

# WHAT WE WANT FROM A LIT FEST

SARAH ANJUM BARI

For the past few years, November has been engaging us in a spectrum of festivals highlighting pop culture, literature, classical, folk and jazz music. The realisation and success of these events give us, the youth of the nation, reason to believe that Dhaka can cater to our cultural cravings just as well as any place abroad. In turn, it gives us courage to voice what more to expect from such experiences, especially as all-encompassing an event as a literature festival.

In the last few years, Hay Festival had been an immense success because of its amazing ambience and the quality of its programmes, and this year's Dhaka Lit Fest followed a similar track.

As Irad Mustafa, one of the many to have enjoyed the experience, pointed out, "You can't really ask for more in terms of the ambience – with the food and book stalls and the great crowd it attracts. You have talks being held on a plethora of engaging topics ranging from poetry to politics, feminism to nature and art and so on. It can turn into a struggle about which one you want to attend." When asked about what other topics would be of interest to him, he mentioned, "Possibly some discussions on the influence of pop culture on our society and the evolution of different forms of music."

That the diversity of discussions and dialogues left little room for disappointment is a common opinion among those who attended the event. What we would like even more, ideally, is a chance to engage in conversations more interactive than the formal structure of Q&A sessions with experts from the literary world – a chance to discuss literature *with* writers in addition to just listening to them.

For readers, it would give them a chance to enquire after the thoughts of their favourite authors – learn about how stories and characters they love came to be conceptualised and developed. "Talking to them or just hearing them speak shows you how they think and look at things. It would give us a chance to learn about different perspectives and how they compare against ours," explained Sameen Ahsan, an avid reader.

Aspiring writers, on the other hand, would get a chance to learn tricks of the trade. As Kazi Akib Bin Asad put it, "If I write, I'd want some-

thing like a tea party with a writer who got published, preferably an author from the Subcontinent so that I can relate. But international big names are also necessary. You get someone who can guide you on how to develop a plot you have in mind – what to do and what not to do."

"For example," he elaborated, "if I got to meet Dan Brown, I would probably ask him how he does his research. His works are full of historical trivia and conspiracy theories; so if I wanted to write something like that, I'd follow the way he does it."

Many of the personalities speaking at lit fests are esteemed writers and critics with a huge depth of knowledge to impart. But since their works are familiar to the literary or journalistic crowd, the average public tend not to attend the sessions. Bringing in "mainstream" authors with bestsellers, or whose works the general public is familiar with, would attract a much larger share of the country's young readers. The names most youngsters agreed on are: Neil Gaiman, Dan Brown, G.R.R. Martin, Stephen King, Haruki Murakami, Chetan Bhagat and even Javed Akhter. John Green would be one of the best personalities to get people (especially YA readers) interested and also make for an entertaining programme; alas, having J.K. Rowling is probably too big a dream to fulfil.

Small-scale workshops would also be a great way to allow exposure to the works of aspiring writers, and also give everyone an idea of the scope of talent hidden amongst

Dhaka's citizens. "As someone who enjoys exploring things relating to literature, I would like to see the budding artists of today brought into the spotlight," said Shababa Iqbal, a student of English Literature at North South University.

"Another thing I would be interested in seeing," she added, "is the adaptations of well-known English plays in a Bengali setting." This opinion of wanting to see the world of English and Bengali literature come together is shared by many. As Lamisa Saadat shared, "I'd like to see the whole world of literature come together at such a festival, not just that of Bangladesh."

Sameen Ahsan added to the idea, stressing on the need for "Something to bridge the English and Bangla medium divide in literature.

Anything that encourages the youth from either of these education systems to get into the literature associated with the other would be useful."

On another note, many are interested in literature belonging to specific genres. Dividing the festivities into divisions of genre would "make it easier for people with specific preferences," suggested Syed Apanuba Puhama.

Raiyan Khan, for instance, is specifically fond of reading horror. "Panels or bookstalls highlighting horror fiction would attract my attention and make me want to attend such an event," he said. Catering to such specific areas of literature, such as horror, YA, or even sports journalism, would attract not only fans of literature who would be interested in these festivals anyway, but also people who are into very niche genres/subgenres.

When you consider the sheer amount of ideas and suggestions that a handful of young readers and writers are able to talk about off the top of their heads, it shines light on how much of an impact a lit fest has on the country's youth. It reveals the existence of a huge audience for such cultural endeavours, and we hope that the Dhaka Lit Fest is only a beginning to what could become a cultural celebration of global repute.

*Sarah Anjum Bari is a ravisher of caffeine and prose, with a heart that lives in Parisian cafes.*

*Reality checks to be sent in at s.anjumbari@gmail.com*

