

Story of simple problems of life

AUTHOR: DANIELLE STEEL

REVIEWED BY DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

DANIELLE Steel is a popular American novelist and has written 142 books—98 of which are novels—and she has sold more than 800 million copies. I first came across her books more than twenty years ago when I saw my student assistant at a university where I taught carry a Danielle Steel paperback in her hands while passing time in between classes. Danielle Steel writes in a simple language about average people caught in the limelight, trying to cope with the simple problems of life, including having too much money. The protagonists in her novels are not big thinkers or achieve any greatness, and this one is no exception.

In the book under review, "Undercover" (Random House, 2015) tracks the work of Marshall Everett an undercover agent for the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). The synopsis on the first page of the book indicates that it is about "A special agent who has lost everything, and a diplomat's daughter hoping to bury the past. After their paths cross in Paris, they must fight once more for their survival." While working in the jungles of South America, Marshall penetrates a powerful drug cartel, and rises to the position of the right-hand man of the kingpin, Raul Vasquez Lopez in Ecuador. However, just before American DEA agents raided the camp where Lopez operated, Marshall was extracted from the jungles, and flown back to Washington DC.

Marshall then was seconded to the US Secret Service on a temporary basis and worked in the White House on the Presidential detail. However, while on a trip with the President, he was injured when an assassination attempt on the President went bad. Marshall took disability and retired from the services rather than take a desk job. He decides to spend a year in Paris and brings along a newly found companion, a dog.

The story then takes a slight detour with Ariana, a New York socialite, and daughter of the newly appointed Ambassador to Argentina. A few weeks after she arrives in Buenos Aires, Ariana is kidnapped by Argentine guerillas and she becomes a victim case of Stockholm Syndrome and develops a relationship with the leader of the kidnapers. And of course, the US government cannot let the Ambassador's daughter be held by guerillas forever, and decides to pay the ransom money but also work with the Israelis

and the British to mount a rescue operation. The leader of the kidnapers Jorge dies in the raid, and Ariana is rescued. As is Danielle Steele's wont, her plot then takes the easy route and the Ambassador dies in the melee following a cardiac arrest. Ariana comes back to USA, decides to take a vacation in Paris, where he meets Marshall, they fall in love and live happily ever after.

If the reader feels this storyline is too formulaic, then I cannot blame you since this is a novel worse than some of the fictions I have read in my high school years. Danielle Steel's writing style is pretty prosaic, as in the following paragraph.

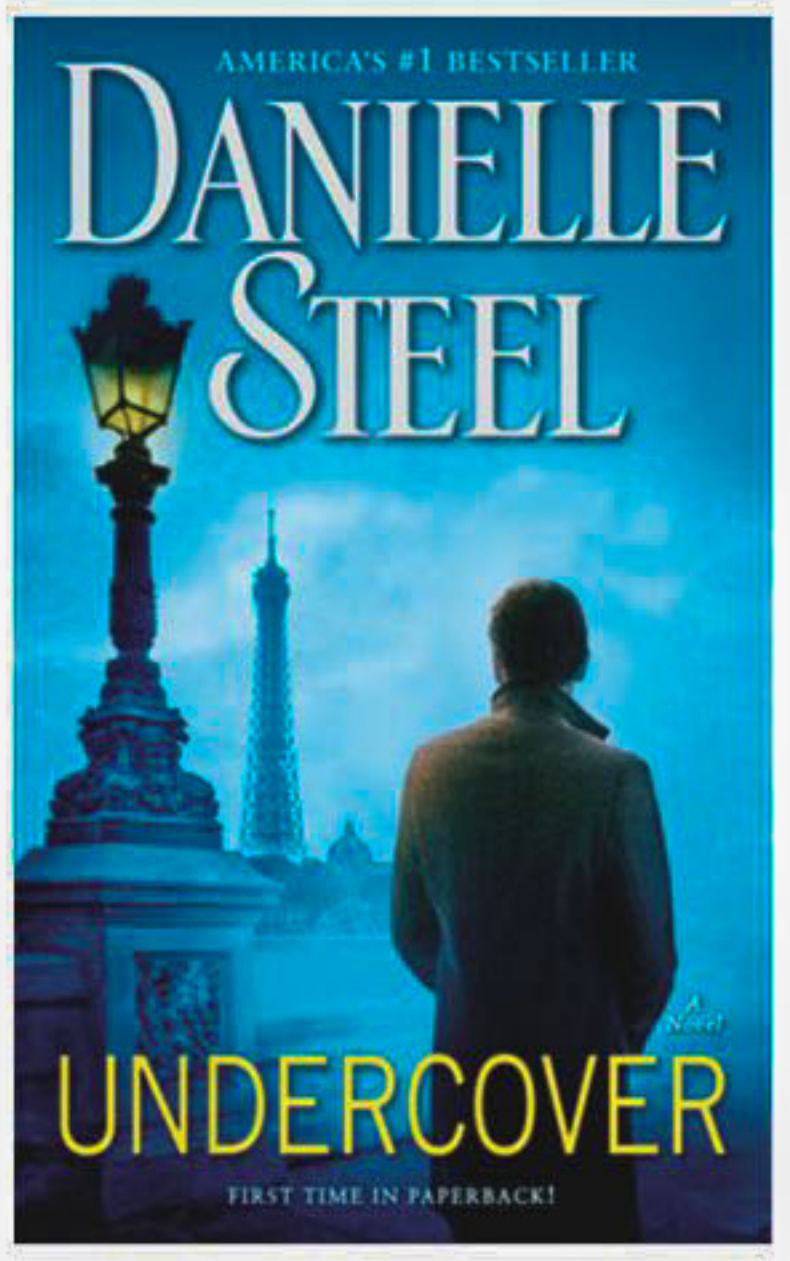
"Marshall had been asleep for several hours when Bill Carter was called to the cockpit, an hour before they landed in Washington. The message relayed to Bill in code was that the camp had been raided. Marshall's woman was dead, shot through the head, and El Lobo had escaped before they got there, yet again."

However, for a fast reader it's not a bad book to read on the plane. As in many other books of Steel, the plot is simple, boy meets girl, after she goes to Paris. The narrative is sometimes over-simplistic. For example, after the successful raid to rescue Ariana from an Argentine captors, the writer describes the mindset of the commando team: "The only survivor the combined forces wanted out of that camp was Ariana—the rest could die in the forest for all they cared. There was no value in keeping her kidnapers alive!"

After coming back to NYC, as Ariana reflects on the fate of her lover, Jorge who perished during the Special Ops mission, and the modus operandi of his gang: "And the fact that he had wanted twenty million dollars of her father's money to help poor people made sense too. Poor people were the saints, and rich ones the sinners. And it only increased her hatred of herself, that he had instilled in her. But Jorge had promised to save her, and now he was dead."

This is the first book by Danielle Steel that I've read and I will say I was disappointed, but I did not expect anything more. Her audience base typically consists of teenagers looking for a quick escape between boring lectures or waiting at the bus stop for a ride.

The reviewer lives and works in Boston and recently published a collection of short stories, entitled "A Chance Encounter".



A singular woman's tale

AUTHOR: HASAN AZIZUL HUQ

The Firebird, translated from the Bengali novel Aagunpakhi by Ali Ahmed, Akkhar-Patra Prokashoni.

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

THE Firebird is a story told by a woman (who is nameless) about herself and her life in a village in what is now Poshchimbongo in India. But it is more than just a story; it touches on issues beyond her personal life from childhood to advanced years, mostly in British India to its partition in 1947 and a few years after that. Written by Hasan Azizul Huq, Aagunpakhi has been translated by Ali Ahmed and published in English as The Firebird. Not having read the original, it would not be possible on my part to compare and assess the translated version, but, on its own, The Firebird is an easy and pleasant read.

The narrator was born, from what could be discerned from events mentioned in the novel, around the beginning of the twentieth century to a quite affluent Muslim family of respectable lineage. In the early part of the book, she provides a glimpse of life in a Bengali village during the Edwardian period. While the emphasis is on the well-off, reputable families like hers, indications may be had of the lives led by the poorer sections of the society. It is a portrait of timeless rural Bengal, which, even in this age of globalization and information technology, may still be glimpsed in the village life of Bangladesh, even if the pace has quickened up a little.

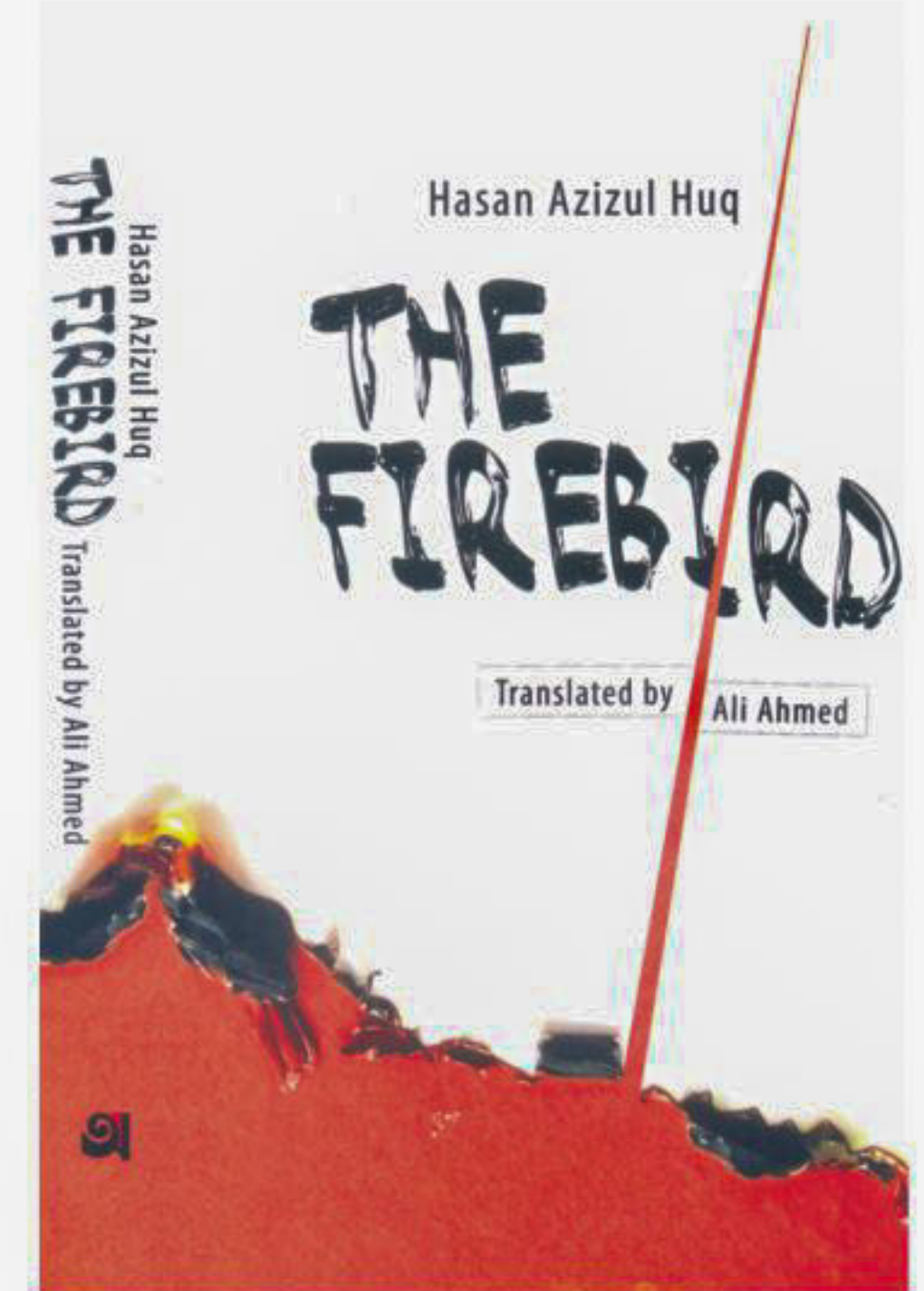
The narrator lost her mother at a very young age, and was saddled with raising her one-and-a-half-year-old brother ("...he was, as though, always a bundle at my waist"). Her father remarried, and, although "there is no getting back the mother once one's own mother departs from this earth", she got a step-mother who was not only a worthy substitute, but also a friend. Her father "was by nature...very taciturn, and would not much care for anybody. Nor would he go badger anyone even if he were in grave danger. But he was not...a hot-tempered man.... He would rarely laugh or even smile, but had a subtle wit...." The author offers this memorable image of life's philosophy of the village people in those days: "People in those days did not know their own age. Nobody had any worry about death."

Huq draws several pictures of the slow-moving life of rural Bengal of the Edwardian era, replete with its superstitions, conservatism, patriarchy, rituals, religious harmony, marriage rites of the upper class ("...marriages were from one house to another --- girls were not married outside the extended family --- and girls from outside were not generally brought into the family. That was the way among the Muslim aristocracy"), and dress codes, to mention a few. Even the narrator, who develops into a strong independent-minded woman while faithfully observing the social customs of the day, betrays a visual belief in the uncanny ("I observed on many days...two shakchumis...perching on top of the wood apple tree").

Hers is, to a fair extent, an account of rituals in the passage of time, including her marriage in her early teens (common, and expected, in those days for females) to a man matching her family background who "throughout his entire life, slighted me, verbally abused me excessively, and attempted to drag me by my arms out of the house, yet, rightly do I know in my heart how he adored me." Yet, her portrayal of his character throughout their long conjugal life

depicts a strong man who held together the joint family he belonged to, provided amply for his wife and children, was an upright person given to the pursuit of education, including strongly cajoling his wife to get self-educated at home, indulged in honest and conscientious politics, and was wise, if stern and implacable.

She got married following the end of the First World War, followed the rituals of married life, and duly gave birth to several children, including a couple who died of the prevalent diseases of those days. Cholera, small pox, and tuberculosis used to devastate villages periodically, especially with no, or only the odd, qualified doctor practicing in the rural areas. In the narrator's words, "Diseases and ailments are a daily occurrence, some of the afflicted get automatically cured while many others also die." Since there was no family planning or birth control methods to speak of practiced, or available, like several decades later, many families had numerous children, thereby appreciably extending the joint families. The narrator gives a



medley of vivid accounts of living in joint families, of the good times and bad, and of the benefits and drawbacks.

Hasan Azizul Huq dwells at some length on the peaceful coexistence of, including much camaraderie between, the Hindus and Muslims of that era. They united against the British during the Khilafat Movement, but once Kemal Ataturk himself did away with the Caliphate in Turkey, the two communities "begun quarrels and bickerings between themselves for realizing their own partisan demands." Eventually, this schism contributed to the partition of India, an eventuality that Huq has reservations about. The narrator's husband's experience, who ran for the presidency of the union council and won from an area that was predominantly peopled by Hindus, attested to the secular thinking of the people at that point in time. However, the second time around, as the demand for Pakistan as a separate state grew, and communal tensions manifested in the great Kolkata riots, he was defeated by communal voting.

As the narrator grew older, she started becoming more assertive, more independent in thinking. She also took effective charge of the joint family. Referring to her getting self-educated at her husband's insistence, she comments, "The alphabets and all the others related to it have gone down into the earthen hearth while I have been cooking to fill the stomachs of no less than thirty-two members of the clan." When the matriarch of the family (the narrator's mother-in-law) died, tensions and fissures eventually ended the joint family, incidentally as the Second World War was raging. That war adversely affected the people of the village, which is very perceptively portrayed by the author. Misfortune followed misfortune during the waning years of the British Raj. First there was a severe drought, to be followed the next year by unusually heavy rainfall leading to severe flooding. The hardships endured affected all, and contributed to the breakup of many joint families.

The natural disasters coincided with the agitation for Pakistan, and then the Hindu-Muslim riots followed. The author trenchantly observes regarding those people who have the leisure to listen to the woes of the victims of the disasters (what and how much effective action they would take is another matter): "Those having no worries of their own for food and clothing, or of any other thing could surely sit in their comfortable drawing rooms and think of great ideas to benefit the poor!" Huq has other general observations on human life (some assuredly will draw protestations!) that are articulated through the narrator: "I can realize, seeing you, what ornaments mean to women! They won't part with their jewellery even if their children die." And, "This is the go in men's families, you go up, up and up to touch the sky with your head, and, often that, you must come down, down and down to take shelter on earth. This is a must --- it happens to every family. No one can stop the trajectory of destiny."

Eventually, the denouement of the story is rather poignant, with the narrator, now a grandmother, displaying her strong independence of character and will. Reflecting Huq's misgivings about the partition of India, she speaks out: "Can it even be that a country, yes, one country inhabited by the same people and speaking the same language but having differences in religion, and having all along been together, will, at one point, split and turn into a different country?... Don't speak only of religion.... People would not then be able to live in any country in the world." A few mistakes have crept in that more careful editing could have corrected. Then there is this confusing translation: "I knew that if any danger came, Hola Bagdi would not care for his own life, and none would be able to so much as cut a scratch on me or on my sons before killing him." One could be confused about who would be killed by whom: the assailant or Hola Bagdi. Minor irritants aside, The Firebird is an agreeable translation of a thoughtful novel.

The reviewer is actor, Professor and Head, Media and Communication department, IUB.

Victimized masses and unsatisfied souls

AUTHOR: ARUNDHATI ROY

PUBLISHED IN 2014 BY HAYMARKET BOOKS, USA, TOTAL PAGES: 128, PRICE: USD 11/- (PAPERBACK)

REVIEWED BY MAHFUZ UL HASIB CHOWDHURY

ARUNDHATI Roy came back once again in 2014 with another outstanding book Capitalism: A Ghost Story. Like all her previous books, this one is also loaded with pointblank words and resentments towards injustice, social inequity, abuse of power and other political and economic anomalies in South Asia and beyond. The level of socio-economic discrimination that prevails across the South Asian countries including India touches the hearts of readers, particularly when it is narrated by Arundhati Roy. Her non-fictional works are just as marvelous and moving as her fictional masterpiece The God of Small Things. Her compassion towards people living below the poverty line is highly noteworthy in all her publications. Simultaneously, her ironbound standpoint against repression also deserves accolades.

She argues that it is capitalism that has over the decades unleashed an inequitable allocation of wealth that has made just a handful of people abnormally rich leaving millions of ordinary people in hardcore poverty. Billions of dollars glitter in the coffers of a few Indians, while a massive number of people have to sweat to the last drop to secure two meals a day. According to Capitalism: A Ghost Story, 2,50,000 debt-ridden Indian farmers have so far committed suicide to get rid of the agony and humiliation caused by their failure to pay back loans taken from different financial agencies and landlords. These ill-fated farmers are just a portion of the huge number of poverty-stricken masses victimized under the jackboot of capitalism. In this book Arundhati Roy allegorically cited the word "ghost" to refer to the unsatisfied souls of these luckless farmers who had to kill themselves for redemption from the whips of pauperism. According to the book, millions of Indian people have been rendered homeless to facilitate the construction of different private and state-

sponsored projects. Most of these forcibly ousted people belong to lower castes and tribal clans whose tears and grievances often go unacknowledged and most of them have shifted to the shanty colonies and slums of Indian cities after their eviction from rural areas.

In Capitalism: A Ghost Story we further come across the "ghosts" of dead rivers,

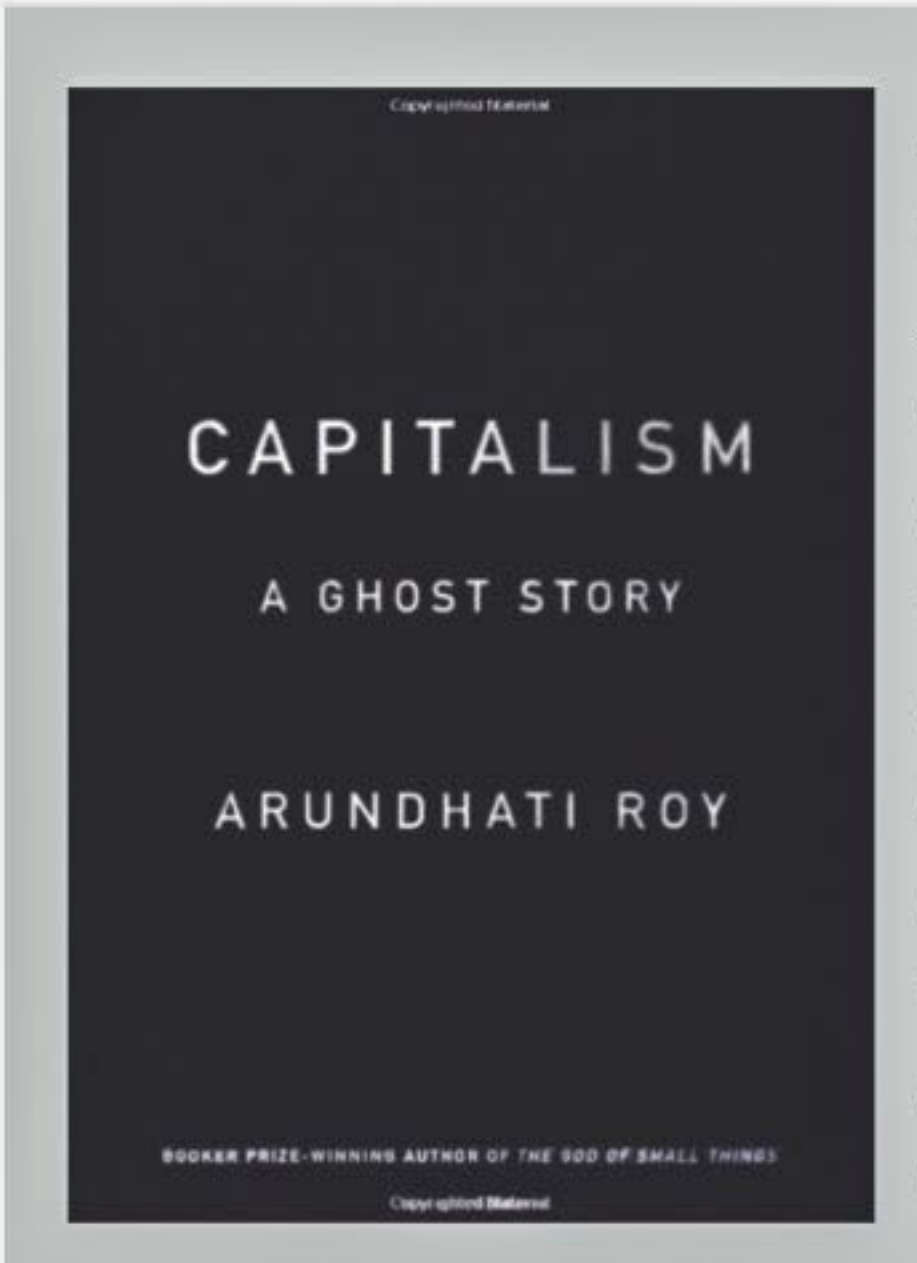
sion of their industries. The owners are being allowed by the Indian government to go ahead with their onslaught on India's environmental splendour and diversity, the writer claims. Moreover, she ticked off another ongoing menace of India—the detention of tribal people on vague charges which are even unknown to the detainees. In her words, "Hundreds of people have been jailed, charged for being

manity flashed out. Rather the police officer who was in charge of that interrogation was later on rewarded for "galantry". Forced confessions and merciless persecution of detainees take place under the custody of Indian law-enforcing agencies quite frequently, as stated in Capitalism: A Ghost Story. Similar instances are found in Arundhati Roy's another book Listening to Grasshoppers.

In Arundhati Roy's view, the form of capitalism we see in South Asia makes itself comparable to an unchained monster—terrifying and gobbling up the poor on its rampage. Besides, capitalism views the world as a marketplace where everything goes on sale—beliefs, moral values, ballots, ideologies and all other things we can think about.

Arundhati Roy touches upon some foreign issues as well in her latest book. She doesn't approve India playing the role of an intermediary between United States and China. She looks back on the Cold War era when Pakistan played a similar role to reconcile United States with Soviet Union as an ally of the White House and she warns the readers about the Indian policymakers' current practice of rubbing shoulders too closely with the American ruling authority keeping in view the present embattled and beleaguered condition of Pakistan. So, neither India nor any other South Asian country should exhibit superfluous eagerness to butter up the western powers all the time. Each state should have its own individual values and principles to determine its policies on governance and development.

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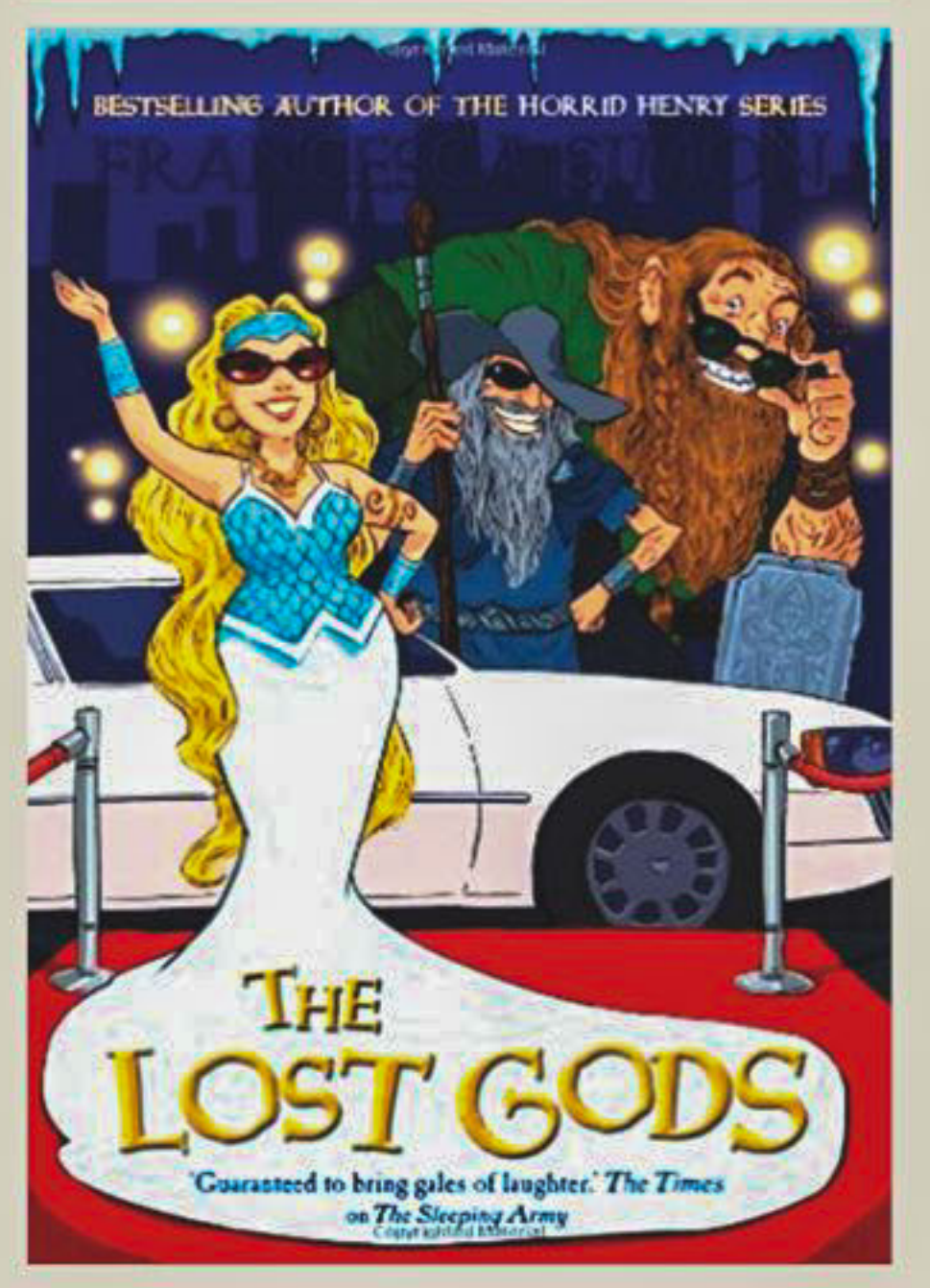
denuded forests and demolished mountains. Deforestation in different parts of India goes on continuously in the name of privatization and progress. This kind of assaults on environmental resources may lead to severe ecological disasters, but the authorities concerned don't have time to pay heed to these issues, Roy regrets. Enormous business organizations have been ceaselessly doing large-scale damages to the forests and hills of India for expan-

Maoists under draconian, undemocratic laws. Prisons are crowded with Adivasi people, many of whom have no idea what their crime is." She gave the example of a female school teacher from a district in central India who was arrested by Indian cops for interrogation and was tortured in the most ruthless manner to force her to confess that she was a Maoist messenger. No action was taken by the Indian government even when the news of this inhu-

NEW BOOKS

THE LOST GODS

BY FRANCESCA SIMON



In The Sleeping Army, Freya went to Hel and back. She fought dragons, fled fire and outwitted giants - all to restore eternal youth to the Norse Gods. But now they're back, does anyone care? The Gods' popularity on earth is waning, and without regular worship, their powers are fading fast and their ancient enemies, the Frost Giants, are stirring. So the Gods hatch a plan - they'll come back down to earth, and they'll pursue a very different kind of popularity. They're going to become celebrities. A rollicking, thrilling and hilarious ride, The Lost Gods takes up where the Sleeping Army left off and takes us back to Simon's brilliantly-imagined modern Norse England.

SOURCE: OMNI BOOKS