

EDITOR'S NOTE

With four days left on the counter for Hay Festival Dhaka 2014, SLR whets your literary appetite with a taster of the delights to come. Abeer Hoque scatters crumbs of her book "The Lovers and the Leavers", recently launched by Bengal Lights Books. She will be discussing it further at the Festival. Joe Treasure gives an insider view of the original recipe that has managed to transcend borders. And we offer just a glimpse of the buffet of hot new reads that await you. An event free for all, Hay Festival Dhaka will be a feast for the mind and soul. Don't miss it.

MUNIZE MANZUR

20-22 NOVEMBER 2014

HAY FESTIVAL

DHAKA

FILTERING THROUGH IT ALL

By Abeer Hoque

Her conversation with Nita Madam earlier that day echoes in her head. It has been so long since she had spoken with someone other than her husband.

"It's love," Komola had told her.

"We have love."

Nita Madam had smiled.

"You know when you're hungry?" Komola

cupped her right hand in a habitual

motion, "You want to eat some rice."

"Yes."

"Well, before you eat, there is love. It comes

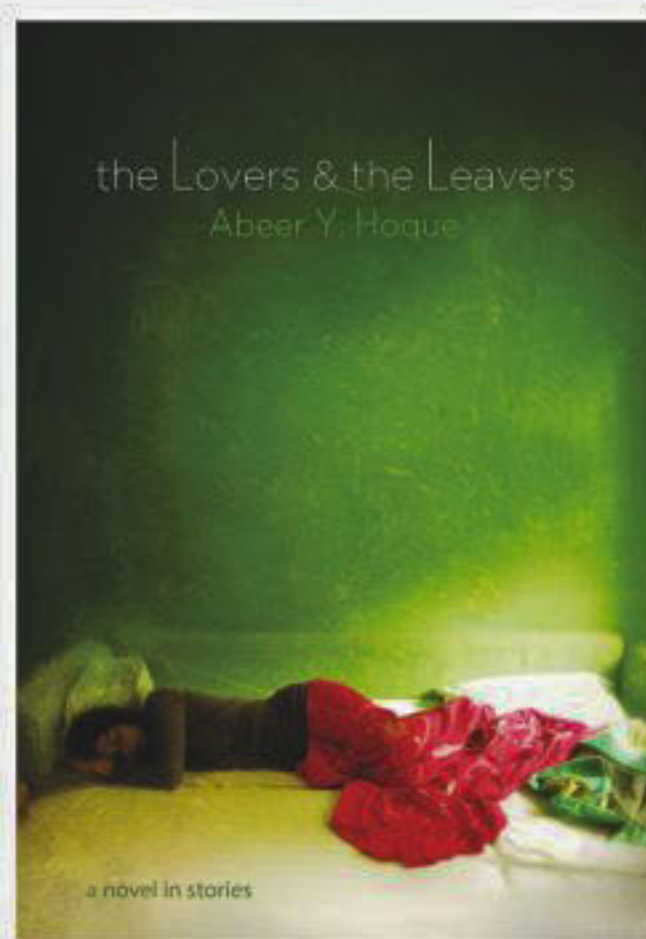
even before your hunger."

"It's true," Nita Madam had said still smiling,

"God forgive us, but it's true."

"Isn't that true?" she had asked again.

"Akdom." Absolutely.



"The Lovers and the Leavers" is a novel in stories, and its chapters are linked by characters who live in or have ancestral ties to South Asia. The stories follow their lives as they intersect over the years and continents. Writing this book marked my first time living in Bangladesh. My family visited many times when I was growing up in Nigeria, but I had never lived in Bangladesh until I landed up in 2006. At the time, I was branching out from years of writing nonfiction and poetry, and my goal was to write fiction set in Bangladesh and India. I thought these short stories would be very different given their unfamiliar setting (to me). But while it's true that there's nothing quite like the mad beautiful place that Bangladesh is (and certainly my arrival felt like an alien landing), it's also true that we think about the same things the world over: love, money, family.

There was a maid who worked in my aunt's house in Dhaka who I became very

close to, and she came to my room one day with a lament I had heard many times from my friends elsewhere in the world, one I had often asked myself: *Why hasn't he called?*

It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from. We all want to be seen.

My conversations with this maid inspired two stories in the book and filtered into a few more. She tragically and suddenly died last year, and in a way, those stories have become my odes to her, although they contain a fictionalised version of her.

When I first started writing, in 2001, I began with poetry and then creative nonfiction, and the latter genre especially has many privacy and self-censorship issues. It's fascinating how differently two people might remember an event, or how they see themselves or each other. Even the same person could look back on some time in her life and feel something else.

It's important to me to remember that

what I'm writing is just my version of it, and even my filter might shift in the next click. However, I think this goes for writing fiction just as well. Either way, I can't think too much about it, at least in the writing, or it'll paralyse my process. I think it's better to get something down (and then choose to edit, delete, or keep it), than have nothing at all.

Despite my third grade Bangla, and perhaps because of it, I have had wonderful conversations with all kinds of people. I loved getting to know my extended family in Bangladesh, my sharp and funny *bhabis*, and all my little nieces and nephews; but my interactions with shopkeepers, drivers, and other strangers were just as illuminating.

Since I wanted visual dimension to my book, I added photographs from my portfolio to each story. Taking photographs in Bangladesh proved to be a most rewarding and complicated act. I am a huge fan of urban and street photography, but being a

woman on the streets of Dhaka is not an easy thing (let alone: a woman photographer). For one, you don't blend in very well, especially not if you have an addiction to crazy hair dye like I do. But as any Bangladeshi woman will likely attest, it doesn't matter what you look like, what class or clothes, what age or activity, it's a bit of a war out there for women and girls, to occupy public space without being harassed for it.

My first year or so in Dhaka, I would often wear scarves, not just to hide the colour of my hair, but the curliness, which is unfortunately not an appreciated *deshi* hairstyle. And I would never step outside without a *dupatta*. But as time went on, I made friends with some extraordinary Bangladeshi women, many of whom wore form fitting *shalwar kamizes*, dispensed with *dupattas*, bared their arms, spoke their minds. It was one thing for me, a non-resident Bangladeshi, to do as I liked. Foreigners the world over get a pass after all, or at least get more leeway. But for a woman to walk her own path in her hometown can become a daily act of courage.

It took me about two years to listen and talk to people, think up stories, and take photographs for "The Lovers and the Leavers". The individual stories were rewritten a few times, sometimes with feedback from editors at magazines which published them, sometimes with advice from writer/editor friends. More recently, I did a draft overhauling the entire book so the stories would fit each other, and be ordered coherently.

I have to admit my initial vision of the book was something a little wilder than this end result. For example, I imagined having different coloured pages and a looser

narrative structure. So one might read the blue pages for one version of the story, the red for another, the poems for a third, the photographs for a fourth, and so on. This book is a bit more straight-laced than that, perhaps thankfully! I still want to make that crazy experimental book. It just wasn't this one.

The passage below is from one of the stories inspired by my maid friend. I dreamed her a love life, complete with the small mundane love bits that exist for everyone. I hope she knows I still miss her.

In the night, her husband will call her from his phone, as he always does, from outside the gate, even though the darwan knows him and would let him in. She will ask him to enter, and he will meet her in darkness to the side of the garden. She will take him round to the back of the house, inside and up the stairs to her room. Before she locks the door, she will ask him if he's hungry. If he is, she will bring him leftovers. If not, she will swing the heavy metal loop of the padlock into place and press it closed, so no one can come in and find them. She will switch off the electric light to save power, and light the candle. Only then, sitting next to him, on the woven mat from her childhood home, will she feel her insides unwind.

The candle will eventually gutter, long after their breath turns from laughter to sleep. The white bougainvillea she picked from the garden at dusk will drape its leaves around the sides of the cracked drinking glass. The pilot light of the oven will remain lit, slowly spreading into the light of the morning.

Abeer Hoque is a Nigerian born Bangladeshi American writer and photographer. See more at olivevitch.com

The unlikely birth of a festival

Joe Treasure

Hay-on-Wye is a Welsh town on the edge of the mountainous Brecon Beacons, with a population of about 1500. I became aware of its existence in the 1970s when my older brother dropped out of London University and moved there, finding work as a forester. My parents disapproved and discouraged me from visiting, but I visited anyway. I have a distinct memory of a cottage with a wood-burning stove and a sense of having stepped into the past.

I didn't know it then, but Hay was already becoming famous among lovers of used books. Richard Booth, a native of Hay, having been educated at Rugby School and Oxford, had renounced accountancy training in London and returned home to sell used books in Hay's old fire station. He too was a disappointment to his parents (according to his autobiography: *My Kingdom of Books*) but, unlike many who were escaping the city in search of a simpler way of life, he had entrepreneurial ambitions, fuelled by a desire to reinvigorate the local economy.

He travelled to Ireland in search of books and then to America. He moved into the larger space of the old cinema. Other bookshops opened, many of them catering to specific interests, and Hay was soon acquiring an international reputation. Booth bought the neglected Norman castle that dominates the town and in 1977, showing his talent as a publicist, declared Hay an independent kingdom.

In the 1980s I was teaching in Monmouth, about an hour's drive away. My brother had moved on by then, and my visits to Hay were for the books. The simplest route stays close to the Wye valley. I preferred the narrow road that winds up into the hills, reaching an area of moorland where sheep and wild ponies graze, before dropping steeply towards the town. It helped preserve my sense of Hay as isolated and not quite of this world.

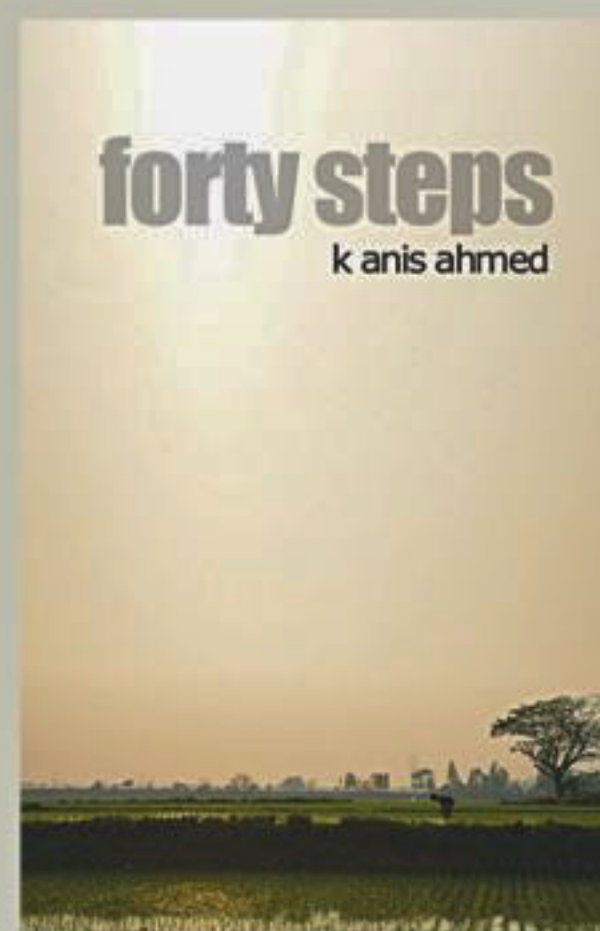
When Peter Florence launched the first Hay Festival in 1988, Booth waged a colourful campaign against it, on the grounds that it created no full-time jobs, while satisfying "the egos and marketing strategies" of second-rate writers. I had other concerns. I'd grown up in Cheltenham, home to Britain's oldest literary festival. A handsome and substantial town, full of elegant buildings including a beautiful Victorian town hall, Cheltenham seemed an ideal venue. Hay is great for a day trip when the sun shines, I thought, but scurrying in the rain along duckboards between tents is surely less appealing. I wondered why a lot of smart Londoners would want to rough it in this backwater.

Clearly I was wrong. Booth was wrong too and recalled later that Florence had "generously forgiven" him. The Hay Festival turned out to be not only hugely successful, but remarkably adaptable. Florence and Tahmima Anam have apparently succeeded in transporting Hay to Dhaka. Physical infrastructure is less essential, it seems, than the conceptual kind, and the old Hay magic has proved able to transcend borders.

Read more of Joe Treasure at <http://joetreasure.blogspot.co.uk/>

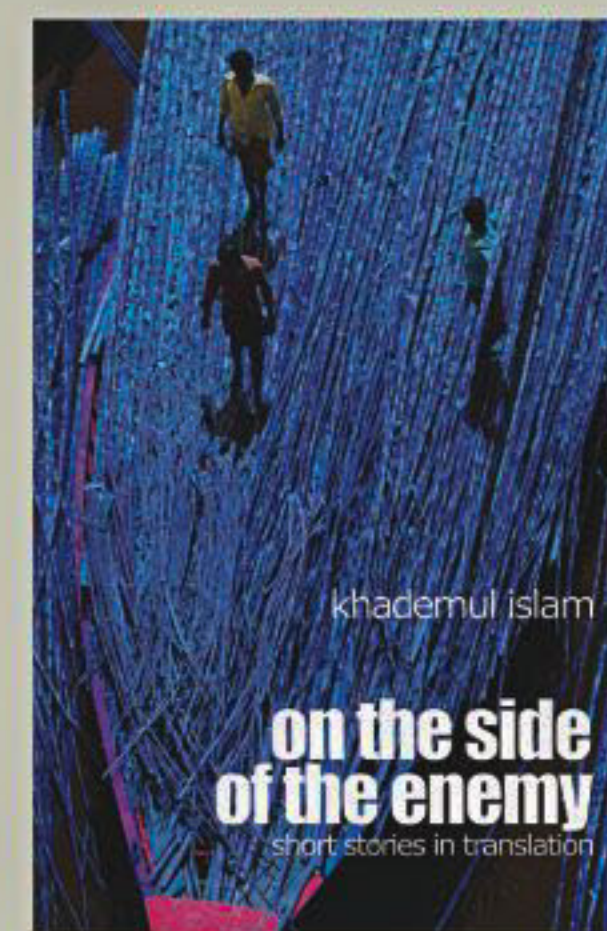
NEW READS

Every year Hay Festival Dhaka launches a variety of new books. Here are some to look out for this November



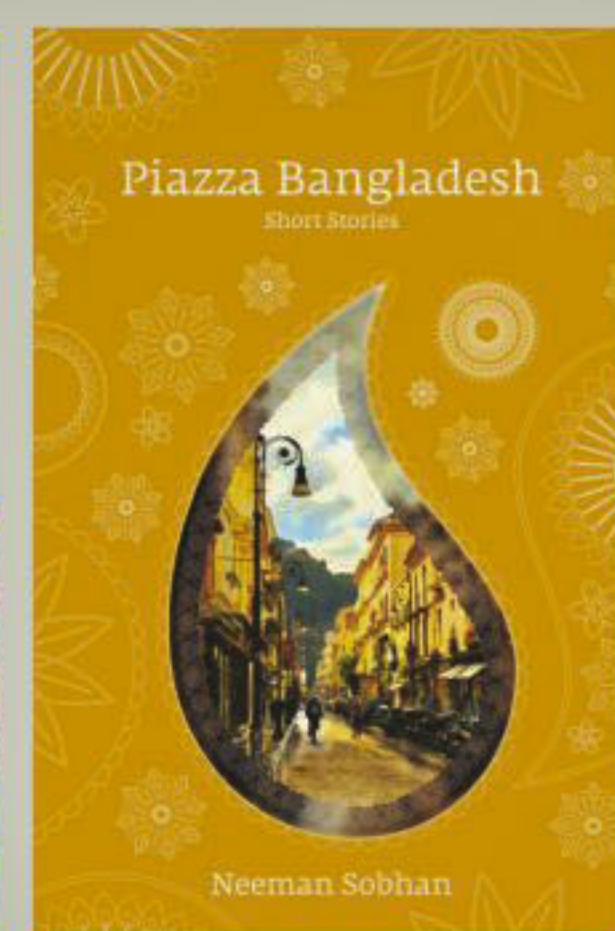
FORTY STEPS - Bilingual Flip Book (Bengal Lights Books) By K Anis Ahmed

A tale that is insightful and humorous as the reader meets a collage of characters – all of whom possess a universal appeal because their dilemmas, their hopes, their desires are reflective of ours, of us.



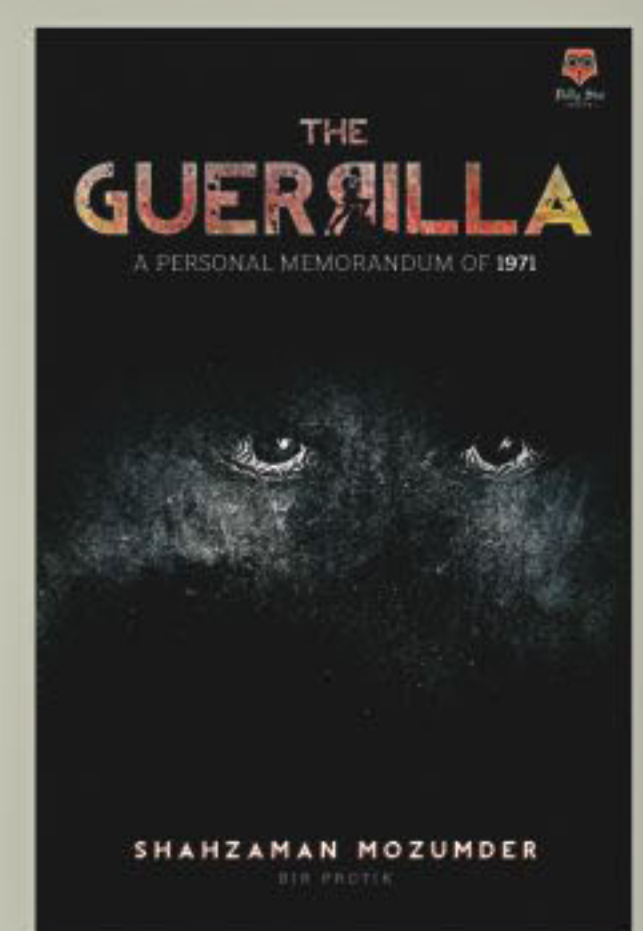
ON THE SIDE OF THE ENEMY – Stories in Translation (Bengal Lights Books) Edited and Translated By Khademul Islam

This collection of translated short stories by different Bengali writers is a brilliant portrayal of Bangladesh from its 1971 Independence War to the present.



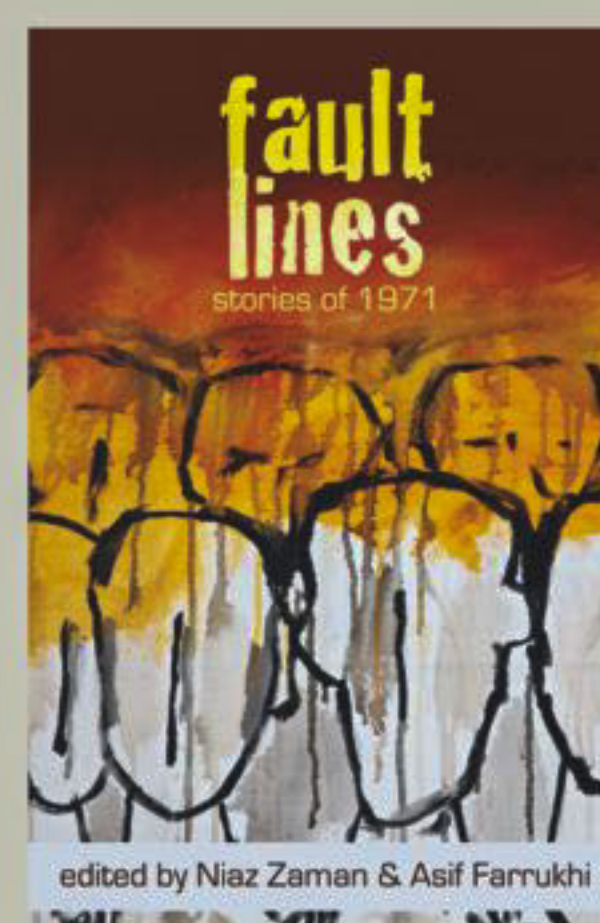
PIAZZA BANGLADESH (Bengal Publications) by Neeman Sobhan

Like the Italian 'piazza', where two or more streets meet, this debut anthology is the fictional confluence of eleven richly textured and delicately nuanced stories, some intertwined across continents and lifetimes.



THE GUERRILLA (Daily Star Books) By Shahzaman Mozumder

A Bir Protik's recollection of the 1971 war; a moving story of a teenager learning hard facts of life and death, with machine guns instead of pens.



FAULT LINES-Stories of 1971 (Revised and Expanded edition, UPL) Edited by Niaz Zaman and Asif Farrukhi

The first ever anthology containing stories from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, the United States and the United Kingdom on the theme of 1971. Painful and often brutal, these tales of quiet heroism oblige readers to ask pertinent questions about their own history.



SYLHET: Nature, Wildlife, Birds by Ihtisham Kabir

A book of photographs and essays describing the geography, flora, fauna and places for exploring in Sylhet. The book ends with tourist information and a proposed itinerary for seeing Sylhet.