

LITERATURE



PICTURE: AMINUL ISLAM

"I feel like I've stumbled upon a new species of something," marveled Sharbari Ahmed, as she moderated a conversation between Jesse Ball and David Szalay. Ball had just revealed his writing process: one week, first draft, sent to press.

The audience, like Ahmed, was certainly aghast, if not a little envious. Who exactly were these strange, beautiful creatures among the crowds of enraptured fans and weekenders who came out to enjoy this year's Dhaka Lit Fest?

At first glance they look, for the most part, like us—all with eyes, arms, legs intact and their own set of quirks: Ben Okri with his beret half-tilted like an alternative crown, William Dalrymple channeling Hemingway in his jeans, brown leather boots and untucked shirt, Jesse Ball's half-exposed leg revealing tattoos under sock rims.

But a closer inspection reveals their unique genius: an ability to see—and articulate—what is in front of us that we cannot already see, at least that is how Okri classifies the trait. In the session *Magical Tales*, he shared with the audience a glimpse into his mind, and in doing so provided one piece in this puzzling, motley group we call "authors."

Okri's piece of the puzzle focuses on the author's ability to access depth, the ability to see and hear things deeply; he calls it "long looking." In his book, *The Magic Lamp: Dreams of Our Age*, each of

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the 25 short stories is based on 25 paintings that Okri used as inspiration for his tales. In his advice to the audience, he emphasised the importance of taking our time as we look, listen, and exist. "When we talk, we interrupt the world coming to us," he mused. "How can we tell stories if we don't listen?"

And how do we access this depth? According to Okri, it is about staying in the present, being still, and developing a tranquility that is needed to process the tumult around us. His advice: "The present is the key to the future. You

cannot jump to the future without going through the present." But cultivating this stillness and transferring it to stunning literary work has a price, too. Okri calls it "the economy of creativity" and it is the first glimpse the audience gets of a darker side to genius: the price that's paid to be extraordinary. In some instances, it's tangible—spilt blood, broken bones. In other cases, it's more complicated. Okri shares his own experience: "When you write a book, that person dies...if you're really writing, there is nothing left and you have to take a new road." What we learn from Okri is that authors with whom genius resides give of themselves in their works, that these works are rarely entirely separate from who they are. Their authenticity and willingness to give are perhaps what speak to us the loudest.

But how can an author who writes about someone other than themselves be authentic? It seems to undercut the very definition. In his book *How to Set a Fire and Why*, Ball features a female, teenaged arsonist—a clear departure from the author himself. Nonetheless, he takes on "the other" and still manages to move readers. Ball explains that although both writer and reader understand they are engaged in a work of fiction, what remains is the author's philosophy; in a sense, it isn't what the character looks like, but what it has to say. For Ball, "Each work is an instance of your philosophy punctuated in time." But perhaps it is his bold and unapologetic style that laces his prose with authenticity, "I write a draft and I'm content," he says, clueing the audience

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into his brand of being, "it doesn't matter what anyone thinks. I stand before you naked in front of the text."

Author of *Beautiful Animals*, Lawrence Osborne, echoes a similar sentiment, "The minute you start writing for someone else, you lose your authenticity and your voice."

Lionel Shriver, author of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, models this truth in her exploration of motherhood. Rather than wax philosophical about what this universal symbol means, she challenges what publishers think readers want to hear and instead gives them another reality, "Women are tired of having motherhood romanticised. It's hard and occasionally rewarding." In the session *We Need to Talk About Shriver* the moderator points out that, formulaically, Shriver's narrative about the mother of a school mass-murderer shouldn't have been popular. It's not fun, it's not happy, and according to Shriver, the main character is the very definition of unattractive. And yet it is her most successful book to date. She says, "The central issue never dates: there is something wrong with our species, there is an enduring malice, not just in some of us, but a little bit in all of us." Like Okri, Shriver sees what many of us miss, even though it is right in front of us: the human capacity for hatred. Her ability to access that authentic part of herself and present her philosophy, laying it out for us to pick up and engage with brings an

scenarios and carry those friendships and that authentic spirit with you."

Accessing depth, insisting on authenticity—these were themes repeated again and again by authors across the festival. But further explorations of these unique minds roaming the fields meant discovering that this was just the tip of the iceberg.

Some authors know their subjects inherently perhaps as reflections of their own human nature. Other authors expend their energy asking questions and doing copious amounts of research. In the session *The Invisible Universe*, Belal Baaquie gives us a sense of what it means to ask more enlightened questions. He claims we can see nothing about nature—everything we see is in fact created by humans and then given a title. The commoner might ask, "What do you mean we can't see?" But Baaquie says the right question to ask is, "What do you mean by seeing?" Unsurprisingly, this ability to ask profound questions—a heightened curiosity—to help us see what is in front of us, turned out to be a trend among the authors. A discussion during *The Bengalis: A Race Divided* had the crowd exploring questions linked to identity and understanding ourselves and the other. Are Bengalis prone to revolution? What role do language and religion play in our understanding of being Bengali? Layer by layer, these thinkers take apart what seems commonplace, asking difficult questions that challenge what we hold safe and sure.

Sometimes, the answers come from introspection and reflection. Many other times, however, it comes from sheer



Tilda Swinton walking around the grounds of Bangla Academy

PHOTO: PRANABESH DAS



Ben Okri reading from his latest work



Lawrence Osborne speaking at his session

PHOTO: AMINUL ISLAM



A full house at the Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharad Auditorium

PHOTO: AMINUL ISLAM

honesty that most of us couldn't bear to face yet cannot turn away from. Perhaps it is this audacity of authenticity that, too, sets this group apart.

For those of us mere mortals who succumb to the pressures of outside, British actress Tilda Swinton provides the crowd with some advice. "Create friendships with people with whom you can be your authentic self," she says. "Then you can go into alienating

effort. According to Albert Einstein, another giant of our species, "Genius is 1 percent talent and 99 percent hard work." William Dalrymple's latest work on *Koh-i-Noor* is the perfect example of this. Dalrymple, notorious for his prolific and stunning tableaux of history, shared a comprehensive overview of his latest work *Koh-i-Noor* with an eager audience on Saturday morning. In order to discover the truth about this iconic jewel,

Dalrymple had to look past common myths and stories, searching through archives and annals for evidence that proved its existence beyond legend. The idea to explore the *Koh-i-Noor* was brilliant, but it was Dalrymple's thorough research of it that once again makes the rest of us wonder—how do these guys do it? There are many among us who have that inkling of genius, but maybe what sets the successful ones

apart from the rest of us is that 99 percent—the commitment, courage, and drive to put in the gargantuan effort a brilliant story idea requires. Like Dalrymple, Ahmed, a writer for the hit show *Quantico*, emphasized the role of research. "You have got to research your work!" she exclaims. "I read books, contacted professors, and went to Kolkata to look through archives." Genius, it seems, is more work, commitment, and devotion than meets the eye.

Alongside this incredible work ethic, an author's steadfast curiosity and tenacity in finding truths sets him or her apart. Combined with an ability to articulate, be unashamedly real and find a voice amongst the chaos, these minds wander among us, together and yet so distinct, toiling for weeks or years to entertain us, to push us, to champion truths we need to see. As Ahmed so eloquently stated, "It is imperative for a writer to bear witness to their times." Most of us will never understand their genius or pay the price that these writers do, but maybe, if we look long enough, we can avail the beauty they bring to our world.

Zahra Somani received her Master's in Teaching and Islamic Arts in Education from the University College London. When she isn't teaching, Zahra spends her time traveling, writing, and creating.