

OPINION

# Why Murakami resonates with young readers

In celebration of Haruki Murakami’s birthday on January 12, 2022.

**Murakami, being part of the youngest generation to take part in the Zenkyōtō movement, grappled, first-hand, with the struggles of identity crises, and questions regarding alienation and identity loss grew to be prominent themes in many of his most popular books.**

SHANJIDA NOWSHIN CHOWDHURY

Haruki Murakami is perhaps one of the most celebrated and well known writers of not only Japan but all of contemporary literature. His writing is humorous, hypnotic, and known to resonate deeply with the youth of every generation. But what is it about Murakami that gets young readers so enthralled? Is it the deadpan style of narration? The miniscule elements of fantasy rising out of the ordinary? Or maybe it's the absurdist sense of humour that has come to be a staple of Gen Z culture? If you asked me, I would tell you I didn't know. Not just because I didn't have the answer, but because Murakami didn't either.

Haruki Murakami, born in 1949, was part of the first generation of Japanese children born after the country's defeat in World War II. Japan, at that time, perplexed by their defeat, was about to embark on the largest socio-economic transformation in all of world history. By the time he reached his youth, Murakami found that the Japan he lived in was completely different from the one he was born into.

The 1960s brought about a time of great economic prosperity in Japan. The value of their currency increased exponentially, and the youth grew up paralysed by the silver spoons shoved into their mouths. With every material need met by a snap of the finger, their minds wandered to more philosophical questions: Who am I? What is my purpose in life?

Frustrated by their inability to find answers, and jealous of how the generation before them were able to draw meaning

by participating in the war, the youth of Murakami's generation decided to bear all of their frustration into one of the largest student protests in Japanese history: the Zenkyōtō movement, which rebelled against the US-Japan Security Treaty. However, the youth behind the rallies weren't just a band of rebellious youngsters. They were confused and alienated individuals, crying out to their motherland, all in the hopes of figuring out what their country meant to them, what they meant to their country, and more importantly, what they meant to themselves.

Murakami, being part of the youngest generation to take part in the Zenkyōtō movement, grappled, first-hand, with the struggles of identity crises, and questions regarding alienation and identity loss grew to be prominent themes in many of his most popular books. For the first few years of his writing career, Murakami avoided giving his characters proper names at all. Though the main characters' names would be mentioned in passing, for the majority of the story, Murakami—in his detached tone—would have characters use first-person narration, referring to themselves as "Boku" (The Japanese equivalent of "I").

In Murakami's later novels, though his characters grew to have proper names, the psychological impacts of alienation and identity loss became increasingly bleak in his writing.

The use of magic realism, a trademark of Murakami storytelling, only furthers the themes of identity loss by presenting a world that, despite being brutally rooted in reality, does not deny the absurdity of

everyday existence. The incorporation of magic into mundane settings allows Murakami to capture the uncertainty and confusion with which young people navigate their way through the world.

As a young Bangladeshi reader, I had a limited understanding of what the Japanese youth of Murakami's generation felt about losing their sense of national identity at the hands of Western capitalism. However, something I did relate to was the longing to feel connected to my country, be it through pleasure or pain. With 50 years under its belt, the Bangladesh Liberation War is something people my age have no personal memories of. With an independent country and endless possibilities, a new generation of youth are forced to tackle those same questions Murakami once did; what do I mean to my country and what does my country mean to me?

So, to come back to the original question, what is it about Murakami that hits so close to home for young readers? I'd argue that it is the unknowability of it all. It is about his stories having ambiguous endings, how the characters venture in search for answers only to end up having more questions, or the lingering confusion lying at the corner of every page. Murakami's writing effortlessly achieves what not many writers can: a shared connection with his readers about how life is a whirlwind in which there are far too many questions and never enough answers.

Shanjida Nowshin Chowdhury is an English major at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

Design: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

## Paulo Coelho, where are you?

OYESSORZO RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

I love it when Paulo Coelho's books start with a challenge or a quest, and *The Archer* (Penguin Random House, 2020), accordingly, does not fail to open with an intriguing pursuit. Upon reading the prologue, I thought I was in for a good read; it was rich and humorous, and in line with the writer's usual mystical tone.

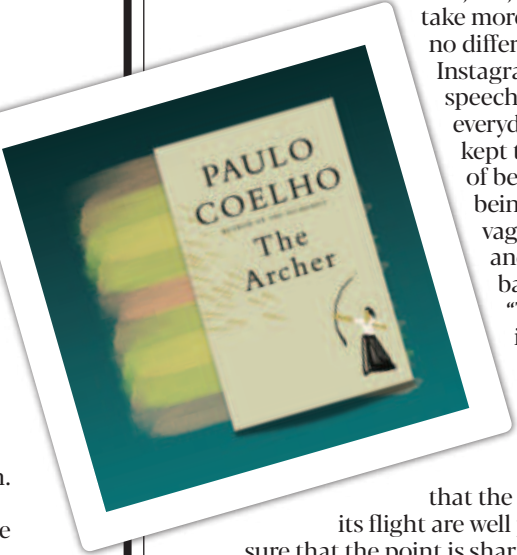
The book follows the stories of Tetsuya, a once master archer who has since become a recluse, a stranger who travels a long way to prove that his archery skills are superior to that of Tetsuya's, and a little village boy who witnesses it all. The plot reminded me of *The Alchemist* (first published in 1988) and the pursuit of realising one's own legend, and I was thrilled at the prospect of discovering the quest through which the stranger overpowers his doubts and insecurities. Much to my disappointment, I found the following pages did not have a strong plotline, but were instead filled with advice for the little boy. Reading about the definitions, characteristics and the mechanism of bows and arrows, veiled by metaphors, was much too theoretical and dreary for me.

The story itself felt like reading motivational quotes on Pinterest instead of a novel. I am personally not against motivational quotes, but lines like, "Join with all those who experiment, take risks, fall, get hurt, and then take more risks" sounded no different from fluffy Instagram motivational speech we come across everyday. Besides, they kept to their ill-repute of being badly written—being sometimes too vague, too technical, and often, outright banal. For instance, "To hold the arrow is to be in touch with your own intention. You must look along the whole length of the arrow, check that the feathers guiding its flight are well placed, and make sure that the point is sharp". They stuck out even more because Paulo Coelho has always been a sophisticated writer. And even though the book adheres with the enlightening tone Coelho usually commands, it does not hold the reader's attention because it is not in touch with a compelling story.

I applaud Coelho for choosing a unique approach for this book and appreciate the pep talk and timely effort for advocating mental well being, but cannot get over how cliched and generic the approach was in this book. I patiently expected this rambling to end and hoped for the story introduced in the prologue to take a turn; it never did. A 130-page book, with more than a quarter filled with illustrations by Christoph Neiman and half empty pages, *The Archer* did not come close to any of the other books Coelho has written previously.

We can't possibly know about a writer's motivation behind writing their books, but I do feel readers try to find the author's mark in their works. And I, despite being a fan, could not find Paulo Coelho in *The Archer*.

Oyessorzo is a humanitarian worker. Collage: MAISHA SYEDA

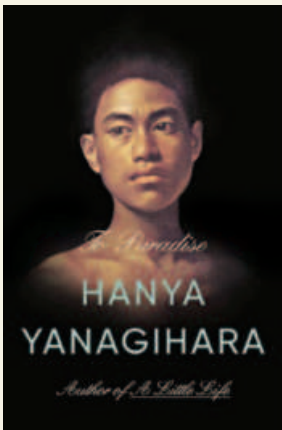


THE SHELF

# New books by favourite authors in the first quarter of 2022

MD TANJIM HOSSAIN |

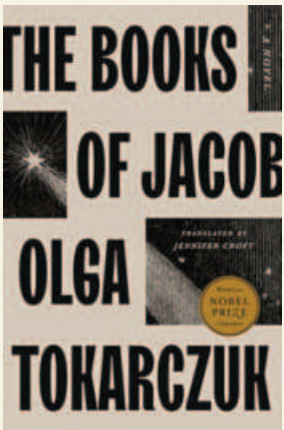
**Read an extended version of this list on The Daily Star website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.**



**To Paradise**  
Hanya Yanagihara (Doubleday)  
An alternate history of America circa 1893, the contemporary Manhattan bustle of 1993, and a futuristic totalitarian nation in 2093: Hanya Yanagihara, author of the bestselling book, *A Little Life* (2015), threads together three different timelines of the American experiment in his latest novel, *To Paradise*.  
Release Date: January 11



**The Christie Affair**  
Nina de Gramont (Mantle)  
Possibly the greatest mystery writer of all time, Agatha Christie, went missing for 11 days in August 1926. While her whereabouts during this period still remain a mystery, Nina de Gramont provides some insights into her story of a real world crisis.  
Release Date: February 1



**The Books of Jacob**  
Olga Tokarczuk (Riverhead Books)  
Spoken through multiple perspectives, Noble prize winner Tokarczuk's new book portrays historical figure Jacob Frank's charismatic spell which leads him to explore numerous empires, like the Hapsburg and the Ottoman, and religions and sects, like Islam and Catholicism.  
Release date: February 1



**All My Rage**  
Sabaa Tahir (Razorbill)  
The Cloud's Rest Inn at Juniper, California, is the product of many dreams by Misbah and Toufiq in Lahore. But in the midst of their dreams, arrive unforeseen events tearing them both in different directions. Having grown up in her family motel, it comes as no surprise to find a book with these elements by Sabaa Tahir.  
Release date: March 1



**Young Mungo**  
Douglas Stuart (Grove Press)  
Having won the 2020 Booker prize with *Shuggie Bain*, Stuart encompasses a broad social canvas in his new book. Set in Glasgow 1992 during a turbulent time for the Catholics and the Protestants, this provocative new book explores the divisions of sectarianism as two young men fall in love with each other.  
Release Date: April 5



**Time is a Mother**  
Ocean Vuong (Jonathan Cape)  
In this deeply intimate poetry collection, Vuong, author of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, grieves at the aftermath of his mother's death and faces the paradox of despair while also wanting to move forward.  
Release date: April 7



**Either/Or**  
Elif Batuman (Jonathan Cape)  
In this sequel to the entertaining and intellectually stimulating *The Idiot, Either/Or* follows Harvard student Selin on her exploration through literature and her efforts to fuse into her life, as she faces an exciting Summer in 1996.  
Release date: May 26

Md Tanjim Hossain is a contributor.