



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

An island of one's own

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

When one begins reading Karen Jennings' *An Island* (Picador India, 2021), one might find it hard to believe that an atmospheric novel with such fluid prose initially struggled to find a publisher. Even when it did manage to grab the attention of Holland House, a small independent press, only 500 copies were printed owing to the pandemic. The book could not take flight as no one championed it via endorsement blurbs. But this—the publishing industry's unforgiving landscape—is a topic for another day.

We meet Samuel as he discovers an oil drum and a seemingly dead man on the pebbly shore thrumming with the sounds of gulls. In the 23 years that he has been a lighthouse keeper on the uninhabited, unnamed island, such an incident is common. Until now, he has buried 32 bodies that have washed ashore. This particular man, however, is not dead. Samuel soon discovers that he is a lucky refugee who has managed to survive a boat capsize. His arrival lands a deafening blow on Samuel's undisturbed solitude. He simply cannot wrap his head around the fact that he is to share the island with another human being. "Was it to be this? This breath, this pulse, this youth, this life, taking over the small cottage, seeping into the floor and the walls."

The man becomes the ultimate moral dilemma for Samuel as he vacillates between accepting him and turning him over to the country's authority, which the man seems to fear the most. Should

Samuel be a selfish human being and preserve the fact of his solitary condition on the island? Or should he accept the new reality of co-inhabiting? We wait until the last page to find out.

The discovery of an answer to these questions is what forms the skeleton of Jennings's story, longlisted for this year's Booker Prize nominations. From a distance, it might seem like such a light premise—yet heavy in its character's ethical considerations—cannot become a novel. A novella, perhaps. But because of Jennings' attention to detail and memory, the story is sustained through 182 suspenseful pages.

Samuel is a complex character. Sometimes, he is likeable, for his habit of carefully burying the dead and keeping them protected with stones and boulders so that hungry gulls cannot gnaw at their bodies. Other times, one cannot stop looking down on him for rejecting chances of redemption, for being a part of communal tension, for being a selfish revolutionary blinded by utopian zeal, among other things. Initially, he is polite with the refugee, despite speaking in feeble signs due to their language barrier. As the story threads on, tension descends upon the island because of a series of dangerous miscommunications among them, and with each passing second, Samuel is made more aware of the walls of his solitude cracking. "Inside him something small and folded began to shift. It opened outwards, growing ever larger....Until he was brittle and creaking with it."

The most brilliant aspect of this novel is how, through his regular interactions with the man, Samuel's past life bursts forth from the depths of his memory, triggered by windows, keys, doors, the man's behaviour, and so on. In the process, we get to see a version of Samuel who has had to deal with harsh circumstances that have turned him so resolutely towards solitude.

Also through those circumstances, an unnamed African country stretches before us, one that first overflowed with hope when independence arrived and eventually became muddled with the rise of dictatorship and deviant nationalism. The ghostly shadows of colonialism, inequality, poverty, heady optimism, and hard realities echo from Samuel's past. This bears a dynamic impact on one's reading experience—I felt calm while reading the passages set on the island, and I felt suffocated (though not in a bad way) with despair while coursing through Samuel's past—marked by lots of begging and torture in prison cells, among other things. The result: not one page is likely to stall you with boredom and dullness.

Haunting in a way that a fable does, *The Island* reveals, through clever pieces of symbolism, the prejudices that govern migrants' lives, the dangers of solitude, and the vicious cycle and forceful inheritance of violence.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.

BOOK NEWS

Mayurpankhi participates at Frankfurter Buchmesse 2021

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Mayurpankhi, a children's book publishing house based in Bangladesh, was invited as a guest this year at the Frankfurter Buchmesse (Frankfurt Book Fair), one of the largest and most important international events in the publishing industry. It serves as a place for thousands of publishing industry professionals to come together and share their ideas, negotiate international book rights, and discuss new trade innovations.

The 73rd edition of the fair took place from October 19 to October 23 and the physical fair was supplemented by a number of digital events, along with several programmes in the city of Frankfurt, Germany. "This initiative was funded by the German foreign office and the program culminates with the Frankfurt book

featured on the stand this year. Other preparations included organising meetings with scouts, translation agents, and foreign publishers, in order to pitch their books and discuss opportunities for collaboration.

Unlike Ekushey Boi Mela, the Frankfurt Buchmesse is a trade fair where publishers can meet agencies and find the right books to publish. Representatives from book publishing and media companies attend the fair to negotiate rights and licensing fees. "While our Boi Mela is completely dedicated to physical bookselling, this fair allows publishing professionals to interact with publishers from around the world and print books in many different languages," Osman shared.



PHOTO: MAYURPANKHI

fair. This is fantastic news for our team as this is an additional testimony to the fact that we are a very serious consideration when it comes to international book business," Mitia Osman, CEO of Mayurpankhi, told *The Daily Star*.

Mitia started the publishing house in an attempt to create colourful and captivating books for children reading in Bangla and English. With publications like Reesham Shahab Tirtho's *Babuibela* series, *Rickshaw Konna*, and their other wide spectrum of picture books, nonfiction books, and notebooks and exercise books, Osman's publishing house has been redefining the quality of production and aesthetics in Bangladeshi children's books.

They displayed their products at a colourful stall in Hall 4.1, Booth H89, at the Frankfurt Book Fair. The books on display included a range of fiction titles, as well as some non-fiction picture and illustrated books.

"Our schedule was packed with 30-minute appointments, throughout the entire day. Publishers can decide who they want to meet and have to mail these details at an earliest," Osman said.

Decorating the stand is another important aspect of the fair and Sabyasachi Mistry deserves a shoutout for doing some of the illustrations

This year's event was focused on children's books and Mayurpankhi was one of the 17 global children's publishers. Over the course of their stay, these publication professionals learnt about each other's markets and gained from an exchange of their respective experiences.

"By the end of the fair, we made new connections, reconnected with our old friends, and came across opportunities for our books to gain a wider readership. It felt great to display our new publications, receive feedback and discuss exciting new ideas," she explained.

As of now, Mayurpankhi is shifting its focus to picture books. "My biggest challenge as a publisher is to get parents, teachers, children in Bangladesh to embrace the idea that picture books can be read by older children as well," the publisher shared. "In Frankfurt, I came across a picture book manifesto created by a group, and dedicated to the picture book publisher from Spain. This manifesto embodies everything I believe in and it can be applied universally," Osman said.

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READ ONLINE

The Booker Prize winner 2021

STAR BOOKS REPORT

The six shortlisted titles for this year's Booker Prize included Somali-born British novelist Nadifa Mohamed's historical-thriller, *The Fortune Men* (Viking, 2021), as well as American poet and essayist Patricia Lockwood's debut novel, *No One Is Talking About This* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021). The only writer of Asian origin, Sri Lankan author Anuk Arudpragasam, with his second novel *A Passage North* (Granta Books, 2021) made the cut, along with *Great Circle* (Transworld, 2021) by Maggie Shipstead, Richard Powers' *Bewilderment* (Heinemann, 2021) and South African writer and three-time Booker Prize-nominee, Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (Jonathan Cape, 2021).

With six brilliant and individualistic stories, Gaby Wood, director of the prize, suggests that "[readers] might avoid the temptation of creating an overarching narrative from the shortlist and instead simply recognise six outstanding individual titles." And it stands to reason that the authors of this year's shortlist come from across borders, and paint a vivid portrait of originality and cultural diversity through their narratives.

Read about this year's Booker Prize winner, announced last night, on *The Daily Star's* website and on Daily Star Books on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn.



FROM PAGES TO PIXELS

How Caroline Kepnes has you rooting for a sociopath

SHARFIN ISLAM

I had heard about *You* from the moment I stepped into the world of bookstagramming. I'm ashamed to say, though, that I didn't pick it up before watching the first season of the chilling yet hilarious (in my humble opinion) show, despite my friends raving about it.

With the third season of the Netflix special officially out, I thought it was high time I shared my thoughts on the first book. Fair warning, though: this might feel like a book versus screen breakdown, but I promise there will be no spoilers.

You (Atria/Emily Bestler Books, 2014), by Caroline Kepnes, is a thriller following a charming stalker, Joe Goldberg, as he lies, manipulates, and charms his way into Guinevere Beck's heart. An unreliable narrator that is obvious from the very first chapters, it's difficult to stay unfazed by Joe's ramblings as he obsesses over Beck.

Interestingly, it is written from a second-person point of view, as hinted by the title. Though not the first of its kind, it is certainly one of the rare ones to become such a hit on mainstream media. The show did decide to bring that in, but it came nowhere close to making me feel as involved as it did in the book.

The first major difference between the show and the book is the tone. Without Penn Badgley's stunning face and sharp jawline distracting me from Joe Goldberg's creepiness, I realized just how unnerving his thoughts are. His charms aren't as easy to pick up off-screen and the mood is far darker than in the show. His jibes at modernisation and his frequent anger towards Beck feel far less amusing and it gives us a glimpse of Joe's instability and borderline misanthropic mindset.

What I hadn't expected, however, was to find out just how flawed a character Beck was, too, and how cleverly Kepnes conveyed that detail to the

readers, despite Joe's incessant affirmations of her perfect persona. The subtext was so subtle, in fact, that I don't think I would have been able to pick it up on my first read of the book if I hadn't watched the show first.

That, of course, is not to say that she deserved being stalked and manipulated, but it definitely added more depth to a character who could have easily been left bland and uninteresting, so loud was Joe's presence in the story.

To put it frankly, *You*, the book, is a thriller and *You*, the show is a drama. What you experience with one will not be the same with the other, though both are absolutely brilliant in their own rights—where the book gives us an exclusive look into layers of Joe's insanity, the show adopts it with a dark, humorous tone to keep the audience hooked throughout the episodes.

I did find it quite unsettling that viewers and/or readers were fangirling over the protagonist, be it the one from the show or the book. I mean, I did too, but for very different reasons. Kepnes captured the essence of a narcissistic egomaniac who could make up scenarios in an instant to justify their actions. His personality is so vivid with his flaws and hatred, and I love a morally grey character. If you are fooled into unwittingly rooting for Joe Goldberg, then Caroline Kepnes deserves all the awards.

So, for those of you who are unsure of whether to give the book a try, I suggest that you do. In the meantime, I will be cozying up in bed and binge-watching season 3, swooning over Penn Badgley and Victoria Pedretti's beautiful faces.

Sharfin Islam, alias A Tiny Reader, is an admirer of art and a devourer of fiction. A feminist and an ambivert, she loves to share her little world on her little blog on Instagram.

