

# Spraying life with charm

## Wasef Wahed observes what once was

Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed needs no introduction. While most young people may know him as an academician and founder of a wonderful institution, Bishwa Sahitya Kendra, some of them also know how popular a TV host he was. And they know that because their elders have told them how they used to remain glued to their television sets to see Abdullah Abu Sayeed's programmes in the 1960s and 1970s. This book of his --Amar Uposthapak Jibon-- is a story of those magical days of his life as a television presenter.

The book is not only a tale of his own life but also narrates the history of four decades of Bangladesh's cultural arena as eminent writer Anisul Haq mentions it in the opening cover page of the book. The sorry state of Bangladesh Television (BTV) is something which needs no mentioning. Apart from becoming the mouthpiece of the government and consequently losing its neutrality and credibility, the insipid shows of BTV make it hard to believe that the state-run TV once produced such memorable shows as "Haar-Jeet", "Shoptobarna", "Choturongo", (all hosted by Abdullah Abu Sayeed) "Jodi Kichu Mone Na Koren" (hosted by Fazle Lohani), etc. And Sayeed mentions in his book that after independence the nationalisation policy of the government was responsible for the destruction of BTV's creativity. He writes that some of the creative producers from the Pakistan era like Mostofa Monowar managed to keep BTV alive for a while before it died in the mid 1980s and became just like any other government office (p.42). Sayeed reminds us that television came to Pakistan in 1964 and he writes that General Ayub Khan's intention was to fill people's evenings with entertainment so that they "become unaware about their reality" (p.43). Unlike the partisan "intellectuals" Sayeed's opinions reflect the truth and in this book he has not been afraid to speak the truth, however bitter it may sound to the vested groups.

As the book moves on readers will be introduced to the extreme limitations within which the crew of BTV had to work. And despite all these limitations, Abdullah Abu Sayeed managed to produce a fantastic riddle-based show- "Shaptaborna." He writes in detail of the behind-the-scene tales centring on this show which eclipsed the popularity of even "Hawaii Five-O." Readers will be surprised to know that his health condition eventually deteriorated to such an extent due to the immense workload he took upon his

shoulders for delivering such memorable episodes that he ultimately had to quit the show. The concept of a "magazine" programme gained familiarity and fame due to his hosting of "Anandamela." Abdullah Abu Sayeed also lets us know the nonchalant attitude of the BTV authorities when he planned to start an educational programme named "Maanchitra." He regrets the lack of enthusiasm among these same people who would be very energetic about his popular shows. This goes to show the dearth of foresight and knowledge of these people who could not understand Sayeed's noble and visionary plan. He also regrets the crass commercialisation television has been gripped by these days and that the sponsors back the low standard shows which are filled with cheap entertainment. And now in retrospect he wonders whether he should have continued with his anchorman job and not let these anti-cultural elements reign supreme in the world of television.

These days many private television channels have emerged and there are numerous television hosts. With a few exceptions most of these hosts lack the

decency and sophistication possessed by Sayeed. They lack the scholarly knowledge and witty sense of humour that Sayeed had. Quantity and quality have not walked side by side. Sayeed's departure from television in 1982

was a big loss for the country. The country lost an opportunity to improve the taste of the masses. However, television hosts and all those involved with private channels can read this book and get some ideas and be inspired to present the people with some innovative and interesting shows. They can follow in his footsteps. As for BTV, it has already become like the alternative rock band incubus' song "Talk shows on mute".

For the generation who grew up in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, this book will surely make them nostalgic. This book will be a walk down memory lane for them. The excitement of those shows will to some extent ring in their hearts. The story of his failure in a radio audition test and yet eventually becoming so successful will be inspiring for the new generation. Also breathtaking will be the tale of his escape from captivity during 1971 due to the Pakistani officer being a fan of his shows!

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Amar Upasthapak Jibon  
Abdullah Abu Sayeed  
Shomoy

# Crisp prose laced with subtle wit

## Ali Ahmed plunges into an exciting tale

When the Man Booker Prize for literature for 2011 was finally announced and the earlier short listed name of English novelist and short story writer Julian Barnes was flashed on TV screens and computer monitors through the internet, I wasn't quite surprised. Julian Barnes is, no doubt, one of the most distinguished writers of the present-day world, and his works have already been translated into nearly thirty languages, although Bengali, unfortunately, doesn't appear to be one of those.

Julian Barnes is primarily a novelist, having already penned ten previous novels. But he also writes short stories and has published three volumes. A couple of journalistic writings are also there to his credit. This Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Sense of an Ending* has already won the prestigious David Cohen Prize for literature this same year 2011.

This slim volume of a novel has almost an enigmatic opening with the protagonist-----we shortly come to learn, he is called Tony Webster-----declaring he remembers---a shiny inner wrist----steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly tossed into it-----gouts of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house, and finally, bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door, although we have left a couple more of such snippets unmentioned. He, however, adds that he did not actually see the one mentioned last. But, then, he adds, almost as an afterthought, that ....but what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed. And that, not quite incidentally, turns out to be the leitmotif of this novel.

Tony and another two of his classmates form what he calls a gang, although it is actually an adolescent elite triumvirate in standard six of their school. They soon have a new member in the class called Adrian----Adrian Finn. After warily watching him for some time, the so-called gang soon discovers he is too talented to be left out of their circle, and they soon form a closely-knit group promising never to be separated in life. But as happens with so many other adolescent promises, they find themselves in different worlds, albeit the worlds of different universities in England. Adrian, as could only be expected, goes to Cambridge on a scholarship, one friend to Sussex, the other to his father's business and Tony to Bristol to study history. He, however, continues with his liaison with Adrian.

Tony, in Bristol, becomes close to a girl called Veronica, who, after a few weeks' dalliance with the former invites him home in Kent to introduce him to his parents there. He goes there, passes the weekend with this rather queer family except, of course, the mother, comes back to Bristol with an unpleasant memory of insults and maltreatments, and continues with the affair with Veronica, who 'tightly guards her body like an exclusion fisheries zone'. But Veronica, after having been introduced to Tony's friends, starts liaising with Adrian soon transforming it into a full-blown affair.

Tony, heart-broken, left for the States after finishing university, had a couple of casual relations with one Annie and others and continued with his aimless journeys there doing whatever odd jobs were on offer for him at whichever place. In those days when mobile phones, internet or skype were not there, he could be traced out by his family back in England with a lot of efforts only to inform him Adrian had committed suicide.

He rushed back home, had a re-union with old friends and sadly settled for an ordinary life, although Adrian's suicide

had made him philosophising a lot. He at last met Margaret and married her, although he didn't forget to define marriage as, 'a long dull meal with the pudding served first'. They soon had a daughter, Susie. But his marriage ended in a peaceful divorce, Tony settling for a single life, finally of retirement and reminiscences.

It all could have proved a rather hackneyed story had there not been a sudden twist in it at this stage. Tony one day got a solicitor's notice, confirmed his address and identity, and thereafter received the bequest of 500 pounds and Adrian's diary from one Mrs. Sarah Ford (deceased). He takes some time to realise this Mrs. Sarah Ford is Veronica's mother. Although Mrs. Ford's money and the solicitor's letter are delivered, the diary is detached and Tony doesn't receive it. His intense desire to receive his dead friend's diary, bequeathed to him by Veronica's mother, lands him in a prolonged exchange of solicitors' letters, finally leading to a meeting with Veronica at the latter's suggestion. But she doesn't hand over the diary, but a letter instead. Tony is simply horrified by reading the letter, written by him immediately after Adrian and Veronica's marriage, and since forgotten. The unmentionable filth and venom contained in it makes him remorseful. He again contacts Veronica, who, as always before with him, condescendingly agrees to a meeting, takes him to a sort of a back alley in town and he finds, through the windshield and window glasses of Veronica's car, five rather abnormal persons and discovers Veronica's attachment with at least one of them, a tall boy.

This incident intrigues Tony. He makes a second visit to the nearby pub, alone. A discussion with the Barman makes it clear to him that the rather autistic, tall boy, greatly resembling his dead friend, is actually his son, and is also called Adrian. He also discovers that the Veronica he has lately been mixing with is called Mary and is, in reality, Veronica and Adrian's daughter, although she is almost a carbon copy of her mother Veronica. This realisation drowns Tony into a sea of remorse and melancholy. The reader

might recall Tony's assertion at the beginning that what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed. Julian Barnes' present novel lives up to his reputation as a novelist of intellect. His crisp prose laced with subtle wit and humour makes the novel thoroughly enjoyable. His allusion to modern English literature, often dissecting T. S. Eliot, making mention of W. H. Auden, John McNiece et al and his references to Darwinism and the *Communist Manifesto* and some others of their kind tends to make the novel more of a cerebral affair than the ordinary reader might have been ready for. Starting with a definition of History, in a casual classroom situation, as 'the lies of the victors' through 'History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation' and, finally, arriving at the point to define it as 'a collective memory of the survivors' simply uplifts the novelist to a pedestal not shared with many of his class. This novel would undoubtedly bring an immense pleasure to those readers who look not just for a story in a novel but an intellectual satisfaction, too.

Ali Ahmed, a former civil servant, is a critic.

# The cure for dandruff

## Syed Badrul Ahsan goes picking some humour

A woman without a man, says Gloria Steinem, is like a fish without a bicycle. That sounds rather strange, even bizarre, until you realise the wit in that statement. And wit is something we have been doing without, much to our surprise, for quite a while now. When was the last time you heard someone among the glamorous and the glitzy come up with a wisecrack? There is Ronald Reagan, with his 'Honey, I forgot to duck' comment to his wife moments after the assassination attempt on him in March 1981. There was John F. Kennedy, who regaled newsmen on his visit to France in 1961 with the remark, 'Gentlemen, I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris.' Rack your brains and you just might recover some of the gems of humour you may have lost over the years.

And while you do, here is a work that promises to do wonders, almost in the manner of an aphrodisiac, to the funny side in you. The love that we indulge in, the sex we think we enjoy, the marriage we fall into --- all of these have elicited light comments over the years. Think of Ann Landers' meaningful statement: 'The poor wish to be rich, the rich wish to be happy, the single wish to be married, and the married wish to be dead.' Smiling, or chuckling away? You will explode in laughter with Woody Allen's 'The only time my wife and I had a simultaneous orgasm was when the judge signed the divorce papers.' So much for happy sex, unless you would like to focus on Gypsy Rose Lee's self-deprecating comment: 'I have everything I had twenty years ago --- except that now it's all lower.' And then, of course, there is the vast field of politics from where you can pick some of the choicest of nuggets when looking for humour to throw around. It was Voltaire who once

told people that 'the ideal form of government is democracy tempered with assassination.' Don't take that seriously, but sure, you can laugh a little. You can even belittle democracy a bit, through quoting H.L. Mencken: 'Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance.' And there you have it, and more. Ralph Abernathy once induced guffaws with his barb on the Watergate president: 'Richard Nixon told us he was going to take crime off the streets. He did. He took it into the White House.' When you think of wit and banter and repartee, there is no better instance of it



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than the personality of Oscar Wilde. Here is a cracking statement from him: 'The English country gentleman galloping after a fox --- the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable.' It is all

about social mores and manners, in that featherweight way of speaking. Cecil Beaton could well have been speaking for many of us when he declaimed thus, with a wink at Churchill of course, on fashion: 'Never in the history of fashion has so little material been raised so high to reveal so much that needs to be covered so badly.' If that was about the revelation of so much human flesh, here is one about bodies unwilling to make their way out of bed: 'It was such a lovely day I thought it was a pity to get up.' And it is Somerset Maugham doing the talking here. Where would we be without him? This is a compendium of laughter-inducing wisecracks. But then, some wisecracks surely do bring out the lighter aspects of our personalities. Here is what Duncan Spaeth has to say about empire and the English: 'The sun never sets on the British Empire because God wouldn't trust an Englishman in the dark.' Lest anyone feel offended, here is an attempt to balance things, albeit at the expense of the Irish and coming from none other than George Moore: 'In Ireland a girl has the choice between perpetual virginity and perpetual pregnancy.' But perhaps the most hilarious example of humour is set against the French, especially those who caused all those events in 1789. P.G. Wodehouse puts it succinctly: 'The French invented the only known cure for dandruff. It is called the guillotine.' What more could you ask for?

And literary humour? You only have to listen to G.B. Shaw. And this is what he has to say: 'I often quote myself. It adds spice to my conversation.' Read the book, if you can. Or stay put. The choice is yours.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Literary Editor, The Daily Star.

# Failure is acceptable, often essential

## Ainon M reflects on life's core calling

This book reminds me of Kahlil Gibran's saying, "*If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.*"

On September 18, 2007, Randolph (Randy) Frederick Pausch gave his last lecture titled 'Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams' in front of an audience of four hundred plus students, faculty and visiting members at the Carnegie Mellon University. The lecture series, previously known as *The Last Lecture*, now renamed as *Journeys*, is an academic practice at the university where select faculties deliver a final prelection to students - on wisdoms they wish to impart to students prior to the faculty's supposedly impending death. Ironically, Randy, a computer science professor at the university, did not hypothesize about his death. He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and had only a few months of living to do. Randy Pausch died on July 25, 2008. He left behind a set of principles, captured in the book based on his lecture, which continues to make millions of people pause and reflect on matters that ground and define life. He did indeed open his heart to life.

Among the audience was Jeffrey Zaslow, a columnist with *The Wall Street Journal*, who paid heed to Randy's speech. He uploaded a five-minute video synopsis of Randy's lecture on the Journal's web-site. For Randy, it set the ball rolling for network coverage, interviews, a remarkable more than six-million hits on YouTube and more. And finally the book, *The Last Lecture*, that has been translated in more than 18 languages. Randy did not write the book in a conventional manner of penning down his thoughts. The book is a product of verbal reflections on his life experiences that he shared with Zaslow through his head cell phone while on bike rides, fifty-three in total. In his life, time for him was compressed and of essence. Zaslow became Randy's partner in recording and transforming his words into a book that has few pages but is grand in its impact reminding us that a credible life is defined by both high and low points.

The theme of the book is living life. It is marked by a stream of deliberations on the author's passion for work and a set of moral codes he practised, as well as gained, while in the process of achieving his goals. His life's account leads to inevitable questions: What makes us unique? Are we defined by the work we do? What do we leave behind for our progeny? If life is a set of interactions, i.e., relationships, which ones are the most significant? What governs those interactions? Randy blends it all together. He takes 'the dreams anchored in childhood' as the starting point of his narration. The validation of life comes through achieving childhood dreams and empowering others to achieve theirs.

His life anecdotes come alive for readers as these are expressions of his heart, the courageous emotions of one not defeated in the face of death. He reflects on lessons learned from parents while growing up; the discipline, the mores he absorbed; the values he upheld in relation to friends, colleagues, students and his family. He did not shy away from articulating the physical and emotional pains of dealing with cancer. He believed each challenge has a creative solution. His was to sort through time left, giving him a chance to reevaluate his priorities. His words carry the determination to live each day, living to its fullest.

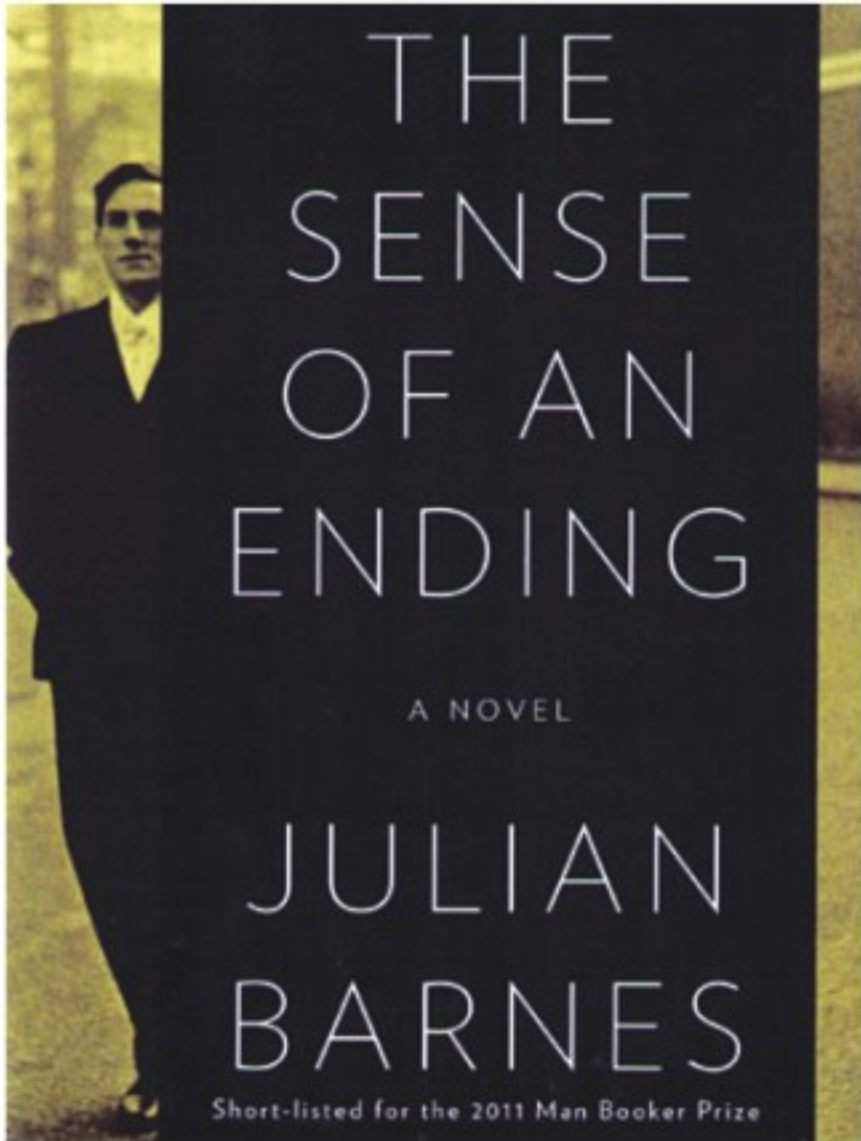
He makes us aware that smooth sail in life is a misnomer. 'The brick wall we encounter,' says the author, 'is a reminder that failure is not just acceptable but is often essential. They're not there to keep us out.' The off-track disappointments are a measure of how intensely we wish to achieve something and a reminder to follow through irrespective of adversities. He gives us a story from his reality. While teaching the 'Building Virtual Worlds' course at Carnegie Melon he created a 'First Penguin Award' for students. It was given to the team who took the challenge of trying new ideas or new technology and failed. His reasonings? 'It was an award for glorious failure and it celebrated out-of-the-box thinking and using imagination in a daring way.' That is what gives us the in-roads to being unique, the slight edge!

At some point in our lives we all wish to take a measure of who we really are. What defines us? That self-formulation takes shape in the context of others - all help shape our core beings! We are not discrete beings and life is not a solo journey. In Randy's words, 'I learned as I grew older that you can't get anywhere without help. That means people have to want to help you, and that brings up the question: 'What kind of person do other people seem to want to help?' What is the interconnection between *I* and *others*? What are the social values that define our

beings, if you will? The quintessential answer, according to him, is simple: tell the truth; be earnest; apologize when you make a mistake; and focus on others. He adds, 'Find the best in everybody. You might have to wait for a long time, but people will show you their good side!' The elegant expressions of "never lose childlike wonder...show gratitude...never give up" are simple words of action, universal in approach to anything we wish to start.

"*Time is all you have. And you may find one day that you have less time than you think.*" For me, these words hit home in earnest. The essence of these words is beautifully interwoven in an instance where Randy ponders on the surprise he gave his wife, in front of a fully enthralled audience, by bringing a birthday cake on the stage where he gave his last lecture. She held him tight and through tears whispered, "Please, don't die." The words define the common denomination in the souls of two people, the warmth and bindings of love. Such captured moments make the book grounded in life's engagements. Indeed, how many days and nights do we allow to slip away in procrastination, dreaming of the ideal job, the ideal project or what we should have said to our dear ones, moments lost without expressing how much we love our children, family, friends, how much we care? All lost in the busy events of life. *The Last Lecture* is not a self-help book but a book that inspires us to think the world is given to us only once and in that we can create choices which make us unique. The words are musings of the heart that knew for sure it would beat for only so many numbered days and no more. What makes it an enchanting read is the fact that the book is a gift wrapped in the legacy of one man's love, his successes and challenges, and a set of precepts that he wanted to leave behind for his three young children. (This review is a reprint).

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The sense of an ending  
Julian Barnes