

A Freedom Fighter's Personal Account of 1971

AUTHOR: SHAHZAMAN MOZUMDER, BIR PROTİK

REVIEWED BY MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

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SHAHZAMAN MOZUMDER'S *The Guerrilla: A Personal Memorandum of 1971*, a non-fictional work launched at Hay Festival Dhaka in 2014 and published by Daily Star Books, is the writer's personal account of the crucial days that he passed in the war field during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. A freedom fighter, Mozumder recounts his experience as a guerrilla fighter in the war. There are many books in different genres including fiction, nonfiction and poetry on the Liberation War of Bangladesh, but we have few books written by participating fighters, and very few in this category originally written in English. This book in lucid English takes the readers to the gruesome images of war as the writer tells his experience in the war field.

The book describes the details of each and every battle that the writer fought. A first person narrative, *The Guerrilla* progresses with the writer himself as the narrator. Readers can visualize vivid pictures of what actually happened in the war field – heroism, killings, bloodshed, fatal injuries and tragedies. It is the tale of a young freedom fighter that will move each and every reader.

Mozumder, an information technology professional as he mentions in the preface, is very humble to say he is "by no means a writer," but this book proves well that he is a writer since there is a mark of adroit presentation throughout the book. The writer also expresses his sense of pride that he could participate in the motherland's War of Independence and survived to tell the story to others. Kaiser Haq, the most important English language poet of Bangladesh and professor of English at Dhaka University, writes a wonderful foreword to the book. A freedom fighter himself, Haq writes how he gets to know Mozumder who approaches him to have a look at the manuscript and write a few words. He comments, "Throughout the book there is a chilling realism, leavened with occasional touches of humour." It's true that the description of battles, deaths and bloodshed that the writer gives throughout the book turns the readers shocked.

Liberation War is the most crucial event in the life of the Bengalis. It is a both glorious and tragic chapter of history – glorious as we achieved independence and tragic as we lost over three million lives of our brothers and sisters. Pakistan Army launched a heinous crackdown upon the innocent Bengalis at the dead of night on 25 March 1971 after talks between Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Yahya Khan had failed. The people of Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, were deprived of basic rights by the Pakistan government, and Yahya denied to hand over power to

Bangabandhu even after losing in the elections. At last Pakistan launched the illogical war, and swooped on the helpless and innocent people of Bangladesh. They began to kill the Bengalis indiscriminately with a sinful mission of eradicating national and linguistic spirit among the people of this region. The Paki soldiers raped about three hundred thousand women of the country. The most pathetic is the case that a few greedy people known as *razakar* helped Pakistanis kill our people and rape our sisters and mothers. The war went

also present in the racecourse to listen to Bangabandhu's historic 7 March speech. He describes the speech thus, "It was fiery, it was thunderous, and it was incomparable, like the greatest symphonies, and he said all that without the aid of a script . . . He gave a clear warning to those in power in Pakistan not to use force to dominate us and a clarion call to the rest of us to be prepared to liberate the country" (14). So the Bengalis understood with the declaration "Our struggle this time is a struggle for freedom, our struggle this time is a struggle for independ-

ence along with his "partner in crime" (4) went to steal litchi from a neighborhood, and suddenly fell into an old grave, and the guard couldn't find him. He humorously says, "The grave saved me that day" (4). But we see at the end of the book that the writer digs a grave with a spade for a proper burial of his mother and brother whom the Pakistanis brutally killed when he was in the war field. After the liberation of Bangladesh, he along with Major Matin, was crossing a road at Dhaka while someone informed him that his mother and brother had been killed by the Pakistan Army. Hearing this just the next day, "exactly a year after their gruesome murder," (169) he dug up the remains – the skeletons, the skulls and other parts as neighbors said that their bodies had been dumped under a jackfruit tree. Mozumder describes, "I wrapped each of them in *kafon* and summoned a *moulavi* from the local mosque. A small crowd had already assembled and we performed the *janaza* and then finally buried them under the same jackfruit tree – their final resting place" (169). One who went to war, fought valiantly, earned freedom for the country dug out his own mother's skeletons, as she had been killed by Pakistani Army, from the ditch. This is how the book progresses and ends.

The second chapter titled "Night of the Beast" begins with the black night of 25 March 1971 when the Pakistani Army launched a cowardly attack on the Bengalis. The whole country was awe-struck, and Dhaka became dead silent. "Our limbs were leaden," describes the writer, "and our tongues lost the power of speech" (19). They were communicating with signs and gestures. It was the condition of all the people in Dhaka that time. Mozumder went to the Dhaka University campus next day to see only dead bodies. "It was a mass grave! They had not even bothered to cover their bloody handwork properly and sticking out of the earth were human limbs" (21). Seeing this condition, Mozumder was dumbfounded, and he says, "My hatred for the Pakistanis touched new heights as I vowed retribution all over again" (21). The writer addresses the Pakistanis as beasts since the atrocities, he thinks, that they perpetrated upon the Bengalis could only be defined as beastly.

Mozumder gives an account of his tale of participating in the war, receiving training, fighting as a guerrilla, witnessing the war from the front, seeing corpse after corpse and blood, hearing the death cries of the fighters, saving lives, and enduring thirst, hunger and injuries in the war field in the next four chapters of *The Guerrilla*. He knew he would not be allowed to join the war, so he lied to the family that his name had been on the list of

Pakistani Army, and only option he had was to join the war. Everyone in the family bade teary goodbye to him for going to war. When he reached Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters), they considered him too young to fight, but he showed his courage and mental strength to be part of freedom struggle. The journey began in the camp. Mozumder shares his experience of training, food in the camp, struggling against weather and many more. He fought in Teliapara in Sylhet, near a tea garden. He also mentions that they had to struggle against the collaborators from the area as they were fervent supporters of Pakistan. There are vivid descriptions of battles between guerrillas and Pakistani soldiers in the book.

Mozumder fought from the front and he shares all his moments in different chapters. He describes the outcome of one battle thus, "Parts of faces and heads were missing, the brains still spilling out; one body was missing from the waist down. What had once been a human leg was now only white bone and tendons, as if a butcher had scraped off the flesh. Incredibly, one of them, his head partly blown off, was somehow still alive . . . I retreated to a corner, sat down on the ground and began to vomit. My companion was also throwing up. The man with the head wound soon died" (54). The freedom fighters faced the kind of experiences that are beyond description, still the writer attempts to bring the images as fresh as possible. Whenever they launched any attack or became successful in a battle, they had strength-generating slogan "Joy Bangla" in their lips. The author points out some lackings including the lack of training, lack of communication, lack of firepower etc., still they had, he believes, moral strength that took them to the last moment of the war.

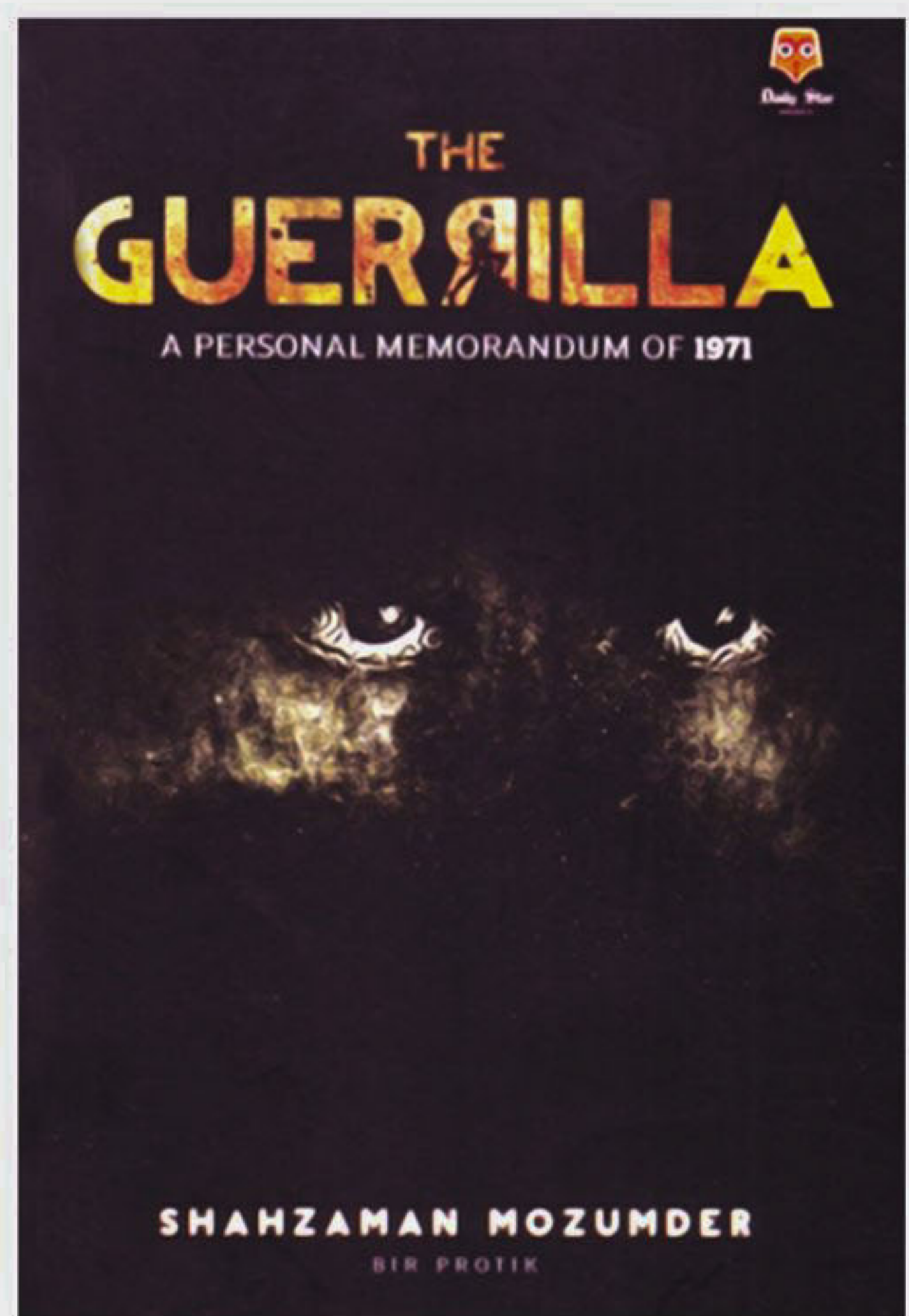
At last December set in, allied forces, the Indian army joined in, and the Pakistani Army began to retreat as "Rolling Back the Beast," the penultimate chapter of *The Guerrilla* notes the time in history. Before 16 December, just before the victory, the guerrillas searched for enemies, but "We found," Mozumder writes, "only a large number of corpses but no live Pakistanis" (161). At last freedom fighters and basically all the people of Bangladesh came to know that Pakistani Army surrendered at the Ramna racecourse – the most coveted achievement, the independence of Bangladesh, in the life of the Bengalis. Mozumder writes how they felt after the declaration of freedom, "We were ecstatic, jubilant. We were like children, firing our weapons in the air as if they were toys, we hugged each other, danced in wild celebrations, and our joys knew no bounds. Our country was finally free, independent, and we had thrown off

the yoke of the Beast" (163). Such great celebrations went on around the country – there were also tears of joy in the eyes of Bengalis. The Pakistani Army committed the most brutal atrocities upon the people of East Pakistan. Their "atrocities committed surpassed all limits" (163), and that is why the Bengalis took up arms against them.

All the people of Bangladesh except a few collaborators sought freedom, and many of them fought under crucial reality that the Pakistani Army launched genocide on this land. To save the motherland, they joined Mukti Bahini. But the chapter "Victory and Its Price," the final chapter of the book, shows how a lot of people took the chance and showed up as freedom fighters and genuine patriots! Mozumder writes, "There was no shortage of claimants for our victory. Many who had crossed the border now claimed they were freedom fighters. Among millions of such 'freedom fighters', those who had actually confronted the Pakistani Army in combat became an insignificant minority and were soon to be forgotten" (166). It was another post-Independence picture in the country. The writer further expresses his agonies, "I saw many well fed people brandishing a variety of weapons with a red cloth tied around their foreheads. They identified themselves as the 'Crack' Platoon, the freedom fighters of Dacca . . . We, the regular troops, exhausted from battle, the sleepless nights at the front, and most suffering from malnutrition, looked pale in comparison" (166-67). After independence, a great many people strove to enjoy the fruits of freedom, but real freedom fighters took rest being extremely exhausted fighting for nine months.

The Guerrilla is an excellent book on the first-hand experience of a freedom fighter in the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The writer adeptly depicts the images of war, attempts to give minute details of the battles he was part of, comments on the overall condition of the war, portrays the pictures of collaborators and compares Pakistanis with beasts, and at the end of the book he writes on the price that each and every Bengali paid during the war and after independence. The burning moment for Mozumder was to give a formal burial to the skeletons of his mother brutally murdered by the beasts. *The Guerrilla* must be a privileged read, and I suggest the readers interested about the history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh to go through the book. I would like to pay homage to freedom-fighter-writer Shahzaman Mozumder as Kaiser Haq does to his comrade-in-arms with three words: I salute you.

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on for nine months and the dreadful Pakistani Army surrendered on 16 December 1971 – Bangladesh was born as an independent country though at the cost of a sea of blood.

When the war began, Mozumder was only sixteen years old, and he was not in a position to participate in the war, but his indomitable spirit and love for motherland made him fight against the Pakistani military. It was brutality of the Pakistani soldiers that compelled the people of East Pakistan to join the war. Mozumder who hailed from Dinajpur from a well-educated family, lived in Dhaka during 1971 and was aware of politics about East and West Pakistan. He was

ence . . ." that they had to be ready with whatever they could for the independence of the country. Immensely inspired by the speech, Mozumder vowed to join the war and contribute to liberating the country from the clutch of Pakistan.

The Guerrilla is divided into a number of chapters with titles. The first chapter titled "Early and Not So Early Years" gives a background to Mozumder's family, his childhood, school and college life, and other sweet memories in his early life. He also gave some details of how he passed his days as a truant and loved other activities more than study. As he remembers his escapades, he says once

A Death in the Family

AUTHOR: KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD

REVIEWED BY DR. SHIBLI JABIR

"*My Struggle*" is a six volume semi-autobiographical novel, or "auto-fiction", by the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard. The six volumes run into three thousand six hundred pages and is one of the most talked about pieces of creative art in western literary circles. He is considered a wunderkind in Parisian cafes for his earlier novels, and "My Struggle" which has been translated from Norwegian. This review will cover volume one, or Book One, originally published as "A Death in the Family".

In this volume, Knausgaard talks about two aspects of his life: his boyhood and events surrounding his father's death when he was twenty seven. His book doesn't have a grand theme nor does the plot change from one episode to another. Nonetheless it is a masterpiece, and for many reasons. For one, he has a gift for description of objects, scenery, and nature from the past, and weaves them into a compelling story. He narrates at great length many incidents from his early life, and his ability to recount details from the past and paint them with the finest brush is uncanny. For example, early on, he describes an incident where he recalls that after a fishing boat sank he saw a face in the sea, the sea had formed into the shape of a face, almost an apparition. And then one could consider his recollection of how during the New Year's Eve in 1985, he and his friend carried a bag of beer in an effort to hide it from his family and avoid being detected for underage drinking.

Part 2 of the volume covers his trip to Kristiansand with his brother Yngve to arrange for his father's funeral. As they make arrangement for the funeral and burial, he describes the process of preparing the house—his grandmother's—where the funeral would take place. The house was in utter disrepair, and a mess with piles of clothes and dirt, stench, and barely usable bathrooms. He describes methodically the process they undertake and it is a good lesson for "do it yourselves", particularly for those who undertake a cleaning process after two people lived there in total disregard for rules of sanitation and healthy living. However, Karl Ove has some very readable passages on his relationship with his brother, on his journey through youth, as he goes from the Academy of Creative Writing to college in

Bergen, his first marriage with Tonje, and reflections on the meaning of life and death. His interviews with Norwegian poets and writers while he tries to make his mark as a writer are also interesting.

The writer's ability to paint events from various stages of his life is breathtakingly fresh. This skill, in describing his surroundings to highlight real events to bring out the starkness of these incidents, is called "hyperrealism" which is a label used for "realism in art characterized by depiction of real life in an unusual or striking manner". Knausgaard is frequently compared with the French writer Marcel Proust, and his literary style is considered Proustian. His auto-fiction is Proustian for two reasons: Most of the book is based on recollection triggered by his father's death and the time he and his brother Yngve spends at his grandmother's house while preparing for the funeral. Another Proustian trait evident in this book is the long-winded and sometimes rambling digressions that Knausgaard indulges in.

Fortunately, his writing style makes long ruminations easy to read. Given his keen sense of art, music and literature, for someone like me who spent much of my time in the USA during the period covered in this book, his references to events of the time come alive.

The first half of Book One is basically a recollection of his adolescence and teenage years. His most important relationship was with his father, but his elder brother Yngve and his grandmother play important roles too. He details how tyrannical and abusive his father was. Sometimes his father was distant, and mocked him because of his difficulties with pronunciations. He says, "My father filled the rooms with disquiet, my mother filled them with gentleness, patience, melancholy, and on occasion, if she came home from work and was tired, also with a faint yet noticeable undercurrent of irritability." But his father was also closer to him than to his brother. His father took him fishing on the sea in the morning before school very early in the morning when it was dark and cold. He wanted to say no, but could not since it would be considered a sign of weakness by him, and he hated it. But he also acknowledges, "I know he did this for my sake, and he had never done it for Yngve".

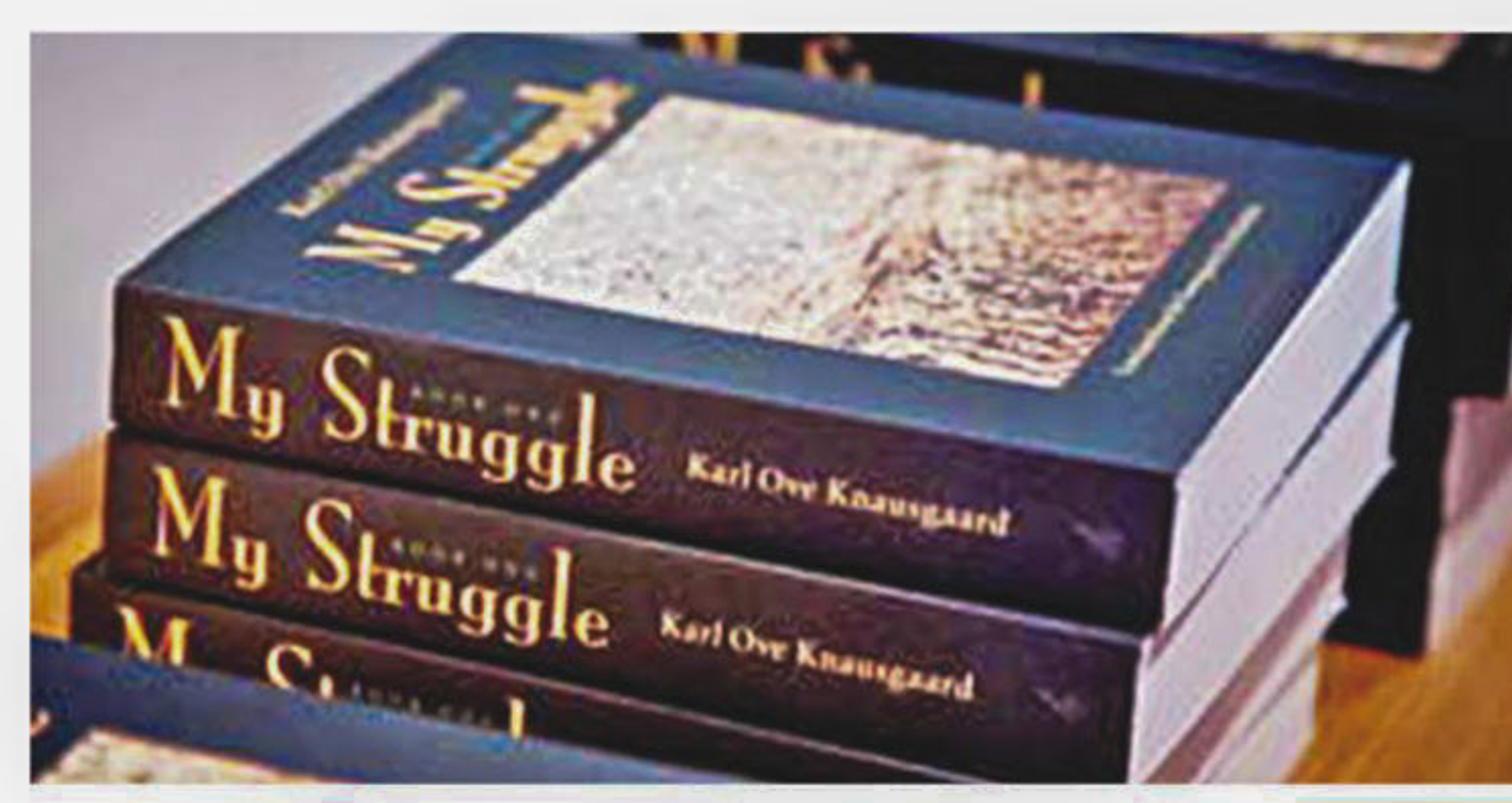
The book has a beautiful beginning but the second part reeks of death, alcoholism, and self-destruction. We find him in 1985 and then the time line jumps to 2003 when he had moved to Stockholm from his native Norway, and remarried a poet he knew. The transition from first to second part happens with the birth of his first child. The narrative then turns back to the events in 1998 when his father died. His father's death disturbs him, and he can't understand how the man he knew and raised him could come to such a catastrophic end. However, his description is never maudlin, although he mentions that several points he was sobbing. Similarly, the storytelling of his own state of drunkenness while waiting for the funeral is a little contrived but brilliant.

Ironically, his drunkenness reminds the reader of his father's condition before his death, and it appears he might be highlighting

The volume is filled with self-criticism, his close friendship with his brother, references to music, old memories and reflection on life.

to show his kinship with his father. His penmanship is brilliant, and the storyline is as good as fiction but has more life, more heart, and emotions. He was mad at his father because he self-destroyed himself. A former school teacher, alcoholism takes hold of him and he moved in with his old mother. During this period, the father would stay at home, drink, and lost his motivation to live. It seems that the sons embark upon a mission to undo the damage their father caused both physically and emotionally, in just the few years he lived in with his mother and encircled her in his world of booze, deterioration, and self-abuse.

Knausgaard waxes poetic in describing his feeling of love and art. He is lyrical as he narrates his own feelings, his emotions, his state of mind, when he realizes he is in love. "That night I couldn't sit still, . . . I felt as if I were



bigger than the world, as if I had everything inside me, and that there was nothing left to strive for. Humanity was small, history was small, the Earth was small, yes, even the universe, which they said was endless, was small. I was bigger than everything". While browsing a book about Constable, a British painter, and his work mostly oil sketches, studies of cloud, countryside, sea, he writes, "I didn't need to do any more than let my eyes skim over them before I was moved to tears. . . . an oil sketch of a cloud formation from September 6, 1822, there was nothing there that could explain the strength of my feelings. At the top, a patch of blue sky. Beneath, whitish mist. Then the rolling clouds."

His ability to contrast is quite masterful. One example is the contrast he portrays between his brother's matter-of-fact coping but his own strong reactions at the father's death; another is the contrast between his first wife Tonje and his worldly sensitivities. On the latter he writes, "Her eyes lit up when she started talking about food, and she was a talented cook; even if it was only pizza she was making, she put her heart and soul into it. . . . And she had moved in with someone who regarded meals, home comforts, and closeness as necessary evils." But, I must mention this self-portrayal is odd for a person who was moved to tears by Constable, loved music, and studied literature.

The volume is filled with self-criticism, his close friendship with his brother, references to music, old memories and reflection on life.

Some other gems are: "I saw life; I thought about death." "For several years I had tried to write about my father, but had gotten nowhere, . . . Writing is more about destroying

than creating." The initial state of shock after his father's death: ". . . such was my state now, I was numb, and the numbness prevailed over everything else." "For the first time since Yngve had called I could see him in my mind's eye. Not the man he had been in recent years, but the man he was when I was growing up, when, in winter, we went fishing with him, off the island of Tromoya. . . ."

Later on assessing the work they would have to do to clean up the mess his Dad left the house in and referring to his brother: "we faced a common foe, Dad, that is."

He writes with facility, using phrases from literature, philosophy, art, music, and current cultural scene, but his most beautiful pieces involve touches of involuntary memory (memory that is triggered by event or smells), particularly as he walks aimlessly after visiting his father's body, as well as the nostalgia he feels for his grandparents.

His books have been translated into at least 15 languages. In Norway, where the hardcover editions cost more than \$50 each, nearly a half-million copies of the books have sold, or one for every nine adults in the country. Why would you read a six-volume, 3600 page Norwegian novel about his experience in writing this book? It is aesthetically forceful, breathtakingly good, and "intense and vital". I leave the readers with one of his many references to death: "Death, which I have regarded as the greatest dimension of life, dark, compelling, was no more than a pipe that springs a leak, a branch that cracks in the wind, as jacket that slips off a clothes hanger and falls to the floor."

The reviewer is a regular contributor to this section.