

A 'solipsistic' epic...

AUTHOR: KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD

REVIEWED BY DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THIS is the third of the six-volume autobiography of the global sensation Norwegian Karl Ove Knausgaard. His magnum opus "My Struggle" has been compared to French novelist Marcel Proust's philosophical musings in "In Search of Lost Time". Each volume has its own distinct name, and the title of the third volume is "Boyhood". True to its name, the 427 page memoir gets into details of the author's boyhood. As we know, the author did not keep a diary but his ability to describe in details many events and characters from his childhood is uncanny.

Some other reviewers have characterized the series as a "solipsistic" epic. Solipsism is the philosophical idea that the self is all that can be known to exist, and "only one's own mind is sure to exist". Solipsism holds that knowledge of anything outside one's own mind is unsure; the external world and other minds cannot be known and might not exist outside of the mind. Knausgaard does not explicitly subscribe to this view, but he has on many occasions indicated in his public speeches that he views fiction with suspicion. That is, the truth can only be experienced from your own experience.

Having already read Book 1 and Book 2, there were not a lot of surprises in "Boyhood". We know his father was strict but his mother a benign and caring person, his brother supportive and nurturing but also sometimes a bully. He was a fast learner and a keen observer with an early weakness for girls. But there are also new aspects of his life, his early memories, first school, his education, his learning process and easy-going style. We also learn that he cried easily, read with phenomenal voracity, and was teased (rather bullied) by others who called him a "jessie" (an effeminate, weak, or oversensitive man).

Book 3 covers the seven years of the 1970s after school begins for Karl Ove on the small island of Tromøya off Norway's southern coast. He gives a beautiful account of his early childhood (beginning with age 7), his adventures with his friends, his crushes, mischiefs (urinating, defecating, and even worse), how they got an early taste of pornography, but also his beautiful trips to his grandparents' farm and other wonderful things you do when you are a child. Also a very colorful account of a Scandinavian country in the seventies. From his earlier volumes readers are informed of his love of music and early baptism with good books, thanks to a very supportive family. All these ingredients make for a good recipe for a successful memoir. But Knausgaard is not Marcel Proust. His characteristics are easy style, ability to recall details, and an encyclopedic memory, which make a dull autobiography interesting even for a person so far removed from his situation. To quote one recent review, "critics often remark on the guilelessness of the prose. Like clear running water, it can seem mysteriously impelled, magically transparent."

Book 3 might appeal to Bangladeshi readers who want to get a glimpse of what life was like in the Scandinavian countries in the seventies when we had ourselves just gained independence. For some, it is also a good example of coming of age literature, a popular example of which for Americans is "The Catcher in the Rye" by Salinger. In "Boyhood", readers learn of his struggle to overcome some childhood handicaps including stuttering, and we also come across a future genius who was precocious with parents

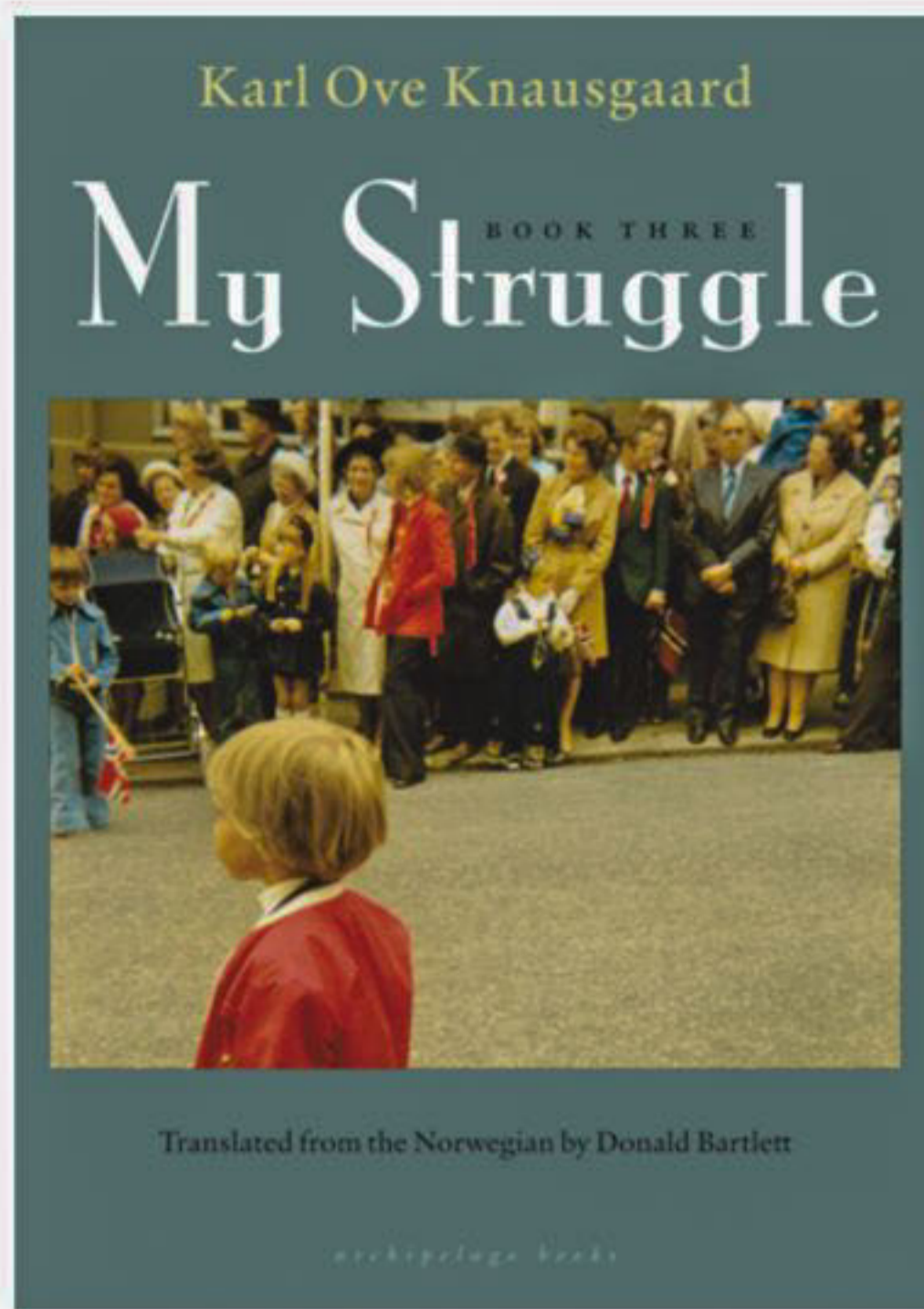
working, a supportive brother, and families on both sides of the parents who were middle-class.

His books are such a hit in the USA and Europe that there is now a sub-culture around his persona, how he wrote it, how his readers react after reading, and what his influence has been on the writing community, not only in Norway but also around the world. I just finished three volumes. Three more to go! I know reading Knausgaard is exhausting: long narratives of events, feelings, or objects from a long time ago. But he compensates for the dull topic with first-rate prose and very fine narratives that really makes you fly along with him. You suddenly realize that for the last half hour or even an hour you are reading about his fascination for another pre-teen or a promenade through Tybakken replete with painstaking details about the grass, trees, or the landscape, and time has passed. Sometimes in your mind you wonder whether his adolescence experience is like those of your own children or even your own from many decades ago.

Many have asked, "What makes his growing pains so special?" Well, that's not the right question, I sometimes feel. It's his ability to make you feel nostalgic, to make you look inside and wonder if you had similar feelings or thoughts growing up; and even if your experience or how you overcame the challenges was the same or different from his. It has made me look very deep inside my own memory well, and made me appreciate my own struggles better, and take more pride in my scrappy upbringing in Bangladesh, and the towns we lived in: Karachi, Dhaka, Mymensingh, and Barisal.

Knausgaard lays down the background for his account of his boyhood, his parents, brother Yngve, the neighbors, the rural surroundings, and then the school and friends and classmates. At the outset let me caution my readers that this is a sad book. I knew, having read his Book 1 that he had a complicated relationship with his father but in this volume, Karl Ove makes the case why he told his readers that he was mistreated by his father. In Book 1 he dedicated almost half of the volume in describing the efforts he and his older brother Yngve made in preparing for his father's unusual death. It is in Book 3 in bits and pieces, and throughout the entire length of this volume, he describes his boyhood activities, his pastimes, good times and bad, but he never relinquishes his focus on his father's mistreatments, and cowardly acts of torture that he unknowingly unfurls on the young boy. As you now see, as this bright, sensitive, and extremely precocious boy is attempting to navigate through his primary school days he is also cognizant of his father's love-hate relationship with him. At times he is the father figure that he should be, teaching him how to cut an apple or tie up a boat, but at other times he is callous and heartless. A touching moment happens when Karl Ove attempts to help an elderly neighbor and takes his father's snow shovel to clean snow off his driveway. After finishing the job when Karl Ove comes back home, his father literally abuses him for taking the shovel without first asking him.

In contrast, his mother comes out in glowing colors. But, a Knausgaard critic (or Knausgaard skeptic as they are called) might point out that the most serious weakness in his autobiography is his "selective memory" and he is getting even with his father since he died an inglorious death, and the two sons



were obliged to clean up the mess, literally. Karl Ove is very detailed in his accounts of his father's misdeeds, but forgiving of his mother's errant ways. She was away from the family for her studies, and did not take much interest in his education. Her inability to connect with Karl Ove can be found in the incident with the cat, Whitie. He calls his mother and is panic stricken when he finds out that the kitten was dying. But she refuses to call the vet even though Karl Ove pleads with her.

"You've got to call now!" I shouted. "Mom, Mom, he's dying! Don't you understand?"

"I can't, don't you understand. I'm sorry. It's terrible."

"But Whitie's dying!"

She gently shook her head.

He nonetheless writes, "She saved me because if she hadn't been there I would have grown up alone with Dad, and sooner or later I would have taken my life, one way or another... if there was someone there, at the bottom of the well that is my childhood, it was her, my mother, mum. ... She was the one who supplied the plaster when we had fallen and grazed our knees; she was the one who drove me to hospital when I broke my collarbone, and to the doctor's when I, somewhat less heroically, had scabies. She was the one who was out of her mind with worry when a young girl died from meningitis and at the same time I got a cold and a bit of a stiff neck. I was bundled straight into the car, off to Kokkeplassen, her foot flat on the accelerator, concern flashing from her eyes. She was the one who read to us, she was the one who washed our hair when we were in the bath and she was the one who laid our pyjamas afterwards. She was the one who drove us to football training in the evening, the one who went to parents' meetings and sat with other parents at our end-of-term parties and took pictures of us. She was the one who stuck the photos in our albums afterwards. She was the one who baked cakes for our birthdays and cakes for Christmas and buns for Shrovetide.

All the things mothers do for their sons, she did for us."

A contrast between his mother and father is expressed again through their driving styles. "Speed and anger went hand in hand. Mom drove carefully, was considerate, never minded if the car in front was slow, she was

patient and followed. That was how she was at home as well. She never got angry, always had time to help, didn't mind if things got broken, accidents happened, she liked to chat with us, she was interested in what we said, she often served food that was not absolutely necessary, such as waffles, buns, cocoa, and bread fresh out of the oven, while Dad on the other hand tried to purge our lives of anything that had no direct relevance to the situation in which we found ourselves: we ate food because it was a necessity, and the time we spent eating had no value in itself; when we watched TV we watched TV and were not allowed to talk or do anything else; when we were in the garden we had to stay on the flagstones, they had been laid for precisely that purpose, while the lawn, big and inviting though it was, was not for walking, running, or lying on...Dad always drove too fast."

All said and done, one is easily mesmerized by Knausgaard's writing style and the manner in which he bares his soul for the reader. His use of words and narratives is by itself a major attraction of these volumes. Let me take an example of his ability to convey what he and his middle school teacher have in common. They were both eyeing the same thirteen year old girl Anne Lisbet, who was his classmate, someone he grew up with and went to school with from grades one to seven during a class trip to the sea. The teacher Kolloen let them go for a swim and they were watching from the shore.

"Anne Lisbet emerged from the sea.

She was wearing a bikini bottom and a white T-shirt. It was wet, and her round breasts were visible. Her wet, black hair shone in the sun. She beamed her broadest smile. I watched her, I couldn't keep my eyes off her, but then I noticed something beside me, and turned my head, and there was Kolloen, he was watching her, too.

There was no difference in our gazes, I realized that at once, he saw what I saw and he was thinking what I was thinking.

About Anne Lisbet.

She was thirteen years old.

The moment didn't even last for a second, he looked down as soon as I noticed him, but it was enough, and I'd had an insight into something that a moment before I didn't even know existed."

Like any reader I am impressed by his ability to recall in great details the events in his life when he was in second grade or the third. I too, like many others, have wonderful memories of the times when I was in his age group in Mymensingh or Barisal, but can recall only the broad details. One of the most memorable incident happened when I tried to walk across the river Brahmaputra in winter, and almost drowned after I got stuck in the quicksand in the middle of my misadventure. I do recall the broad outlines, but who were with me (I know that since I was not alone), and then how did I extricate myself? Did I get any help? I must have been assisted since I was only nine years old.

After reading this one, I wish my mother was alive since while I remember many of the faces and places I've been to when I was ten years old, I could use her help in bringing back alive those years to be able to write with the lucidity and the beautiful colors with which Karl Ove paints his childhood. In one episode of his life, his mom, based on her determination that comics glorify violence towards women, forbid him from reading them anymore. But his mother offered an

alternative that with the benefit of hindsight changed his life. She made a deal with him to borrow books from the library at Arundel once a week. "I read all the series they had about Henry Ford and Thomas Alva Edison, Benjamin Franklin and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, ..." Well, you get the idea! We get to see the process that went into the making of this good writer who just does not only write faithfully (or nearly so) about his boyhood, but also offers a glimpse into life in rural Norway and the struggle that every boy endures while trying to juggle the demands of parents, school, social life, and growing up. All this clicked with me since his library routine was somewhat similar to mine when we were living in Mymensingh, and I would walk from my house to the center of town where the USIS library was located.

He is at his best when describing his feelings for girls, Kajsa, Lene, Kjersti, he had a crush on and his emotions betray the true romantic, and are almost Shakespearean. There is a very elaborate description of his crush on Kjasi. Even for me, it evokes memories from my youthful days. He is very detailed and candid. His memory was 20/20 but he was in Grade 6 and only 12 years old. But this part is better than fiction. At point, after learning that Kajsa wanted to go out with him, he sings out the Beatles song "Come Together" while heading back home on his bicycle. I was a Beatles fan in my younger days, and his story compelled me listen to it again. However, he also leaves some mysteries. Why did Kajsa break up? The reader needs to figure out whether it was his body odor or the kissing incident.

The book ends with a bittersweet note. Some have called this ending note a little anti-climactic, a little corny. But it resonates with me. His father got a job in Kristiansand and they stayed for him to finish seventh grade. Finally they were ready to pack up and go to this new town. At that time, he felt it was a good thing, time for a new beginning. All the bad memories of the last seven grades gone. But now he realizes that those are treasures that he will never get back!

"After the moving van had left and we got into the car, Mom, Dad and I, and we drove down the hill and over the bridge, it struck me with a huge sense of relief that I would never be returning, that everything I saw I was seeing for the final time. That the houses and the places that disappeared behind me were also disappearing out of my life, for good. Little did I know then that every detail of this landscape, and every single person living in it, would forever be lodged in my memory with a ring as true as perfect pitch."

Every time I start a Knausgaard volume, and am halfway through it, I am torn between two feelings: carry on or just chuck it away. This one was no different because of the slow pace of the timeline. But, the last 100 pages went very fast, and when I was done, I felt sad. And I know I will now try to borrow Book 4 from my town library. But maybe I will do so after a little break.

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

Why humans need to communicate

AUTHOR: SHEIKH SHAFIUL ISLAM AND SHAH NISTER KABIR

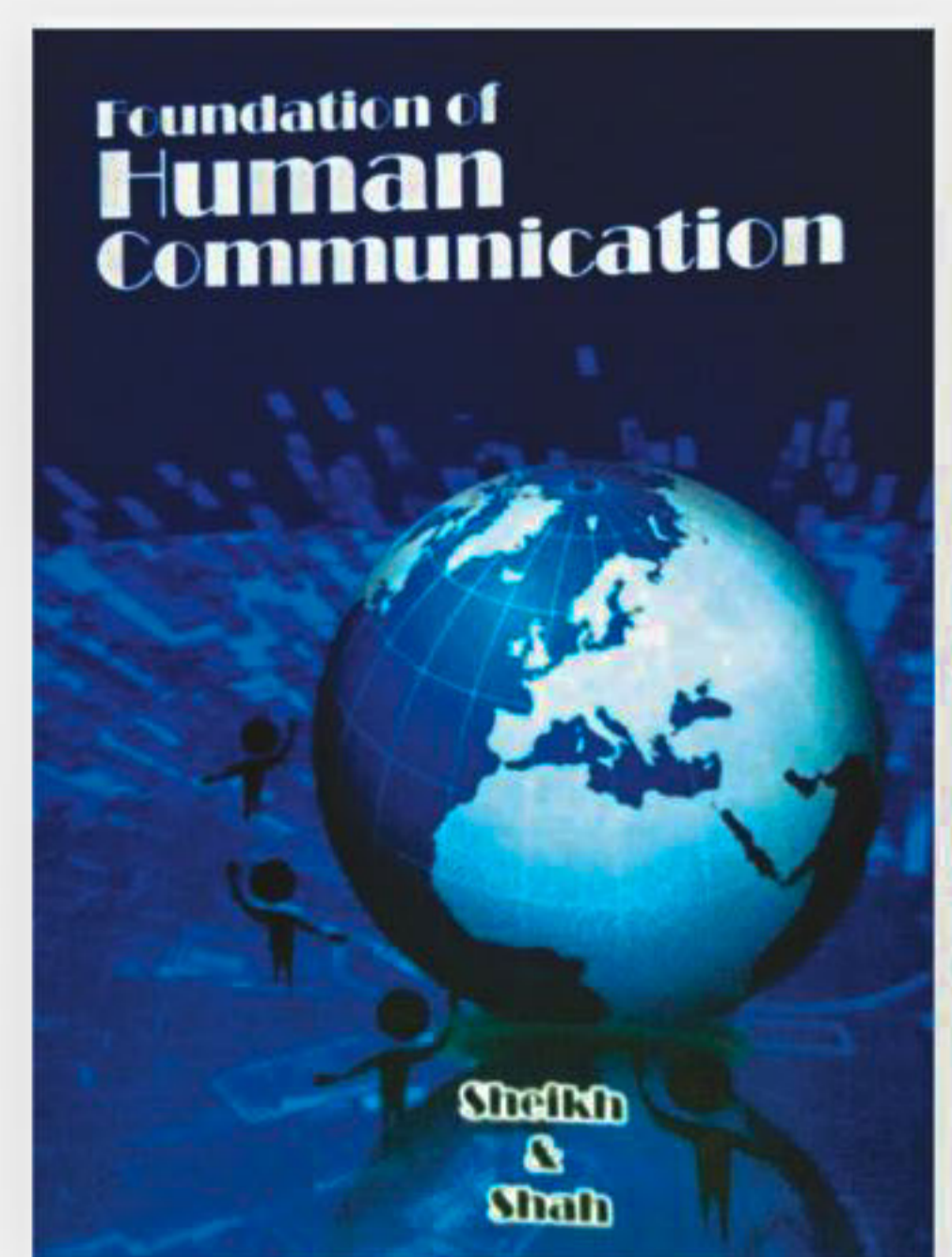
REVIEWED BY MD. MAHAMUDUL HAQUE

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TWO concepts—communications and communication—mistakenly or unknowingly are used interchangeably in the applied field of communication in Bangladesh. If you see the visiting card of a communication officer or a communication expert, the organisation where she/he works terms this designation as 'communications officer' or 'communications expert'. Even, journalism and communication graduates after taking up the job describe their designation as communications officer/expert/manger/director. What is the problem adding 'S' to communication? Communication and communications are different concepts that derive from two different disciplines. Communication is a process of sharing messages involving individuals. Communication is the study of how messages are shared, received, perceived or understood, and what meaning is produced through interactions. This process of interaction among human beings is called human communication. On the other, communications is a system of technical transmission of information, like telephone, radio, television, fiber optic representing engineering system. Communications is a technology-based system. You can also say road communications, rail communications, which are absolutely correct with 'S' while completely wrong without 'S'. May be in a bid to help avoid such misconception, Sheikh Shafiqul Islam and Dr Shah Nister Kabir, teachers of Journalism and Mass Communication at Daffodil International University, have written a book

titled 'Foundation of Human Communication' defining and clarifying fundamental concepts and theories of communication.

Students, academics and researchers have been facing difficulties in using books on communication in terms of contextualization since the inception of Mass Communication and Journalism department at Dhaka University in the 60s as these books have mostly been written in western or alien perspectives. Till date, there are six or seven books on communication, written by native writers. Of the books, at least four are in Bangla but all the books reflect more or less the same perspective. Two books have been written in English focusing on development communication issues in Bangladesh. But no book in English focusing on communication concepts and theories has been published depicting Bangladesh context. The authors did an excellent job in writing this book focusing on fundamental communication concepts and theories clarifying these in the context of Bangladesh in simple and lucid language. The presentation of appropriate and real-life examples with photos and illustrations throughout the book increases not only its attractiveness but also understandability of readers. Eminent communication expert Dr. Golam Rahman in his foreword in the book said, "The examples and analyses have been made in the local context coupled with established conceptual framework." By going through this book, communication students in general can



enhance their cognitive capacity easily with matching their native perspectives.

Why do we communicate? Why are communication skills needed? In this regard, the authors said, "Communication is a part of skill, a part of art and a part of science. It is a 'skill' as it involves certain fundamental techniques, it is an 'art' as it involves creative senses and challenges, and it is a 'science' because it involves logics of approaches (p-18). The writers added, 'Quality of human life depends upon communication.

Communication is vital to functioning effectively in the modern world. It helps achieve personal, social and organizational success (p-19)."

The book includes a diverse range of concepts, theories and models of human communication in its ten chapters. Chapter One begins with conceptualisation of communication and highlighting its scope and importance in personal, social, national, international levels and even religion and culture. Chapter Two mainly presents emergence, definition, nature of human communication while Chapter Three describes its process, components, and models. Chapter Four focuses on verbal and non-verbal communication and meaning as well as their aspects in effective speaking and writing. Chapter Five describes intrapersonal communication, self, self-development and self-motivation techniques. Chapter Six offers a step-by-step introduction of interpersonal and group communication as well as element and effectiveness of interpersonal communication, relationship development, group formation process, and organizational communication while Chapter Seven elaborates public and mass communication as well as art of public speaking.

Chapter Eight mainly provides techniques of enhancing communication skills, listening and effective negotiation and leadership skills while Chapter Nine discusses attitude and credibility matters. The last chapter explores various research methods in communication, including content and discourse analysis,

survey, focus group discussion and case study. It also presents guidelines of writing a research proposal.

Once, communicators used to be born but now professional communicators are made through training and education for which reading books is one of the principal prerequisites. If you fail to communicate with people effectively, your goals will not be achieved. You can say how the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) effectively communicated with people without any training, education or reading books. Actually, he knew the way of communicating with people irrespective of religion, language, race, sex and social status. As a prophet, he took into account the psychological peculiarities of the individual and society to disseminate divine messages among them in the most effective way. Along with following such successful born communicators, reading books on communication can help you make an eloquent one. In this regard, this book can be an excellent read.

As a whole, the book presents concepts and theories in communication logically and systematically but it would be great if the book were free from some mistakes in language and presentation. Despite some slight flaws, which are quite natural, the 160-page book, published by Anyadhara, will serve better the purposes of communication teachers, students, researchers and communicators.

The reviewer is senior journalist of The Daily Star and author of 'Sangbadikota: Offline Online'.