

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION

Depths of humanity in artificial intelligence

MEHRUL BARI

Despite *Klara and the Sun* (Faber, 2021) coming out on my birthday, and soft science fiction being not only a genre I regularly read but write, I found myself with no real connection with the Nobel Prize-winning author's latest work. Kazuo Ishiguro, for me, has always been one of "those writers"; the kind who you're sure write perfectly good stories, but the sheer amount of praise they receive from just about everyone leaves you a little sceptical. (Novel titles like *Never Let Me Go* surely didn't help). Or maybe it's just me. What I have found, though, once I actually leafed through the pages—and I'm sure this won't come as a surprise to any fans of the author—is that my opinion, one might call it bias, was completely unsubstantiated.

What I found in the 307 pages was indeed the deep meditation several reviewers promised. What I found were the exact many qualities the writer has always been celebrated for, that this particular reviewer had always dismissed with a shrug. The prose, elegantly simple, is as efficient and to-the-point as is Isaac Asimov's, though nowhere near as soulless. The spirit, the "heart" that the book's back cover takes great space to write of, was not unlike the humanity you find in a Bradbury or a Le Guin—but its focus, centred so fixedly at the base of human existence, is its own. What I found was a work of science fiction with no direct analogue, no immediate referent, save for its own maker's.

"To some extent as a writer you're always in dialogue with your earlier books", Ishiguro told *TIME*. "Part of me wanted to reply to *Never Let Me Go* (Faber, 2005), which is a very sad book. It's not pessimistic exactly, but it's very sad. I wanted to reply to that vision". With a

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COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

story similarly examining the hypothetical, and not wholly unrealistic, future rounded out by artificial intelligence, both novels approach and ultimately deal with the subject in their own ways. If you are anything resembling this reviewer, please do not conceive any notions based on the insipid film adaptations of *Never Let Me Go* (2010) and the thoroughly fine, if unremarkable, *Remains of the Day* (1993).

Don't be dissuaded, either, by the platitudes surrounding this novel's release. "What does it mean to love?" is a quote you'll find tied around its marketing. The back of the first edition pulls out the quote, "Do you believe in the human heart?", which sounds more like a Cher song than the circumstances in which the question is asked in the novel—in the middle of a taut, confused conversation the protagonist has three-quarters of the way through, spoken more literally than may seem without context.

The novel, which follows the narration of "Artificial Friend" Klara, far exceeds the sum of its parts. At its core, the story doubles as a *Toy Story*-coming of age tale, with central figure Josie, the terminally-ill adolescent, kicking the plot into gear. Klara, who is from the start more human than human, is our moral compass and audience surrogate. In pulling off this age-old SF trick, setting the parameters of the narrative around the android's naivety, Ishiguro transforms what might have been "sick lit" under lesser hands into a fully realised humanistic portrait of our modern, digitally-enhanced life.

Klara and the Sun, Ishiguro told *Publishers Weekly*, originally began life as an illustrated children's book, "about a child who isn't well; confined to her room. She and her doll watch the sun go down until one night they are able to

leave the room and visit outside". It was when his daughter, writer Naomi Ishiguro, interjected that he changed courses. "She said, no way. You cannot tell this story to children; you would traumatize them".

Indeed, there is material enough in the novel to cause tremble to the most seasoned adults. We find out how in this world children are "lifted", an uncertain process involving genetic modification, and schooled thereon only through phones and tablets ("oblongs", as Klara identifies them); parents hold "interaction meetings" to ensure socialisation; and those families that can't afford their children's "lifting" are seen immediately as members of different society.

There is little attempt to mask the technophobia present in the writing, but all the cruel things and cruel people that appear in the book appear in full three dimensions. Characters will often seem hateful, and they will later seem full of love. The advancement of technology is more hindrance than blessing, but Klara, who observes and absorbs humanity, is often the most compassionate in any given situation. Ishiguro has said in the past how in his writing he seeks to make a universal statement, and *Klara and the Sun*, his first novel in six years, is just that. There is nothing grandiose about it. He doesn't approach it with kid-gloves, nor does he yank our shoulders blaring his message. There is a gentleness to his writing, an assured sense of direction, that makes me regret, above all, my neglecting of his work.

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

THE BOOK REPORT

Demystifying the COVID-19 pandemic

ANIRBAN MAHAPATRA

One year ago, I was tracking cases of a novel coronavirus as it was spreading all across the world. One year into the pandemic, COVID-19 needs no introduction. All of us have been bombarded by information and misinformation on the origin of the virus, symptoms of the disease, how to protect ourselves, how effective drugs and vaccines are, and how the pandemic will end. I started to write my book, *COVID-19: Separating Fact from Fiction* (Penguin Random House India, 2021), to put COVID-19 in the broader context of what we know about viruses and pandemics. There was a lot of misinformation on the severity of the virus and how it spread, which I wanted to dispel.

As a microbiologist, I remembered SARS and H1N1. But I soon realised that this was a pandemic unlike any we had faced in our lifetimes. The COVID-19 pandemic is not simply a

where SARS-CoV-2 came from and how it infects our cells. I discuss how the virus spreads and why some people show no symptoms. I offer practical steps we can take to reduce our own risk as we go about our lives.

The COVID-19 is not affecting everyone equally. Taking a broader view, I cover the impact of the first year of the pandemic on the economy, health, technology, and society. Just as more people are getting vaccinated, new variants of the virus that are more infectious and might potentially evade immune responses are becoming a factor in ending the crisis.

More than 150 countries instituted some form of a lockdown last year including Bangladesh. Since then the trajectory has not been the same in every country. In 2020, Bangladesh and other countries of South Asia had seen lower mortality rates from COVID-19 than many other countries (though some of it may be attributed to underreporting). We do not definitively know why cases remained low through 2020. But we do know that variants (particularly the ones that were first identified in the United Kingdom and in Brazil) are spreading faster than the strain that was predominant through last year. The UK variant has been identified in a patient in Dhaka earlier this year. This is concerning, particularly as Dhaka eases into its second lockdown exactly a year from the "general holiday" imposed last year.

In many parts of the world, infectious diseases such as cholera and malaria are a perennial threat. Asian countries are used to taking these threats seriously. But there is also no room for complacency. Right now, we are in the middle of a race between a virus that is mutating into new variants with increased transmissibility, and the ability of the world to produce vaccines and vaccinate people rapidly to end the pandemic. But as I write in my book, "COVID-19 is not the pandemic that will end civilization. It is not even the last pandemic that many of us will face". We must be better prepared for the next one.

Anirban Mahapatra, a microbiologist by training, is the author of *COVID-19: Separating Fact From Fiction* (Penguin Random House India, 2021). These are his personal views.



biological epidemic; there are social, geopolitical, and economic components as well. As I wrote and filled in gaps, I understood that there is a human element that requires us to tie in all of these components together. There are articles written every day about the pandemic. Indeed, I've written some myself. What the length of a book allows is the ability to add historical context and scientific detail, and bring various threads together.

The book was written for non-scientists, but there is an extensive list of references that include scientific articles and news stories in the back that might help anyone who wishes to dive deeper. I have outlined the leading theories

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

'Anubhutih Abhidhan': A peek into the world of Tahsan Khan

ELITA KARIM

As a lover of books and music, it is no surprise that I would pick up *Anubhutih Abhidhan* (Addhayan Prokashoni, 2021), a book of musings, stories, and poems written by Tahsan Khan— singer, songwriter, actor, teacher, and also a mentor to many in Bangladesh. He has been writing this book for quite some time now, bringing together his experiences and picking his memories for stories from his past. The book is a quick read, however, and it portrays Tahsan Khan's excellent hold of the Bangla language and his love for literature.

In an era in which we're quicker to read reviews of bestsellers instead of actually reading the books, *Anubhutih Abhidhan* turns out to be a gratifying read. Besides being short and sweet, each chapter is satisfyingly crisp and insightful. Clearly, the book is an excellent way for fans to catch a glimpse into the mind of Tahsan Khan.

Autobiographies written by famous people are always expected to be "open books" (pun not intended), where the lives of the rich and famous come out crawling with scandalous quips, wise anecdotes, eminent "name drops" and, of course, the very obvious rags-to-riches moments, adding to the climax at the very end. *Anubhutih Abhidhan* was actually none of that.

Instead, Tahsan sorts through a huge accumulation of experiences that he has gone through over the years while dealing with friends, fans, producers,



COLLAGE: MEHRUL BARI
COVER ART: ARAFAT KARIM

admirers, and himself as an artist. He writes about old friends, music, communities, school, love, and regrets, and connects them with fear, passion, arrogance, inspiration, humility and so much more. Each of the 20 short chapters describes a certain human emotion.

For instance, Tahsan beautifully defines "Bismoy" (marvel) in a chapter in which he goes back to the young days of his band Black, when he was thinking of ways to scrape money together to buy a keyboard. He writes about how his father became the ultimate hero of the story. A chapter titled "Koutuhol" (curiosity) brings together his thoughts on politics, on how the "different" and the "other" are discriminated against, and how people end up following so-

called world leaders who promote hate, instead of using the power of curiosity to think for themselves and ask powerful questions. In "Aupoman" (insult), he expresses his surprise and sorrow at the fickle human mind and how the souls of many around him prefer to be enriched by the shallow instead of the abundant.

To a music fan particularly familiar with the industry in Bangladesh, the book will seem reminiscent of an old-school CD packaged in a diamond case, from the late '90s or the early 2000s. Adorned with an image of the author, the cover art designed by Arafat Karim will take Tahsan fans back to the era of *Nei* or *Kothopokothon*—two of his many popular solo albums. Back then, the flaps would often include little notes of dedication, lyrics, artwork and so much more. Similarly, *Anubhutih Abhidhan* features poems written by the author himself, following up each of the chapters and summarising his thoughts into songs. Each of these poems, then, are followed by illustrations screaming nostalgia, created by Arafat Karim.

In a nutshell, Tahsan Khan manages to showcase himself in *Anubhutih Abhidhan*, focusing on the positives, opening up about his personal fears, and of course talking about the people he loves.

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BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC FICTION

An untold story of Black liberation in the Amazon

ISRAR HASAN

The New World, as started by Spanish and Portuguese authorities followed by the Dutch and the English, was built on the amputated bodies of countless indigenous and Black people. Just as there was oppression, there was insurrection, led by prophetic voices of liberation. One such real life story took place in modern day Brazil, which until its official abolishment of slavery in the late 1800s harboured more than 5.5 million slaves, far outweighing the number in North America.

Released in 2019 by Fantagraphics, author-artist Marcelo D'Saete fleshes out an important episode of Black resistance to slavery in the heart of the Amazon in the galloping 424-page graphic novel, *Angola Janga: Kingdom of Runaway Slaves*.

D'Saete conducted his research over a long span of 11 years to bring to life this history of a community of runaway slaves in 17th century Brazil, who lived in a collection of slave-run settlements known as Palmares, which, the author admits, numbered at least 20,000 people at its peak. Drawing across a plethora of sources including colonial-era documents, and testimonies, D'Saete takes us deep into the heart of their conflicts with slave owners.

Angola Janga or "Little Angola" was the name given to these autonomous settlements, named after Angola, from where many of Brazil's modern day Afro-Brazilians originate. The leader of Palmares, Zumbi, has a fascinating backstory, having been raised by a loving Franciscan monk, who turns his back on his imposed identity and Christianity and joins

the slaves in fighting off their masters. Along the way, Zumbi and his loyal yet confused companion, Soares, band with fellow slaves and members of indigenous communities to ward off the Portuguese and Dutch colonisers.

The author vividly depicts the history of this precarious kingdom, including the heartbreaking tales of fugitives, brutal raids by colonial forces, and tense power struggles among the people. Drawn in black and white ink, the art showcases glimpses of life in colonial Brazil with images of forests, wildlife, native Bantu culture, and Christian motifs—all of which saturate the book in depth. Black and white ink criss-cross between flashbacks and realities of the slaves, the elders, the slave owners, priests, and the white settlers.

The only shortcoming lies in the construction of the historical episodes—D'Saete leaves a lot of empty space in regards to character development, especially for the women who he admits had a large presence in the Palmares. The graphic novel, while proving to be an energetic read, carries too little dialogue and packs too much emotive energy in the images, particularly of the fights, skirmishes, and moments of retribution, neglecting some of the cerebral happenings of the story.

Regardless, D'Saete has still been able to delve into an unknown fragment of the wider Black freedom struggle to create a new story seldom heard.

Israr Hasan is a contributor.

