

# WE READ MORE, THEY SOLD LESS

How the second year of pandemic continues to affect the local reading culture

SARAH ANJUM BARI

If you're part of social media's book-reading community in Bangladesh, you'll remember the initial slump in and then an outburst of posts on how much people were reading books. The first few months of Bangladesh's first lockdown in 2020 had brought the flurry of books across the country almost to a standstill, first with physical bookstores closing up, and then Rokomari halting their delivery services.

It wouldn't be until May of that year that bookshops would start reopening, and double down on their home delivery services. By then, local businesses operating in the book trade were forced to consider closing shop. Independent bookstores near Dhaka's Elephant Road could no longer make rent, with not a single customer visiting their store. Years-old bookshops in Nilkhet, which relied primarily on selling textbooks to students, were forced to close down. Street hawkers suffered the worst, seeing little to no sales at all. By the time bookshops were receiving walk-in customers again, in October 2020, they had also started seeing delays in their shipments from India and other neighbouring countries, with consignments reaching them weeks or even months late, and books reaching them in damaged states.

Readers, however, remember the last two years rather differently.

"2020: 7 books. 2021: 31 books", says Tasneem Tambawala, teacher and founder of the Bookcentric library.

"I lost my job due to the pandemic and I had to find a way to stay sane so I reverted

to childhood joys and hobbies", Tashfia Ahmed, a high school Maths teacher, tells The Daily Star. "Reading was at the top of the list".

Another reader shares that they haven't read this much in years. "My marriage fell



ILLUSTRATIONS:  
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apart during the pandemic, so reading helped me cope with the crushing loneliness. I've always been a reader but a relationship without peace takes a lot of time commitments. When I stopped giving time to that, I just had more time in hand."

Nearly all the readers interviewed echo the sentiment that the past two years have somehow changed their interaction with books.

Qazi Mustabeen Noor, a former lecturer in the English department of University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), shares that it made her more restless and unable to focus on books. "I force myself to settle down and read", she says.

"Social media is a distraction", Redwan Islam Oritro, digital media advertiser and co-founder of Bookstagram BD on Facebook, shares.

Others explain that the looser structure of working from home and attending online classes, as well as the act of seeking

reprieve from all the personal grief Covid-19 brought to families, has allowed them to nurture their relationship with books in a way that the daily chaos of work or student life doesn't allow. It has helped them face mental health crises caused by feelings of claustrophobia during lockdown, when a close one passed away, or when the struggling economy enforced layoffs in workplaces. For some, it meant venturing out into genres and authors beyond their comfort zones.

"Books like Candice Cartie-Williams' *Queenie* helped me see my trauma from a more objective perspective and inspired me to go back to therapy. Books like *Mexican Gothic* by Sylvia Moreno Garcia made me reflect on romantic attachment and open up about it in said therapy. Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* made being a half-half third culture kid with an identity crisis feel seen. Reading, I repeat, is everything", Tashfia Ahmed shares.

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The memory of last year's Amar Ekushey Boi Mela is perhaps still fresh in many of our minds — the promise of a virtual Boi Mela followed by a twice-postponed in-person event that eventually saw limited visitors and books and stalls drenched in the storm of March 2021.

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পছন্দ ও প্রয়োজন অনুযায়ী বেছে নিন যেমনটা আপনার চাই  
আধুনিক ইসলামী ব্যাংকিংয়ের ধারাবাহিকতায়  
এক্সিম ব্যাংকের

আকর্ষণীয় আমানত হিসাবসমূহ

- মুদারাবা কোটপতি আমানত প্রকল্প**: "সঞ্চয়ে পাঁচা সুদিনের স্বপ্ন"
- মুদারাবা সেনামোহর/বিবাহ আমানত প্রকল্প**: "আর তোমরা ত্রীণগকে তাদের সেনামোহর সন্তুষ্টিতে দিয়ে দাও" পূর্ব নিয়ম, আগের ২২
- মুদারাবা হজ আমানত প্রকল্প**: "আপনার হজ্জ হোক স্বাস্থ্যশ্যামল"
- মুদারাবা কাপ কয়তুক আমানত**: "ইহসৌকিক শান্তি-পারলৌকিক মুক্তি"
- এক্সিম কনসারভেটিভ এক্সিম বিয়োসেভ**: "তিন বছরে থিওপ"\*
- এক্সিম পেন্সন**: "প্রয়োজনের মুহূর্তে নিরাপত্তার আশ্বাস"
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- আল ওয়ানিয়ার চলতি আমানত**: "আমানত থাকুক সুরক্ষিত"
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  - মুদারাবা হাউজিং / অট্টোপ্রেনারশিপ ডেভেলপমেন্ট প্রকল্প
- মুদারাবা সঞ্চয়ী আমানত**: "সঞ্চয়ের গুরু এখানেই"
- মুদারাবা মাসিক সঞ্চয়ী আমানত প্রকল্প**: "মাসিক সঞ্চয়ে বার্ষিক মুনাফা"

\*\*এক্সিম ব্যাংকের সকল হিসাব শরীয়াহ্ মোতাবেক পরিচালিত হওয়ায় মুনাফার হার কম/বেশি হতে পারে

**EXIM** এক্সিমপোর্ট ইমপোর্ট ব্যাংক  
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