

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

JALAL-UD-DIN AHMAD

A headmaster's memoir

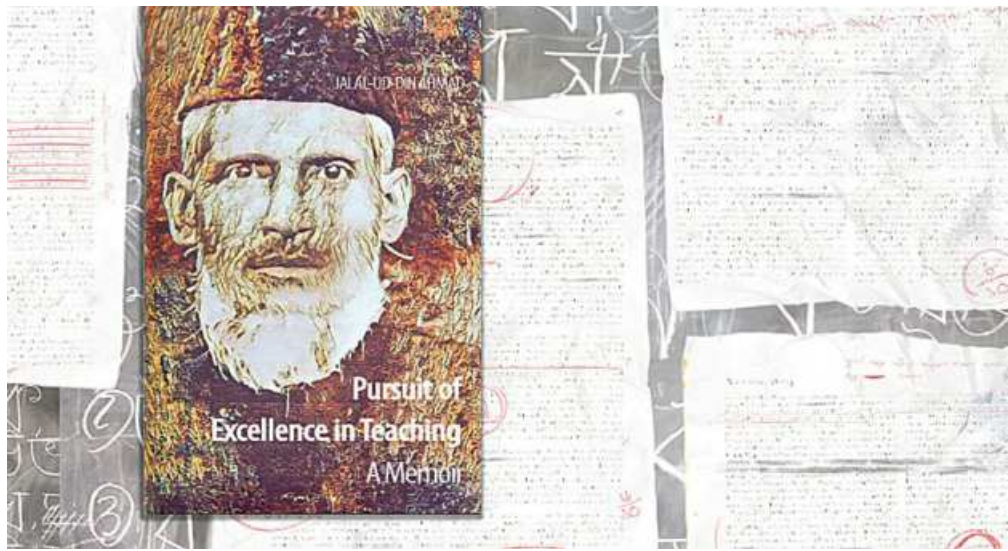
NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

Pursuit of Excellence in Teaching: A Memoir (University Press Limited, 2021) chronicles the life and legacy of Jalal-Ud-Din Ahmad, a gifted educator who grew up to be the first graduate in his village in Feni, East Pakistan, and whose humble beginnings culminated in his winning the Presidential Award for "Best Headmaster in Pakistan" in 1967.

The contents of the memoir are recounted by Ahmad himself, but they were recorded by his son, Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed during conversations taped in 1987. The project came to a halt, however, following Jalal-Ud-Din Ahmad's passing in December of 1992. Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed, a Rhodes Scholar and columnist, would not return to the project for over two decades before 2014, when efforts for the prospective book began again, and would continue for seven more years of editorial work. The headmaster's oral accounts constitute 99 percent of the finished book, the remaining one percent comprising updates between 1987 and 1992, as related by the editor.

Jalal-Ud-Din Ahmad's journey, as simple and humble as it was, was also one of turbulence. The beginnings of the memoir attest to this: "The theme of my life can be summed up thus: all my life, I had to struggle mightily to keep abreast of poverty; I made enormous sacrifices in pursuit of a decent education; in my professional life, powerful people pressured me relentlessly to break school rules and bend to their will; I played by the book, kept my focus on being an excellent teacher for my students, and sought Allah's guidance to successfully thwart them". This opening statement not only prepares us for the inspiring narrative about to unfold, but it also allows us a glance into the struggles of the man, and how they shaped his philosophy towards life.

Ahmad had been a citizen of three countries, starting from the British colonial era to present-day Bangladesh. He captures the essence and sociopolitical events of the times he witnessed in his memoir, from the mechanisms of the local schooling system to the culture of *jagirs*, and his transition through Daganbhuiyan Middle English School, Mongolkandi High School, Noakhali's Arun High School, and his matriculation and entrance into the University of Dhaka as a student of Mathematics Honours. Another case in point would be Ahmad's



COLLAGE: MEHRUL BARI

descriptions of the Feni town of the 1920s, and the famine of 1943 during the Second World War, an event of such profound human suffering that it prompted Ahmad to take charge of the Union Food Committee and give aid where he could. Later, while serving as founding headmaster of the Kemal Atatürk High School, Ahmad was pressured to join politics by the school secretary, an offer which he refused, recalling his reasons as plainly as possible: "Any political preference on my part would have interfered with the integrity of my academic work and diminished my authority as impartial administrator", he wrote. "Life is too short for two careers." Despite his ethical ideologies, the school secretary would later try to frame him with false accusations.

Ahmad tried to be sensitive towards financially-constrained students, from whom he kept two separate accounts of fees so they could sit for their exams and pay them back later at their convenience. When this policy was abandoned by the order of the administration, Ahmad would often loan the students out of his own pocket. "We were trying to educate a very poor population, and my policy was to get every student to pay their tuition without disrupting their studies", he writes in one chapter.

His passion as an educator later took him to war-ravaged Feni Model High School, where he successfully brought about significant changes

and reconstruction, introducing sports and extra-curricular activities and shifting attention towards every student. This was a core part of his teaching philosophy, which helped elevate the Feni Model High School to the ranks of University of Chicago's Pilot School, a change that benefitted both students and teachers. Headmaster Ahmad's is a journey that can inspire and guide our present day educators and policymakers.

For me, the most intriguing part of this memoir was Jalal-Ud-Din Ahmad's children sharing the memories of their father. Well-established individuals with distinctive personalities and careers in their own right, his children are nonetheless influenced by the legacy of their father. In prose that is heartfelt albeit occasionally repetitive, in his preamble to the text and his editing of the book, Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed celebrates his father's achievements but also takes time to be critical of some of his actions, namely his strictness and the way he punished his children. This allows the reader to look at Jalal-Ud-Din-Ahmad through a more humane and nuanced lens. Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed's efforts to preserve his father's memories and his legacy are visible within every aspect of the production of this book. It is heartwarming.

Nahaly Nafisa Khan is sub editor of Toggle, The Daily Star.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

How real is the world we imagine?

YAAMEEN AL-MUTTAQI

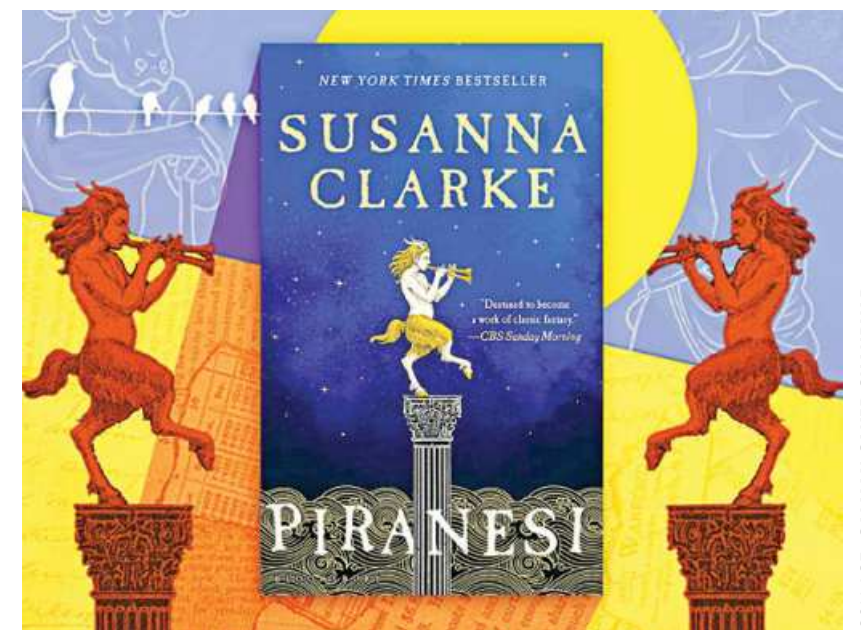
In the 1700s, there lived an Italian artist, architect, and archaeologist who saw in the world far more than what was in it. Giovanni Battista Piranesi captured his world, among other things, through prints: the most famous of which are the *Views*, an imitation of the classical remains of Rome, and the imaginary renditions of the *Prisons*. His works strained the bounds of the imagination, creating geometries and architectural wonders using optical illusions over a century before the likes of MC Escher. Susanna Clarke's second novel, *Piranesi* (Bloomsbury, 2020), lives up to its namesake. It constructs an elaborate world of concepts and illusions, and guides the reader through an impossible landscape as if it were a neighbourhood park. It is an adventure, a mystery, and a deep dive into the essence of human existence.

Piranesi is the tale of a man who lives in The House, which is the entire world. The House is labyrinthine, with no beginning nor end, and is lined with thousands of wholly unique, marvellous marble statues. He explores the house—its distant regions, its surges of migrating birds and tides—and journals his experiences, which is how we read of

is slow to reveal its secrets, and yet once a secret is revealed, it confuses more than clarifies, and this keeps the reader engaged throughout the tale. This is easy to do, for Piranesi is an incredibly likeable protagonist, resourceful, observant, and smart.

Yet Clarke expects her readers to be just as smart as her. She plays with distinction of the narrator's point of view versus the reader's: things that seem suspicious to us are normal to Piranesi, and things suspicious to Piranesi are normal to us, and the world itself is so bizarre and enigmatic that the reader cannot help but question everything they think they know. Clarke uses this confusion to build mystery and hide in plain sight.

This novel could be classified as a work of speculative fiction or mystery—but to do so would be nothing but a marketing move, for if anything, *Piranesi* is a dissection of perception, language and meaning, and reality itself. His diary entries, each quizzical to the outside viewer but oh-so-sensible when explained, are a fine example of how memory and language marry and play. His ascribing of meaning to the statues and the cycles of the House—to time



COLLAGE: SALWAN SAKIB SHAHRIAR

them. He shares his experiences and The House with his friend, The Other, a man who visits twice a week to seek help researching A Great and Secret Knowledge hidden within The House. But as Piranesi explores, questions emerge from the depths of The House, and the mysteries he is dragged into upturn his entire view of the world.

Like the works of Piranesi the printmaker, Clarke's writing is fractal in its layers of meaning. The story itself is presented as a journal, yet it throws itself against the conventions of journaling to further its own delving into the human condition. Clarke's tone, her use of punctuation, and capitalisation of letters change throughout the book too, and they are used to subtly show the narrator's changing states of mind. Her prose is gracefully simple while tackling themes that, in the hands of a lesser author, would render the book dense and verbose.

We start slowly, watching Piranesi's everyday, and while that does serve the purpose of grounding us within his normal, one cannot help but wish it had been done a bit quicker. The novel

itself—mirror how we give meanings to the things around us through our interactions and our preconceived biases. Clarke thus questions the inherent morality in relying on a self-governing higher power for "justice", even when we may personally oppose those methods. And she questions the idea of a Self—how it metamorphoses through different stages of life, and how simply writing about it can translate this strange process into something familiar and grounding.

It was not written for a pandemic-scarred audience, but after nearly 1.5 years of being forced to cut off social interaction, reading this book resonates deeply with the collective sense of alienation that we're all experiencing. With or without the pandemic as a backdrop, however, Clarke's novel, shortlisted for this year's Women's Prize, is a masterclass in world building, in crafting atmosphere and approachable philosophical discussions.

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

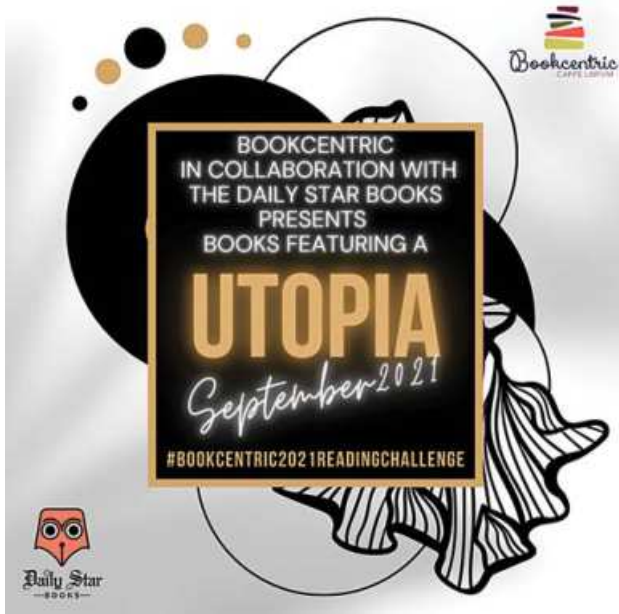
BOOK NEWS

Bookcentric announces September 2021 reading challenge

STAR BOOKS DESK

Dhaka's Bookcentric library has announced their September 2021 reading challenge in collaboration with Daily Star Books. For this month, Bookcentric will look at books that feature a "utopia" or, conversely, a "dystopia", given their thematic similarities, from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Ursula K Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) to Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* (1905), among others.

To participate, use #bookcentric2021readingchallenge on social media and tag @bookcentricbd and @thedailystarbooks to get a chance to be featured on Bookcentric's social media pages. Your reviews stand a chance to be published digitally by Daily Star Books!



MUSINGS

The allure of the campus novel

SARAH ANJUM BARI

In Susannah Clarke's *Piranesi*, whose review rests atop this article, the narrator labels time not by calendar dates but by the things that happen to him—the birds who visit his wing of the world, the tides that come swinging or gently. Some of us readers, similarly, like marking time by the seasons and the books they inspire us to read. And while I treasure the blanket wraps and hot chocolate mists of cosy winter stories, nothing feels as stimulating, as strangely soothing, come Fall semester of September, as the campus novel.

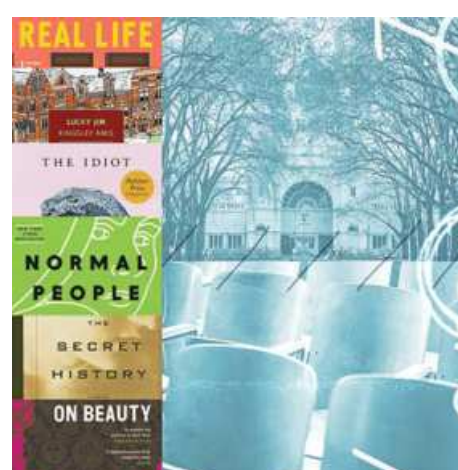
Is it narcissism? This need to read—or write—"about [our] own world, and indeed about [our]selves", as Elaine Showalter once put it?

Maybe so, but I'd be quicker to accept the blame of voyeurism than narcissism if I had to reflect on this fascination with books set in university or school campuses, usually amidst the politics of humanities faculty boards.

While growing up, particularly in a country like Bangladesh, we are made to

believe that knowledge exists like a block of concrete that we must train ourselves to lift. We are conditioned to see our teachers and admin personnel as all knowing epitomes of composure. In the space of a campus novel, it is so fascinating to watch them falter.

Netflix's recently-premiered TV show, *The Chair*, takes a politely humorous and "woke" tone in portraying the drama of tenure approvals, gender inequalities, and repressed love lives in the English department of Pembroke College in the States. But while it sometimes risks sounding preachy, it echoes the more overemphatic comedy of Kingsley Amis's 1954 novel, *Lucky Jim*, or the heated, hilarious intellectual feuds of Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), as academics become increasingly panicked about designing course curricula and drafting lectures. In *Lucky Jim*, especially, Amis pokes fun at how arbitrary the process of designing a syllabi can be—as arbitrary as the publications or faculty positions one scores based often on what



COLLAGE: MEHRUL BARI

transpires outside the classroom or library. The satire in campus novels—this ability to make light of its own work—succeeds in melting that concrete block of the idea of knowledge. In this more pliable form, the

performance of education—the preparation, the missteps, the passion, the commitment—becomes so much easier to respect and empathise with, and so much more deserving of embrace. It is so much fun to realise that our teachers, too, are constantly in a state of learning and unlearning.

And yet some of the best campus novels have been the ones written from the point of view of students. Interestingly, theirs has been the perspective more steeped in intellectual inquiry.

"I was thinking about the structural equivalences between a tissue box and a book: both consisted of slips of white paper in a cardboard case; yet—and this was ironic—there was very little functional equivalence, especially if the book wasn't yours". Selin, a Harvard freshman, muses on her first day on campus in Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* (2017)—my favourite campus novel of all time. Here, and in Donna Tartt's cult classic, *The Secret History* (1992), the microcosm of the college campus teases out

the basest instincts and the most fascinating observations in young minds waiting to be stretched free. From 'Form in Nonfiction Film' to the ecstatic heights of a Dionysian bacchanalia, the places one can go are truly limitless, and from the often forced interactions of specimens from different communities arise discerning commentaries on race, class, and morality.

Campus novels, to me, bring a heightened equivalent of the feeling I get every Saturday, when a fresh batch of book reviews lands in our inbox. "What new ideas, what new emotions will we encounter while preparing for this week's issue?" I ask myself after the lull of the weekend. After the lull of the summer break, similarly, the Fall semester brings the promise of new adventures. Books about the Fall semester—they're vicarious living.

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