**SEGMENT 3** 

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ANNIVERSARY SUPPLEMENTS 2022 ENTERTAINING A NEW WORLD

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## 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 bookreading 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.

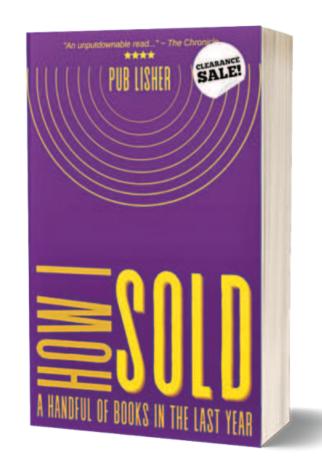
Years-old bookshops in Nilkhet, which relied primarily on selling textbooks to students, were forced to close down. Street hawkers suffered the worst, seeing little to no sales at all.

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. Yearsold 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

In a report published in The Daily Star in August 2020, Shamal Paul, vice president of the Bangladesh Publishers & Book-Sellers Association (BAPUS), was quoted as estimating the total value lost to the pandemic, including creative, academic and other related books taken into consideration, between Tk 2,500 and Tk 3,000 crore.

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.

says. "Social media is a distraction", Redwan Islam Orittro, 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 twicepostponed 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 একিমা রোগেকের

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