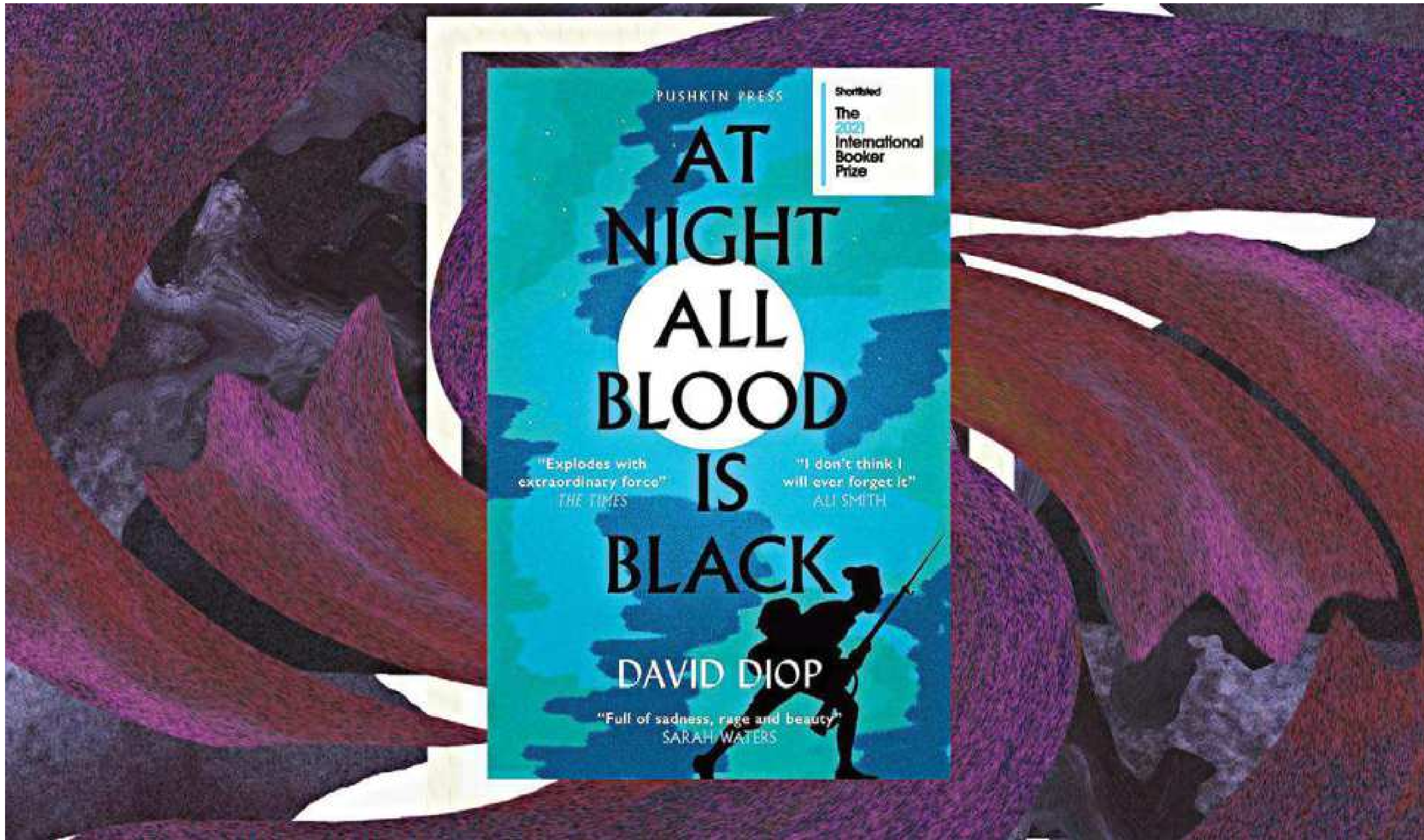


DESIGN: **MEHRUL BARI**

FICTION REVIEW: INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE 2021 SHORTLIST

All that war leaves behind

MEHRUL BARI

At Night All Blood Is Black (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020; transl. Anna Moschovakis), shortlisted for the 2021 International Booker Prize, is a slender, vivid, wildly-imagined novella on the lives fractured by colonisation and war, the second novel by the France-based Senegalese author David Diop. Less novella and more continuous prose-poem, the book loops and curls, with several refrains that delight and, in time, frighten. "... I know, I understand, I shouldn't have done it. I, Alfa Ndiaye, son of the old, old man, I understand, I shouldn't have. God's truth, now I know", the story begins. Its narrator—and you will hear his name often—is a World War I-era Senegalese soldier, forced into a battle several times removed from his own reality. What occurs before the very first page of the story is the death of his childhood friend, Mademba Diop, who dies slowly in his hands, pleading, ultimately in vain, for Alfa to take his life for him. Regrets pile up over the pages and, coupled with the traumas of war, coalesce into a broken state of being for the young man—who thinks only of the "more-than-brother" he has lost.

In the book's epigraph, a quote reads "I am two simultaneous voices, one long, the other short". The line is taken from Cheikh Hamidou Kane's seminal *Ambiguous Adventure* (Melville House, 1961), a novel hailed by luminaries like Chinua Achebe as one of the greats of African literature. Two things are indeed often one much throughout *At Night All Blood Is Black*, and not only is this present in Alfa and Mademba's relationship, but in the book itself; entwined intrinsically with the past, tropes of canonical African literature manifest itself in this modern French novel. One can find here the classic idiosyncrasies of African stories—the charms, the wisdoms—most noticeably in the characterisation of Alfa, who resembles heroic, boastful narrators like *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*'s (Faber, 1952), who are casually able to perform fantastical feats without a second thought.

The matter-of-fact nature of the narration lends the book an overarching element of naivety and simplicity. It is, after all, a basic necessity that is robbed from our central characters, at a most impressionable age, too. But it is the same childlike directness that makes descriptions of entrails, disfigurements, and the war's gore all the more real, and all the more unbearable. The narration hiccups more and more as the chapters roll on, repeating, rhythmically almost, its refrains of "God's truth" and "I know, I understand", and a myriad of phrases that are repeated in full.

> The wonder of this novel is not that it sticks to its general conceits, but that it fleshes out for us its characters and their world. When the story shifts further from the present and deeper into the past, the momentum never stalls.

The wonder of this novel is not that it sticks to its general conceits, but that it fleshes out for us its characters and their world. When the story shifts further from the present and deeper into the past, the momentum never stalls. New plotlines, new mysteries, and new themes keep this other half well in motion, and we meet the families and friends left behind in a world the two characters couldn't wait to escape. We learn of the one girl both boys loved, we hear of Alfa's mother, missing for years, we learn of the lives that were ahead of Alfa and Mademba. While the subject of war is the pivot in the middle, there is much more to unpack than just the blood and viscera strewn on the earth in its opening chapters. The novel was, in fact, titled *Frère d'âme* ("Soul brother"), in the French original—a more fitting title, though thank heavens it didn't carry over.

In the background of the story, left usually as incidental happenings, are the sharp, protruding edges of colonisation, racism, societal conceptions of masculinity, and so much more. The narrator couldn't care less for most of the above, as he grieves in all the wrong ways, busying himself with recollections, recantations, and amputations—since his friend's death, Alfa sneaks out every night and returns to the trenches with the severed hand of a German soldier. "If I had been then what I've become today, I would have killed him the first time he asked, his head turned toward me, his left hand in my right. God's truth, if I'd already become then what I am now, I would have slaughtered him like a sacrificial sheep, out of friendship".

Mehrul Bari S Chowdhury *is a writer, poet, and artist. His work has appeared in* Kitaab, Sortes Magazine, *and* Marías at Sampaguitas, *among others. He is currently the intern at Daily Star Books.*

FROM PAGES TO PIXELS

'Shadow and Bone': Fantasy adaptation done right

YAAMEEN AL-MUTTAQI

With the demise of *Game of Thrones*, Netflix seems best poised to offer a replacement—with *The Witcher* gearing for a second season and now *Shadow and Bone* taking the internet by storm after premiering on April 23, 2021. Announced in 2019, the series was to combine into one seamless story, the Grisha Trilogy novels with those of the *Six of Crows* series. Fantasy is notoriously hard to adapt well, especially ones with complex world-building like the Grishaverse, but author Leigh Bardugo's inclusion in the creative process as executive producer meant that the changes in the show were, in a way, rewrites of the original stories while remaining true to their essence—a rarity in adaptations.

Shadow and Bone is set in Ravka, a fantasy version of Russia, which is split in two by the Shadow Fold—a large strip of darkness inhabited by nightmare creatures, all created by a "Shadow Summoner" of long ago. The only hope to destroy the Shadow Fold is the legendary Sun Summoner. Being a classic "chosen one" hero's tale, we find our protagonist Alina Starkov discovering that she is the Sun Summoner of legend, and being recruited into the Grisha—this worlds' mage—army, and trained to destroy the Fold. As word gets out of her existence, the gang from the *Six of Crows* books are hired to kidnap her, thus bridging the two originally distinct series.

> Changes like Alina now being mixed race help flesh out the politics of the world, and explore the racism within the world without being too blunt.

The entire cast of the adaptation is excellent, and their on-screen chemistry is downright combustible. This is especially true of Alina and her best friend/love interest Mal, whose on screen chemistry forms the emotional core of the story, and the Crows, whose scenes have a momentum to them that is reminiscent of heist classics like *Ocean's Eleven* (2001). Characters like Jesper, Inej, and even the side characters Zoya, Mikhal, Dubrov, and Ivan are all portrayed with a depth and nuance that truly bring life to the show.

But *Shadow and Bone* would not be an adaptation if it did not have some very prominent changes from its source material. In most cases, these changes serve it very well—and most were made by Bardugo herself, or with her permission. Changes like Alina now being mixed race help flesh out the politics of the world, and explore the racism within the world without being too blunt. Her relationship with Mal, too, who is no longer the womaniser he is in the books, finds room to breathe and grow, helped by the changing viewpoints of the screenplay. And the years added to each character's age allows the series to explore darker themes, like abuse, corruption, propaganda, manipulation, and human trafficking without breaking audience immersion or pulling punches, as is the case with too many YA adaptations.

The changes that disappoint are the alterations made to the world building to make the story flow better on TV, a lot of which could potentially weaken

the plot in later seasons. While Alina's story sticks to the books for most major plot points, the *Six of Crows* group are given a new prequel story, set before the events of their first book. Sadly—and this might come across as a spoiler—tying the two stories together via Alina means the Crows' heist was doomed to fail from page one, thus robbing it of any tension or gravitas, especially for the book's readers. A fair number of things are also left unexplained or unexplored in the series, which may leave viewers who have not read the books, confused.

That said, *Shadow and Bone* is an ambitious adaptation of Leigh Bardugo's beloved series, and for the most part, it hits all the notes it needs to to be a success. Brilliant production, animation, costume design, and set direction, combined with a stellar cast with electrifying on-screen chemistry, serve to compensate for any lacking that comes with merging two non-connected series into one. It is a rambunctious ride from start to finish, and a great binge for any lover of fantasy.

Yaameen Al-Muttaqi *works with robots and writes stories of dragons, magic, friendship, and hope. Send him a raven at yaameen3112@gmail.com.*

THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH IN BOOKS

The books that went to war

After half a century from where we began, Daily Star Books will spend all of this year—the 50th year of Bangladesh—revisiting and analysing some of the books that played crucial roles in documenting the Liberation War of 1971 and the birth of this nation.

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

The books authored and published during a war always have an archival quality; they capture the time in its crudest form. They are a seamless blend of all the possibilities of the time and the event. Hope and despair. Confidence and confusion. Spontaneity and determinism. During the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, several books were published of which two deserve special mention: Syed Ali Ahsan's *Roktakto Bangla* and Abdul Gaffar Choudhury's *Bangladesh Kotha Koy*. They were published by Swadhin Bangla Sahitya Parishad Muktadhara, founded under the leadership of Chittaranjan Saha.

Read this article on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn pages.

COMIC REVIEW: INTERNATIONAL LABOUR DAY 2021

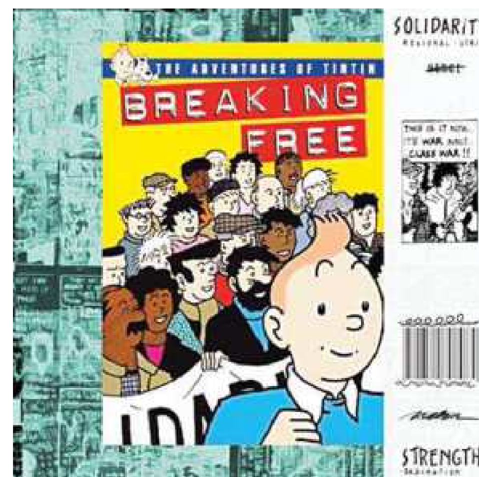
An anarchist retelling of Tintin

ZOHEB MASHIUR

The globetrotting hero-reporter, he of the blonde quiff and the plus four trousers, had many an adventure throughout a 46-year-long run under the iconic *ligne claire* penmanship of his creator Hergé (the Belgian cartoonist Georges Remi). We've seen him canoeing down the Amazon, driving Atomic era tanks through the Eastern Bloc, and beating Neil Armstrong to the moon. Yet none of these settings feel as exotic to the character as the picket line of a worker's strike.

Tintin: Breaking Free (Attack International, 1988) was published in the UK at the tail end of the Thatcher years. Written by the pseudonymous J Daniels, it is a repudiation of the rapacious capitalist regime of the Tories in the wake of union-busting, industrial collapse, and the privatisation of the welfare state. The comic is an example of the leftist practice of "détournement", hijacking media to critique the very capitalism it was intended to support.

Every character, every pose in the comic is a recreation of an original Hergé drawing, completely recontextualised. Tintin here is no Belgian reporter: he's a working class lad (quite workshy and with little class) who begins the tale at the end of his tether, out of work and in trouble for shoplifting. With the help of his uncle the Captain (Haddock, though that name is never used and his colourful language and alcoholism are set aside) he finds work at a construction site. Rumblings of working class alienation, lack of social support, gentrification, the corruption of union bosses and the disunifying evils of homophobia and racism lead to a full-scale



DESIGN: **MEHRUL BARI**

social upheaval when a worker at Tintin's construction site dies as a result of nonexistent safety measures.

What follows is an incredibly earnest exploration of building working class solidarity and of how to organise properly: picket lines, meals for the elderly, cooperative printing presses and strike coordination centres. There are violent clashes with the police, unlawful arrests and beatings, death threats and arson, but nothing that crushes what is implied by the final pages: an international revolution, and the coming of a new, better world. For the cynical reader unconvinced by socialism, it can be dry and maudlin. It was not written for the cynical reader.

In the best traditions of the Tintin stories, J Daniels took the character and placed him at the heart of contemporary issues; the ever-malleable, everyman reporter becomes a vehicle for the author's intent. Unlike Hergé, whose inauspicious beginnings saw Tintin spout anti-Bolshevik propaganda and justify the Belgian colonisation of the Congo before switching to more well-meaning racism in the service of critiquing the Japanese atrocities in pre-WWII China, Daniels' Tintin is no cipher or audience surrogate character. He's not fighting for the perpetuation of a status quo, or inserting himself into the business of hapless foreigners; Daniels' Tintin is protecting his own people at home and trying to carve out a better world for them.

Hergé may have tried to distance himself from his roots in right-wing, fascist media, but the later Tintin comics never truly rose out of that ideological pit. The popularity and staid worldview of the comics invite subversion. *Tintin: Breaking Free* is the most famous—and extensive—of a series of reworkings from the left. Interested readers should look up the raw, powerful one-pager *The Adventures of Tintin in Patriarchy Is Our Prison*, or *The Adventures of Shrimptin* on social media, whose admins have dedicated themselves to undermining Hergé's legacy through bizarre, barely comprehensible memes.

Zoheb Mashiur *is a doctoral researcher on race and the British Empire. He is based at the University of Kent's Brussels School of International Studies.*