

MY STRUGGLE: BOOK TWO

AUTHOR: KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD

REVIEWED BY DR. SHIBLI JABIR

KARL Ove Knausgaard, the Norwegian novelist, has emerged as a major force in the current world literary scene, as well as a major contender for the Nobel Prize in Literature. His Magnum Opus is the six-volume "My Struggle" which is a blend of autobiography, fiction, mini-novella, and a philosophical treatise on life, love and family. The title of his dense novelized memoir "Min Kamp" was "deliberately borrowed from Adolf Hitler's autobiography Mein Kampf." But the similarities between these two books end there. While Hitler's book ends up propagating hatred and advocating world dominance, Knausgaard's is poetic, artistic, and leaves one feeling loved. He was just named the "2015 Literary Innovator" by the Wall Street Journal Magazine.

Book Two of "My Struggle" originally published as "A Man in Love" has been translated from Norwegian by Don Bartlett. It offers details of his relationship with his wife and two daughters, and an analysis of people in different social settings—for example at birthday parties where he hangs out and at his children's daycare center's meetings. As a stay-at-home dad, his companions are his two daughters, Vanja and Heidi, and he offers such loving characterizations of their divergent personalities. But we also get insights into his writing style and modus operandi from a conversation at a birthday party with Gustav, father of Jocke, who was his older daughter, Vanja's friend.

"So, are you writing anything new?" he asked.

I shrugged.

"Yes, I'm keeping busy," I said.

"Do you work at home?"

"Yes."

"How do you go about it? Do you sit

waiting for inspiration?"

"No, that's no good. I have to work every day like you."

An enduring charm of Knausgaard is his humility. It is evident in his views on poetry. He writes, "Although much has changed in my life since then my attitude to poetry was basically the same. I could read it, but poems never opened themselves to me, and that was because I had no "right" to them: they were not for me. When I approached them I felt like a fraud, and I was indeed always unmasked, because what they always

a terrible death; alone, drunk and buried in detritus. The reader is left with a mystery; how could his mother be absent at the funeral? We learn from Book One that his parents were separated, and this casts a very dark shadow on Knausgaard's very detailed description of his father's last days and the funeral arrangements. The last page of this volume offers a beautiful and sweet closure for the reader, as he describes a conversation with his mother.

"That morning she went on to tell me about the first time they had met. She had

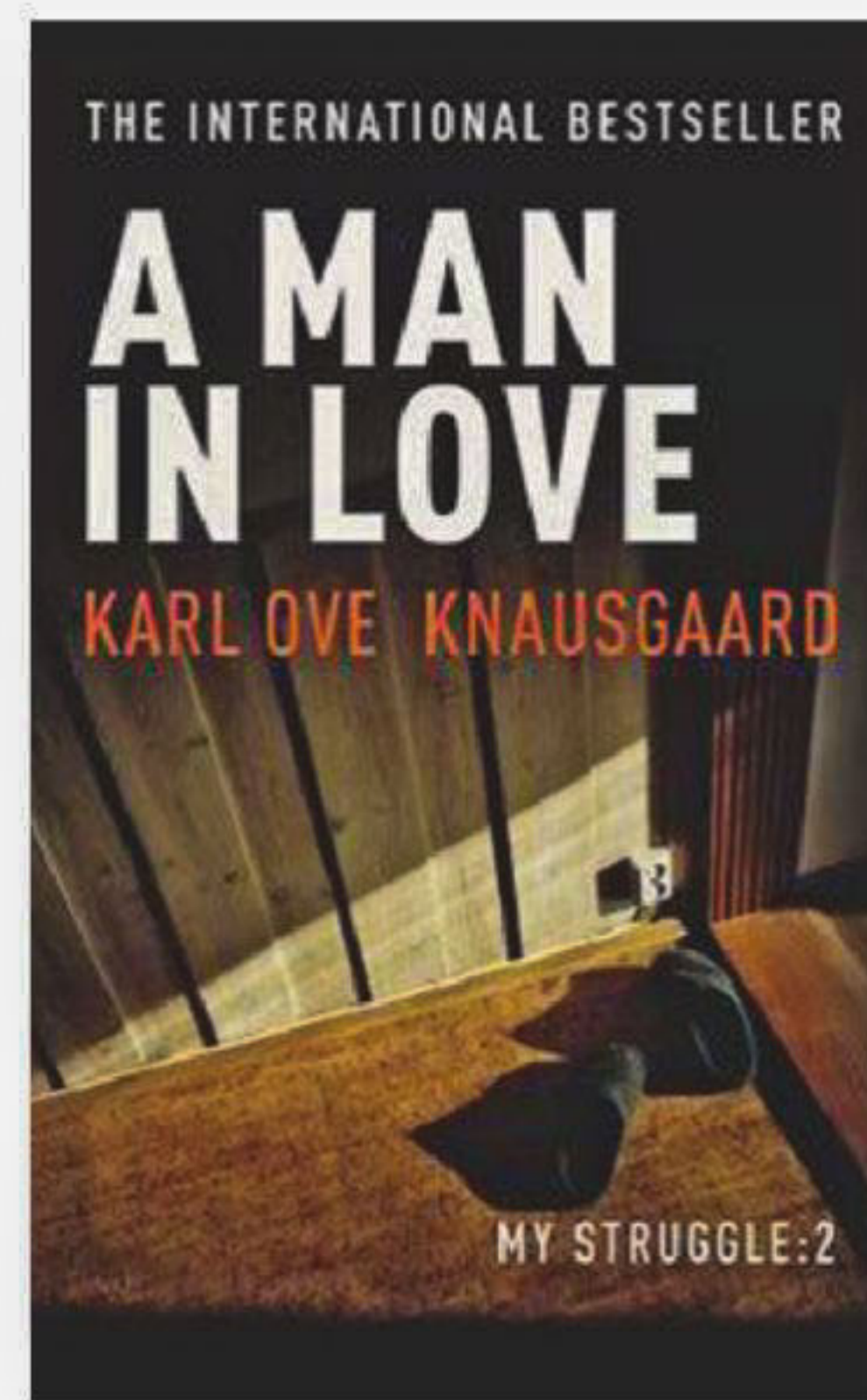
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said as well, these poems, was: Who do you think you are, coming in here? That was what Osip Mandelstam's poems said, that was what Ezra Pound's poems said, that was what Gottfried Benn's poems said, that was what Johannes Bobrowski's poems said. You had to earn the right to read them."

He touches many aspects of his life that he either mentions in the first volume, and events that happened later in his life. His father's death was traumatic for him and he covers extensively in book one. His father, a former school teacher, lived the last few years of his life with his old mother. He died

been working at a hotel in Kristiansand during the summer when she was sixteen, and one day at a terrace restaurant in a large park, in the shade of a tree, her friend had introduced her to her boyfriend and his pal.

"I didn't quite catch his name, and for a long time I thought it was Knudsen, she said. "And at first I liked the other one better, you know. But then I fell for your father... it's such a good memory. The sun, the grass in the park, the trees, the shade, all the people there... We were so young, you know... Yes, it was an adventure. The beginning of an adventure. That was how it felt."



Knausgaard's account of his first encounter with his father-in-law, Linda's father, Ronald Bostrom is very revealing. He met Ronald for the first time a few years after he married Linda. Ronald, who had spent some time in a mental institution, comes to visit them, and after the introduction, and some perfunctory talk about the job that Karl Ove did by painting his house, they go inside the house. There, he continues,

"Something I had never seen before had come over Linda. She adapted to him, she was subordinate to him somehow, she was his child, she gave him attention and her

company, while also being above him, in the sense that she was consistently trying to hide—although never quite succeeding—her shame."

He is also indiscreet. He told an interviewer that his revelations caused his wife Linda, a poet and novelist, to have a nervous breakdown. One should not be completely surprised at this turn of events after going through his lengthy account of his first meeting with Linda, which happened while he was still married to Tonje, his first wife. Regardless, it touches your heart. As a master of "hyperrealism" (realism in art characterized by depiction of real life in an unusual or striking manner), his love story is mesmerizing. He begins this way,

"The first time I set eyes on Linda was in the summer of 1999 at a seminar for new Nordic writers at Biskops-Armo Folk High School, outside Stockholm. Standing outside a building with the sun on her face. Wearing sunglasses, a white T-shirt with a stripe across the chest and green military fatigues. She was thin and beautiful. She was thin and beautiful. She had an aura that was dark, wild, erotic and destructive. I dropped everything I was holding."

Knausgaard, regardless of the size of these volumes (3600 pages), is read around the globe (his books have been translated into at least 15 languages), and is the most sought after author in the creative writing circuit. If you Google Knausgaard, you get almost half a million hits, and he is being quoted for his views on art, music, and realism in every corner of modern literature.

The reviewer is a regular contributor to this section.



A Navigator's Voyage to ENLIGHTENMENT

AUTHOR: DANIEL DEFOE

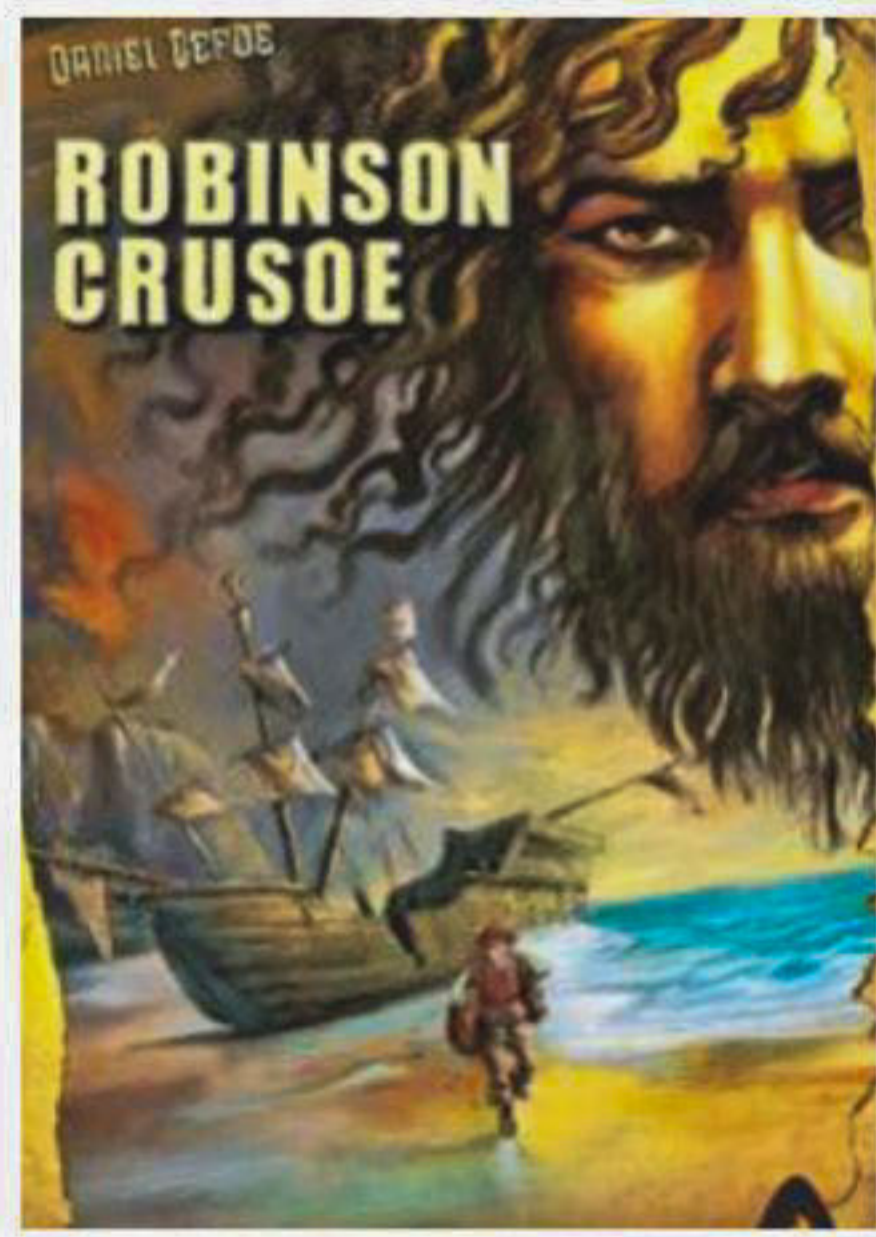
REVIEWED BY MAHFUZ UL HASIB CHOWDHURY

ROBINSON Crusoe is one of the earliest works of fiction in English literature. In this book Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) illustrated an adventurous and stubborn young man who had a long-cherished desire to travel by seas and oceans and to explore the world. That young man was Robinson Crusoe, the protagonist of the story. His father wanted him to study law and didn't support his son's willingness to travel overseas as a navigator. But Robinson Crusoe did not pay heed to his father's advice. He left home one day and moved away to London from his hometown York by a ship.

He proceeded from England to other countries and on his way through different maritime zones he learnt the strategies of a trader. He purchased several food items, clothes and other things from one port and sold those commodities to another. From this point of view, we come across the image of a colonial merchant in Robinson Crusoe. We have read in history that during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries traders from England, France, Spain, Portugal and some other countries visited different parts of the globe in order to set up colonies across continents. Robinson Crusoe was virtually on a similar pursuit. He landed on the soils of Africa and Latin America to quest for business opportunities. However, he got in a big trouble while sailing along the African coastline when his ship was seized by a gang of Moorish pirates. Those pirates plundered all the belongings of Robinson Crusoe and the pirates' ring-leader detained him and later made him a slave. Robinson Crusoe passed two years on that island of the Moors under captivity. Anyway, one day he escaped. He had with him another slave named Xury while running away from the pirates' den. They were picked up by a Portuguese captain on his ship that took them to Brazil. Robinson Crusoe sold Xury to the Portuguese captain and got a good amount of money. While in Brazil, Robinson Crusoe made plans to become a slave-trader because he thought there would be very lucrative monetary prospects in this business. So, he left for West Africa to procure black slaves from there and to sell them out to different nations. But his ship capsized near the coast of the Caribbean Islands. Robinson Crusoe alone survived that shipwreck while all his companions drowned. It was a ter-

rific test for Robinson Crusoe to survive on that remote, solitary island. One lucky thing happened at that time that, the remains of the wrecked ship were brought ashore by a strong current which enabled Robinson Crusoe to recover a few guns, ammunitions, a little food and some more things including a copy of Bible from the rubble of the ship. Nevertheless, he became very repentant for not listening to his father.

Robinson Crusoe's struggle for survival continued through hunting goats and birds and gathering foodstuff from trees and plants. He also learnt to make fire which gave him a little light to read verses from the Bible inside his small hut which he had made with branches and planks of wood by cutting down trees. One night it seemed to him that



he was visited in his dream by an angel and he came to realize that God had sent him to that island for deliverance from his previous sins and for spiritual regeneration. He apologized to God several times for his reckless, impious past life and his penitence enlightened him with the truth that sufferings purify human souls and get humans closer to sanctity. He started to view his total loneliness on that island from a brighter angle and envisioned himself as the king of that landscape. After some years he came across another human being on that island who belonged to a primitive clan and was a cannibal. Robinson Crusoe saved that man from his opponent group of cannibals and thus became his master. Robinson Crusoe named him Friday,

taught him a little English and gradually converted him into Christianity. This is another aspect of colonialism that the white Europeans intermingled with different nations, subdued them in different ways and also preached Christianity to the native people.

During Robinson Crusoe's initial days on that island where he had been marooned for over two decades, he once asked himself:

"Can God spread a table in the wilderness?"

His query was answered before long. Mother Nature offered her benevolent resources generously to make survival easy for Robinson Crusoe on that island. It made Robinson Crusoe overwhelmingly glad as he came across a great deal of fruits in one part of that island and he expressed his pleasure through the following lines:

"I found melons upon the ground in great abundance and grapes upon the trees. The clusters of grapes were just now in their prime, very ripe and rich."

The trees on that island not just yielded edible fruits to Robinson Crusoe; they proved highly essential to him as he chopped down wood from those trees for making fire, for securing his hut and also for making a boat. He built a bower in a particular part of the island surrounded by hills and woods which he found beautiful and at times he stayed there to delight himself with the pristine natural glamour of the island.

Anyway, after many years Robinson Crusoe and Friday were rescued from that island by a ship bound for England. Coming back home, Robinson Crusoe found that his parents had died before his return. Only his two sisters were alive. He left England once again for East Indies in 1694 to make new commercial efforts. The story ends with Robinson Crusoe's revisit to that island where he had been stranded for over twenty years. When he went back there, he found that the island had become a Spanish colony and looked much more civilized than before. So, through the voyages of Robinson Crusoe we get to look back on the colonial history of past centuries as well as a man's rediscovery of himself in an absolutely new light while he was going through hardships, hunger and hazards and finally experienced a spiritual resurrection accorded by God.

The reviewer is Vice President, Chowdhury Philanthropic Trust, Sylhet. Email: mhasib.chy@gmail.com

THE TRAVAILS OF TRAVELS

AUTHOR: AKHTER MATIN CHAUDHURY

PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR IN 2015

PAGES: 197, PRICE: BDT 500

REVIEWED BY SHAHNOOR WAHID

PERHAPS the *ghorkuno* Bengalis were introduced to real life travel stories first by

Rabindranath Tagore and next by Syed Mujtaba Ali (*Deshe Bideshe*). Both of them have given vivid account of their journey across various terrains in their iconic style of writing. One cannot but read their stories again and again to glean the last drop of nectar stored in the pages of the books.

But travel stories are hard to come by these days though more people travel now and to a wider choice of destinations either for work or for pleasure. May be it takes different kind of a mental makeup to develop the interest and have the right amount of energy to write a nice little travel book after a long tour half way across the world. Writing down details in a note book or storing them in brain cells for future use are not enjoyed by all, especially if one has to run against time to catch the lone flight in a remote airport in the middle of nowhere.

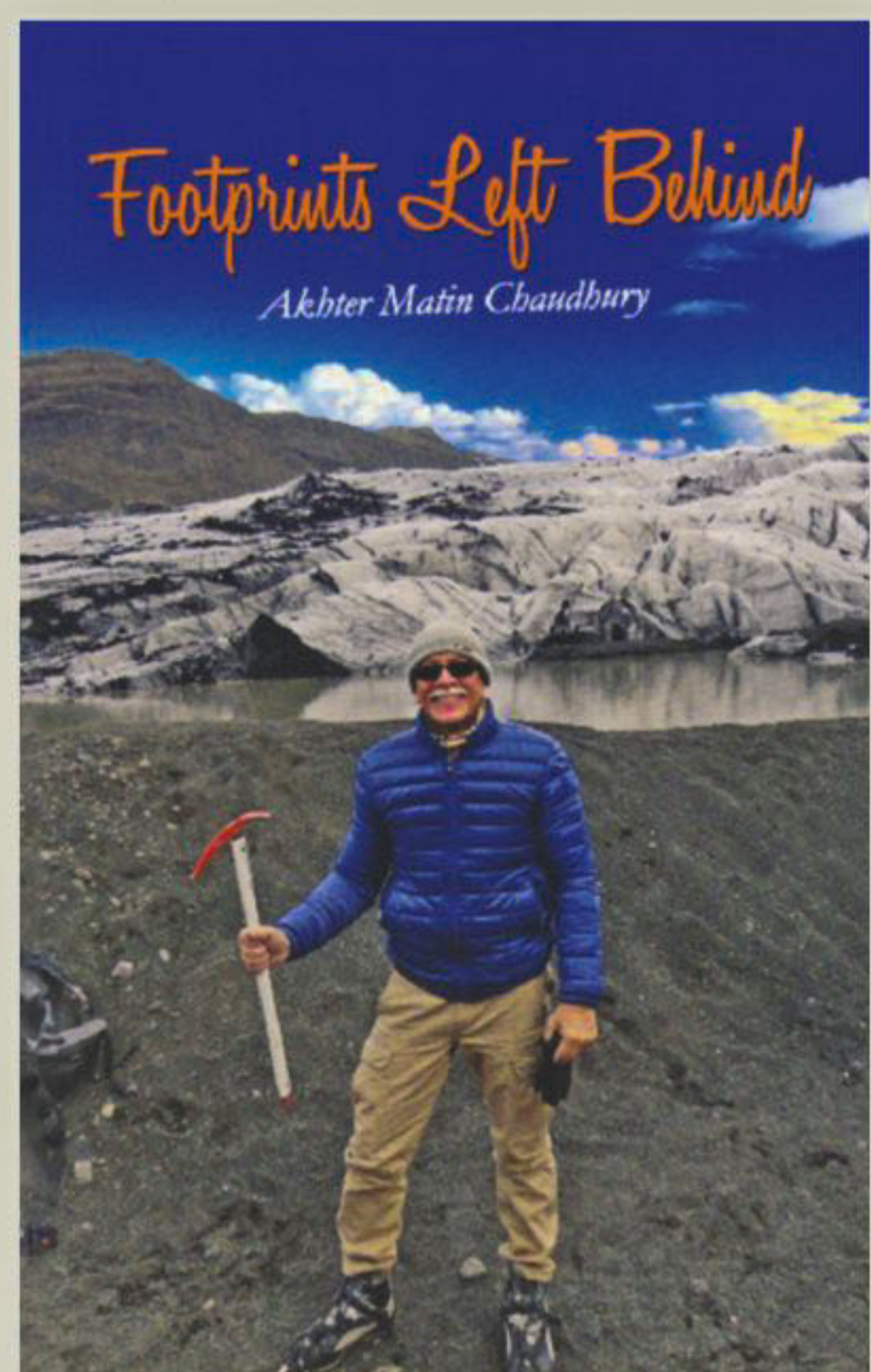
Among the dwindling species of travel writers in Bangladesh who travel to write, Akhter Matin Chaudhury's name stands out as the one who tries to keep the genre alive. He has travelled widely, like a true "Globe Trotter", and written three books to immortalize his experiences in black and white for the future generations. We shall make attempts to review his latest publication "Footprints Left Behind". The Foreword of this book has been written by Ihtisham Kabir, a columnist of The Daily Star. He writes, "It is Chaudhury's third book about travel. He takes us on some intriguing and thought-provoking adventures. His previous books have recounted his travels in Tibet and the Balkans. Now he takes us to several outlier countries including Iceland, Laos, Jordan, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as well as more familiar ones such as Denmark, Norway, Sweden, England and Ireland." In another paragraph Ihtisham Kabir writes, "Chaudhury presents the book in the form of a diary. The language is formal, as if he is

having a conversation with us. He informs us about the cost of things, about the relative merits of hotels, busses and trains that he uses..."

In the Preface the author narrates the beginning of his long travelling extravaganza, at the age of 5 only, when his parents took him to Liverpool from Bombay, on a large ocean liner. Since then the beckon of the salty sea air became too strong for him to overlook. He acknowledges with due humility the contribution of some persons in the publication of the book, firstly his wife for encouraging him to travel, and then Md. Asaduzzaman Joseph for helping him with the task of publication and Waqar Khan (of Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies) for his encouragement and connecting him with

Asaduzzaman Joseph. He also expresses his gratitude to Ihtisham Kabir for the Foreword.

The book is divided into the following chapters: Foreword, Preface, The Spirit of Captain Bligh, The Casement Quest, The Anderson Trail, Vientiane – A Hidden Surprise, Scandinavia, The Baltics, Land of Fire and Ice, The Jewel of Jordan. The book contains some beautiful photographs, mostly taken by the author, to supplement the description of the



places depicted therein. For example, description of ancient Petra in Jordan would not be as dramatic and vivid without the photographs of the place. The photographs of various historic towns, castles, tombs, museums, graveyards etc, speak volumes about the author's penchant for history and culture.

This inexhaustible traveler is a pharmaceutical executive by profession. It is sheer passion for travelling that makes him hit the roads every now and then. He dedicated the book to his father, Dr. Abdul Matin Chaudhury and mother Mrs. Razia Matin Chaudhury.

The reviewer is Special Supplements Editor, The Daily Star.