

ICONS, AUTOGRAPH HUNTING AND SAVVY ACTRESS-IN-TRAINING

SHAHID ALAM

I was never an autograph hunter. Never felt the urge, or the thrill, or the bragging right, or any of the rapid heart-thumping emotions of possessing a piece of paper or notebook which contains a signature randomly scrawled by someone “famous.” Not before I went to RADA, nor after I had left it. But in between? Ah, now that is another story altogether! For a couple of months I did transform myself into, if not exactly an autograph fiend, at least a keen hunter! The strange thing is, once that very brief period of time in my life had passed, I returned to my old self and resumed being autograph-apathetic.

Actually, a Belgian trainee from a different group, whom I got to know during our Stratford-upon-Avon trip, acted as my catalyst. Now, she was an autograph freak! Little wonder, she persuaded me to tag along on her hunting expeditions, not that I needed much persuading. She was so beautiful and charming! Not to say cold-hearted, but which I found out only much later. That, however, is beside the point. I have to admit that I did get to meet (all too briefly) and obtain the autographs of some of the greatest actors that ever graced the stage and the silver screen, courtesy the tenacity and ingenuity of my charming Belgian companion and the seemingly omnipotent power and magic of our RADA ID card. I also got to watch them perform in two great plays: Henrik Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* and Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*.

As I mentioned in an earlier piece, the RADA ID card did bring in some perks in the way of finding seats and, occasionally, ticket

price discounts, and most of the trainees had no qualms in reaping those benefits for themselves. Our first expedition regarding a few meet-ups with theatre celebrities and getting their autographs ended in failure, though, but not for any lack of effort on our part, or for the ID card failing to work its magic. Among the many plays we two watched together was Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* at the National Theatre, a London landmark forever associated in so many ways, including its founding director, Lord Laurence Olivier. The acting peer, peerless in his acting days, was long dead when we were at RADA, and was the only person for whom I would have given my arm to watch him act on stage, especially in a Shakespearean play.

Olivier is acknowledged by critics, directors, actors, actresses, and other members of the performing arts circle as someone belonging to the very top echelon of actors of the last century. Quite a few consider him to be the very best seen thus far. Among his prominent admirers in the acting community who think this way are the Americans Spencer Tracy, Humphrey Bogart, and Lauren Bacall. The American actor William Redfield, too, assesses him this way: Despite being less gifted than Marlon Brando, Richard Burton, Paul Scofield, Ralph Richardson, and John Gielgud, Olivier, still, was one of the definitive actors of the twentieth century. The great British actor Peter Ustinov put it down to his dedication, scholarship, practice, determination, and courage. Brando himself, in his autobiography, pays the highest tribute to

Olivier. Olivier, Gielgud, Richardson --- now there was a triumvirate of contemporary actors who dazzled audiences with their acting in Shakespeare's plays.

Back to Stoppard. While the play was in progress my Belgian friend whispered that the author was in the building and that we should go backstage to the greenroom to meet him and get his autograph. She asked me not to worry about stationary as she was going to give me a page from her own autograph book. I was ambivalent about getting the signature, but certainly not about meeting the author whose work I have always admired. So, as soon as the play ended and the actors had taken their curtain call we two and a few other RADA course mates, who had also gotten wind of the author's presence, made a beeline for the greenroom. With our RADA ID cards hanging down quite proudly from our necks, we were allowed to pass by the security guards. As we were about to enter the greenroom, a senior security man came up to us and asked if there was anyone in particular we wanted to meet. Informed of our intention, he regretted that Stoppard was supposed to come, but, in the end, did not turn up. We were free to go inside and mingle with the cast and crew though. As we had no desire to meet anyone but Stoppard, we swallowed our disappointment and beat it out of the majestic theatre complex.

We struck gold the next time around. This time just the two of us planned on taking in *Uncle Vanya* at the Richmond Theatre. Another truly great thespian, Derek Jacobi, was acting in the title role, but there were

several other accomplished performers like Frances Barber, Constance Cummings, Trevor Eve, and Imogen Stubbs. Theirs was a stellar performance that did justice to a high-class production. This time around my clever friend had already pried out from the security people the best place to corner the actors for their autographs. It turned out to be the back entrance, which was strictly watched over by security. The magic IDs allowed the two of us to make our way to the back entrance and wait for the actors to come out and make their way to their respective transports. And so we got our autographs on their pictures inside the programme booklet. I still have them, along with the personalized “to Shahid” from Frances Barber, Imogen Stubbs and Trevor Eve. Imogen gave me a huge hug, while Trevor mumbled “How's the old place?” as he scribbled his signature. He was, of course, referring to RADA, whose alum he happened to be. Of course, our IDs hung out from our necks, and with Derek Jacobi, who had just given a monumental performance, graciously giving his signature, we two felt that we had a few great hours and were ready for more.

For me, though, the next successful autograph hunt was the best. We were back to the National Theatre, some fifteen of us, including my Belgian friend, getting tickets to watch *John Gabriel Borkman*. Only a few seats at the back were available, which our magic IDs enabled us to get. From there, I got to watch two of the finest actors ever doing justice to one of the best works of a playwright generally ranked by critics and

scholars after only Shakespeare. I had watched Paul Scofield in the films *A Man for All Seasons* (for which he won an Oscar for Best Actor) and *The Train* in my teenage years in Dhaka, and was aware that he vastly preferred the stage. For him, the challenge of acting Shakespeare represented the Mt. Everest of acting, while performing in an Ibsen play was the second highest mountain to be climbed (from an interview of him that I had read in *The London Times* newspaper's magazine a few days before I had watched the play).

Vanessa Redgrave, from a distinguished thespian family, was proclaimed by the illustrious American playwrights Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams as “the greatest living actress of our times.” Jane Fonda placed her on the same high pedestal as Brando. She is a political activist who has championed the cause of the Palestinians, something that got her into loggerheads with hardline Zionists, and limited her cinema appearances in the United States. She managed to win a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her role in *Julia*. After exhibiting magnificent performances, the two master thespians were not tired enough to refuse their autographs to my Belgian friend and me. I still have their signatures. But, soon after, the Belgian and I parted ways, and the autograph hunting, for me, stopped. That, though, is another story.

Shahid Alam is a thespian and Professor, Department of Media and Communications, IUB. He is also an occasional writer in The Daily Star Literature and Review Pages.

POETRY



A Life Truly Worth Living

RONNY NOOR

Dedicated to Dr. Muhammed Zafar Iqbal

Say this, don't say that.
Write this, don't write that.
Swim with the crowd, lips sealed.
The thought police are out with swords.

If I can't think for myself,
Blindly chained to the ancient faith,
How do I walk in the digital age
Without oxygen in my head?

When I put pen to paper, I don't
worry about who feels validated,
Vindicated, or flat out rejected
Lest my brisk Pilot grind to a halt.

The pen is mightier than the sword,
as the saying goes and every child
knows.
So I dance to the tune my clear
conscience dictates, come what may.

If nothing else, at the end of the day
I can rightly say without remorse or
guilt, since I wasn't the cause of
pain,
That was a life truly worth living.

The poet is a Professor of English at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA.

REVIEWS

The Tide of Nationalism in the Rise of Bangladesh

SHUVA DAS

A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed's
Bengali Nationalism and the Emergence of Bangladesh: An Introductory Outline.
International Centre for Bengal Studies. ISBN: 984 05 8127 02. 1994

Nationalism is one of the most powerful political ideologies of the world and its wave still vibrates through the Indian subcontinent since the colonial powers had this country under its grip for an extended period of time. Professor A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed, an intellectual celebrity, in *Bengali Nationalism and the Emergence of Bangladesh: An Introductory Outline* has depicted a vivid image of this ideology which at first divided India and then Pakistan. The full magnitude of Ahmed's intellectual work, though, is yet to be fully examined and understood.

Ahmed vastly underpins the Muslim Bengali nationalism. He points out how the harmonious orientation between Hindu and Muslim relations existed before the British took control of the region. However, among Muslims of both the undivided India and the united Pakistan there was virtually no sense of unity. Because of the divide and rule policy of the British rulers, the Muslims were relatively backward than the Hindus because they could not readily accept the Western culture. Extreme Hindu nationalism and the biased behavior of the foreign administrators left Muslims remain right where they were and uneducated even.

However, the author argues that not before the last part of the nineteenth century, this repressed community felt a separate political consciousness due to the advent of some Muslim leaders such as Abdul Latif, Syed Ahmed Khan, Amir Ali and so on. Unfortunately, they were Urdu-speaking and would deliberately avoid standing with Bengali Muslims in the line. The English Empire's decision to divide Bengal generated a psychological tension between the two rival religious players as the Hindu-Muslim communal discord began to take effect sharply at that time.

The establishment of the Muslim League in 1906 was a milestone for the Muslims. It is historically known that Bengali Muslims did not get any space in the political arena of the Sub-continent until the rise of great minds

like Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq. Huq, in his political carrier, was a practitioner of secular politics, and yet participated both in Congress and in the Muslim League. In 1929 he established “All-Bengal Peasant and Tenant Farmers Party.”

After the end of British rule in 1947, two countries emerged -- India and Pakistan. West Pakistan and East Pakistan were combined into one country, which added a bizarre look to an already politically unstable scenario. The former exploited the latter ruthlessly in terms

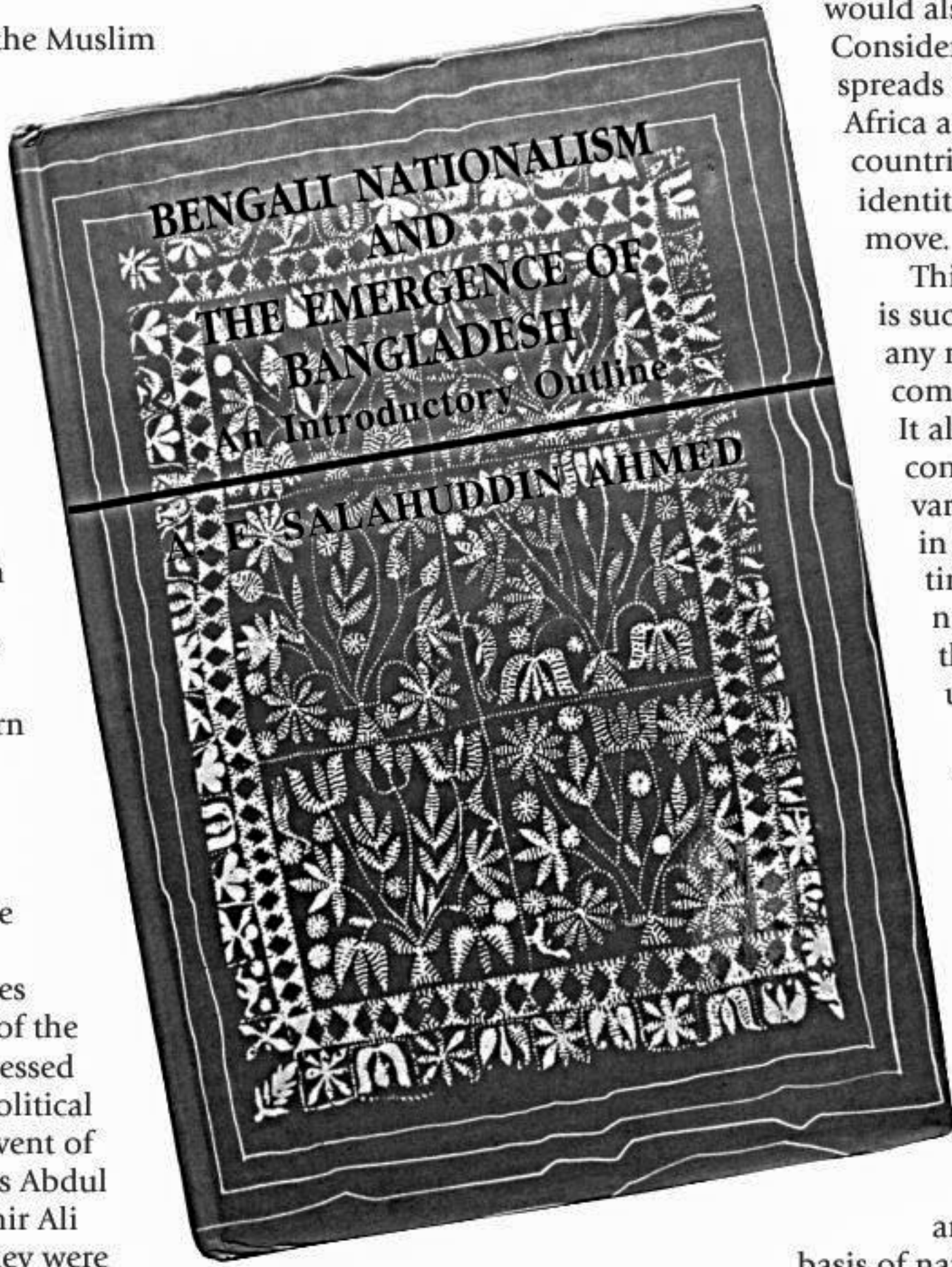
1952 Language Movement onwards, Bengali nationalism began to flourish and people of East Pakistan launched into a struggle to achieve independence. In 1971, finally, the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) became independent through a bloody war prompted by the unique leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of our nation. But, after Bangabandhu's assassination, the military-turned rulers took an exclusive stance and transformed “Bengali nationalism” into “Bangladeshi nationalism” since the term “Bengali” would also include Indian Bengalis. Considering the Arab nation that spreads over West Asia and North Africa and which contains several countries with different political identities, S. Ahmed criticizes this move.

This thought-stimulating book is such an enjoyable read that any reader can easily comprehend the author's ideas. It also incorporates the actual contexts which introduced various socio-cultural changes in South Asia and at the same time recognizes that nationalism can be good for the repressed and underprivileged population.

In my understanding, the author has brought his nationalist elements from professor Benedict Anderson's most acclaimed book on the origin of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*. Strictly speaking, Ahmed uses some ambiguous ideas on nationalism; for instance, he believes that religion and language cannot be the basis of nationalism. But in reality it was language that inspired Bengali nationalism. Besides, he also seems to belittle the efforts of the Hindus by monopolizing the phrase “Bengali Muslim nationalism.”

Despite these shortcomings, this four-chapter slim book is a treasure trove for us to know our evolutionary identity and the birth of Bangladesh and its political aftermath.

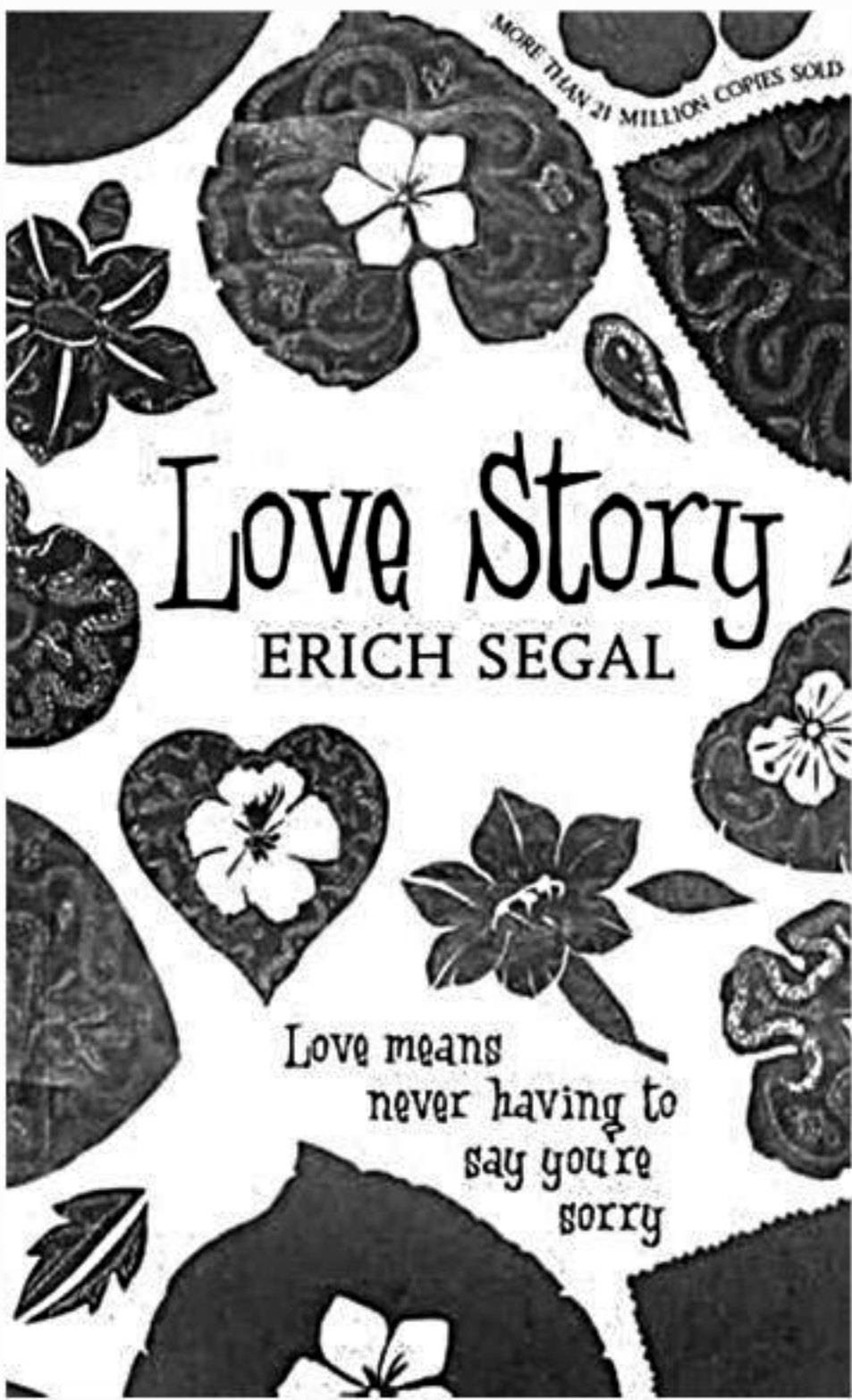
Shuva Das is a third year student of International Relations at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science & Technology University (BSMRSTU).



of social, economic, political, and cultural aspects. The writer claims that there was nothing common between the two entities other than religion and they held no brotherly bond when it came to language, common heritage, shared history, life-style, political values and so on.

Because of its discriminatory acts, the popularity of the Muslim League declined in the eastern part of Pakistan and so, the Awami League immediately was able to capture the mindset of the population of this region. From the

THUMBNAIL REVIEW



LOVE THE ENDURING KIND

T. S. MARIN

Love Story, Erich Segal, Hodder & Stoughton, 978-1-444-77696-6, 1970.

"Love means never having to say you're sorry."

Fast-paced, cinematic, and utterly romantic -- Erich Segal's masterpiece, *Love Story* justifies the title brilliantly as a modern day epic romance since its first publication in 1970. More of a novella than a novel, it is a story of two star-crossed lovers who are as similar as chalk and cheese.

Chronicling the love life of Harvard jock Oliver Barrett IV and a working-class beauty from Radcliffe, Jennifer Cavilleri, *Love Story* never stops being humourous, witty, and profoundly moving.

Apart from the enigmatic Jenny and rather headstrong Oliver, their sassy bantering, and depicting the enduring power of love, another beautiful aspect of this book is that it is written from Oliver's perspective. The glimpse into the soul of a jock is rather touching.

Without giving much spoilers, the climax is a smidge of confusion at the beginning; but soon, everything begins to unravel in a quite unnerving rate, and the story ends with the untimely death of Jenny and broken hearts everywhere.

A beautiful summer read!

T.S. Marin is a Lecturer at Primeasia University. She is also the Sub-editor of The Daily Star Literature and Review Pages.