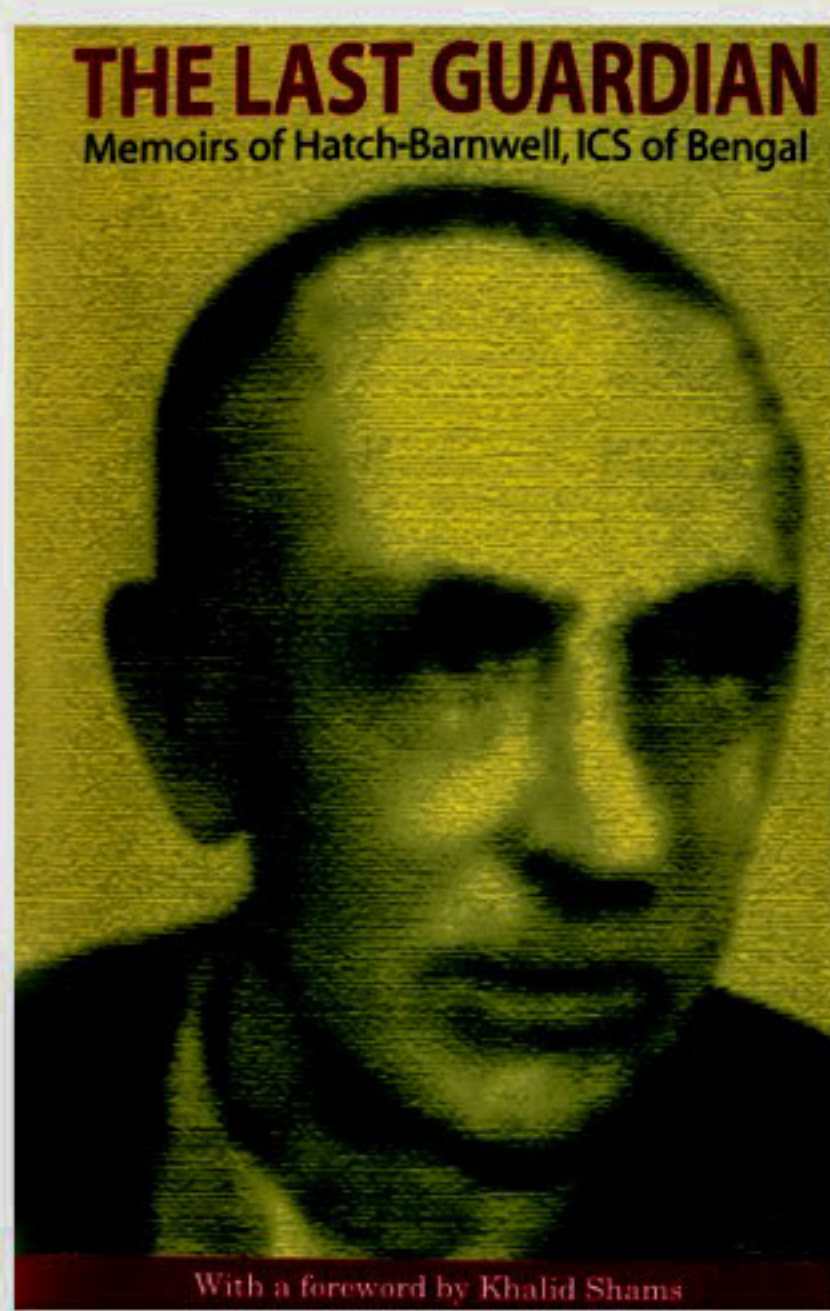


# Footprints on the sands of time

## Shahid Alam celebrates a lost era

I love the opening line of Stephen Hatch-Barnwell's memoirs *The Last Guardian* for its sagacity: "It is better to trust luck than to be clever." And it is a book of memoirs, and not an autobiography. His purely personal life is dismissed in a total of three or so sheets (that, too, is a generous estimate) out of a voluminous book of 384 total pages. The rest is devoted to his professional career as a member of the exalted Indian Civil Service (ICS) during the waning years of the British raj. He ended this chapter after reaching the pinnacle of the service as a member of the Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP), the successor service in the new country of Pakistan. In fact, he ended his career in East Pakistan (he had worked all his civil service life in undivided Bengal of British India and the eastern province of Pakistan) in 1966 before retiring to end his days in the country of his birth --- England. The unusual aspect of his life and career was that this was a quintessential Englishman who voluntarily opted to stay on in the land where he began his professional career even after the sun of the raj that had made his job possible had finally set in its crown jewel. Even his name, Stephen Hatch-Barnwell, smacks of the archetypal Englishman, somehow even evoking the image of an empire-builder. He has left behind one of the most delightful books that I have read over the last ten years or so.



**The Last Guardian**  
Memoirs of Hatch-Barnwell, ICS of Bengal,  
The University Press Limited

he considered himself among the goats (or also-rans) rather than among the sheep (or the top order), but was happy that his goat position got him posted to the place he would have preferred to be in: Bengal. "As last man in, I was more lucky, as it turned out, than surprised to find myself posted to Bengal." During training as a probationer at Oxford University, Edward Thompson, the novelist, who taught Bengali, impressed him the most. But his impression in hindsight was that "his Bengali, though amply sufficient to teach us beginners, was not as profound as his knowledge of the Bengali people." Then, recounting a particularly ridiculous bit of political and bureaucratic bungling in the immediate aftermath of the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, he thus summed up the outcome: "In the end we had to pay labour to throw the debris into the river where the fish doubtless got a good meal of mixed pulse and weevils free of charge." By the way, you will get a discerning account of the famine and his perspectives on it as an official and an observer in the self-explanatory titled chapter, "Great Bengal Famine and Politics of Food". Two of his comments warrant relating: "Basically, the Bengal famine of 1943 was at least as much an economic famine as an agricultural one." And, "...a considerable part of it was due to politically motivated cornering of a very short market, in the very last days before the new crop came in and in the days immediately

thereafter." H-B is a shrewd judge of human character and he is at his best in recounting the idiosyncrasies and foibles (including those of himself) that eloquently illustrate that delightful adage of mad dogs and Englishmen. He talks of the legendary district officers of the raj. One ICS officer, a man of considerable private means, was posted to Murshidabad, did not want promotion because it would entail being transferred somewhere else from his beloved district, and threatened to resign from the service if he was! Consequently, he remained there and was instrumental in completely upstaging Mahatma Gandhi at his own ploy. To propagate his civil disobedience campaign, Gandhi proceeded to Murshidabad, but before he could arrive, the district officer decided that he would lead a procession and hold a public meeting at the same time as the Mahatma. Accordingly, "at the appointed time, clad in a loincloth and accompanied by a goat, the District Magistrate Sahib led his procession through the town and held his meeting. Poor Gandhi was totally outshone by Mr. A's vast following and attracted none but his own already dedicated followers." Jolly good show and all that, old chap!

H-B's explanation for the fair abundance of legendary "characters" in the service before he joined it and the disappearance of those "whose eccentricities were quite...outstanding" during his tenure is as delicious as it is perceptive: "Probably the proliferation of telephones and motor cars had to some extent moderated the isolation which served as a forcing house for the seeds of any queer traits in the mental make-up of those posted to outstations." His reference to Mr. A above is an acknowledged stratagem of keeping the names of most individuals anonymous because of their foibles, but he also names names, political organizations and places. "I never liked Calcutta for more than a flying visit." The government of East Pakistan in 1955 "was riddled with corruption" and "probably contributed largely to the ease with which the military coup took place three years later." One of the architects and chief beneficiary of that coup, Ayub Khan, "was not a very good judge of men and was a bit apt to handle them as if they were chessmen." H.S. Suhrawardy he assessed this way: "As an administrator he was absolutely first class --- but as a politician less so. This was unfortunate, as with his tradition of western culture he was a firm believer in the institutions of parliamentary democracy, without realizing its practical limitations."

H-B expresses some strong reservations against both the judiciary in general, and the United States and, particularly, its aid policy. He talks about "...the art of dealing

with impunity with the vagaries of the judiciary. The latter conceived it as their mission to "teach the executive a lesson" on the awe in which their "Lordships" should be held by hauling executives up on charges of contempt of court, whenever the slightest excuse of doing so could be found." And, "the higher strata of the judiciary either lived in a world of unreality or had different ideas on the administration of justice from mine." He barely concealed his contempt for the American way of doing things. "The Americans seemed to think (and I fear still do) that the "American way of life" is good enough for any people. They have evidently not read their Jean Jacques Rousseau." And, "he (Ayub Khan) need not have fallen so completely into their (the Americans) incompetent and as it ultimately proved, unreliable hands." H-B has other astute gems to offer: "...the advance of democracy had made politics a profitable industry and the achievement of cheap popularity at colossal expense to the economy was considered justifiable." And, "Politics can earn money directly and professional politicians seldom die poor."

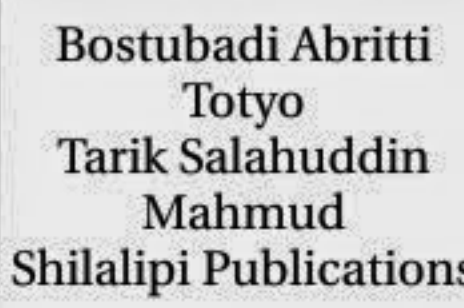
H-B's observations on the land tenure system in Bengal, Calcutta riots and the partition of Bengal, tackling food crisis, agricultural development, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Kaptai resettlement, both from historical and personal perspectives, are illuminating and instructive. His reflections on the Bengali character are no less incisive: "For some reason the villains and clowns in works of fiction about India are usually Bengalis. This is a total misrepresentation." So, who are they? "They are highly emotional and also given to forming passionate likes and dislikes. For them the world is full of heroes and villains. They will follow their heroes blindly... Unfortunately, they do not always choose their heroes for logical reasons and are apt to attach at least as much importance to personalities as to principles... They are extremely idealistic... They have a wry sense of humour and a strong sense of the ridiculous." Not too wide off the mark now, is he? There is enough in the book to keep the reader engrossed. Particularly as it is laced with delightful doses of sardonic humour. *The Last Guardian: Memoirs of Hatch-Barnwell* will take you back to the days when problems were complex, but life was easygoing, romance was in the air, winters were crisp and/or chilly in Bengal for close to four months at a stretch, and the bureaucrats were truly ruling servants.

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## BOOK choice



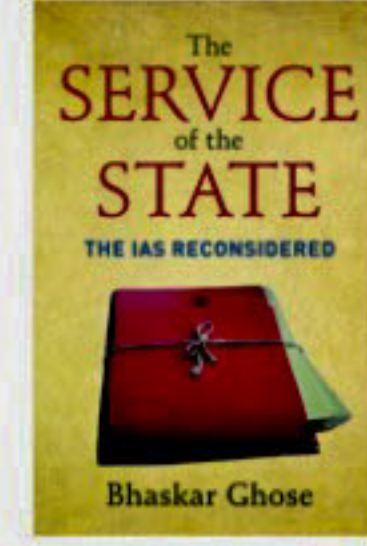
Marble Foler  
Moushum  
Pias Majid  
Shuddhoshor



Bostubadi Abritti  
Totyo  
Tarik Salahuddin  
Mahmud  
Shilalipi Publications



What Did I Ever  
See in Him?  
Amrita Sharma  
Penguin Books



The Service of the State  
The IAS Reconsidered  
Bhaskar Ghose  
Penguin/Viking



Uttoradhikar  
Asharh/Srabon 1418  
Bangla Academy

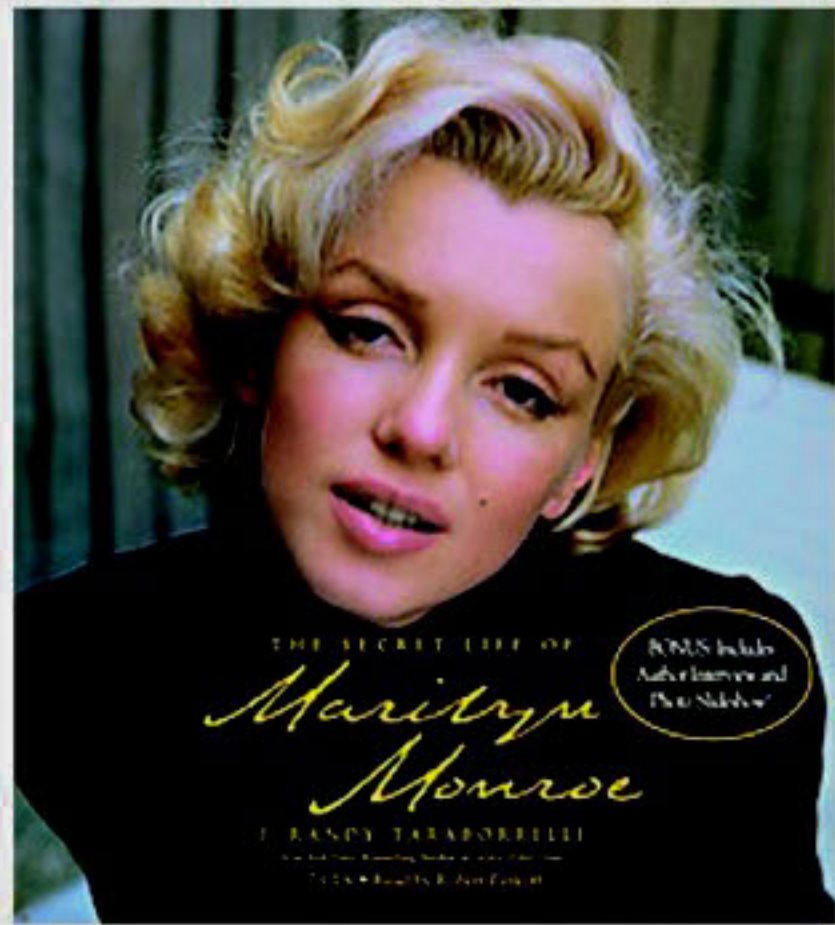


# A woman truly insecure

## Syed Badrul Ahsan reads of a complex character

There are certain American obsessions you cannot ignore. Take the fascination with the Kennedys, for instance. Or think of Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson. And then there is the other side of this fascination. Fidel Castro remains a threat for the US government, despite so many changes having taken place all across the world since the bearded Cuban revolutionary marched into Havana in 1959. Today, it is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chavez who worry America, especially its ruling elite. And obsession sometimes can go to ludicrous lengths in Washington. Forbes magazine has just informed us that Michelle Obama happens to be the most powerful woman in the world. Now that is surely ridiculous, given that Mrs. Obama holds no position in government nor has done anything significant on her own to justify that definition of her capabilities. She happens to share the bed of the current occupant of the White House. How then, you wonder, does she edge ahead of the likes of Angela Merkel as the most powerful woman on the planet?

America's willingness to fall for obsession goes back a long way. If you have had cause to read J. Randy Taraborrelli's rather excellent work on Marilyn Monroe, you will know why. In no other country, not even those in what we choose to think of as the western world, does Monroe hold people in such thrall as she does in her native America all these years after her death in 1962. She is still thought of as a great beauty, sometimes as a great actress (though that last bit appears to be something of an exaggeration). In this work, Taraborrelli tries drawing out the woman behind the image. He does it pretty well, even though he too occasionally falls for the old charm while reflecting on her moods and her idiosyncrasies. In the end, what the writer does is to project the life and death of a woman in constant need of attention despite the all too evident failings on her part. She missed shooting deadlines; she threw tantrums on the sets and she was forever in need of a shoulder to cry on. Above all, it was sex that was an obsession with her. First it was the sportsman Joe de Maggio. Monroe stormed into marriage with him and then saw her dream of a life spent with her husband fizzle out, one reason being De Maggio's volatile nature. He even had goons, led (unbelievably!) by Frank Sinatra, barge into a room (the wrong one) in a hotel where Monroe was on a tryst with a new lover. That was after the end of her marriage to De Maggio. You then come to the question of why Marilyn Monroe would go for the writer Arthur Miller as a lover and then husband. Like



The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe  
J. Randy Taraborrelli  
Pan Books

all men acutely happy at being in the company of sex symbols, Miller plunged into wedlock with Monroe, only to discover that she possessed none of the intellectual genius he perhaps had assumed she did. For her part, the actress too acknowledged her shortcomings, though it did make her happy to have the world know that with Miller it was an alliance of intellect and beauty that she had forged. The alliance was not to survive. Monroe would lurch from one affair to another, from one emotional distress to another. When her psychiatrist had her confined, through clear deception, to a sanatorium, she fell back on former husband De Maggio to get her out of the rut.

Of all the tempestuous moments in Marilyn Monroe's life, nothing has exercised a greater hold on the American imagination than her presumed links with the Kennedy brothers. Monroe was a friend of Patricia Kennedy Lawford, sister of JFK and RFK and wife of the British actor Peter Lawford. It was at her place in early 1962 that Monroe met Robert Kennedy and his wife Ethel over dinner. RFK, then US attorney general, gave absolutely no hint that he had been taken in by Monroe and yet, in subsequent days and months, the actress let everyone who would listen to her know that she had had a date with the brother of the president. With the president, of course, it was different. John Kennedy was obsessed with women, more with thoughts of sex with them. He and Monroe spent a weekend in Florida, a time that Monroe would gush over repeatedly. As for the president, he surely enjoyed the carnal moments with Monroe and then simply forgot all about it. He did not, for all his cheating on Jackie, conceive of Monroe being first lady in the White House. Monroe had other ideas, of course. After Florida, she constantly called the White House asking to be put through to the president, who had meanwhile firmly told the switchboard to do no such thing. Was JFK playing safe? Or did he feel that once he had made a sexual conquest of Monroe he could move on to other women? We will never know. But we do know that in May 1962, at New York's Madison Square Garden, Marilyn Monroe, in shimmering, body-hugging dress that almost made her appear nude, sang Happy Birthday to the president. She was never to see John F. Kennedy after that. Three months later she was dead. From an overdose of barbiturates? From murder? No one will know.

Laurence Olivier, though irritated by Monroe's moods, maintained his calm on the sets as shooting went on. Clark Gable too remained indulgent. His death in 1960 sent Monroe on a paroxysm of grief. Tony Curtis would have everyone know that kissing Monroe was like kissing Hitler.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is with The Daily Star.

# The tensions of not knowing

## Charles R. Larson studies relationships

Hisham Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance* is not so much the narration or analysis of a person's disappearance as a profound exploration of the psychological effects on characters whose lives have been brutally altered because of the disappearance of a loved one. The main character and the narrator of Matar's wrenching novel is Nuriel el-Alfi, age twelve when he begins relating what happened when his father disappeared two years later in 1972. As he observes in the opening of his story: "There are times when my father's absence is as heavy as a child sitting on my chest. Other times I can barely recall the exact features of his face and must bring out the photographs I keep in an old envelope in the drawer of my bedside table. There has not been a day since his sudden and mysterious vanishing that I have not been searching for him, looking in the most unlikely places. Everything and everyone, existence itself, has become an evocation, a possibility for resemblance. Perhaps this is what is meant by that brief and now almost archaic word: elegy."

Nuri's mother is dead and he lives in exile in Cairo with his father, once the advisor to the king of an Arab country presumably Libya. His family fled when revolution ended the monarchy. Father (Kamal Pasha el-Alfi) and son travel around Europe and Egypt, where the two of them first encounter Mona, at a small hotel on the beach in Alexandria. Mona is half European but speaks Arabic. Nuri and his father are both attracted to her, though the boy is only twelve and his father is much older. Nuri observes, "She was twenty-six. Father forty-one and I twelve: fifteen years separated them, and fourteen separated her from me. He scarcely had any more right to her than I did. And the fact that Mother was also twenty-six when she and Father married did not escape me. It was as if Father was trying to turn the clock back."

The boy's father succeeds in accomplishing that, marrying her two years later. But the marriage does not stifle Nuri's feelings for Mona, which his father

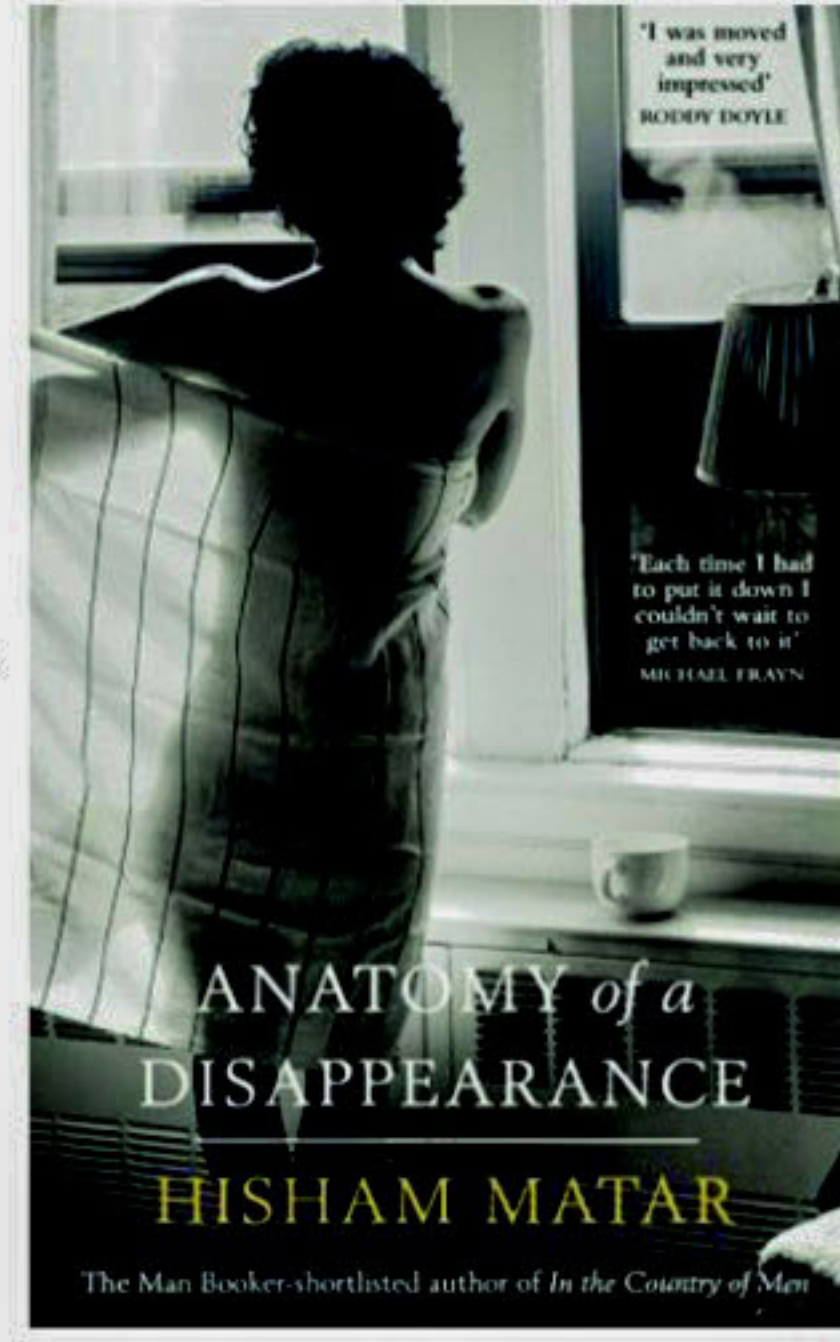
clearly understands, so he sends the boy to England for his education. It is during one of his father's visits in London that he makes a remark that Nuri does not understand: "Don't frequent the same places. Don't make it easy for anyone to know your movements."

Not much later when Nuri spends three days in Geneva with Mona, waiting for his father to appear, word comes that he has disappeared. Then several days later, Nuri and Mona return to Cairo, still waiting for Kamal, though details of foul play soon leak out. A family friend tells them, "The regime has issued a statement saying they have him, that he has, of his own volition, returned to the capital. But they didn't show him. They could be bluffing. It's possible."

Months, years pass. Nuri is still drawn to Mona, sexually. On one occasion, the two of them have intercourse. The psychological implications are obvious. Does Nuri want his father to return, or does he want Mona? There's a further account of Kamal's assumed kidnapping, but as more years pass by and the past begins to blur, Nuri works out a context that he is able to live with: "The truth is, I don't believe Father is dead. But I don't believe he is alive either." Yet there is something comforting about that limbo, as well as Nuri's realization that Mona has become involved with another man.

What Matar captures so utterly convincingly in *Anatomy of a Disappearance* is the sense of conflict from not knowing. As he did so compellingly in his earlier novel, *In the Country of Men* (2006) set in the country of his heritage, Libya Matar explores the tortured dynamics of father/son relationships. The son increasingly begins to assume the personality of the father, implying that to do otherwise is impossible. And the language to describe these all these interesting twists of fate and character is elegant, lush, nostalgic.

Charles R. Larson is Emeritus Professor of Literature at American University, in Washington, D.C.



Anatomy of a Disappearance  
Hisham Matar  
The Dial Press