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## Influence over quality: Who are the bestselling authors at the Boi Mela?

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In 2019, when a Bangladeshi female comedian published a book, she immediately captured people's attention with memorable lines like "My sister's best friend Anusha is like a sister. Her family and my family are like family."

Some readers were offended by the book's overall quality of writing and expression. Others outspokenly defended the young woman's right to express herself; an article even compared her to Jane Austen. In recent years, books by comedians, influencers, YouTubers and other internet personalities have dominated sales at the Ekushey Boi Mela.

If younger, creative individuals are gravitating towards the traditional written medium, when online platforms for self-expression are abundant, that must surely be indicative of a flourishing local publishing scene or perhaps of an audience that really wants to read?

It's difficult to find conviction in either answer. Firstly, criticism of the quality of these books by readers and critics alike is abundant. When it comes to fiction, criticism can of course be subjective. Yet, because a book bends genres or breaks traditionally upheld conventions of writing, it doesn't earn its right to be lauded for its originality, especially when the quality of writing is below par at best.

The least readers can expect is for these authors to work on their craft and hone their quality of writing, but perhaps many aren't intending to establish their career or identity around writing in the first place, with their authorship coming like a deal later in their established careers, the way celebrities endorse brands.

A large portion of the non-fiction titles are also self-help and motivational books. In the age of hustle culture when young people feel suffocated in the rat race and it seems every other person on social media is more successful than you are, the appeal of self-help and motivational books isn't difficult to comprehend.

Words of enthusiasm can do wonders for young people who need the inspiration but don't hear it in their own surroundings. It, however, becomes a problem when these words tread into the territory of dangerously asking young people to expect success if they "grind", and extend oversimplified, vague platitudes as their guidance.

These books also ignore many realities – as much as we want to believe hard work guarantees success and that every one of our business idols are self-made, many have benefited from privilege, networks, or other intangible benefits which we cannot count on for ourselves.

Finally, we have to ask if these books by popular figures are bestsellers because of their genuine quality as a publication, or because of the influence of the author? If it is the latter, then is the way to secure one's position as a bestselling author to establish oneself online as a popular personality first?

Authorship doesn't come easy for most. Aspiring young authors often struggle to launch their career, with royalties of book sales, striking a deal with a publisher and even finding an audience all being difficult parts of the road to publication.

Clearly, I'm asking more questions than I have answers to. I just hope as a reader, authors and publishing houses reward me for picking up their work.

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# How English gives you an unfair advantage

**MATILDA**

What is the common metric used to judge a job applicant, a prospective partner, or a South Asian cricketer after a match? Their fluency in English.

English is often called the lingua franca of the modern world, as close as we've gotten to a universal language. That there is immense demand for English proficiency is obvious to anyone who has come to Dhaka. Advertisements of educational institutions, online education platforms and specific training institutions promising improvement in English within a short period of time cover every kind of surface in public spaces in the form of bright yellow posters.

The need for English seems ubiquitous in Bangladesh. Jobs require it, and universities use it as a means to not just judge who gets a scholarship but even decides who gets admission in many circumstances. In a study carried out by Centre for Policy Dialogue and the Bangladesh office of the German social development organisation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 46 per cent of employers claimed to be unable to find appropriately skilled graduates, with low English proficiency being one of the chief issues.

The pervasiveness of the benefits provided by the ability to speak English, from increased geographical mobility (think people being denied visas for inad-

equate language skills) to social mobility (recall fear of judgement and aforementioned study) are undoubtable. However, what often gets lost in this race to learn English is the consideration of whether this is desirable.

The sheer size of England's colonial empire is a testament to the influence it wielded back then. The fact that one of the chief sources of culture cringe here involves people of our country speaking English poorly with foreigners is a testament to how colonial practices have influenced us to this day.

Students might be familiar with the infamous Minute on Education (1835) penned by Thomas Babbington Macaulay where he stated "it is universally felt that the Sanskrit and Arabic are languages the knowledge of which does not compensate for the trouble of acquiring them" and "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia". This is merely one of the many ways in which English slowly came to be dominant. With the case of Bangladesh, the matter takes on a deeper note with the prominent issue of language in the struggle for independence.

However, the fact remains that acquiring English language skills has become almost essential. The point isn't to feel guilt regarding the learning of a language, but rather to be aware of how it came to attain the power



it has in the modern world. English has not come to occupy the position it has today in an innocent manner, and to be unaware of this creates conditions where we repeat the mistakes made by colonisers.

Recognising this is imperative, not just for understanding the necessity of learning and preserving other languages, but also to prevent us from walking on the same unfortunate paths already carved out in history.

*Reference*

TBS News (December 4, 2021). 46% employers do not get the skills they want: Study

*Matilda sincerely believes it is always other people's fault. Tell her she's right at matilda.tilda1234@gmail.com*