EDITOR'S NOTE

It's time for a change in the seasons, for the new to take charge. And if the new is symbolized by Munize Manzur, it is only fitting and proper that a new course be charted by her. Having supervised the literature page for the last few years, it is now my very great pleasure to inform readers that from here on it will be Munize's show. She is a remarkable writer and has all the qualifications to do a great job.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

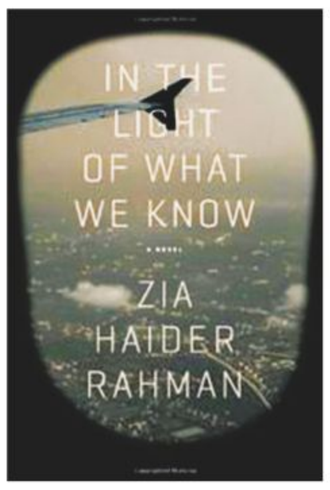
I am deeply honoured to be taking over the baton from my mentor and, it must be said: one of my favourite English teachers – Mr Badrul Ahsan. I hope to do him proud with the new Saturday Literary Review.

On this page, we will take an inside look into global literature and significant literary events. Simultaneously, we shall be showcasing the richness of our Bengali Literature in the form of translations and the promise of new talent. We seek opportunities to run informed, engaging opinions on a variety of books as well as an appetizing mix of great writing about the literary world. Comments, viewpoints and contributions are welcome at: DSLitEditor@gmail.com

MUNIZE MANZUR

Interview with Zia Haider Rahman

JAMES Wood of The New Yorker praises it as "a dazzling debut, unashamed by many varieties of knowledge." In a New York Times Sunday Book review, Amitava Kumar says it is a "strange and brilliant novel…at ease drawing sharp lessons from subjects as varied as derivatives trading and the role of metaphor in determining the fate of pigeons." The Journal Sentinel calls it "A cross between Herman Melville and David Foster Wallace as refracted through Graham Greene." Zia Haider Rahman's debut novel "In the Light of What We Know" has stirred up a great deal of interest within the literary world.



Born in rural Bangladesh, Zia Haider Rahman was educated at Balliol College, Oxford, and at Cambridge, Munich, and Yale Universities. He has worked as an investment banker on Wall Street and as an international human-rights lawyer.

One September morning in 2008, an investment banker approaching forty, his career in collapse and his marriage unravelling, receives a surprise visitor at his West London home: a friend from his student days, a brilliant man who disappeared years earlier under mysterious circumstances. The friend has resurfaced to make a confession of unsettling power and seek atonement. As the friends begin to talk, their room becomes a world and they begin an exhilarating journey between Kabul, New York, Oxford, London and Islamabad. Set against the breaking of nations and beneath the clouds of economic crisis, "In the Light of What We Know" tells the story of people wrestling with legacies of class and culture, as they struggle to tame their futures.

In an extraordinary feat of imagination, Rahman capably mixes a story that threatens to erupt into le Carré–like intrigue with intellectual disquisitions of uncommon breadth. It is a quiet, philosophical novel of ideas, a meditation on memory, friendship and trust.

In an exclusive interview with the Saturday Literary Review, Rahman shares his views on his writing influences, giving readers space and the world of madmen.

SLR: Please share with us the process of how or why the story "In the Light of What We Know" became the chosen topic as your debut novel. How long has it been in the making?

ZHR: There was no process at arriving at the story, only a history of circumstances. A few years ago, I quit my job and began a journey overland across Europe and Asia. Not long after setting off, an idea for a story came into my head, a character, then another, and a story. I scratched down a few thoughts in a notebook and did nothing about them. They were notes of the kind we routinely write and there was no intention to develop them into anything. But they took root in my mind and I found myself often thinking about them.

My journey was interrupted by the death of someone close to me and, finding myself with time on my hands, I took up those notes of a story and starting writing with an urgency not easily accountable. I don't think I dwelt too much on the why but simply yielded to a need—a sense of necessity—to write a story whose shape had quickly evolved in my mind.

When an author is asked how long a novel was in the making, I don't see how she can say anything other than 'the whole of my life until now.' All imaginative work surely draws on ideas percolating in the recesses long before they bubble to the surface.

SLR: Who are some literary influences in your writing?

ZHR: Everything I've read has given me something. I don't think I can say what my literary influences are any more than I can identify particular meals I've had that have been especially nourishing. I've learned a lot from things that haven't quite worked, a paragraph or chapter I've read here or there, in some novel. Trying to figure out why a passage isn't quite successful is enormously rewarding and the lessons learned that way can, I imagine, be the most effective or at least leave a deep impression.

On the other hand, I've definitely felt I've received a license to do certain things of my own when I've seen great writers either attempt the same thing or attempt something else. Sebald, Naipaul, Conrad, Didion, Roth, Coetzee—they've all caused me to reflect on myself and identify something in me that was holding me back in some way. There are also certain qualities of writing that draw me. For instance, I admire writing that trusts readers. The tendency detectable in some fiction today to treat readers as if they have no imaginative life to bring to their reading reflects, I think, a broader social tendency to reach the widest market and treat people as consumers who must be supplied with all the materials for "a good read." To make a novel their own, to inhabit it and vivify it, I think readers need to be allowed space for the furniture of their own experiences and histories. It is the activity of working with the text, as a reader, that enlarges the text. The reason theatre can bite into the skin in a way that TV never can is that the viewer has to do some work to enable the suspension of disbelief; the viewer rolls up his sleeves and lifts some of the weight, and by so doing invests in the moment. Good writing includes the reader in the cast.

SLR: Between the narrator and his friend Zafar, which character were you as a writer more invested in and why?

ZHR: I imagine all writers feel hugely invested in all their characters. Zafar and the narrator are indeed the most prominent characters of the novel, but I was so deeply invested in both that it's hard—and perhaps unimportant—to figure out which one I was most invested in. It's certainly true—and perhaps this is what you're trying to tempt me into addressing—that Zafar on his face bears some similarities with me. But a CV should not be mistaken for the person. Both the main characters draw on me, either facts about me or fantasies of some kind or other. It's handy to recall that, in the biblical story, the prodigal son was loved the most even before he returned, before, that is, he had atoned. Why we love is a mystery. In other words, I'm not sure I can properly say why I was as invested in the characters as much as I was.

SLR: At the heart of "In the Light of What We Know" is Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, a theorem of mathematical logic about the impossibility of proving certain truths. Please describe the role of Gödel's proof in your novel.

ZHR: Gödel's theorem operates as an overarching metaphor of the limitations of human enquiry, such limitation being a central theme of the novel. The theorem states that there exist mathematical propositions that are true but that cannot be proven to be true. It is an unsettling theorem, unsettling especially to the character of Zafar, who sees it as evidence that even the truths of mathematics cannot be relied upon to be accessible.

SLR: There is a prominent use of epigraphs in your novel and they form an integral part of the story. If you could choose an epigraph for the current chapter of your life as a novelist, what would it be?

ZHR: Literature that aspires to penetrate the soul shows signs of the author's attempts to recover from the ravages of memory and to find in the sanctuary of imagination some vestige of meaning. This is not rewriting the past but the artist's bid for beauty in the interval between remembering and forgetting. The epigraph that I would take from the novel for the current chapter of my life—and perhaps for every chapter--is the excerpt from James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room:*

Perhaps everybody has a garden of Eden, I don't know; but they have scarcely seen their garden before they see the flaming sword. Then, perhaps, life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or: it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget.

Are creative writing courses a waste of time?

JOE TREASURE

Hanif Kureishi caused a stir at the Bath Literature Festival by describing creative writing courses as 'a waste of time'. He said that most of his students at Kingston University have no talent, and talent can't be taught. He gets no marks for tact, but does he have a point?

In recent years in Britain there's been a huge expansion in university courses in creative writing. It's no coincidence that this has coincided with a shift from public to private financing of higher education, and the growing pressure to respond to consumer demand. Creative writing is what the customers want. But can the universities deliver on their promise?

Novelist Lucy Ellman thinks not. She used to teach creative writing at the University of Kent, but now describes such courses as 'the biggest con-job in academia', suggesting that universities charge fees on false pretences. If people take these courses in the expectation of getting published, many will be disappointed. If they have fame or wealth in mind, they're almost certainly deluded. But students I talk to often have more modest ambitions. They speak of wanting to improve their writing, or of needing the structure to help them write a story they've been thinking about for years.

Asked if he would consider studying creative writing himself if he were starting out now, Kureishi said, 'No… that would be madness. I would find one teacher who I thought would be really good for me.' That's easier said than done. Most aspiring writers work in isolation, sometimes with no one to consult but family members or friends who mean well but don't really get what they're trying to do. You can't pluck a good teacher out of the air. The university course provides a community of students and teachers who understand the urge to write and respect the struggle to produce good work.

The defenders of creative writing courses often talk about the elements of craft that can be effectively taught. Novelist Matt Haig says that courses can be 'very useful, just like music lessons can be useful'. I understand the temptation to liken this new subject to more established kinds of training, like studying an instrument. But there's a huge difference. Playing music is a precise discipline. Predictability is an asset. It's best to start young, and you can't expect to think about self-expression before you've achieved some level of technical mastery. In contrast, people typically take up novel writing in adult life, sometimes in midlife. It's an activity that springs from individual experience and celebrates personal vision. It's not a skill that can be acquired in predictable stages. Publishers may value craft, but they continually seek fresh voices.

To this extent, Kureishi is right to emphasise the importance of individual talent. But, for the very same reason, startlingly good work can sometimes emerge from apparently unpromising students. University courses may not be able to teach people to become writers, but they do provide an environment in which writers can find themselves. ©Joe Treasure

Joe Treasure is the author of two novels, "The Male Gaze" and "Besotted" and teaches creative writing at Royal Holloway, University of London. He may be reached at: joetreasurestar@gmail.com

FANTASY *Masterclass*

SAAD Z HOSSAIN

With the phenomenal success of Lord of the Rings and Game of Thrones in mainstream media, it is evident that fantasy literature is no longer the sole purview of game playing, sword wielding, dwarf baiting geeks obsessed with magic. Tolkien is widely considered the father of epic fantasy, and indeed he's a master world builder, scrupulous in filling in pages and pages of 'unnecessary' details, going so far as to devise a complete Elvish language. He's spawned countless imitators, inspiring legions of writers who essentially inhabit the world of dwarves, elves and orcs which he first created.

The high watermark of epic fantasy however, in my opinion, is Steven Erikson's Malazan Book of the Fallen, a ten book extravaganza which can easily put to shame the now defunct Encyclopaedia Britannica for sheer bulk and gravitas. This is world building on a mind boggling scale. There are gods, dragons, demons, alien races, evolutionary dead ends who refuse to die, a vast and organic magic system – an actual mythology which roots back millions of years!

The most striking thing is that every single aspect of this world is original. There are no Elves. No dwarves. No Orcs. This is not a retelling of the Crusades, or the War of the Roses. This is not dressed up Norse mythology or some other easy rip-off. Erikson is an archaeologist as well as an anthropologist, and these disciplines shine through in some solid, technical foundation work which underpins the massive stories. His empires ebb and flow, his ancient races evolve, there is a sense that everything is moving and changing, ancient gods and civilizations ground up and replaced by new powers.

Aside from all of this, the stories themselves are awesome. The Malazan Empire is in the throes of a battle for succession, after the founders ascended to Godhood. As the various armies of the empire wage war across the known world, they are caught up in the machinations of the Crippled God, an alien deity pulled down by ambitious humans, broken up in the descent, still alive and seemingly intent on vengeance. This is not a linear series. The stories go all over the place, and any one of the major threads is worthy of a stand-alone novel.

One final reason to start reading: Quick Ben -- one of the best characters ever written in fantasy. While there are a massive number of outrageously potent players, the books often centre around a squad or two of ordinary, weak mortals, struggling, often failing, to survive in a violent world, straining their ingenuity to cheat their way to victory. Quick Ben is arrogant and devious, almost honour bound to cheat in every contest, the quintessential mage bluffing his way into the big game.

While the series should be read in sequence, the first book is a tight, focused story which is an excellent introduction to the Malazan world, but not as large in scale or ambition as the rest of the volumes. Books Two and Three are both stunningly good and one could start with either. I started with Book Three: Memories of Ice, and it remains my favourite to this day.

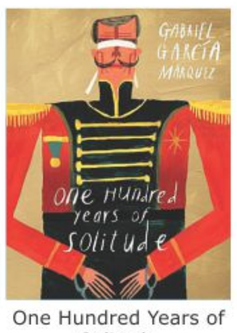
Saad Z Hossain is an entrepreneur and author of "Baghdad Immortals". He is currently working on his second novel.

That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.

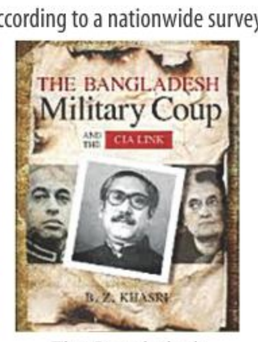
F. Scott Fitzgerald

TOP FIVE BESTSELLERS

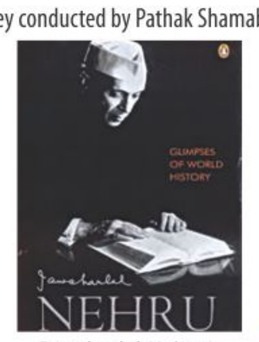
According to a nationwide survey conducted by Pathak Shamabesh, the current bestsellers are:



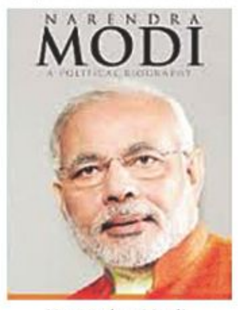
One Hundred Years of Solitude by **Gabriel Garcia Marquez**



The Bangladesh Military Coup and The CIA Link by **B.Z. Khasru**



Jawaharlal Nehru: Glimpses of World History by **Jawaharlal Nehru**



Narendra Modi: A Political Biography by **Andy Marino**

Selected Surrealist Poems: Abdul Mannan Syed, Translated by **M. Harunnur Rashid**