

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Mapping the mangrove forest

The British East India Company took control over this region (including the Sundarbans) in 1757. By 1770, they started to convert the forest lands of the Sundarbans to agricultural land and started commercial logging. Some two hundred years ago, the Sundarbans comprised double than its current area, around 10,000 square km of which 60 percent lies in Bangladesh.

PINAKI ROY

Only a few people have both knowledge of and love for the Sundarbans.

Professor Monirul H Khan, author of *Sundarbans: The World Heritage* (Nymphaea Publications, 2021), who has been working on the home of the Bengal tiger for more than two decades, has both—immense knowledge about the mysterious mangrove forest and also love for it.

“The author-cum-photographer of this book has many years of experience working in the Sundarbans region and I consider him as an authority on the Sundarbans”, Professor Ainun Nishat, former Vice Chancellor of BRAC University, writes in her foreword for the book.

Professor Khan, a faculty of the Zoology department at Jahangirnagar University, has written the 362-page book using existing data on different aspects of the Sundarbans that are often not easily accessible. He makes use of 262 photographs and 20 artworks, almost all of the photos taken by the author himself. These images are not only beautiful, but are also valuable documentation of rare wildlife species and other forest dwellers, their livelihoods, and important cultural practices of the region.

All aspects of the Sundarbans—from its history to its biodiversity, from the people's professions to their cultures, and even the potential threats to conservation—are covered in the book.

Conversely, it is different from other literature on the Sundarbans that have been published so far, as it covers regions of the Sundarbans in both Bangladesh and India.

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The earliest reference to the Sundarbans, according to Professor Khan, can be traced back to the epic *Mahabharata* (around 300 BC to 300 AD), in which the eldest and second Pandava brothers, Yudhishtira and Bhima, visited Gangasagar (literary meaning “place where river Ganges met the sea”) during their pilgrimage.

Even today, thousands of Hindu pilgrims visit Sagor island in the Indian Sundarbans and Dubla Island in the Bangladesh

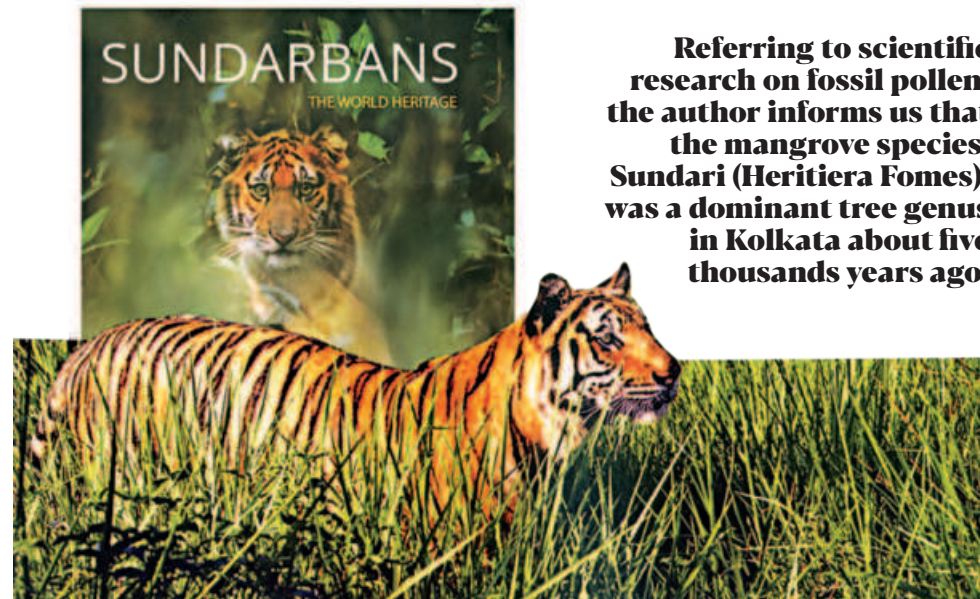
Sundarbans. Through his discussion of these rituals, the author shows how the culture, myths, and beliefs of the people of this region are evolving, centering the Sundarbans, from a very ancient time.

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which literally means ‘maternal uncle’.

“There were [...] tigers in 11 districts out of 17 of the British Bengal till 1930”, the author writes. This large predator was so abundant and widespread that it was treated as a menace, and the government used to pay bounty for killing tigers.

Citing *Banglar Shikar Prani* by Satish Mitra, the author mentions Pachabdi Gazi, the last remaining hunter from the traditional hunter family from the



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two hundred years ago, the Sundarbans comprised double than its current area, around 10,000 square km of which 60 percent lies in Bangladesh. As the book's appendix reveals, 76 mangrove plants, 44 mammals, 374 birds, 68 reptiles, 16 amphibians, 380 fish and 82 crustaceans are to be found in these forests. The land and ecosystem serve as a natural barrier against cyclones and save millions of lives and agricultural fields in the north.

Apart from these discussions on how the forest came into existence and how it has survived destructive human practices, the book narrates valuable details, one of which are conservation efforts to save the big cats.

In the chapter titled “Iconic Tiger”, Professor Khan states, “Out of fear and respect, the local people call it ‘mama’,

Sundarbans region, who killed the last tigers on January 20, 1987. Gazi killed 57 tigers in his lifetime. Currently, the entire Sundarbans holds only around 210 tigers—the national animal of both India and Bangladesh.

“The book is a significant addition to our campaign for ‘Promoting Bangladesh’ and an exploration of the Sundarbans through the lens of ecological diversity, culture, and livelihoods”, Karunangshu Barua writes in his publisher's note for the book.

The book is available at the stall of Nymphaea Publications at the Ekushey Boi Mela.

Pinaki Roy is Chief Reporter, The Daily Star. Collage: Orchid Chakma

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Denise Mina's 'Rizzio'

A bloody slice of Scottish history

JAHN KAISSAR

In 2021, Polygon, an Edinburgh-based publisher, launched the Darkland Tales, a series of “dramatic fictional retellings of stories from history, myth and legend” written by Scotland's greatest contemporary writers. Denise Mina's novella *Rizzio* is the first in the series.

A tour de force of interwoven perspectives and psychological suspense, its action largely unfolding over the course of one fateful weekend, *Rizzio* dramatises the brutal assassination of David Rizzio, private secretary and friend to Mary, Queen of Scots, and its immediate aftermath.

On March 9, 1566, Edinburgh's Holyrood Palace, like the rest of Scotland, is replete with political intrigue and religious divisions. Parliament is in session, preparing to divest the heavily pregnant Queen's remaining rivals of their lands, powers, and titles. What Mary does not know is that there is a mob of conspirators, mainly Protestant nobles, who are brewing a murderous plot.



They plan to weaken Mary's power by murdering her right-hand man, Rizzio, on the premise that he is a papal spy. Even Lord Darnley, Mary's husband and king consort, sides with the treasonous nobles, hoping that his wife witnesses the bloody scene and miscarries her baby.

However, the coup does not go as smoothly as planned, and Mary must find a way to survive a treacherous political landscape.

Queen Mary's story, a story of murder, sex, religion, rivalries, and unsuitable lovers, has captured the imagination of numerous historians and writers. By focusing on Rizzio's assassination, an episode that is often overlooked in the queue of infamous events in Mary's life, Mina offers a new take on a bloodstained chapter of Scottish history. It is worth noting that *Rizzio* is written in current vernacular, attesting to the fact that we can only understand the past through the modern lens.

In the novella, Mina provides insights on themes such as misogyny, religious turmoil, and politics

of power. In an era dominated by men, Mary wears the crown. However, since she is not respected by the Protestant lords due to her gender, religion, and background, she becomes the victim of their political machinations. Despite witnessing Rizzio's gruesome murder and becoming a prisoner in her own palace, Mary manages to turn things around for herself. With her political astuteness and with the help of her allies, she outsmarts the power-hungry men and becomes a survivor. It should be noted that not all of the men

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in the novella are greedy, dastardly, one-dimensional characters. Mina's portrayal of Mary's husband Darnley, for example, is at once contemptuous and sympathetic. On one hand, she describes him as a philanderer leading a life of debauchery despite his aspirations for the Crown Matrimonial. On the other hand, she recognizes his weaknesses—his gullibility and his fragile self-esteem—that initially cause him to betray Mary.

Mina also questions the belief that history is determined by men. Several times throughout the novella, the narrator refers to the major players in Rizzio's assassination—the Protestant nobles—as “The Great Men of History.” These are the men “who fill history books with their squabbles and claims and resentments...These men know they are great. They feel confident that they have just changed the course of history with their forcefulness and righteous vigour. They haven't”. These men are ultimately just self-important nobles, driven by personal gain rather than by higher motives they try to ascribe to their actions. As Mina thus demonstrates in the novella, sometimes it only takes a middle-aged woman with a piss pot to change the course of history.

Rizzio reads like a spare but searing historical account, drawing on the psychological riches and vivid details that only fiction can provide, yet creating a narrative so emotive and raw that it feels as if the author had lived through the events she presents. It is a must-read for those who are fond of historical fiction.

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THE SHELF

Books to better understand the Ukraine-Russia conflict

STAR BOOKS REPORT

UKRAINE'S MAIDAN, RUSSIA'S WAR: A CHRONICLE AND ANALYSIS OF THE REVOLUTION OF DIGNITY
Mychailo Wynnyckyj
Ibidem Press, 2019

Mychailo Wynnyckyj, associate professor of sociology at the National University Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, was a regular commentator and analyst for English-language media outlets during the 2013–2014 Maidan protests and during the early years of Russian aggression in the Crimea and Donbas. In this book, Wynnyckyj offers the history of the ongoing war between Ukraine's Maidan and Russia—a conflict that was sparked in 2014, when the government

attacked peaceful students and Ukrainians rallied against the corrupt Moscow-backed regime.

PUTIN'S PEOPLE: HOW THE KGB TOOK BACK RUSSIA AND THEN TOOK ON THE WEST

Catherine Belton
William Collins, 2020

Investigative journalist and former Moscow correspondent Catherine Belton begins the scope of this book from the fall of the Soviet regime, and unveils the story of Putin's and his KGB men's ascent to power. She taps into how Putin restructured the workings of the Kremlin “with a new generation of loyal oligarchs”, as a result of which Russia experienced a revamped economy, with greater reach into USA and Europe.

THE ROAD TO UNFREEDOM: RUSSIA, EUROPE, AMERICA

Timothy Snyder
Tim Duggan Books, 2019

Comprising a wide scope of research and personal reporting, Snyder, Levin Professor of History at Yale University, frames his analysis of Putin's Russia in his reliance on the philosophies of Russian-born Ilyin, who died in exile in Switzerland in 1954. Ilyin favoured Hitler and Mussolini, and proposed a Russian fascism that would dispel the effects of the 1917 Revolution. Snyder's retelling of contemporary events in Russia touch upon the role played by human and digital propaganda, and how Russia then attempted to export this policy across its borders.

ON OUR WAY HOME FROM THE REVOLUTION: REFLECTIONS ON UKRAINE

Sonya Bilocerkowycz
Mad Creek Books, 2019

A Fulbright grantee in Belarus, Sonya Bilocerkowycz, in her essays, writes of post-Soviet characters such as a Russian intelligence officer who found Osama bin Laden shortly after 9/11, a Ukrainian poet in conflict with Russian separatists, a relative who confronts Chernobyl, and more. As a member of the Ukrainian-American diaspora, she melds personal narrative with political analysis and commentary on Ukraine's history, culture, myths, tracing the trajectory of past revolutions to mull over the potential of future ones.



YOUR BOI MELA STORIES

NAZMUS SADAT

I had started reading books when I was in class three, and I inadvertently found lots of books for me in my father's bookshelf, which he had started buying from the year I was born. He was probably planning to give them to me at a much later date, but had I instantly become friends with those books.

After that, going to book fairs and buying books became a tradition for me. It started with going with my parents and I continued to do so with my relatives, friends, potential love interests, colleagues, and if no one was available, then all by myself. This year, however, was different.

On February 5, my father was diagnosed with stage III colon cancer. Between his surgery, my hectic office schedule, and a professional course, it was hard to find time to go to this year's Ekushey Boi Mela. But on February 20, I found an opportunity and went to the fair. I didn't have much time, so I went straight to buying books that were on my Goodreads “To Read” list. I bought *Mrityu-Khudha*, *Badhon-Hara*, *Kuhelika*, and *Shiuli-Mala* by our national poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam; *Cancer-er Satho Bosobas* by Jahanara Imam for my mother; and *New China 1952* by Bongobondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, for my father.

Afterwards, I started looking around a bit—not all the book stalls were open. The venue was full of beautiful people, even in this pandemic. I noticed that some people were reluctant to wear masks.

Everyone was looking through books for themselves or their loved ones. All the stalls and pavilions were decorated in their own unique way. In particular, the Katha Prakash pavilion caught my eyes. However, I felt the necessity for more information desks as, at times, it was difficult to find the desired bookstalls, but the overall experience was exhilarating as always.

Amar Ekushey Boi Mela 2022 has truly created an ocean of books for book-lovers and spread positivity and joy during this difficult time.

Sadly, I had to rush back to the hospital soon after. And although I am not a kid anymore, I really hope I will be able to go with my father to the book fair next year.

To have your Boi Mela experience featured on The Daily Star, send us your story and your name to thedailystarbooks@gmail.com.