

INTERVIEW

Behind the book covers

SHABABA IQBAL

In addition to authors and publishers, book cover artists are particularly busy during the Ekushey Boi Mela. In a conversation with Daily Star Books, five artists who designed book covers for this year's Boi Mela share their design process, opinions on judging books by their covers, and the challenges of their job.

On conceptualising book covers

Having graduated from the University of Dhaka's Faculty of Fine Arts, Sabyasachi Hazra's work first gained momentum in 2005 and today, is a mainstay during the Ekushey Boi Mela.

Most of the covers that Hazra designed this year are for poetry and research books. "I did the cover of *Oshompto Saanko* by fiction writer Ifekhar Mahmud. I wanted a minimalistic design which would reflect his simplicity as a person", he said.

"Publishers release their own versions of classics and translated books every year", he adds. "The cover art for those is always a challenge, as I have to think about my own interpretations of stories that have been told and retold over generations".

An eminent architect and artist, Reesham Shahab Tirtho has worked on the covers of Romen Raihan's poetry books, *Queen Kortobho Binuro* and *Ei Deshe Bhul Kore Esho Chhilo Corona* (Annesha Prokashon), and American author Samuel Jaffe's *An Internal Matter*, a nonfiction book on the US grassroots activism and the creation of Bangladesh. He has also designed his own book, *Babubela Volume 2* (Mayurpankhi), which portrays his journey as a new father and the everyday activities of his daughter through humorous illustrations.

"It is important for me to have fun while designing a book cover", Tirtho shares. "Most publishers and authors who approach me know my work well and give me plenty of freedom. I read the manuscripts and have multiple conversations with the authors about their expectations".

"For fiction, the author or publisher usually provides the book's synopsis. They share the manuscript if they have time to spare", says Razib Datta, who used to design covers for *Little Magazine* at Chittagong University. "I usually design poetry books more quickly. Nonfiction books about common topics, such as the Liberation War, are also simpler to work with".

"Many authors had the free time to write over the months of isolation in 2020", Datta adds. "So, they handed in the manuscripts much earlier this time".

Ahsana Angona has been designing book covers since 2017, when she was a second-year student at DU. "My father drew a portrait of my mother with graphite once. That inspired me to pursue my career in art", she shares. "I have designed several book covers for the Boi Mela this year, among which I was particularly drawn to *Srishtir Jukti O Dorshon*, a philosophy book by Mostofa Morshed, and *Utterer Kahini* (2018), a book of short stories by Hasan Azizul Huq about

people who have lost their homes. My process involves sitting with the author or publisher to get a general idea about the book. Then I start sketching and give them options to choose from".

On covers driving book sales

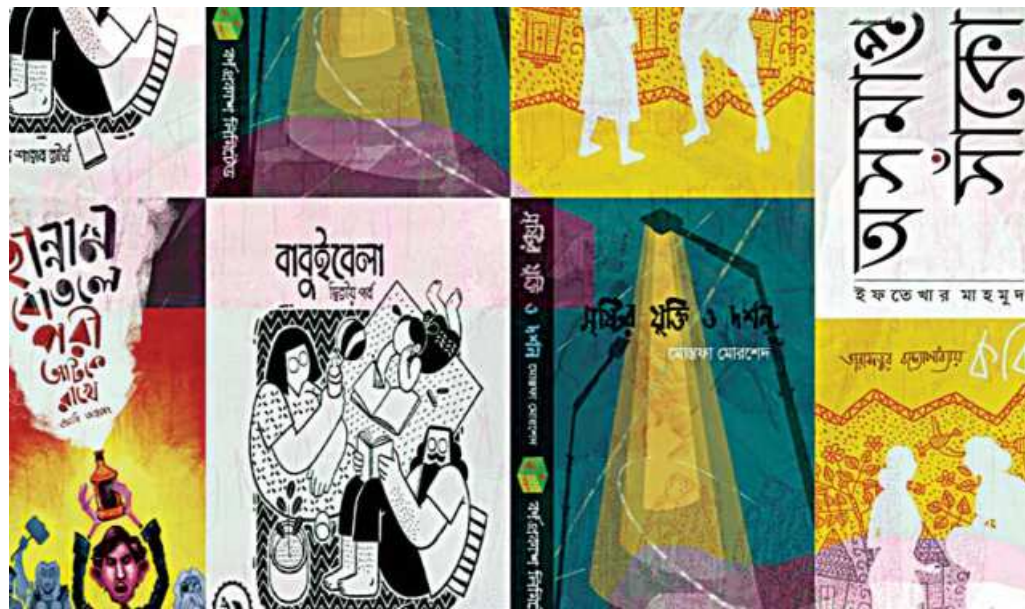
A contributing artist at *Kishor Alo* and *Ikrimikri* publishing house, Rehnuma Proshoon is quite new to cover design. She has worked on two books in this Ekushey Boi Mela: Wasee Ahmed Rafi's *Hannan Botole Pori Atke Rakhe* (Oboshor) is a black comedy in which Hannan—a young executive director—has failed four times to

"On the other hand, covers of children's books need to be pictorial and colourful to capture their attention. Those who make spontaneous decisions while browsing the stalls are indeed influenced by covers", he says.

On innovations and challenges in this field

"There have been times where I couldn't recognise my own covers because of the poor printing quality", shares Hazra.

As most of the cover artists explain, there is an overall lack of structure in the profession. "Cover designing as a full-time job is not an option for



COVER ART: Rehnuma Proshoon, Reesham Shahab Tirtho, Razib Datta, Ahsana Angona, Sabyasachi Hazra

COLLAGE: MEHRUL BARI

pass his HSC examinations while pretending to hold a "master's from Manchester" at his uncle's multinational company; *Dekhite Giyachi Chokkhu Meliya* (Abosar Prokashana Sangtha) is a travel anthology in which seven authors share snippets from their trips to Bali, The Andaman Islands, Darjeeling, Pondicherry, Kenya, Spain, and Mexico.

"Readers may buy a book because of the cover, but a book's true merit lies in people reading it and liking it", Hazra comments when asked about the function of book covers.

However, as Proshoon explains, an attractive cover can increase book sales, because it is ultimately the face of the book and the first means of communication with readers.

An author's popularity and a book's target market also influence sales, explains Tirtho.

us yet", Datta says. "The payment is nominal. [We] need to have other sources of income or develop other skill sets to sustain".

He adds, "Cover artists do not receive any royalty for the work they do, even though their covers are [used] year after year. Often, publishers change the colours or the fonts of book covers without consulting the artist".

Ahsana Angona, however, is hopeful about the future. "Publishers tend to stick to trendy or formulaic ideas at times, but many young, talented artists have forayed into cover art now. They are pushing for their own, individual styles", she concludes.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Gothic fiction writ anew in Daisy Johnson's 'Sisters'

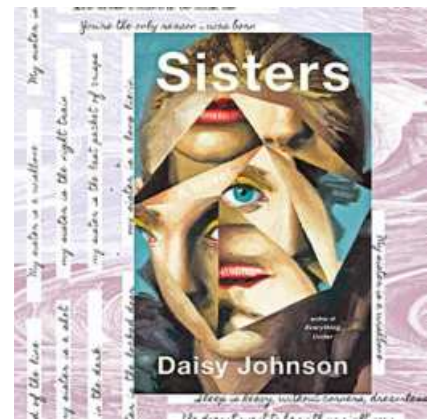
MEHRUL BARI

One of 2020's more positive highlights was Daisy Johnson's stunning sophomore effort, *Sisters* (Riverhead Books). The novel, a Gothic-domestic drama, starts with siblings September and July in the backseat of a car, on their way to the "Settle House". We find descriptions and the scene set early for us: "We have never lived in a house with a name before. Never lived in a house that looks the way this one does: rankled, bentouttashape, dirtyallover". The house is presumably somewhere desolate, enclosed by a sea, or a waterbody, and a beach, and by the time they arrive their mother's body "looks as if it is too much to carry. She has been this way", we learn, "taciturn or silent, ever since what happened at school". What that something is drags behind the character's feet, and grows no lighter through the pages.

The younger of the sisters, July, narrates the majority of this story, but is far from its driving source. That responsibility is seized firmly in the palms and whims of September, who was born in this very house, she says to July, one of many lies that may or may not be true. The reasons for the three to be marooned in the Settle House are more and more kept at bay, and just as well forgotten as the plot we are shown tiptoes around the plot that actually is. There is so much kept just at the cusp. The terror is one of presumed terror.

There are no spirits or ghouls in sight, presumably, but the Settle House is the most haunted, horrid thing. The way the wood of its floorboards creaks, the way everything—the normallest things—plays out in the rottenest air, the way the past unfolds, is told to us, and we are waiting, simply waiting, for something horrible to have happened. And for every bad that happens, we always expect something worse.

The novel brings to mind *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). In the 1961 film *The Innocents*, possibly the best iteration of Henry James' spectral tale, the central groove of the picture's many terrors is the thought it leaves the audience: "Is it the children that are haunted, or is it the Bly House?" The mother of *Sisters* resembles, and often is, the picture of James' *Governess*, and the children at their worst could easily double for Flora and Miles. We know there's



DESIGN: MEHRUL BARI

something going on, something wrong, and the novel dangles its own set of questions before the reader's eyes, but it sustains the mysteries right to the last letter.

One of the book's greatest terrors, of course, is the titular relationship. A symbiotic growth of a sisterhood, July and September live off one another to the point that feelings, sensations, thoughts, and prose are shared. "Is Mum crying? I don't know. Should we ask?" reads a line, rattling in the middle of July's narrations. Though the interruptions lessen as the novel goes, the interdependency does not.

July is disconcertingly subservient to the older September, and gladly plays "September Says", a thought-up game that teeters between misbehaviour and malevolence. But September is there, too; the first to ask how July is doing, the first to gather a meal or snacks, the first to braid her hair for the day. Johnson's greatest success in writing this novel is leaving in all the "good parts" that always exist in such an abusive relationship.

A good deal happens from chapter to chapter in this book, and the thrill of the unwrapping is paramount to the Gothic story. This review has left several details out, and should perhaps leave out more. The best means of enjoying this novel is to read, and to unwrap, and gasp and squirm and draw near when applicable.

Mehrul Bari S Chowdhury is a writer, poet, and artist. His work has appeared in *Sortes Magazine*, *Kitaab*, *Six Seasons Review*, among others.

BOOK REVIEW: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Where's the cake?

EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

It's party time in the animal kingdom. A turtle just happens to be in charge of making a birthday cake. He's small and he's slow but he has a plan. He started early because he knew speed wasn't his strength.

The story began with our turtle baking a cake, complete with an ingredient list if you want to bake a cake yourself. He set off early in the morning for the party that was to take place later in the evening. He can't be late because the party is for Baagh Mama after all. The tiger. The current and most democratically voted king of the jungle.

Also, I am not sure what gender the turtle is, but we will assign our own as we go along.

Along the way, the turtle came upon all the other denizens of the kingdom. A frog, mouse, giraffe, elephant, pair of monkeys and so on. Each animal asked our intrepid turtle as to why he was heading for the party so early. Some asked him to slow down and chill out. A banana or a slice of cheese was offered. But our turtle was focused, determined. He's not very fast but he is a steady fellow.

Sadly, he just wasn't fast enough as evening quickly approached. How would the others react at the party? Would Baagh Mama get mad? Does the turtle become soup?

Writer Shuchishmita has crafted a beautiful story of friendship and kindness in *Baagh Mamar Shubho Jonmodin* (Mayurpankhi, 2021). Kids will love the art style by S M Rakibur Rahman. Uncomplicated, large swathes of paint illustrate the animals. These are basic shapes simple enough for



PHOTO: NIHA HASAN

kids to mimic with a colour pencil on a fresh, white living room wall, like in my house. My three-year-old daughter got almost all the animals right, except the little ghost. That she thought was a bird with a "chicken nugget" face.

The book has a few extras in store. It comes with a lovely postcard and a couple of bookmarks and ends with an origami instruction on how to fold and create the tiger. But you will revisit the adventure story with an underdog hero or heroine who wins in the end because everyone decides to come together and help. That's what we want from our kids—to work hard, help others, and to make friends who won't leave you stranded.

Ehsanur Raza Ronny is a writer, marketer, a graphic design consultant, and clueless dad of two.

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

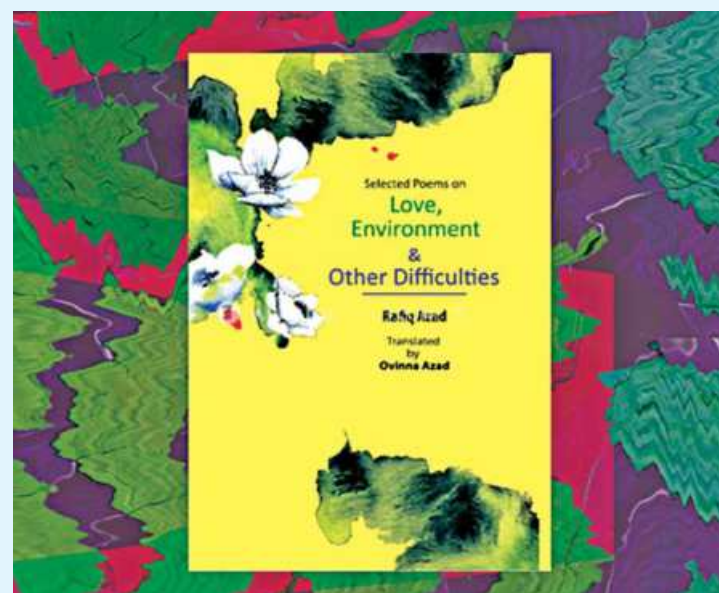
A son's tribute to Rafiq Azad's poetry

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

Selected Poems on Love, Environment & Other Difficulties (Chitra Prokashani, 2020) is a collection of poems by the late Rafiq Azad, one of the most prolific poets of Bangladeshi literature, translated from Bangla by his son Ovinna Azad. Rafiq Azad was the mastermind of the short lived "Sad Generation" movement (1964-65) which, led by writers such as Belal Chowdhury, Abdul Mannan Syed, Prasanta Ghoshal and many others, had its roots in nihilism, existentialist sadness, and a sense of non-conformity towards conventional morality, largely inspired from the Beat Generation movement in the USA. The Sad Generation poets showed a lack of interest in politics and newspapers, which seemed to stem from the censorship imposed by the military rulers of that time, General Ayub Khan in particular.

After Bangladesh's independence, Rafiq Azad returned to the literary arena as a transformed poet, devoted to his social and political responsibilities. His inspiration ranged across love, closeness to nature, search for familial roots, the commonalities of urban life, and the contingencies of contemporary society and politics.

The poems in this book reflect



DESIGN: MEHRUL BARI

the ecocriticism that Azad was among the first to introduce in his works. Most of these poems were written in the 1990s, and were years ahead of their time in subject matter and the concerned tone he adapted. By humanising different elements of nature and instilling a sense of empathy among readers, these poems lend a gentle voice to the growing global discourse on environmental and climate issues, the most urgent problem concerning the world today.

One such poem is "The Axes in Your Hands", in which Azad expresses his agony over

deforestation. Written in a strong, arresting tone and language, the humanisation of forestry and nature here make the reader feel unified with these elements; the pains of the forests are felt by the reader as their own. In translation, verses like, "Human, is hostility your favourite habit?" remind the reader how powerful a medium poetry can be even in delivering messages generally confined to the territory of non-fiction.

Another poem that captivates is "Beautiful Barbarians". It talks about the modern world as it has existed over the last hundreds of

years—capitalist and unjust. Azad hopes for a revolution through which the youth can take the world toward better days, when equality and justice cease to be utopian ideals and tip over this side of reality.

Ovinna Azad does well to preserve the poems' spirit and imagery in translation. In "I Leave Behind", the poet talks about lost, but not forgotten, memories and glimpses of the past, using motifs of sounds and images. He writes:

"Sweet treats made by Bostumis, sparkling clean households,

And their sweet banter: "Ogo-Hai go" a laughter of kind-I leave behind."

When I read this collection, I found more than the translation of poetry. Both the author and translator, father and son, seem to share a bond beyond blood. Both, as mentioned in the jacket, are avid readers and nocturnal creatures. In addition to the technicalities of language and form, when I read these translated poems, I found a son trying to preserve and find solace in his father's legacy. This collection is special because it is personal and heart-warming.

Nahaly Nafisa Khan is sub-editor of *Toggle*, *The Daily Star* and a contributor of *Daily Star Books*.