

“What I read in 2020”: Writers Select

COMPILED BY SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI AND TOWRIN ZAMAN

We asked some of the prominent writers and academics from Bangladesh about the books they most enjoyed in 2020. Some of them confessed that the year has been too difficult to find much time for reading. Others named a diverse line up of books, from fiction set in Bangladesh, Nigeria and Florida, to nonfiction exploring current affairs, poetry, history and memoir.

FAKRUL ALAM
Writer, academic, translator
Author of *Once More into the Past* (Daily Star Books, 2020)
One book which bowled me over and which I realise I should have read a long time back is Akhteruzzaman Elias’s masterpiece, *Khawabnama* (Mawla Brothers, 1996). I believe it’s being translated now; if it finds a good international publisher Elias will surely be on the shelves with Hardy and Faulkner as a literary chronicler who made a whole region come alive at a certain moment of history.

As the year ends, I am being astounded by Shashi Tharoor’s immensely relevant and learned but completely absorbing book, *The Battle of Belonging* (Aleph Book Company, 2020), and I can’t resist telling you how the Nobel Prize awards alerted me to Louis Gluck’s quiet but subtle poems of emotions evoked oh so delicately!

KAISER HAQ
Translator, critic, academic
Of books published this year, I have read with particular pleasure two books that happen to be very different in subject matter. *A Little History of Poetry* by John Carey (Yale University Press, 2020) engagingly blends biographical and historical information with insightful textual commentary, and in just 80,000 words covers almost everything poetic from *Gilgamesh* to Maya Angelou and Les Murray. *Has China Won* (PublicAffairs, 2020) by Kishore Mahbubani is a timely and brilliant analysis of issues arising out of China’s meteoric rise as an economic superpower. It includes wise advice that the West had better heed.

SELINA HOSSAIN
Writer, academic, translator
It is hard to find books on Indian Aryan tribes and learn about their traditions and experiences. I found both in the writings of Indigenous author Verrien Elwin, edited by Mahashweta Debi in an edition published by the Shahitya Academy in 2001.

REBECCA HAQUE
Professor of Literature, University of Dhaka
In 2020, I re-read *The Romantic Agony* by Mario Praz (Oxford University Press, 1978, tr. A. Davidson), Meena Alexander’s *Name me a Word* (Yale University Press, 2018), Shahidha Bari’s *Dressed* (Jonathan Cape, 2019), Moira Egan’s



COLLAGE: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

Synaesthesia (Encounter Books, 2017), Toni Morrison’s *The Measure of Our Lives* (Knopf, 2019), Chuck Palahniuk’s *Consider This* (Grand Central Publishing, 2020), Ntozake Shange’s *For Coloured Girls who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (Scribner, 1997), and Lakshmi Vishwanathan’s *Women of Pride* (Roli Books, 2008).

SHAHEEN AKHTAR
Author, development worker
Although originally a poem about love, verses on the Prophet Solomon have been performed in synagogues for the past 3,000 years, yet never have they lost their depth and essence, even when translated into Bangla. This year, I was completely enchanted by the *Soleiman Geetika* in poet Sajjad Sharif’s translation.

TAHMIMA ANAM
Writer & anthropologist
Author of *The Bengal Trilogy* (Daily Star Books)
The book that bowled me over this year is Leesa Gazi’s *Hellfire* (Westland Publishers, 2020, tr. Shabnam Nadiya). It was published in Bangla 10 years ago as *Rourob*, but I read it for the first time in English. It’s a surprising, dark, thought-provoking novel which has haunted my dreams since I read it. The translation captures the humour and tone of Leesa Gazi’s writing perfectly. I cannot recommend it enough.

SHABNAM NADIYA
Writer and translator
Among a handful of books that blew me away this year, Barnali Saha’s *The North End* (Pathak Samabesh, 2020) has a simple story—the narrator is in Dhaka asking a friend to help her leave her husband and fly off to her Danish boyfriend. Saha uses this springboard to explore

why the pricey coffee joint The North End has eight branches, all in Dhaka, and one in Ulkhiya, the remote border town hosting the biggest Rohingya camp, globalization, international aid, and the refugee crisis. This novel is rooted in *desh* while it casts a keen eye on the bigger world out there and does so utilising a female voice that is contemporary, urban and self-aware.

FARAH GHUZZAVI
Author of *Fragments of Riversong* (Daily Star Books, 2013), Editor of *Lifelines*
Written by Florida-based novelist Carl Hiaasen, *Squeeze Me* (Knopf, 2020) manages to satirise what many of us would consider beyond satire—namely, an American president who spends much of his time in his Florida resort, surrounded by his fawning, racist fan club. Hiaasen then draws in a cast of misfits to tell a blackly humorous tale where the only illegal alien worth worrying about is a Burmese python. It is the snake that is responsible for the disappearance of one of the president’s rich acolytes, whose “murder” is inevitably blamed on an illegal migrant.

I also enjoyed reading Oyinkan Braithwaite’s *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (Doubleday, 2018). This book tells the story of a dysfunctional pair of Nigerian siblings. As the elder of the two, Korede has been brought up to protect Ayoola. But when this extends to cleaning up after Ayoola’s murderous tendencies, the reader is left wondering what really drives Korede to keep rescuing her sister. For me, the story was a brilliant escape from the challenges of pandemic reality, and a welcome introduction to a writer capable of pulling off such an interesting and unusual writing style.

THE BOOK REPORT

READING RE(AR)VIEW

A Wrap on Reading Challenges and Recording Stats

YAAMEEN AL-MUTTAQI

As the final pages of 2020 flick away, a lot of us find ourselves cracking open our diaries, or signing into our reading apps to log in the last few books of the year. Reading challenges are great—it was a reading challenge that introduced me to one of my now favourite authors, and another that made me finally finish the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, a whole decade after my dad confiscated it from me for reading too much.

Challenges with set criteria can be a great way to diversify your reading. The Reading Women challenge, for instance, is diverse and intersectional—the categories for the 2021 challenge include trans authors and writers from Muslim, Latinx, Caribbean, Asian, Arab, and indigenous backgrounds, and stories related to incarceration, social justice, rural settings, and queer life. “Our goal is to encourage you to read widely (and fight the patriarchy [...]) so just have fun with it!” they told readers on Instagram. With the dearth of diverse voices in the publishing industry—be it the indigenous and minority lives of Bangladesh, or the paltry offerings of ethnic counterparts in the West—the more diverse authors we read, the more they will be published, and the greater the variety of human experience will be out there for us to dive into.

For those who get a serotonin rush from ticking off goals, reading challenges can help track capabilities and prejudices and improve ourselves year on year, like an athlete keeping a log of how fast and long they can go each month.

Personally, I prefer using The StoryGraph, a web platform that functions much like Goodreads to catalogue your reading. It is, however, far more user friendly and community based, and aims to deliver a more nuanced approach to recommending books and categorising likes and dislikes. StoryGraph breaks down the moods, genres, pace, lengths, and ratings of your books, and records how many times you have reread them. From my breakdown, for instance, I learned that I was mostly in the mood for adventure this year, and that I vastly overestimate the average size of the books I read.

As many of our followers have told us on Instagram, books were an escape from the grim reality that has been our

everyday this year—“providing a sense of achievement and also something to wake up to every morning,” as Sabrina Anjum Poonam, a bookstagrammer, put it. But as adults, we may crave the days when we could finish entire 500-page novels in one sitting, when we never had to worry about meals, or laundry, or bills, or jobs and assignments. All these activities take time and energy, and reading, for many of us, is a hobby that needs to be put to the side for more important tasks.

A truth we do not often acknowledge, too, is that sometimes we need a break from our hobbies. Burnout is very real—as Mutiul Md Muhaimin shared with us on social media, “This year was so horrible that hobbies, like reading, that normally uplift me did not do anything to cheer me up.” These anecdotes reveal



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a common theme: life happens, it is okay to take a break sometimes, and in that break, you can find other ways to grow, to listen to stories, to gain new information, through video games, podcasts, film, TV shows and documentaries. Your books will be there for you when you get back.

Humans are social creatures that enjoy consuming and telling stories. Reading challenges are a wonderful marriage of those traits. As they become more and more popular, it really boils down to setting realistic boundaries and expectations. And being kind to oneself if you fail to meet them. Reading is fun. Whatever challenges you set yourself in the coming year, hold onto that joy.

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

THE SHELF

Daily Star Books’ Favourite Reads of 2020

COMPILED BY MEHRUL BARI

The DS Books staff are excited to recommend the books, published in 2020, that taught us what it means to find joy, to be terrified and uplifted, and to willingly get lost in the written world. A longer version of this list—with more books suggested by more staff writers—will be available online. Read and follow us on @thedailystarbooks on Instagram, @DailyStarBooks on Twitter, and fb.com/DailyStarBooks on Facebook. Have a happy new year!

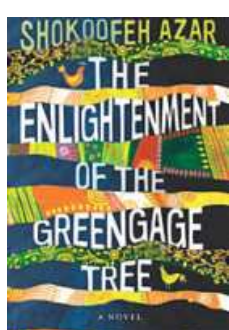


LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND
Rumaan Alam (Ecco Books)
Selected by Sarah Anjum Bari

Out of all the books that I had to speed through for work this year, Rumaan Alam’s *Leave the World Behind* was an exception. I gulped it down because it was impossible to put down. The novel captures perfectly the mood of 2020—the slow dread and unease of living in a world approaching collapse, while we distract ourselves with social niceties and capitalist consumption and, unnoticed, our prejudices and animal instincts to protect our own start kicking in.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE GREENGAGE TREE
Shokoofeh Azar (Europa Editions)
Selected by Shah Tazrian Ashrafi

A work of magic realism, told through the perspective of a dead narrator, *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* is about an Iranian family post-revolution, treading through the consequences of a brutal regime’s rise to power. The stories in this book brilliantly capture the terror and beauty of being alive. It opened my eyes to new frontiers of literature and its endlessly expanding scope.

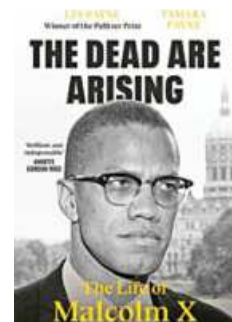


SISTERS
Daisy Johnson (Riverhead Books)
Selected by Mehrul Bari

One of the year’s greatest highlights was Daisy Johnson’s *Sisters*, a gothic-domestic drama which follows siblings September and July on their way to a house that has no option but to be haunted. Not paranormal by any means, there are ghosts aplenty—with even the prose, jarring, shifting often between its characters like crazed rattles. As much *Martha Marcy May Marlene* as *Turn of the Screw*, Johnson’s *Sisters* presents 2020 with one of its most haunting tales this side of the television.

THE VANISHING HALF
Brit Bennett (Riverhead Books)
Selected by Samira Ahmed

The Vanishing Half tells the story of twins Desiree and Stella, a timely, topical read that explores Black history and underscores the devastating, long-lasting effects of racism on marginalised groups. Bennett’s writing pulls the reader right into the gripping events of her novel. No wonder HBO snapped it up for a seven-figure deal!



THE DEAD ARE ARISING: THE LIFE OF MALCOLM X
Les & Tamara Payne (Liveright)
Selected by Israr Hasan

My favorite book of 2020, which I read twice in two separate readings, is the latest fleshed out biography of Malcolm X. The book brings to life the vivid pageant of black resistance under oppression, and the will to confront the ideas of change and personal reinvention. It also charts the formation of one of 20th century’s most charismatic civil rights activists, whose thoughts saturate the ongoing social justice movements across the globe.

BANG!
Matt Kindt & Wilfredo Torres (Dark Horse Books)
Selected by Mir Zariqul Karim

Few books can entice more than with a cover quote from Keanu Reeves. Likening it to James Bond and *Tintin*, and with an unprintable adjective about the graphic novel’s mad-cap nature, the man wasn’t wrong. **BANG!** is absolutely all those things and more. When within the first few pages the suave and punchline-ready secret agent gets fatally shot and dumped into the ocean by what would normally be a prototypical Bond Girl, you know that things are going to spin out of control soon.



WRITERS & LOVERS
Lily King (Grove Press)
Selected by Towrin Zaman

Reading this felt akin to being hugged by a close friend. A story about a 31-year-old writer grappling with the mess that is her life, it is a book about writing a book. The prose enchanted me and the character and her journey will stay with me for a long, long time.

WHAT CAN A BODY DO? HOW DO WE MEET THE BUILT WORLD?
Sarah Hendren (Riverhead Books)
Selected by Selima Sara Kabir

This will definitely be a go-to suggestion for anyone looking to learn more about disabilities, or even just for its thought-provoking storytelling. I think it deserves to be added to college/university syllabi on diversity and inclusion.

