

THE BOOK REPORT: WORLD BOOK DAY 2021

THE ALLURE OF A BOOK

RASHA JAMEEL

It happened on a slow morning during my university English literature class. We had just finished reading one of Roald Dahl's lesser-known short stories, "Skin", published in *The New Yorker* in 1952. The lecturer called upon the class to present their analyses of the short story. When it was my turn to speak, I became tongue-tied as my mind slowly went blank. It had been close to four years since I had picked up a book.

I can't really remember when it was that I'd fallen head over heels in love with books, and subsequently, literature. If my mother is to be believed, then I'd been reading since I was a toddler. Unlike most children, I wasn't a fan of picture books since my impatient young mind always considered the illustrations to get in the way of my imagination. I ended up rummaging through my sister's collection of plays, essays, and classic novels such as William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1602) and Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) in pursuit of more words.

But was it really the words I wanted? Off the top of my head, I can name about 50 people from different stages of my life who have told me why it's important to read books. Every single one of their reasons were different variations of "They'll help you get acquainted with new words and their usage". However, the words in a book were different, they opened up all kinds of portals, from those grounded in reality to the ones that let me dream. So it wasn't the words after all, it was the allure that the books possessed. Books are more than words. They're heavy with the souls of the authors who wrote them. They're people, their testimonies and love and struggles, and hope and comfort and magic.



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Experiencing reader's block for the first time was a painful experience for me. It set in slowly over time as the pressure to strive towards academic perfection took the front seat, leaving my love for reading to grow cold at the back. Soon enough, I was reading to pass a course at school, not out of curiosity. Texts that had once sparked intrigue, became a drag.

Now picture a life devoid of that allure. That magnetism is gone and so are your magic portals. Under such circumstances, I imagine that people usually tend to gravitate towards television for some sense of escapism. Not me. As much as I enjoy watching films and TV shows, the escapism offered on the silver screen ultimately was no match for that found in the pages of books.

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sparked intrigue, became a drag. My fascination with poets, researchers, and historians had begun to ebb. Regardless of how well-written the texts were, I simply could not bring myself to invest in them emotionally and intellectually as I once had, and thus chose to glance through only the excerpts assigned for reading in class. A chord somewhere had snapped, causing my curiosity to be replaced with an emotion I would never associate with books: frustration. I ended up finishing no books all throughout high school.

It's common for adults leading busy lives to experience a reading slump every now and then, due to a drop in energy, or an overall unwillingness to keep the mind occupied with the contents of a book. As an adolescent, I had to come to terms with the realisation that books were no longer a reprieve away from the materialistic world but had rather begun to embody materialism itself. I stepped back after graduating high-school and opted for a break away from trying to read entirely.

It was in 2019 that I decided to try my hand at something I had no prior experience of: book blogging. Being able to connect with so many readers from all over the world on a shared platform, Instagram, made me aware of all the different personal connections that these people had formed with the books they'd read. They offered the motivation I needed to once again bury my nose inside a book out of curiosity.

I reached for an old favourite—*The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri. The nostalgia I found in those pages was enough to dispel any lingering disinterest. Like a vaccination

procedure, however, there were side effects. I was unsure whether my relationship with books would ever be the same.

It wasn't. Instead, I began to see books in a new light, as more than "uniquely portable magic", to use Stephen King's words. I began to see books as the driving force behind creative expression and multicultural conversations. I interacted with bloggers from different corners of the world and understood how the definition of "popular" books had changed over the years, from a millennial perspective to one better suited for generation z. There was so much to learn and discover about the mechanisms of book-blogging: photography, content writing, social influencing. But I felt comfortable about sharing my insecurities, my criticism and my experience with specific books. I had found my safe haven once more.

My grandmother used to say that her relationship with books was an addictive one, that all it took was a whiff of that typing ink, fresh or aged, and that allure would take over you, mind and soul. She wasn't wrong. About five months after joining the bookstagram community, I went out and bought myself a fresh copy of a recent release, *These Witches Don't Burn* (Razorbill, 2019) by Isabel Stirling and took in the smell of the smooth pages. I devoured the 280-page book in under four hours, and proceeded to look for more.

Rasha Jameel studies microbiology whilst pursuing her passion for writing. Reach her at rasha.jameel@outlook.com.

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

Tracing South Asian Muslim civilisation through food

MANNAN MASHRUR ZARIF

Desi Delicacies: Food Writing from Muslim South Asia (Pan Macmillan India, 2020) is a delightful anthology edited by Claire Chambers—no stranger to the lifestyle of Muslims. As a Professor of Global Literature at the University of York, she teaches the literature of South Asia, the Arab world, and their Diasporas. This collection brings forth our love for food, and as one goes through the 18 essays and short stories, they cannot help but admire the element of surprise they each have to offer, even for the most seasoned foodie.

The book divulges such secrets, like that of the yoghurt in subcontinental cooking, or the simple addition of a dash of turmeric during preparation and how it can make all the mouth-watering difference to a dish. This, the book tells us, is not just a matter of taste, but of culinary legacy. Chambers talks also about the slow cooking secrets of meat preparation in Pakistani households, and reveals how the potato entered the Muslim kitchen, becoming inseparable from the Bangladeshi *kachchi* or the quintessential *samosa*.

Each essay and story ends with a relevant recipe. The editor reminds us that in households of South Asia, "most recipes were passed down through the generations within the family and never written down with precise measurements". Yet, for the convenience of modern cooks, the recipes given do provide accurate quantities.

Does this take away anything from the alchemy that is this region's cooking? Maybe so, but this tweaking of South Asian culture is a necessary step in making the methods relevant to newer generations. This is why *Desi Delicacies* is more about the experiences attached to food, shared by the pool of writers in this collection, numbering 23. The language is straightforward. Its use of common Muslim words, often given without clarification or explanation, is expected to nudge the reader towards some curious fact finding. And instead of daunting the reader, it enhances the ambiance of a South Asian Muslim household. Much to the credit of Professor Chambers, this is one of the most attractive aspects of the book.

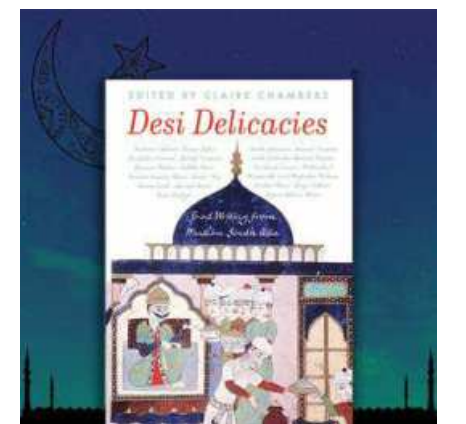
While the collection is on Muslim South Asian society, it breaks down geographical boundaries, simply because the food it talks of has done the same. It has been the attempt of the editor to not limit herself in chronicling a glorious past of Muslims. Her framework is set in history, but it is contemporary in nature as it divulges into the cultures of present day Lucknow, Rampur, Srinagar, Lahore, and Dhaka—the different seats of that glorious past.

The Muslims of this region bear the signature of a civilisation over a millennium in the making. Once they set

foot in this region, they took inspiration from the richness of this land, and made significant contributions to local culture, most visible in its architecture and gustatory traditions. One noteworthy mention from the collection would be the essay "Jootha", in which Tabish Khair carefully outlines for us the division lines of inter-religion, and even intra-religion, that exist in and within the Muslim community, as is obvious in the food habits of its people.

Another example from our own country would be Kaiser Haq's writing on the delicacies of Bangladesh, known to be highly influenced by Mughal traditions, and steeped in Bengali heritage. Haq writes about the confluence of culture, in which Bengalis have known to harbour a love affair with both meat and vegetarian dishes, the latter often stemming from Hindu influence.

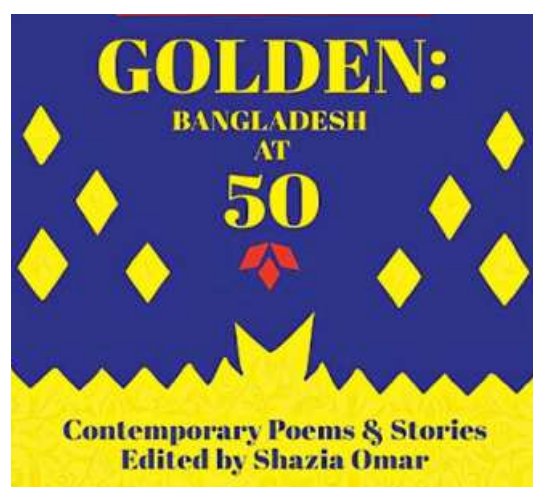
This, once again, shows that the Islamic civilisation is anything but monolithic, soaked in the legacy of its past, but quick to absorb anything around it. Thus, the "paye" is as much a Muslim food as it is Hindu; the "lotus stem" belong as much to the Kashmiris as to the rest of the subcontinent; and the "burger"—a term carrying heavy connotations in Pakistan—while a global phenomenon, has blended itself into the Muslim identity of the nation, giving rise to the so-called "burger generation" of Pakistan.



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

The politics of food takes a front stage in this book as it addresses the abhorrent social hierarchy that evidently existed and continues to exist in some Muslim households of the subcontinent. The stories often present this bigotry, subtle but clearly evident in the food practices of the community. This is what makes the book interesting. Full of mysteries from the kitchen of Muslim households of the Indian subcontinent, *Desi Delicacies* narrates the pathos and the glee food evokes in the minds of the people, numbering over a billion across the globe!

Mannan Mashhur Zarif is a senior sub editor at The Daily Star.



READ ONLINE

The writers of 'Golden: Bangladesh at 50' tell their tales

MEHRUL BARI

In *Golden: Bangladesh at 50* (University Press Ltd, 2021) edited by Shazia Omar, 23 of Bangladesh's eminent writers and poets—including Kaiser Haq, Arif Anwar, Shabnam Nadiya, Farah Ghuznavi, and others—find home for their varied expressions of Bangladeshi life, culture, history, love, hate, as well as the lulls that defined our quarantined existence this past year. Earlier this week, Daily Star Books spoke with them about their stories and their inspirations.

Read this article on [The Daily Star's](http://TheDailyStar.com) website and on the Daily Star Books pages on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. To pre-order a copy of the book, visit uplbooks.com.bd/golden-bangladesh-50 or send an email to sales@uplbooks.com.bd.

REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

A hope grows in "Borderland"

In this new monthly series, we review short stories that deserve to be rediscovered and appreciated.

QAZI MUSTABEEN NOOR

I discovered Olga Tokarczuk in 2018 after having lapped up the contents of *Flights* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), a novel, written in fragments, that invites obsessive reading, winning Tokarczuk and her brilliant translator Jennifer Croft no less than the Man Booker International prize that same year. Later in 2019 the Polish author became a Nobel laureate, and the book caused quite the stir. However, my late-night research on the author led me to this strange little story about a post-apocalyptic world—"Borderland".

Tokarczuk typically does not write speculative fiction; *Flights* was half-novel, half-travelogue written in a constellation of fragments, and *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2018) was a straight up thriller. Here we are, though, at a certain "Borderland" where all the writing tools are from a time "before", many can no longer be used, and a lot of the paper has caught mildew from the moisture discovered in their storages. Whose storages? Some celibate monks, almost childlike, who had never seen a woman until the arrival of "Christopher".

Their spokesperson is an unnamed narrator-monk—the only person entrusted with the responsibility of writing. Reading about this strange

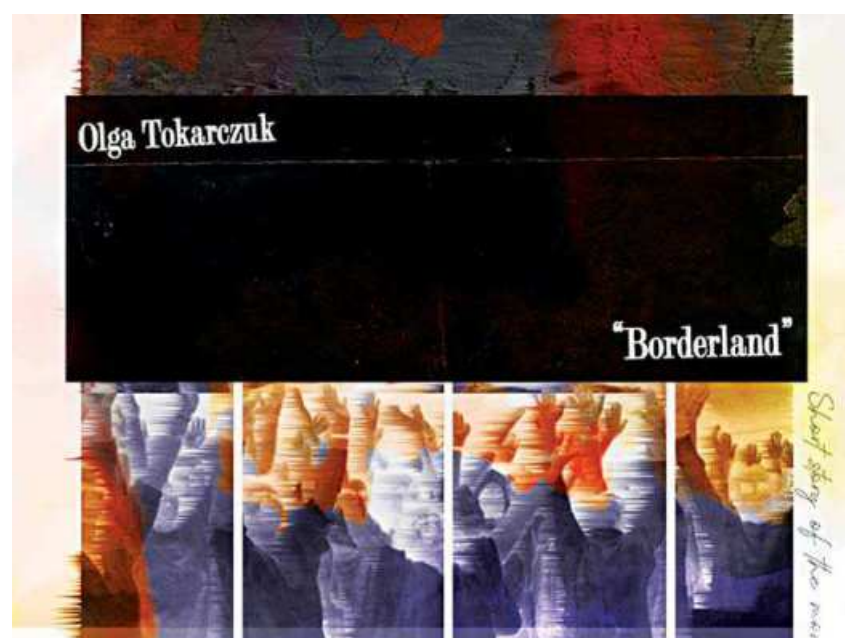


ILLUSTRATION: MEHRUL BARI

Borderland makes one shudder. The narrator describes many of our everyday objects: the lightbulb, printed paper, paper fan, and others, but their description is alien. This population no longer knows how to use these artifacts; they are living in an insular garrison surrounded by a river, with only 12 books in their library.

Somehow the guns have survived. After all, it is the responsibility of these monks to protect "civilisation" from the "barbarians".

"Christopher" refuses to go by this holy name bestowed upon her, and insists that they call her Udina, her real, barbarian name. The children she brings

along, however, are named Peter and Paul. In a holy man's world, everybody ought to have a biblical, masculine name irrespective of gender. The three bring new knowledge and customs to the Borderland, even friendship and love. They bring a semblance of normalcy in an orderly, lifeless world. Hope, too, perhaps.

Throughout the narrative, there is a pervasive sense of loss. It is a lot like what we are going through right now, in 2021, with a deadly pandemic ravaging our lives. "Something strange has happened to our world now—it's like it's broken, like it's lost its freshness. Like it's rotted". We too had a time before, and we too will have a time after. "Borderland" weaves a vivid standard of hope, with colourful thread, dyes of different types, and Udina's fresh perspective of life.

After all this ends, we too deserve a bit of hope.

Olga Tokarczuk's "Borderland", translated from the Polish by Jennifer Croft, can be found on the *Granta* magazine website.

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