

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



A future heroic reader?

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

The Heroic Reader

I was reading in *Financial Times* about John Mackey, the American entrepreneur who started Whole Foods Market, the international grocery chain. As a college student, he was required to read Jean-Paul Sartre's massive and dense book *Being and Nothingness*, but soon became bored and frustrated. So one day he threw it out and, vowing never to do anything against his will, started his grocery.

This got me thinking about difficult books I had started and finished. I recalled an excruciating struggle with a book that I took during a trip. Do I have to finish a book once I start it? Am I a heroic reader?

For example, some time ago I started *Bellefleur* by Joyce Carol Oates, a contemporary American writer. At 558 pages, this book is (nominally) fiction because its events and characters are imaginary.

But we have certain expectations of fiction: the continuous unfolding of a story, and characters that are easy to remember. Then there is the matter of time and place. A work of fiction often creates a world that the reader enters.

Bellefleur has none of these. Made of numerous stories and anecdotes from seven generations of a large family in north-eastern USA - in apparently random order - it repeatedly challenges the reader's memory. There is no narrative to pull the reader along.

What would any normal reader do after fighting through the first twenty pages of this book? Put it where it belongs - on the "Never Again!" pile. Not me. I charged ahead believing that the book will "click" at some point.

Around page 327, I admitted to myself that it was not "clicking." But I was too far gone to quit. Incredibly,

Oates rewarded my heroism with a surprise ending.

But heroic reading does not always guarantee happy endings. While visiting Dhaka years ago - I was living abroad then - I caught the flu. While bed-ridden, I got hold of Proust's *Swann's Way*.

I am convinced that my dogged persistence grinding through that book was the reason my flu lasted weeks, not days.

How to avoid this unwarranted heroism? When evaluating a new book, I find that reading the first few lines and deciding quickly helps. Nowadays, I continue only if those lines catch my interest. This approach has greatly reduced my exposure to heroic reading.

There are some wonderful first lines out there. In Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, for example, Gregor Samsa wakes up to find he has turned into a giant worm. Nabokov's *Lolita* starts a slow-burn with "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins." Our own Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* engages with this gut-wrencher: "Dear Husband, I lost our children today." Chinese-American author Ha Jin's novel *Waiting* is enigmatic: "Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife ShuYu." How can a reader lose with beginnings like these?

And books for my next trip? *Pride and Prejudice* is a strong possibility. I am hopeful that a book starting with "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in need of a wife." does not require heroic reading.

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SUHRWARDI UDYAN Illegal structures mar park's beauty: Bapa

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An environmental group yesterday said a myriad of "illegally built" structures of both private and government organisations had dotted the capital's Suhrawardi Udyan, ruining the historic park's beauty as well as natural character.

In a recent visit, a team of Bangladesh Poribesh Anodolon found that there were around 100 makeshift and permanent tea stalls, some permanent government establishments, an enclosed golf course run by a renowned club, and an extended temple, said Bapa General Secretary Abdul Matin at a press conference at the capital's Mukti Bhaban.

The garbage produced by the shops is also damaging the environment of the park, he said.

Matin said a huge number of trees of the park were cut down, and there were many places where the grasses died out completely but no new initiative of tree planta-

tion was taken.

The sluggish work of Swadhinata Sharok Stambho (memorial monument of independence), which has been going on for the last one and a half decades, is the main reason behind the park's mismanagement, said the environmental activist.

Bapa demanded completion of the memorial as soon as possible and proper steps to save the park.

Recommending forming a high-powered committee to survey the park's present situation, columnist Syed Abul Maksud said Suhrawardi Udyan was the lung of Dhaka city, and it bore testimony to the country's history, culture and independence.

The Bapa leaders demanded a fair re-demarcation of the Kali Mandir (temple) boundary, closing down of the golf course, relocation of the government establishments to other places, reducing the number of shops, and setting up of shops in a planned way.

Drive out godfathers from N'ganj

Toki Mancha urges city dwellers

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

Santrash Nirmul Toki Mancha Convener Rafiur Rabbi yesterday called on the city dwellers to drive out the godfathers, murderers, land grabbers, extortionists and other criminals from Narayanganj to build it as a livable city for the next generation.

He said this during a meeting at Chashara Shaheed Minar to protest the ongoing incidents of forced disappearance, killing, robbery and deterioration of law and order in the city. Toki Mancha, a stage to eliminate terrorism in Narayanganj, organised the event.

Rejecting the possibility of his participation in the next parliamentary election, Rafiur Rabbi said police always protected the ruling party criminals. He hoped that the city people would be united to drive out the godfathers from the city as law enforcers always sided with the killers.

Toki Manch Member Secretary and Narayanganj Press Club President Halim Azad and Communist Party of Bangladesh district President Hafijul Islam also spoke.

Rafiur Rabbi is father of Tanvir Mohammad Toki, who was found killed on the bank of Shitalakkhya river on March 8, two days after he went missing.



British Foreign Minister William Hague meets Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her hotel suite in London on Thursday.

PHOTO: PID

Girl raped by muezzin

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Feni

An 11-year-old girl was raped allegedly by the muezzin of a local mosque at a local maktab (elementary school for Islamic education) in the district's Daganbhuiyan upazila on Thursday.

Md Mostafa, 34, muezzin (who issues Adhan) of Sundarpur mosque and teacher at the maktab, asked the girl to wait after the end of that day's lesson. He raped her after all other students left the maktab around 9:00am, said police and relatives of the victim.

The parents took the girl to a village doctor as she was bleeding and tried to hide the incident to avoid social stigma. The village doctor, however, sent the girl to Feni Sadar Hospital Thursday night as her condition was deteriorating.

Mostafa, a father of one child of village Joydevpur under Rajapur Union, has gone into hiding after the incident.

Woman killed in her house

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barisal

A woman was stabbed to death by a miscreant in her residence on Janoki Sing Road at Kawnia in the city yesterday.

The victim is Dil Afroz, 40, wife of Mahmud Al Jalal.

Police said the criminal entered the house about 2:00am and locked Jalal's room from outside. Sensing presence of the criminal, Afroz screamed and clasped him. At one stage, the man stabbed her and fled with two cellphone sets and Tk 2,500. Afroz was declared dead at a hospital.

Ruling party men attack press club in Satkhira

4 journos, policeman hurt

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Satkhira

Activists of Sramik League and Bangladesh Chhatra League allegedly attacked Shymnagar Press Club in Satkhira yesterday morning, injuring four journalists and an on duty police sub-inspector.

The activists also ransacked the window, furniture and computer. Police arrested Adam Ali, a BCL activist.

The press club President Akbar Ali said a procession, led by Shymnagar upazila Sramik League General Secretary Liakot Hossain and BCL leader Abdur Rahman, launched the attack around 11:00am.

Shymnagar police Officer-in-Charge Aslam Khan confirmed the incident. Locals said they brought out the procession as Rajib Haider, son of upazila Awami League President Jaglul Haider, beat Azad Ali, brother of Liakot, on Thursday over a trifling matter.

Liakot denied leading the procession. Jaglul very often sat in the club, Liakot said, adding that there had been a dispute over the leadership of the club.

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