

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A big step forward in the country’s comic book industry

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KAISAR KABIR

When I saw the first public announcement of *Protibastob* (Dhaka Comics, 2022) on social media, I knew right away that this was going to be something special. Immediately I did two things: I pre-ordered two copies, and I messaged the Editor of Daily Star Books to call dibs on reviewing it. Sarah Anjum Bari gracefully agreed.

I got the package from Dhaka Comics a few weeks later. I unwrapped it carefully and found, to my pleasant surprise, that it wasn't only the book in the pack, with the title and cover art designed on it—there was also a sticker set of fascinating looking characters and a poster of the book as well.

The dust jacket on the book depicts a post-apocalyptic world where nature has overtaken an urban city due to human neglect—with the sun on the horizon, a girl is sitting on a thick vine wrapped around the remnants of what appears to be a tall building. Near her, a cat is sitting atop the hood of a rickshaw without wheels. While the artwork fascinated me, I couldn't help notice that the title, *Protibastob Comics Shongkolon 2022*, was not well aligned. I took off the dust jacket and found that the hardcover of the book was in black, and the name in silver. Below it was a silver

silhouette of the 'futuristic Subodh' from the sticker set. I couldn't wait to dive in.

*Protibastob* is perhaps the first of its kind in the country—the biggest anthology of original comic books focusing on young and super-talented artists. The 22 stories are written by popular, contemporary writers with big names such as Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, Ahsan Habib, and Mehedi Haque. Their stories are fun to read, nine of which are written by the artists themselves. Genre-wise, they are pleasantly diverse, including sci-fi, horror, adventure, fantasy, and so on, and most of them, regardless of genre, brought unexpected turns at the end that I could not predict. A few that I particularly enjoyed were 'Eka', 'Quarantined', 'Daini', 'Nishongota', and 'Kissa'.

The collection has a few feel-good stories which young children would really enjoy—one called "Summer", which is about a cat not feeling loved by her owners; "Harano Ebong Pawa", about a little girl always losing her things mysteriously; "Krakra", about a young crow being ridiculed for his 'sweet' voice; and a few others. However, given that a lot of the other stories have dark undertones and violence in them, including serial killing and body horror elements, and sci-fi and horror stories where the monsters have the last laugh—I would not recommend this book for readers below their

teen years.

Each of the 22 artists in the book shines bright in their own unique colours (pun not intended, with 19 of the stories drawn in black and white). Intricate background details of futuristic worlds, manga-like look and feel, well-drawn body horror elements, minimalist art—this book has got it all!

Jumping from one story to another with a completely different art-style is something that I immensely enjoyed because there was always something new. I found the dynamic and 'fast-paced' art of "Chhut" delightful, as well as the immaculately detailed world of a post-apocalyptic time in "Eka". The simplistic art of "Quarantined" and the innovative panelling of "Oshombhob Chur" caught my attention as well. This book can serve as a great case study for up-and-coming comic book artists in the country.

As bonus content, there is a very well-researched and detailed article on the history and evolution of Bangla comics. Two insightful interviews are also included. One by Sankha Banerjee, the artist of *The Mahabharata* graphic novel, whose work I have always heard about but never got the opportunity to experience—which will soon change, thanks to the inclusion of his interview. The other is of Dave Gibbons, the artist of *Watchmen*, one of the best graphic novels ever created.

In his interview, Gibbons offers a glimpse of the differences between the US and UK comic book industry—how in the UK, comic books were mostly black and white, while the advent of colourful comics in America was compared to colour television. Furthermore, I found out, wasn't entirely accurate.

*Protibastob* is a big step forward in the evolution of the Bangladeshi comic book industry and I dearly hope that Dhaka Comics makes this a yearly publication where popular writers join forces with talented young artists to create something that is truly unique, fascinating, and celebratory of this visually engaging mode of story-telling.

Read an excerpt of Shankha Banerjee's interview on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages.

Kaisar Kabir is a pop-culture enthusiast and a former radio show host currently earning dough in the content industry.

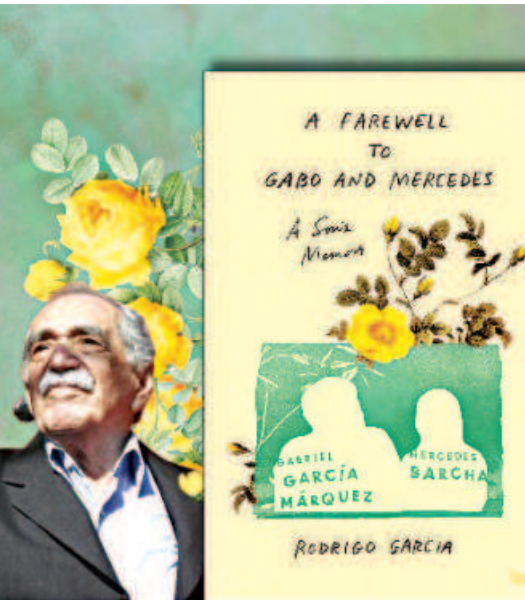


PHOTO: REUTERS; COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Thus, we bid goodbye to Gabo and Mercedes

USRAAT FAHIMDAH

Gabriel Garcia Marquez once famously said, "All human beings have three lives: public, private, and secret."

Although we are quite familiar with the author's much celebrated public life, *A Farewell to Gabo and Mercedes* (HarperCollins, 2021) is a memoir by his son, Rodrigo, that offers us an intimate look into Garcia's "private" life. When Rodrigo received a call from his mother in March 2014, that his father had been in bed with a cold for two days, he didn't think it was unusual. But he was alarmed by Mercedes' prognosis. "This time it's different".

And so Rodrigo Garcia, a prominent director, then took up the tricky task of recording the events as they unfolded while balancing between the "private" and "public" as the narrator. On one hand, he was witnessing his beloved father's last days, and on the other he had the daunting task of writing about one of the greatest writers of all time.

The book is barely 120 pages; a two hour read at most. The chapters aren't long or stretched out. The honest detailing is what makes this book beautiful. The sincere language lends the memoir brevity that makes it difficult for me to review it. No one else could have written this book better than Garcia's son.

Garcia, called lovingly Gabo by his family, has a timeless legacy to his name. The Colombian writer is a much celebrated public figure in his country and worldwide since winning the Nobel Prize in Literature 1982. Despite all that success, Gabo managed to maintain a light-hearted and humble persona throughout his life. This memoir paints a picture of exactly that with its intimate account.

It comprises only five chapters. Each starts with an epigraph that quotes Gabo's most famous works—*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The General in his Labyrinth*, *Love in the Time of Cholera*—as a way of paying tribute to the author's legacy. As you near the end of the book and read about life slowly ebbing away from Gabo, each of the epigraphs serve as a stark reminder of his timeless and eternal legacy.

One beautiful aspect that no one can take away from this book is the account of a writer's relationship with writing during his last days. "Memory is my tool and my raw material. I cannot work without it", Gabo pleads. As he battles with dementia, we see how it affects his grip on memory and reality, a writer's most treasured possessions. His son realizes the most brutal thing to happen to a writer is this. But the brilliance of Gabo shines even in these last days. Despite all the health struggles, he's joking with the nurses, listening to vallenatos—his favorite form of music—and playfully cursing "jerk" in his native language.

After Gabo's death, Rodrigo shares their struggle as a family coping with the grief. "My mother hasn't returned to the study (Garcia's study) and never will", he writes.

In 2020, Mercedes too passed away after her lungs gave up from years of heavy smoking. She was a resilient figure. When Gabo was working on *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, she took up the mantle of family affairs so Gabo could work on the book without any distractions. Later, when they needed money to send that manuscript to a publication, she pawned off the last of her things—a heater, hair dryer and blender—to send the draft to the publishers.

After both his parents' passing, Rodrigo shares his grief that'll resonate with anyone who has lost a loved one. "The death of the second parents is like looking through a telescope one night and no longer finding a planet that has always been there. It has vanished, with its religion, its customs, its own peculiar habits and rituals, big and small. The echo remains", he writes.

"My father complained that one of the things he hated the most about death was that it would be the only aspect of his life he wouldn't be able to write about", Rodrigo writes in a later section. "Everything he lived through, witnessed, and thought was in his books, fictionalized or ciphered."

With this emotional memoir, a son shares his father and mother with the world in a way no one else could have done.

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BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

Poems well worth waiting for

FAKRUL ALAM

Ahaduzzaman Mohammad Ali's first book of poems came out more than two years ago. In reviewing it now, the first thing that comes to my mind is what Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote on July 21, 1855 to Walt Whitman. The poet had self-published *Leaves of Grass* earlier that year and then sent it to the apostle of American transcendentalism, Emerson. He had famously responded by writing to Whitman thus: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start."

Only time will tell whether Ahad will have a great career as a poet or not, but when I finished reading *Nakhshatra Nivey Jai* (Anyaprakash, 2020), my immediate feeling was that this may be a very impressive debut volume and Ahad might be publishing his first book of verse in his mid-60s, but he must have immersed himself in the craft of poetry for a long, long time. For sure, he must have been writing poems on and off without thinking of publishing them till now to have produced verse of this quality in a debut volume.

Ahad's preface bears out this line of thought. He says there that he had been reading poetry all his life, written a few poems as juvenilia, and some more later, but for some time had never thought of publishing them. A teacher of Dhaka University's Department of Mass Communication and Journalism till June 2019, he goes on to say, he first presented his first poem publically in a departmental wall magazine at the requests of students three decades ago. What readers of *Nakhshatra Nivey Jai* come across, then, are thoughtful and feelingly written as well as delicately crafted poems by a mature poet who had honed his poetic skills over decades.

Ahad's book is divided into two parts. The first part, titled "Khoano Shabder Lesh" (Traces of Lost Words), begins in the elegiac mode. These poems are dedicated to his wife and departmental colleague Sitara Parvin, also once Professor of Mass Communications and Journalism at Dhaka University, who had tragically died in a car crash in the USA in 2005. The dedication and the title tell us how intense grief

led Ahad to poetry. Indeed, readers will find in the opening poems of the book an intense and moving lyrical record of his feelings about their relationship after she had passed away.

The first two dozen poems or so of *Nakhshatra Nivey Jai* reveal the poet musing on the past and their relationship—from the spring days of courtship to seemingly inconsolable grief, to acceptance of a kind, and intensely felt hope of reunion in another world. Missing the loved one, yearning to be with her, feeling at times that he is all alone on an unending path, wanting his memory to continually refresh his stock of images of her, recalling the dreaded moment of the news that she is no more—these are all quite moving, poignant poems.

Midway into the first part of *Nakhshatra Nivey Jai*, however, we see the poet moving towards acceptance of the loss that had traumatized him so. He now resolves to depend on his memories of his loved one to cope with her absence. But he knows he has to go beyond grief and once again become part of the workaday world, which in

his case means his academic career, the university he loves and students, whose liveliness can rejuvenate him. But here too there is a terminus, for he realizes he will have to face retirement yet again and sustain himself with memories then too!

The final poems of the first part of *Nakhshatra Nivey Jai* pay tribute to ancestor poets/artists he finds soul-stirring—Rabindranath and Nazrul, as well as Lorca and Neruda. But revisiting his memory's spacious corridor in verse, he also remembers gratefully his mother and father for shaping his sensibility. Images of Dhaka and Leeds—cities he has made parts of him—also haunt the poet. However, in the final poems of this part he is back with the memory that has overwhelmed him most and that he will treasure forever—his dear, departed wife!

The second part of *Nakhshatra Nivey Jai*, "Shok Ar Drohar Shlok" contrasts markedly with the first one. Here Ahad seems to have moved, so to speak, from home to the world—a world of people pained, shattered, disillusioned. It is a world full of blood spilled in streets, consumer society excesses of a few,

and hardship and deprivation faced by the many. Nevertheless, the poet finds here selfless people as well—dreaming, sacrificing themselves. The world here includes diasporic people or imprisoned, wretched men and women. These are poems where Ahad empathizes with the many and regrets the abuses and abusers he has observed taking place inside and outside his country. A series of poems also reflect his ecological sensitivity to the machine in the garden and snakes and hyenas imperiling forests and rivers and Dhaka—the city he has lived in for most of his life. He has poems as well reflecting his secular, democratic feelings.

Ahad's debut volume thus reflects a mature poetic sensibility and a poet in complete control of his craft. These are immensely readable poems ranging over themes we can all empathize with. They are lyrical as well as thought provoking. Readers will surely feel these are poems that were worth waiting for!

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DESIGN: FATIMA JAHAN ENA