

Why we need to open that book now



SARAH ANJUM BARI

A group of teenagers spray-painted a historically black school with racist and anti-Semitic messages recently in Virginia. The judge, as reported by the *Huffington Post* on February 7, 2017, served the young men an unusual punishment: writing reports on a list of books and movies, besides also visiting a Holocaust museum and doing research on the swastika. Among the books they have to read are *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Native Son*, all of which map the struggles of marginalised and repressed lives.

Reading is often thought of as a form of escapism – an act that allows us to delve into triumphs and pitfalls within a book's pages, and shun out our own. But here's the flipside: it starts with a person who, a few years ago, felt the need to convey a message to the world. The person spent about twelve hours thinking about the complexities of what they had to say. They drove people mad asking about their lives and experiences; drove themselves mad with endlessly meticulous research. They spent months of going through archives, news reports, films, music, and hours of bringing to life each perfect word followed by another. A week later, they rewrote the whole thing. And after many repetitions of the same cycle, after evolving further in the hands of a host of editors and designers, a book was born.

Imagine absorbing all of that hard work, experience, and innate knowledge by simply reading what the pages have to say.

An article on *The Guardian* talks about the research carried out by psychologists at The New School for Social Research in New York. They tested 1,000 participants with the Theory of Mind technique – a cognitive science practice that uses a person's mental states, beliefs, and opinions to predict his/her actions. The study revealed that reading literary fiction enhances empathy in readers and allows them to better identify others' sentiments. David Comer Kidd, one of the psychologists behind the experiment, explained how the incompleteness of characters in well-crafted literary works helps readers to formulate those characters individually, making the experience their own. Given that the same psychological processes are involved in navigating through

real life situations, Kidd explained that, "Fiction is not just a simulator of a social experiment. It is a social experience. [It] lets you go into a new environment and you have to find your own way."

Philip Davies, a professor of psychology at Liverpool University who countered Kidd's methods through his own experiment, added that experiencing a novel also teaches a person not to judge.

Bangladesh has seen a significant rise in literacy rates over the past decade. World Bank figures reveal a rise in net enrolment rates at the primary school level to up to 98 percent in 2015, with secondary school net enrolment rates at 54 percent. As of October 2016, 61.5 percent of the population above 15 years of age could read and write, with a school life expectancy of 10 years, according to the CIA World Factbook. And yet, over 87 million of our workforce was reported to be undereducated, with only 25 to 44 percent of school students possessing fluent language and numerical skills. It must be noted that such large numbers of people unable to read and write fluently, let alone

engage in creative practices, foreshadow a higher number of dropouts in the future, and hence a less efficient workforce.

The government, with the help of NGOs and educational experts, is showing significant efforts towards tackling these learning deficiencies in our country. However, merely teaching them to recognise letters and numbers and sign their own name is nowhere near enough to ensure that a bursting young population can think for themselves. While the recent discrepancies in textbooks is an alarming indicator of the kind of substandard education being fed to the next generation, it is equally frustrating to note how rigid some portions of the student body have become in their rejection of creativity and intellect.

In 2015, public school examination candidates were wrongfully humiliated in the media for their dearth of general knowledge. While we must keep in mind the immense mental pressure they must have been under while being charged on national television, it was nevertheless disappointing that almost none of them could attest to a

habit of reading for pleasure. The one student who claimed that she likes reading Tagore couldn't even name one story written by him. Towards the end of 2016, the introduction of creative questions in public examinations brought about a wave of protest from students who refused to accept the change. This newspaper received several letters complaining about the policy as an injustice dealt against them; some even compared it to the language movement and the war of independence, reiterating how Bangladesh's student body is always prepared to rise up against what is wrong. What direction are we headed towards if we think of creativity as an affront?

Most of the issues at the forefront right now, be it xenophobia, bigotry, youth violence, child marriage, or the alarming spike in murder and rape, can be traced back to an apparent lack of empathy and intellect in our midst. If we want to truly tackle these issues and help drive our country towards the sustainable development goals at the forefront of public discussion, the efforts must start at the roots.

The government and schools must give greater attention to promoting literature and the arts, not by forcing students to memorise works of fiction like much else that they learn in school but by teaching them to fall in love with them. Parents should read to their children, and instil in them the curiosity to explore not only the monuments around the globe, but also the spectrum of human emotions. Meanwhile, it is up to the media to inform the masses of the literary and creative options available to interested readers, as well as the benefits of the act itself. We need more reviews, more features of literary works, and heartier and more accessible public discourse regarding these matters. It is only by creating better and more intelligent human beings at every level of the society that we can build a more efficient workforce, as well as better leaders.

It was the week before my final exams that I had read *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, one of the books the boys in Virginia have been sentenced to read. It doesn't speak too well of me as a student, but I put off revising the syllabus to finish



SOURCE: THEWORLDWRAITH.COM

Parents should read to their children, and instil in them the curiosity to explore not only the monuments around the globe, but also the spectrum of human emotions.

the last few chapters of the book in frenzy. I remember being blown away by the kindness of a white man braving social persecution to protect a black man wrongfully accused of rape. It was also the book that inspired me to pursue a minor in English, a decision that changed my life and helped put me in the rooms of *The Daily Star*, writing this article today. If the young minds around us can learn to appreciate a fraction of the marvels made possible by literature, this country will be headed towards far greater heights than we can imagine.

The writer is a student of English and Economics at NSU, and a member of the Editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

PROTECTING WILDLIFE

The forgotten cats of the wild

MD. ASHRAFUL HAQUE

We rarely talk about smaller cats like the ones mentioned here, which add to our precious biodiversity. With continuing habitat loss, these beautiful creatures are getting closer and closer to extinction every day.

I usually despise visiting a zoo or a place where wildlife is kept in captivity. When a human being is detained without charges, there will always be people who will speak for his/her release, like representatives of rights groups or family members. For a caged animal, there's no one. Although wildlife like deer and monkeys are kept in fenced areas in Karamjal Wildlife Breeding Centre in the Sundarbans near Mongla, as the name suggests, it is not actually a zoo. Last year, during a research trip to the Sundarbans, I decided to visit this place, where I saw many baby crocodiles in reservoirs.

Starting from January 29, over the last week, about 60 of those beautiful creatures went missing from the breeding centre. At first, everybody suspected that they were stolen and smuggled. Two of the staffers were also suspended. However, after another two hauls, some of the cubs' body parts were found. On February 6, forest officials claimed to have unearthed the mystery by identifying the miscreant. They did not stop here; they shot the "thief" dead, the thief being a leopard cat, an even more beautiful creature currently at high risk of extinction.

It is beyond comprehension how forest department (FD) officials could just shoot a wild animal that is protected under the Wildlife Act and has its name in the IUCN red list as a

vulnerable species. Did they take the cat as a rogue animal that did something it was not supposed to do? I guess not. FD officials know the rule of the jungle. It is perfectly okay for a wild animal to kill and/or eat another if it can manage to do so. It was the job of the staff of the centre to seal the containers perfectly to prevent any harm to the baby cubs until they were released in the wild.

In fact, the reservoirs are well-fenced to prevent entry. Then how did one leopard cat enter the pit under lock and key to take away and kill about 60 baby cubs? Mystery still surrounds the haul and killings. Possibility of foul play and cover-ups cannot be ignored. However, let's assume there were some holes and such on the fence that required repairing and the authorities ignored it. It is then not the cat's fault for which it was shot dead. Of course, according to newspaper reports, the officials tried to capture it and when they failed, they killed it.

It is not this specific leopard cat's death that bothers me most. Rather, it is our collective attitude towards smaller or less glamorous cats like these including the jungle cat and the fishing cat.

In early 2014, a national daily reported that an unknown species of wild animal was seen to be roaming in the shoals of Padma River in Faridpur, attacking and scaring villagers. A friend and I decided to go there to see the animal. By the time we reached the place called North Channel, villagers had run a drive to kill the animals. Fortunately, they didn't find the predators during

the campaign. We saw people walking with sticks in fear of those animals. They even kept themselves inside their houses unless it was absolutely necessary to go out.

So we got down to business, hid ourselves in the bushes for two days with cameras in our hands and found that those reportedly ferocious animals dubbed as 'tigers' were nothing but some jungle cats. Actually, they were a lot bigger than usual, but that doesn't matter because the villagers never saw a jungle cat before, and the jungle cats were a bit aggressive in some cases, perhaps because it was mating season for them and/or some cats were trying to protect the cubs nearby.

However, we didn't find any truth in reported attacks after interviewing some who claimed to have been attacked earlier on newspapers and word spread like bushfire. It took us some days to ease the fear by visiting a couple of villages, showing people pictures that I took and talking to them about how harmless these creatures are, at least to humans and how they help by killing rice field rats.

Another beautiful but unfortunate wildlife species is the fishing cat. In the same shoal of Padma River in Faridpur, a fishing cat was beaten to death by fishermen just a few days before our visit when a fishing cat got tangled in a fishing net. Villagers showed us the series of pictures of the attractive animal getting hacked and killed. Killing of fishing cats is a

usual act countrywide as they are often caught trying to steal poultry.

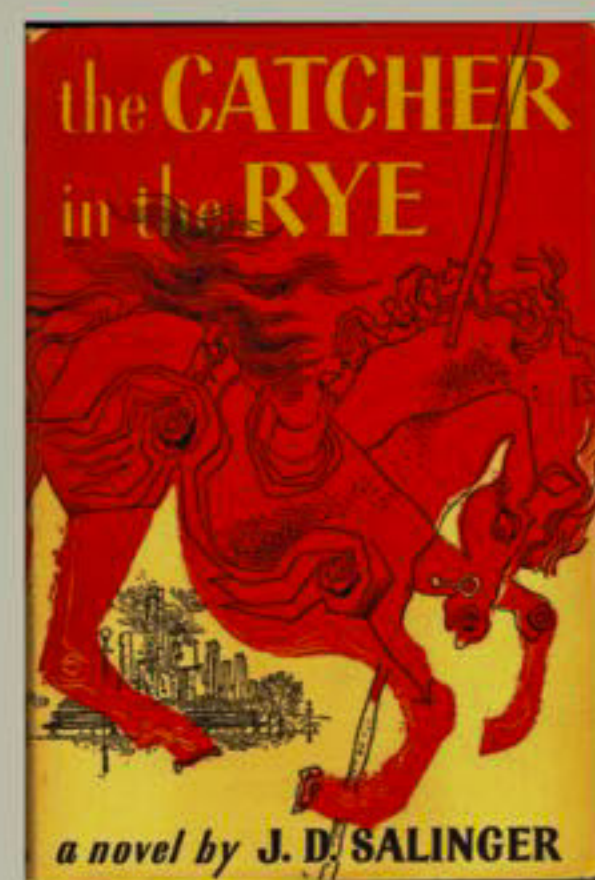
I always wished to photograph a fishing cat in the wild. Last month, I spent some days in and around Kalenga wildlife sanctuary and Lawachhara national park trying to spot one. Just one day after I returned to Dhaka, someone from Lawachhara called me to inform that a fishing cat was run over by a speeding vehicle very close to the place where I stayed. I just mentioned it to show the many ways in which these cats can get killed. It is worth mentioning that rail tracks and/or roads going through the forests like Lawachhara, Satchhori, Chhunati and Madhupur cause death of numerous wildlife animals.

We have seen tremendous expression of love in recent days for the Sundarbans and the only big cat we have, the Bengal Tiger. We rarely talk about smaller cats like the ones mentioned here, which add to our precious biodiversity. With continuing habitat loss, these beautiful creatures are getting closer and closer to extinction every day. It is high time we started acting more responsibly and valued these small predators. It can start with the forest department saying sorry for holding a predator responsible for preying on other wildlife, which in this case happens to be baby crocodiles insufficiently protected in a reproduction centre for which only human negligence is to be blamed.

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A WORD

A DAY



BILDUNGSROMAN

A novel dealing with a person's formative years or spiritual education

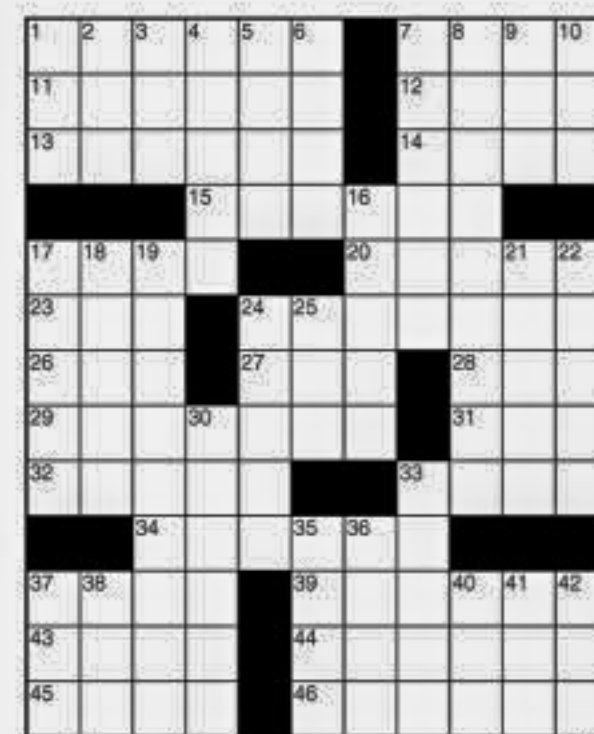
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Foray maker
- Diving duck
- Statue setting
- Cougar
- Intensify
- Lab aide of film
- Conclusion
- Urban fleet
- Rider's straps
- Outback runner
- Stand with shelves
- Really enjoy
- Granola bit
- Night before
- Fencing cry
- Sleuth Spade
- Agronomists' study
- Inquires
- Not optional
- Doe or buck
- Speech maker
- Sunup site
- Male escort
- Tousle
- Appeared

DOWN

- "Far out, man!"
- Pub staple
- Rink surface
- Ninnies
- Divisible by two
- Tear asunder
- Small piano
- Hot, humid condition
- Punk rock offshoot
- Simple card game
- Seething
- Hands over
- Acid type
- Beta software problem
- Kim of "Vertigo"
- Globet parts
- Not so good
- Suffered from
- Tips off
- Old saying
- Feet, in slang
- American lake
- Rep.'s rival
- French water
- Huck's pal
- Bullring cry
- Angling aid



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

