

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: NON-FICTION

Bill Gates' blueprint for a greener planet

STEVE DONOGHUE

Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft and the world's fourth-wealthiest person, has written a new book, *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* (Knopf, 2021) in which he cites the looming catastrophe of radical global climate change and sets out an incredibly ambitious goal that he argues is the only possible path for our species' survival: achieving zero.

Zero carbon emissions, that is. Gates stresses that the battle against greenhouse gas accumulation must be total in order to be effective; any carbon emissions, compounded with the damage that's already been done to the environment, would be lethal. "If nothing else changes, the world will keep producing greenhouse gases", Gates writes. "Climate change will keep getting worse, and the impact on humans will in all likelihood be catastrophic."

Anyone who's watched the news in the last few years knows something about this catastrophe: freakish weather patterns, monster storms, unendurable heat and drought, dwindling resources of arable land and potable water, massive migrations, rising violence.

To fight that future, Gates fills the pages of his book with proposals and their pragmatic details, accentuated with talk of cooperatives, market incentives, and venture capital that starts out confusing and only grows more so as the narrative progresses. Ultimately, however, Gates urges that shifting consumption patterns to renewable sources of energy is key, and that means two things: producing those alternate energy sources to scale and making them affordable.

"I'm an optimist because I know what technology can accomplish and because I know what people can accomplish", Gates writes. "We can keep the climate bearable for everyone, help hundreds of millions of poor people make the most of their lives, and preserve the planet for generations to come."

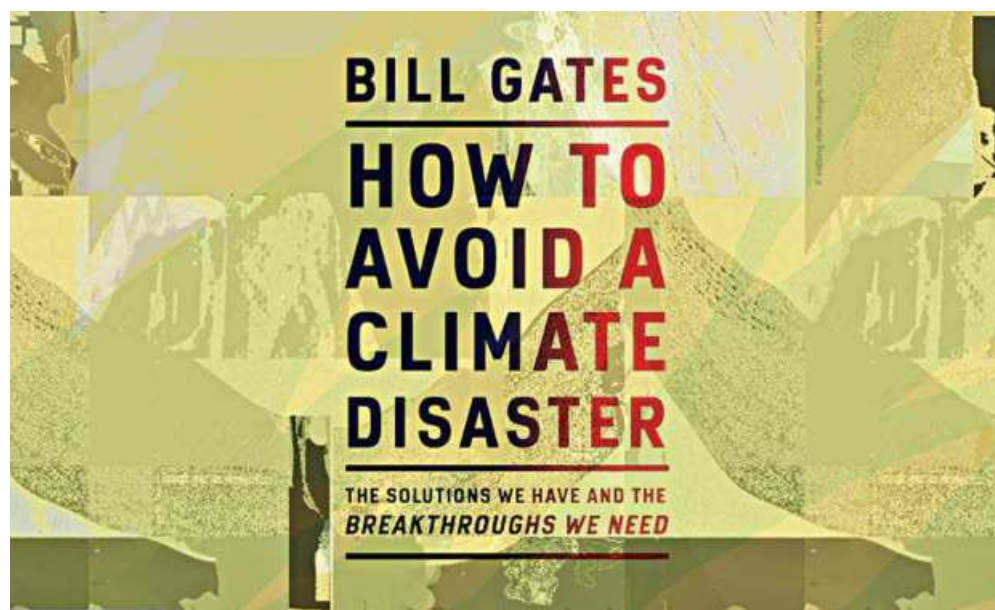
Gates is encouraged by the response when he brings these proposals to two dozen of his very wealthy friends. "To avoid the potholes that the venture capitalists had run into", he reports, "I committed to help build a focused team of experts who would vet the companies and help them navigate the complexities of

the energy industry."

At the moment of this writing, Bill Gates' personal net worth is roughly USD 110 billion. That figure is deceptive; not only does it increase by roughly USD 11 million every day, but it fails to take into account a wide variety of partnerships and other equities. In an emergency, it's entirely likely that Bill Gates could marshal (or borrow) ten times that amount. The large amounts that the Gates Foundation donates to various charities and causes amounts to a tiny fraction of Gates'

measures to combat that threat and likely get the entire civilised world at or very close to zero carbon emissions.

He isn't doing that. Instead, despite the fact that he's not an expert in any of the fields involved, he's written a book detailing his thoughts. And despite the fact that he's talking about a species-killing threat and believes he has answers that can save mankind, he's not posting that book online for free to anybody with an Internet connection. He's not even mandating that the for-sale book be available



DESIGN: MEHRUL BARI

own net worth.

Here's the point: according to Bill Gates, global climate change is an emergency—in fact, the gravest emergency humanity has ever faced, a potential species-killer. In the pages of his new book, he goes on at some length about how the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively minor threat compared to the world's rapidly-changing climate.

In the face of such a threat, Bill Gates—just himself, alone—could single-handedly fund the most effective social and technological

only in e-book.

Instead, unless the book was published using synthetic or recycled paper, he chose an incredibly carbon-wasteful option. The only possible conclusion to draw from all this is simple: *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* is at least as much an exercise in irony as it is a gesture of philanthropy.

Steve Donoghue is a book critic whose work has appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Washington Post*, and *The National*.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Night has brought him something worse: 2021's first must-read

MEHRUL BARI

"The thing was that everyone knew Julita's parents hadn't died in any accident: Julita's folks had disappeared. They were disappeared. They'd been disappeared". Hearsay, superstition, poverty, perverse proclivities, cannibalisms, spirits, animals, public defecation, death, jealousy, coming-of-age, and missing children spatter the 208 pages of Mariana Enriquez's compulsive new collection, *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed* (Hogarth Press, 2021; transl. Megan McDowell). Encompassing the highest levels of depravity and the lowest depths of humanity, Enriquez's world would be so terribly distressing if it wasn't the refraction of our own.

The Argentine author does exceedingly well in creating a state of oppression and depression that clings long beyond its pages' end, but where she succeeds most is the fine line towed between the axes. Through all the gory and gothic-sticky details of the 12 stories' contents, she never loses her reader. It may not be that the reader has had their own encounters with the walking, pointing, rotting corpse of an infant, as in "Angelita Unearthed", nor is it a prerequisite to have a sensual inclination for pulmonary illnesses, as in the collection's most unsettling tale "Where Are You, Dear Heart?", but when we read these stories we are gripped and we are there, right with the characters, with the largely feminine eyes we see and enact the perversions through. We walk with the characters, and we breathe, uncontrollably, with every step they pace, every thought that came and most probably will bring about some great evil soon.

For all the adjectives and nouns that can be thrown to describe this book, you are just as likely to find *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed* filed under "general fiction" as you are "horror", or "psychological thriller", and that is nothing if not a testament to the universal nature even its most wildly-imagined stories possess. As in our realities, there is comedy yet in tragedy, and tragedy yet in comedy, and truth and fiction play a muddling, twinning game. "Angelita Unearthed", for one, is the collection's most openly humorous, however phantasmic and however real.

Each short crams a world, or more, into a slender few pages, its own idiosyncrasies and bad habits unique. All the stories will take about three to five flips, with the exception of "Kids Who Come Back", the book's haunting centerpiece which, with twice the average length, plods and plots a course of a city plagued with missing children.

Upon reading the book's many highlights readers can only twist their brows at this being only the second English translation of



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the author's many works. None of her novels or novelettes have seen English publication despite her status as a celebrated author of some thirty years, and the only two, this release and 2017's equally sublime and delirious *Things We Lost in the Fire* (Hogarth), are both collections of her shorter works.

The Dangers of Smoking in Bed, as can be ascertained from its occasional references to MySpace and other bygone institutions, was published originally in Spanish in 2009. If any of the book has been lost in translation, none of it shows. McDowell's translation leaves several words and expressions as they were ("villero", "mamita", "paco") and allows for a fresh, smooth read. I never felt like a tourist, even when having to check and double-check the countless streets and parts of Greater Buenos Aires. Even in the brilliant "Rambla Triste", which sees its Argentine heroine spend the story in Catalonia and in which the only reference I could grasp was that of "a Barça game", I found myself by streets and alleyways and city lights perfectly formed.

Enriquez's latest is an engaging read, grabbing you from near start to finish, with only its title story conceding any real momentum. The book is a many different things—a campfire tale to scare all ages; a parable left on the cutting-room floor; a monochrome portrait of life in bed—but in all its shapes and forms, the stories maintain the author's character, that of the impossibly illusive older sibling; the one with all the cool records, all the experience, and all the right (wrong) friends.

Mehrul Bari S Chowdhury is a writer, poet, and artist. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Kitaab*, *Sortes Magazine*, and *Marias* at *Sampaguitas*, among others.

BOOK REVIEW: DRAMA

Translation with a Midas touch

TUSAR TALUKDER

Abdus Selim, a noted Bangladeshi translator, playwright, essayist and educationist, has, of late, come up with a collection of five plays in Bangla translation titled *Panch Manchanubad* (Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 2021). The collection includes *Endgame* (1957) by Samuel Beckett, *Love Letters* (1988) by AR Gurney, *Our Country's Good* (1988) by Timberlake Wertenbaker, *A Woman Alone* (1977) by Dario Fo and Franca Rame, and *The Vertical Hour* (2006) by David Hare.

In his Introduction, Professor Selim details how the idea of the "Theatre of the Absurd", during the days of his youth, exerted a deep influence on him. Such an influence, later, propelled him to translate Samuel Beckett's masterpiece, *Endgame*, into Bangla. Likewise, Timberlake Wertenbaker's quest for historicity, David Hare's progressive political thoughts and activism, and Dario Fo and Franca Rame's combined efforts to portray a woman's life, love, and confession all drove Selim to offer Bangla renditions of the plays.

The Bangla translation of the tragicomedy *Endgame* beautifully captures Beckett's worldview—the extreme futility of human life and the existential angst and despair. Professor Selim has remained thoroughly faithful to the original English text, preserving its conversational tone so as to let the major themes of loneliness and emptiness appear as they did in Beckett's original.

Similarly, historical facts are translated without any distortion in *Our Country's Good*. It can be challenging to translate a play with such a long list of characters written with the idea of "doubling" in mind, meaning that certain actors are meant to play more than one character. Ten actors play 22 roles in Wertenbaker's play. In handling the concept of doubling, the translator remains very conscious of the use of language as one character reappears with multiple roles with a certain lingual variation. So, Selim, in rendering the dialogues of the characters, had to follow the footsteps of the playwright.

One can easily assume Abdus Selim's ingenuity

as a translator when going through the dialogues of the characters of *The Vertical Hour* who, we find, have engaged in opposing views regarding the invasion of Iraq by the US and its allied forces in 2003. The translation thoroughly captures the psychological tension between public and private lives during the war and it touches upon the vital aspects of atheism, the philosophy of Freud, terrorism, the ethnic cleansing project in Europe, and ethics of journalism and medical science.

It is important to note that Abdus Selim has translated arguably the best play, *A Woman Alone*, by the duo Fo and Rame. This rendition neatly brings forward the main theme of the play—the helplessness and mental agony of a woman in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, in translating Gurney's *Love Letters*, Professor Selim has changed the time frame and the names of characters and places, but the deviation most notably does not bring about any change to the plot. The play, originally written in the backdrop of WWI, has been rendered in Bangla against the backdrop of 1971. This bold bit of recontextualising was an effort on Selim's part to draw modern relevance to the work and in doing this, the translator considers *Panch Manchanubad* an adaptation rather than a straightforward translation.

Three of the aforesaid plays have been performed by different troupes in Bangladesh, earning adulations at home and abroad. *Love Letters* and *Endgame* have not yet been staged—the late Aly Zaker was set to perform *Love Letters* along with Ferdousi Mazumder, before his sudden passing put a stop to the project temporarily.

Without an iota of doubt, Abdus Selim has left an indelible mark on drama enthusiasts through his Bangla renditions of these plays. Their stage performances have sharpened my social and political consciousness in many ways.

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INTERVIEW

Conservation through literature

SARAH ANJUM BARI

The River Tales (2021) is a series of graphic novels for children, commissioned by Asia Foundation's Let's Read Asia digital library project and produced by HerStory Foundation in an effort to raise awareness about Bangladesh's heritage and culture. Sarah Anjum Bari speaks to Katerina Don, Curator at HerStory Foundation, writer Anita Amreen, and artist Sayeef Mahmud about their processes of research, writing, and graphic designing.

Sarah Bari (SB): This series is different from the previous books HerStory has released—focusing on places instead of people. Why is this important?

Katerina Don: *The River Tales* has 15 short illustrated stories about Bangladeshi crafts, theatre and music, architecture, and festivals. A team of brilliant illustrators worked to bring the stories to life for children and adults all over the world. The architecture series features three locations which celebrate the rich cultural diversity of Bangladesh—the Armenian Church, Panam City, and Kantaji Temple, illustrated by Sayeef Mahmud. Like *HerStories*, it looks at history through a specific lens—that of heritage—and celebrates our unique identity. Since our team was behind the production, most of the characters in the books are girls interacting with older female characters. The books feature girls who travel, girls who learn and celebrate their identity.

SB: How did you manage to include crucial information while keeping the language accessible for young readers?

Anita Amreen: While we were mindful of the younger audience, we didn't



ARTWORK: SAYEEF MAHMUD/ INKSMITH

let that be the first priority behind the tone or choice of language—we wrote with the intention to engage and encourage a sense of wonder. If a place or story holds enough weight and is as magical as Kantaji Temple, you don't need to add too much detail or "dumb it down" for a younger audience. We held on to what anyone from any age would find interesting about such a temple—the mind boggling detail, the terracotta artwork of everything from dance parties to dragons. As for the characters, we wanted to steer clear of stereotypical brother-sister duos and normalise opposite sex friendship. Nahian and Mira are friends who bond over the magic of a 300-year-old temple, one that Mira has visited but Nahian hasn't.

SB: What inspired the colour palette and style of artwork?

Sayeef Mahmud: I had a roommate back in 2017. He has a grand personality, is a surfer and wears very vibrant clothes. Until then I mostly worked in black and white but in 2018 I did a watercolour series with these colours and slowly, over

the past few years, the palette has evolved to be what you see now.

I always liked architecture. And I really enjoy drawing buildings. While working on an illustration, the main task is to translate the concept well for everyone, be it from real life or fantasy. But getting to draw a favourite subject is always a treat.

SB: What kind of research went into the project? What are the distribution plans?

Katerina Don: The list of topics was selected by Asia Foundation and HerStory Foundation. The festival series celebrates the language movement, the indigenous community, Old Dhaka flare, and the agrarian calendar. These are the ingredients that make us who we are—a beautiful *chanachur* of influences. We recently visited the Armenian Church and met the caretaker's son who showed us around. We learned that his family had been taking care of the grounds for three generations and that they are Hindu. This is the harmony and cohesion we sought to celebrate. We also learned that the Armenians were the ones to set up the jute trade in this part of Bengal. Our cultural identity is an amalgamation, there is no such thing as "pure" and that is beautiful.

We hope to have the books available later in the year in print. They are free on www.letsreadasia.org in Bangla and English, easily accessible on both desktop and mobile.

An extended version of this interview will be available online. Read it on *The Daily Star* website, on [facebook.com/DailyStarBooks](https://www.facebook.com/DailyStarBooks), [@thedailystarbooks](https://www.instagram.com/DailyStarBooks) on Instagram, and [@DailyStarBooks](https://www.twitter.com/DailyStarBooks) on Twitter.