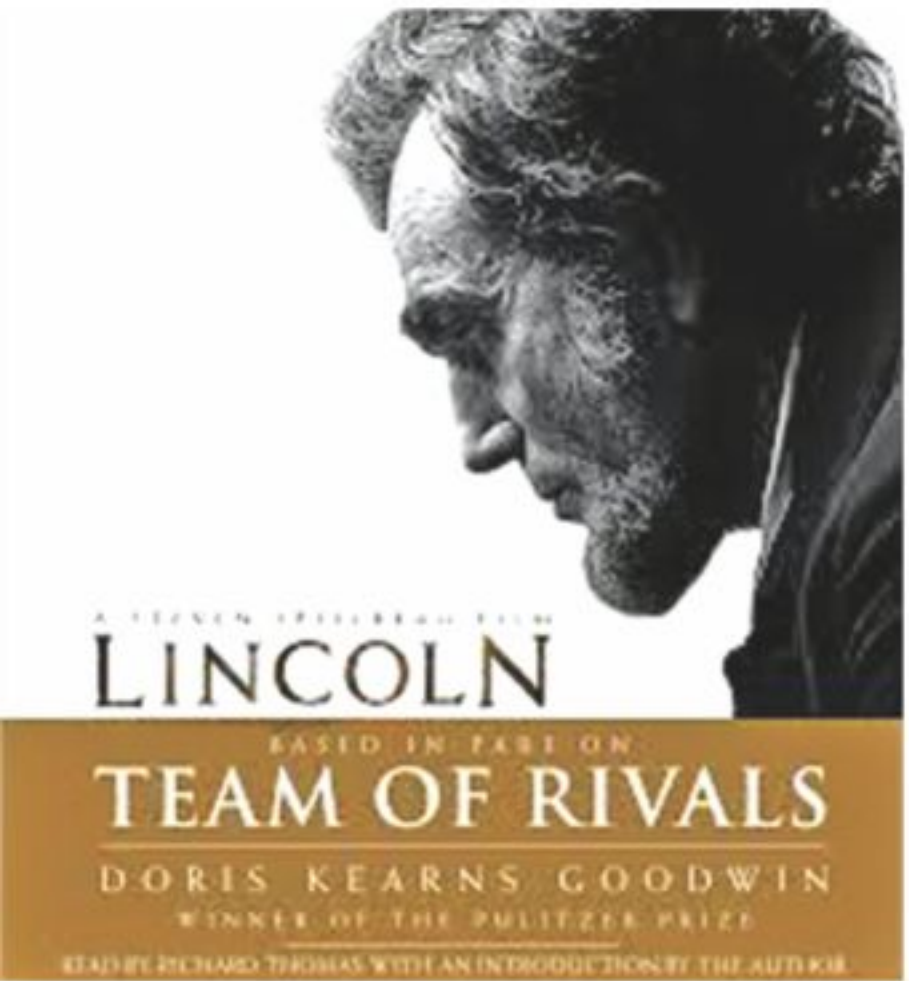


ESSAY

The pleasures of reading

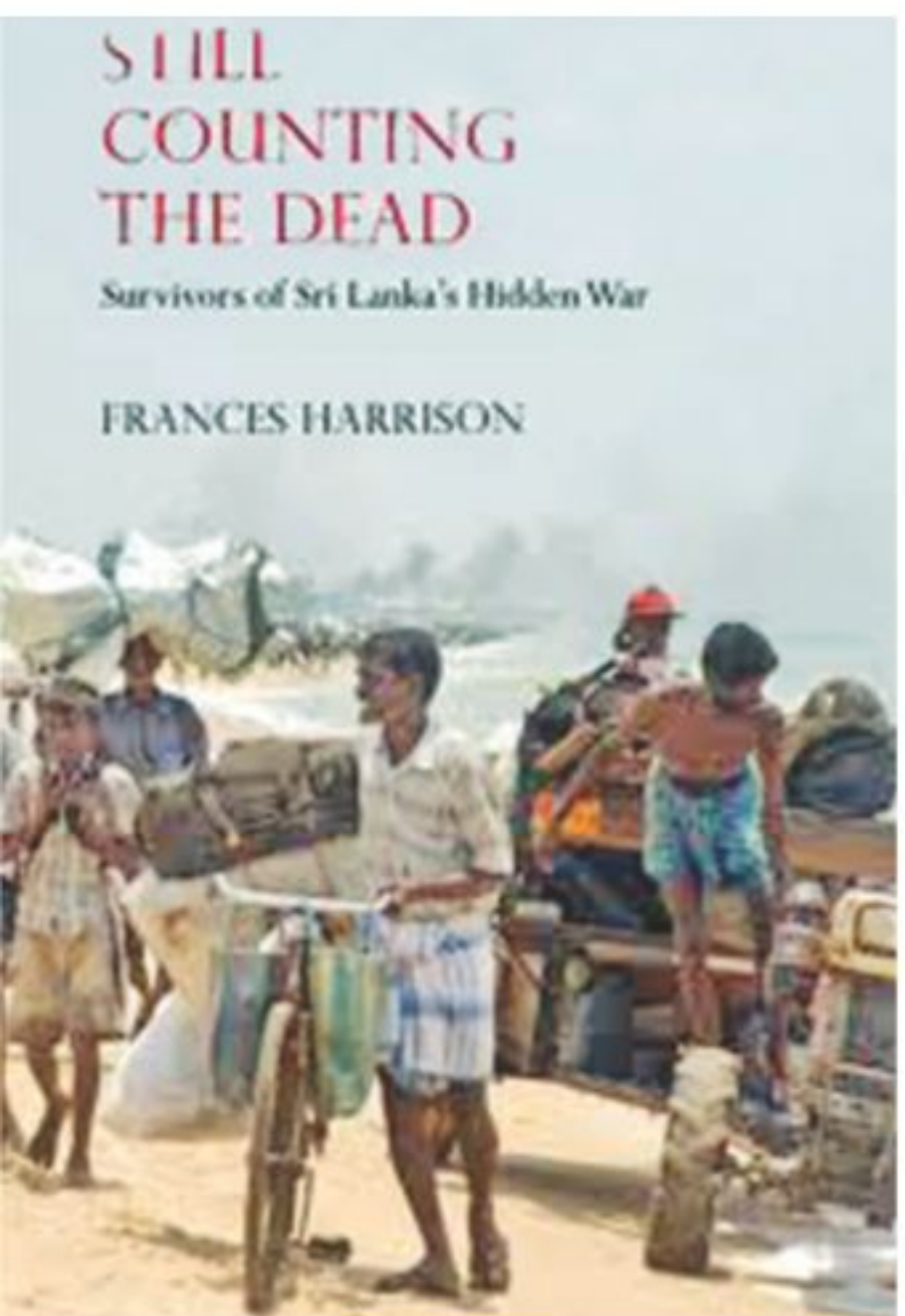
Syed Badrul Ahsan reflects on a few books

COMING by books or looking for them is forever cause for joy. Now that people all across the world have had their interest in Abraham Lincoln rekindled, thanks to Daniel Day-Lewis' screen portrayal of America's sixteenth president, it is somewhat cheering to go back to reading Lincoln, or of him. There is Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*, a tome which explores the political savvy of Lincoln when it came to handling his rivals for the presidency. He was unwilling to leave men like Seward out in the cold as he began



the process of shaping his administration after the election of 1860. He then did what he needed to do: he found places for them in his administration.

Team of Rivals is, therefore, one more instance of Lincoln demonstrating before the world his enormous capacity for political accommodation, especially with those who had little reason to agree with him on public issues. It was a team that served Lincoln well, with the result that when he was assassinated in April 1965, they were quick to remark on his foresight and abilities as a reader. Read the book and you will then quite understand why Barack Obama read it in such minute detail before he approached Hillary Clinton and offered her the job of secretary of state in his administration. Additionally, you could do just fine with another work on Lincoln, written a good number of years ago and which chooses to separate the man from all the myths that have come up around the politician who succeeded in keeping the American union intact. Stephen B. Oates' *Abraham*



Lincoln is essentially an examination of Lincoln the man, with all his human traits, with all his foibles. Yours truly spotted a copy of this pretty searching work in Delhi's Daryaganj Sunday book market not long ago. And it will be a Sunday to remember.

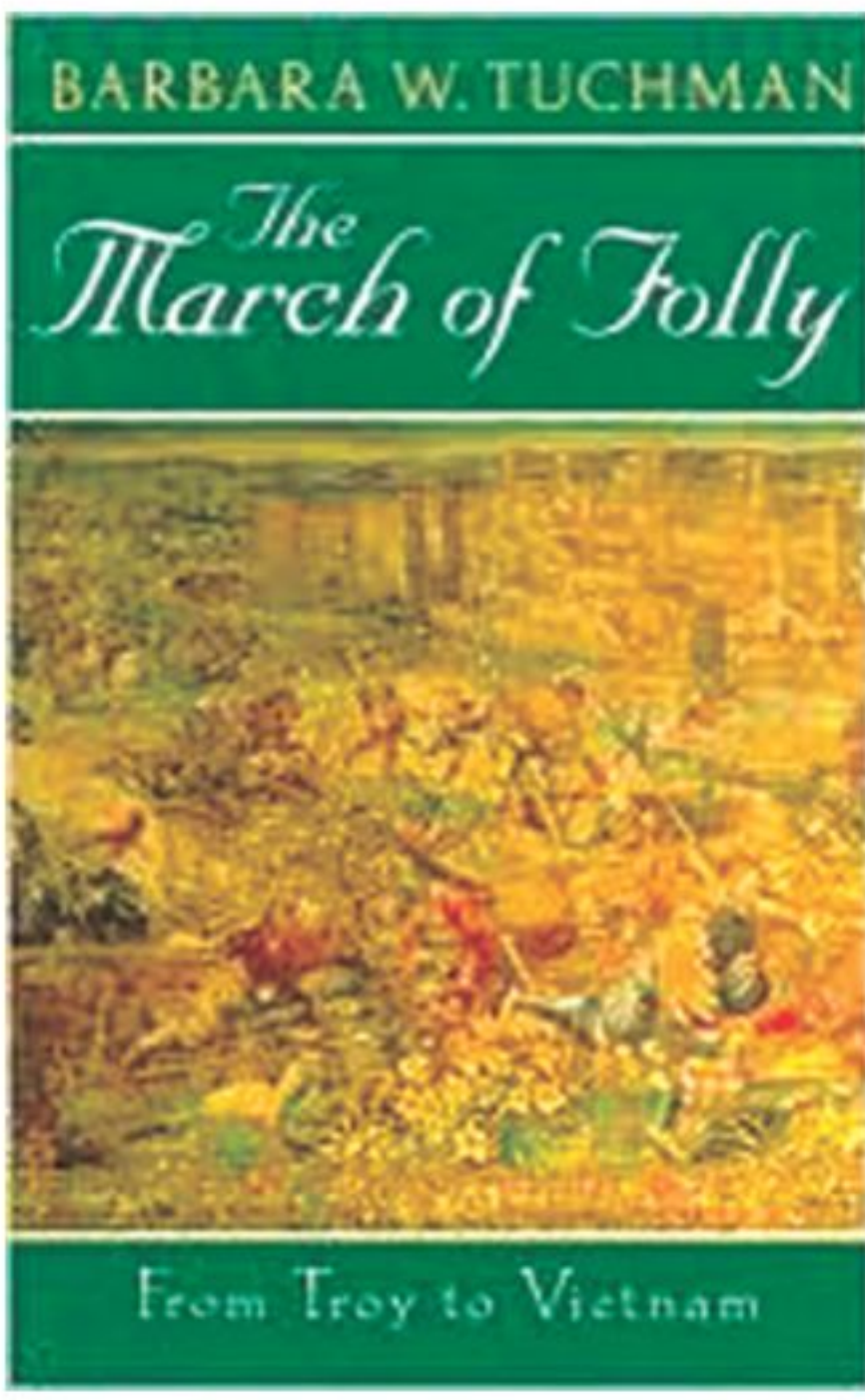
Searching for books we have always wanted to read is something of a painful pleasure we go through at some point or the other. About a decade ago, I happened to step into a second-hand bookstore somewhere in a small town in Yorkshire. The second-hand books looked rather new to

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*, 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. Much the same can be said about Hugh Sidey's John F. Kennedy: *Portrait of a President*. Sidey, if you recall, was for very many years the writer of an incisive column in *Time* magazine on the American presidency. The column was regularly an insightful observation of the way the White House worked. More significantly, it was a study of particular presidents at work in particular phases of modern American history. When we read those columns, it was not very hard to comprehend the nature of US politics and to grasp the truth of how democracy in America had arrived at the stage where it offered the best in terms of leadership and accountability to the American people.

This particular work of Sidey's on JFK first appeared in 1964, less than a year after the president was murdered in Dallas. It is certainly an encomium on the man, considering that the scandalous details relating to Kennedy's life that were to mar his reputation in the 1980s and 1990s were yet unknown or deliberately concealed. But do enjoy the book, assuming that you get your hands on it (the edition I have was published in 1964). Sidey writes with feeling on the tumultuous times in which President Kennedy lived, especially his dealings with world leaders. His meeting with De Gaulle is an interesting review of how two important countries can politely disagree on critical global issues. Kennedy's summit with the Soviet



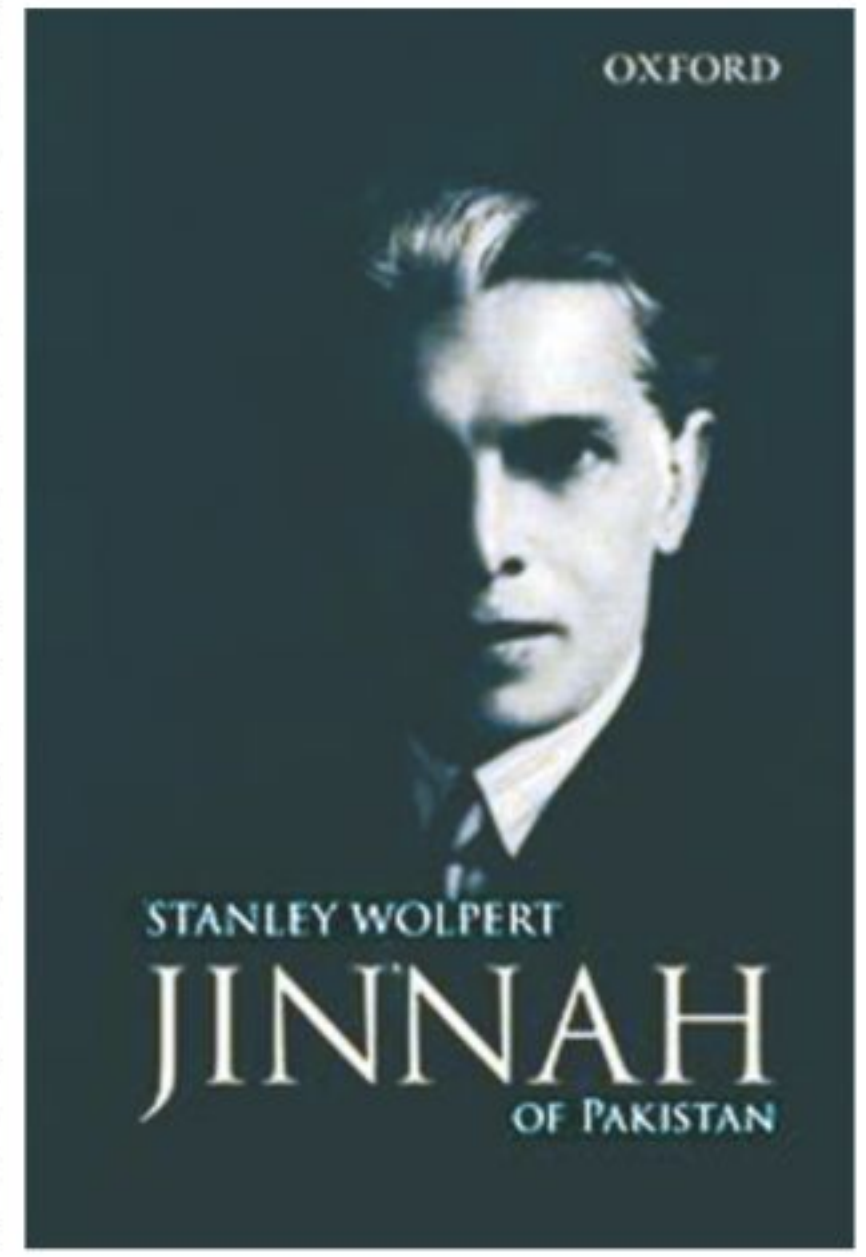
Union's Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961 is a story we will not soon forget, for it was a meeting where the man from Moscow sized up the young American and where Kennedy understood for the first time that he needed to handle Khrushchev in a different way.

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 two years ago, 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.

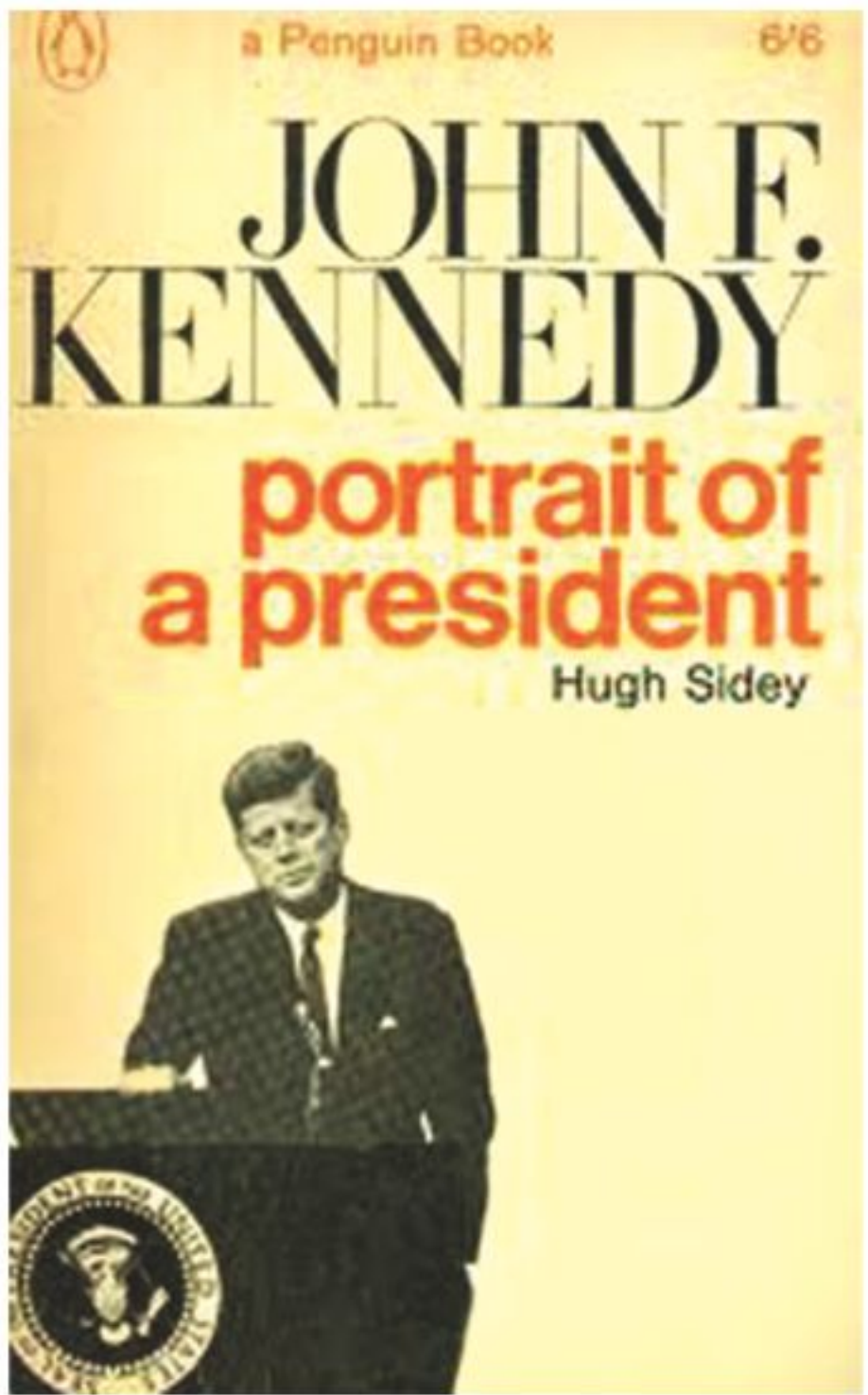
So I have Helene Hanff's book, now resting proudly on the little table beside my bed. It shares space with Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (with that famous image of Kate Winslet on the cover). Since my teacher, Professor Niaz Zaman, a couple of weeks ago gave me that copy, which I must share with another 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



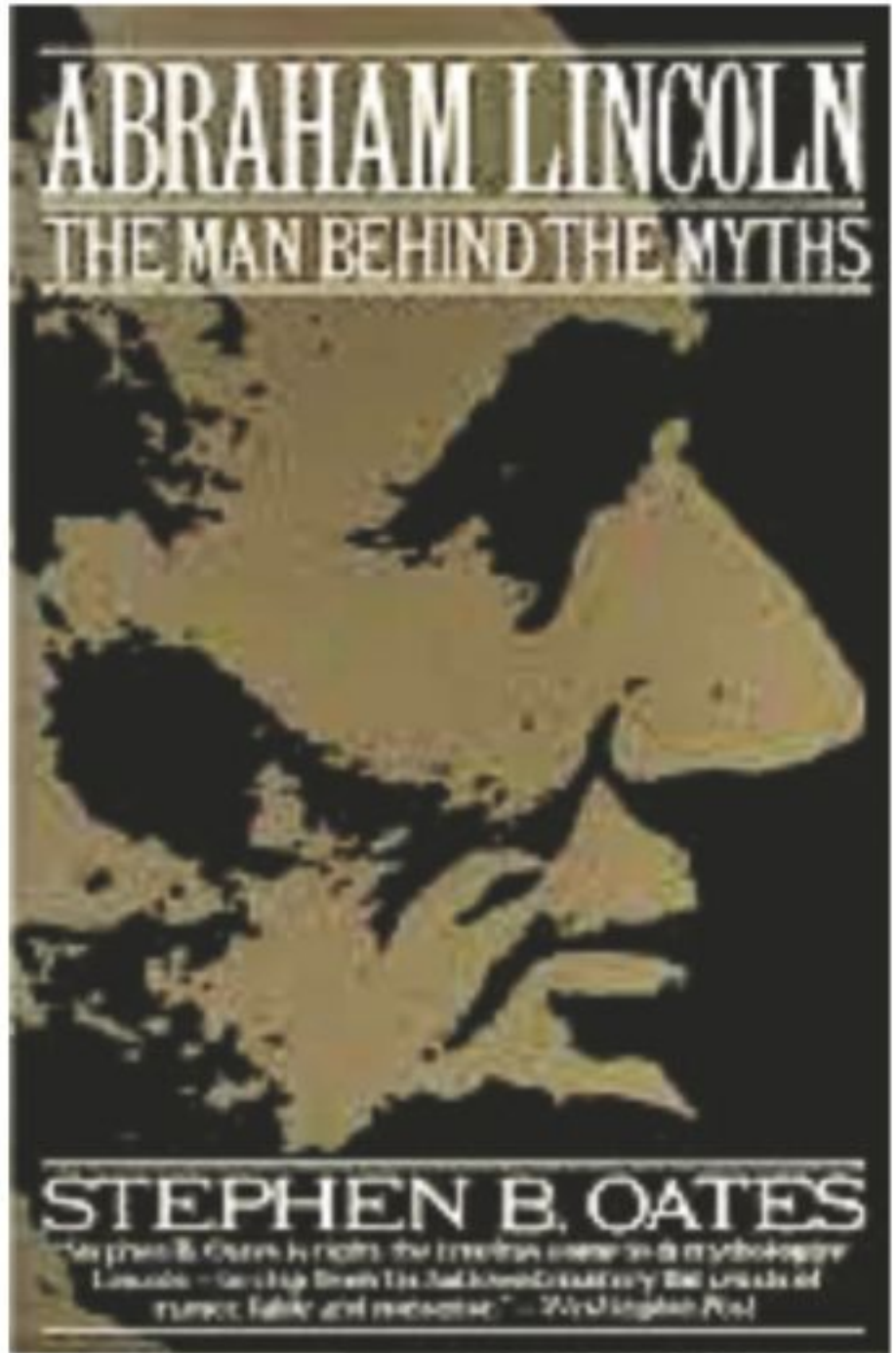
makes this book a new treasure in that old trove you have had for years.

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 Stanley Wolpert's *Jinnah of Pakistan* to go back to, for some much needed re-reading. Wolpert has been a pretty interesting author. His Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan is a sympathetic portrayal of the man who was instrumental in pushing politics into chaos in 1971, the result being a genocide of



Bengalis in the country's eastern province before it emerged as the independent state of Bangladesh. At some point in the later 1990s, some people in Bangladesh wondered if Wolpert could be persuaded to write the biography of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I am glad he did not, for his views of Mujib, as they appear in the Bhutto work, were quite unflattering. It is difficult to believe that a writer, any writer, can be equally fair to such contemporary figures of history as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

A final point: the former BBC journalist Frances Harrison has come forth with an account of the final days of the Sri Lankan



conflict. *Still Counting the Dead*, a harrowing account of the tribulations the country's Tamils were pushed into once Velupillai Prabhakaran's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were defeated in 2009, makes sad but gripping reading. It causes to rise up in you the entire history of Sinhala-Tamil conflict in a country to which independence came peacefully in 1948, at a time when millions were dying through the partition of India in 1947.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR

The celebration of women

Charles R. Larson hasn't a clue about the title of a novel

THE quotation from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* at the beginning of Ali Sethi's novel is a dead give away: "The difficult task of knowing another soul is not for young gentlemen whose consciousness is chiefly made up of their own wishes." Eighty pages into the story, one of the main characters is reading *Middlemarch*. At the novel's conclusion, there's a quotation from Tolstoy: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Granted, Tolstoy wasn't a Victorian, but his novels share numerous characteristics with his English counterparts: lengthy explorations of family dynamics, rapid social change, and so on.

These are also the stuff of Ali Sethi's sweeping debut novel, *The Wish Maker*. At a recent question and answer session after the author gave a reading in Bethesda, Maryland, he answered a query about Victorian novels—confessed, in fact, that he enjoyed them. More importantly, he said that many Bengali novels also have the same shape and social consciousness. Certainly these characteristics work well for him in his own novel: covering, roughly, a period in Pakistani history from Partition (1947) to 9/11. Never, however, can it be said that Sethi's narrative employs chronological order. Rather, there are numerous lengthy flashbacks (some perhaps too long) with his characters locked into historical events in his country's often troubled history.

Two threads work well for this ambitious novel: the troublesome angst of adolescence and the slow but incremental advance of women's rights in a conservative Muslim culture. For the former, Sethi, surprisingly, uses his masculine narrator, Zaki Shirazi, not so much to chronicle his own awakening sexuality as that of his female cousin, Samar Api, as well as her often more worldly girlfriends'. The issue of women's empowerment is explored in parallel fashion by using Zaki's mother, a pioneer journalist, who began her writing career after her husband's (and the narrator's) death, two months before the birth of their son.

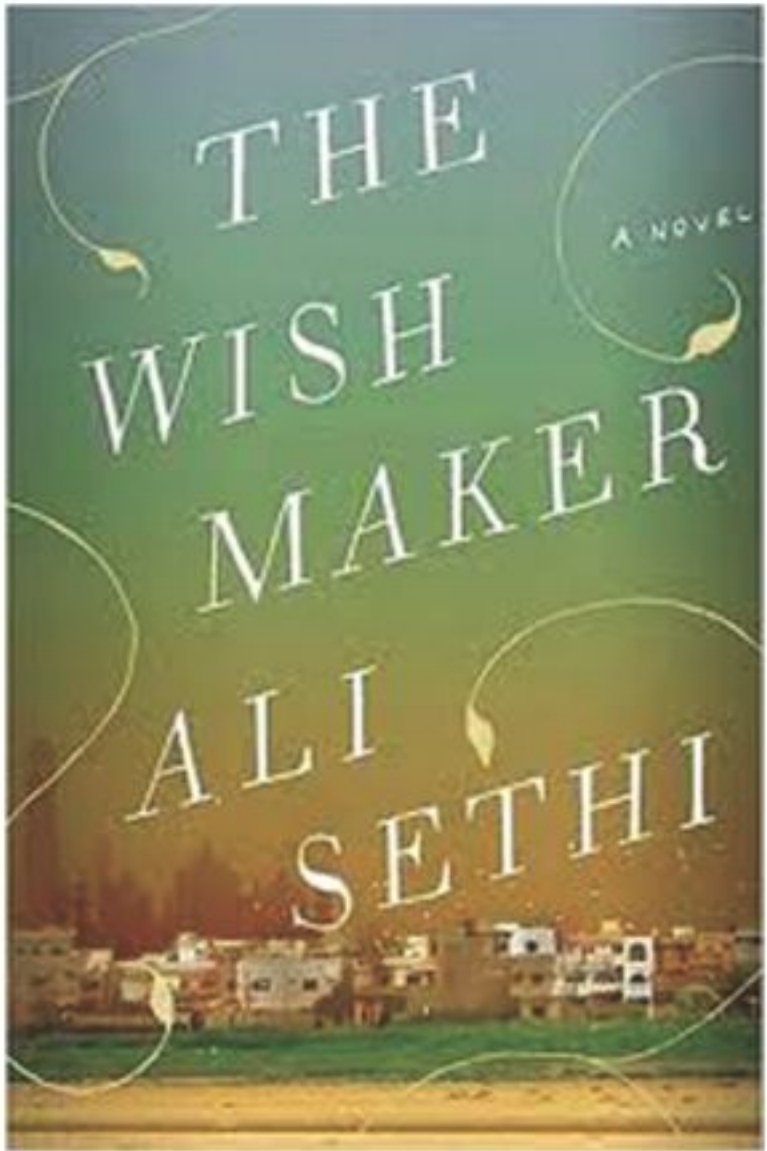
Vividly, tellingly, the author depicts an entire generation of Pakistani youths, mostly in the 1980s and 90s, exploring promiscuity, alcohol, and drugs—all forbidden, of course, by their faith. Young men and women meet secretly without the knowledge of their parents (sometimes the result of Internet arrangements), watch pornographic films, get high, and sometimes get pregnant. It all seems fairly universal until you think about these activities in conservative societies. Needless to say, these indulgences are those of the children of well-to-do families, who often shower their offspring with too much money. Thus the focus, in part, is upon adolescent rebellion—getting away with what's possible, especially out of the eyesight of their elders.

While their parents are much more traditional, Zaki's mother, Zakia, is equally serious about her own attempts to shake up society. She becomes the editor of a publication called *Women's Journal*, boldly confronting the status of women in Pakistan. Politically, the journal becomes one of the early supporters of Benazir Bhutto's move into politics, but then when Bhutto and her husband are accused of corruption, the journal's staff (including Zaki's mother) realize that their own ideals have been compromised. The entire narrative of *The Wish Maker* is steeped in political reality: the rise and fall of Pakistan's leaders, the volatility and abuse of governments and their often short-lived leaders.

Late in the story, Zaki's own situation takes center stage, but by that time the female characters have already been established as the novel's primary focus. These female characters are, in fact, the novel's imaginative center. Their lives shape most events in the story and tell us more about social change than a concentration on masculine characters would. In the final sections, Zaki has his own horizons to confront at a private boys' school, his own issues with education, and maturity, as well as his determination to continue his advanced education (as the author did) in the United States, but by that time the women in his extended family have become much more interesting.

The Wish Maker is an often lush and revealing story about the last fifty years of life in Pakistan, especially for the privileged. But don't ask me what the title means. I haven't a clue.

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The Wish Maker
Ali Sethi
Riverhead

Hard to be humble

Shahan Haq reads about human ego and is left stupefied

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 did 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?

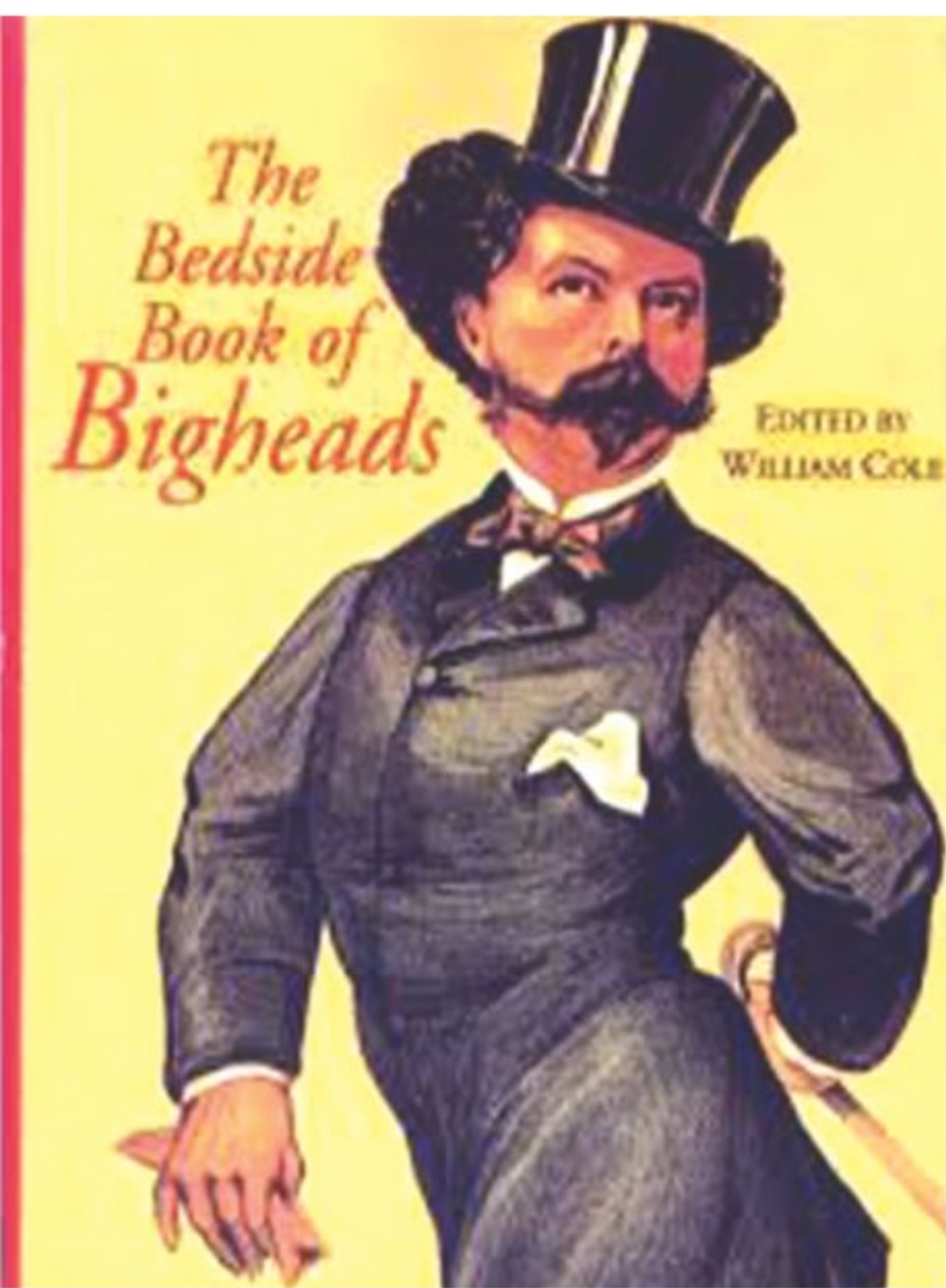
Never mind the answer. Just move on. Listen to what the writer Noel Coward says about his own place in the universal scheme of things: 'I am an enormously talented man, after all it's no use pretending that I am not, and I was bound to succeed.' And Jerry Hall about herself? 'I think if I weren't so 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