FICTION

Let the seasons begin

NAZIFA RAIDAH

It was a time in the night where one can't really tell if it's night or eve. The sun is still sleeping in and it's unlikely that it has any other plans anytime soon. Nothing but silence cloaks the wood and it is the time for the chatter of the owls and bats. It is the night of small preys, meeting their ultimate doom or the start of their heroic tale.

ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

In the midst of it all, a grand oak tree stretches and creaks with ample effort. The tree closes its eyes and tilts its branches towards the sky, basking in the moonlight. It lets out a deep resounding yawn and says, "Forgive me, friends...it seems like I've been asleep for almost an eternity."

"Hey! That tickles!" giggles a Young Fir, poked by one of the oak's branches.

"My apologies little Sprout, I didn't notice you there", says the Grand Oak without a second's haste. "I told you not to call me that!" exclaims an exasperated Sprout, letting out a shake to affirm his annoyance.

"Well, my highly dignified neighbour, I've seen you since you were a wee sapling," the Grand Oak says in amusement. Before Oak could say anything else, Sprout declares, "Well, I'm a hundred years old now... and it's finally time you treated me like an adult!"

Suddenly the winds carry the weight of a hushed, ancient tone in its blow. To distant inhabitants living outside the forest, it sounds like the faintest whistle. And for those who don't quite get the language of the trees, it sounds like a ghost, trying to tell you all their secrets but failing miserably.

"Hush now, youngling, the mother is speaking," says Grand Oak, leaning onto Sprout. It seems that Sprout is still unsure of what to do. With one of his longest branches, Sprout flicks one of Oak's leaves to break their trance. "Well, what am I supposed to be doing here?" asks Sprout, waiting eagerly.

"Listen", says Oak, saying nothing else at all. A frustrated Sprout gives another shake, but Oak doesn't pay any heed. Without even waiting a second, Sprout says, "Well, I can't hear anything. Who is this mother, anyway?"

"Shhhh!" says Grand Oak, "Use your roots, travel to the centre of the network...you'll find everyone there."

Impatient still, Sprout attempts to follow Oak's instructions. After all, this old log's been here for a while. And for the very little credit Sprout places on Oak for his wisdom these days, deep down, they know that no one knows this forest better than Grand Oak.

"Look to the centre...look to the centre," says Sprout, chanting to itself. The wind rustles the leaves of his other neighbours, and they too seem to be stuck in the trance. The forest floors are coated with their old, tired leaves. And then suddenly, as if it's been dropped into a whole new dimension, the young Fir finds itself hearing chants of a thousand trees, surrounded by a hymn it has heard before, but didn't quite understand.

In the midst of it all, a grand oak tree stretches and creaks with ample effort. The tree closes its eyes and tilts its branches towards the sky, basking in the moonlight.

"We are the guardians of the forest, rooted deep in the earth," said a thousand trees in unison. "We have watched the comings and goings of the creatures who roam our woodland home. We are the protectors of this land, and we shall endure until the end of time."

"And now," says the mother, the oldest tree in the forest, "we shed our leaves in honour of the King of seasons, who grants us the bounties of youth, rustles our leaves with gentle breeze and makes our flowers bloom."

All the trees chanted in unison, and so did young Sprout, as now, Sprout too was connected with the others.

Their words echo through the forest like a soft sigh.

As they speak, the sun begins to rise above the horizon, casting long shadows across the forest floor. The trees sway gently in the wind, their branches dance in the first lights as soon as it graces their surface. They continue to whisper their secrets, and the forest is filled with the sound of their voices, like a gentle lullaby.

And as they watch their leaves clear from the floor in the breeze, they know for certain that it is Spring.

Nazifa Raidah *is a sub-editor at the City Desk of* The Daily Star *and a student of Media and Communication, Global Studies and Governance at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).*

POETRY

Dhaka (2007–)

SHANJIDA NOWSHIN CHOWDHURY

I was nine years of age the first time I set eyes on a Dhaka street.
I received my first welcome from a group of beggars tapping on my car window.
"How awful" I thought, as my heart doubled over with pity in my chest.
"Why is no one helping them? Why does no one care?"

PHOTO: MAISHA SYEDA

Thoughts ran ramped only to be calmed by a voice too familiar to be recognised
"You'll get used to it," it said. Too composed to be questioned,
Too sympathetic to be doubted.
The nights in this city are brutal.
No wind, no stars, just heat.
I hear distant cries from the balcony
A man, a woman and generations of pain.
How many screams go unheard in this city?
Drowned by traffic, muted by the evening prayer?
To wonder is a privilege, to know is a curse.
Why would anyone live here voluntarily?
I find myself wondering rather often.
The air is polluted, the people are corrupted.
Everyone here is a thief;
Some out of necessity, some out of greed.
Cries of help all sound the same
I find myself turning away from those in need,
Sometimes out of necessity, sometimes out of greed.
This city has turned me into a person I do not recognise;
A damsel in distress and the monster that torments her
All under the same skin, connected by the same blood.
The airport feels like a distant memory these days.
I wonder how I'd feel now if I ever went back.
What would I see now that the window is a mirror?
No pretension, no pity, just recognition–
You are me and I am you. This city is ours
To ruin and be ruined by.
To rebuild and be rebuilt from.
To love and hate till we fall as one
Crumbled into dust on heaven floors.

Shanjida Nowshin Chowdhury *is a recent graduate in English Literature and Cultural Studies from the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).*

ESSAY

Everything is illuminated, but something is lost

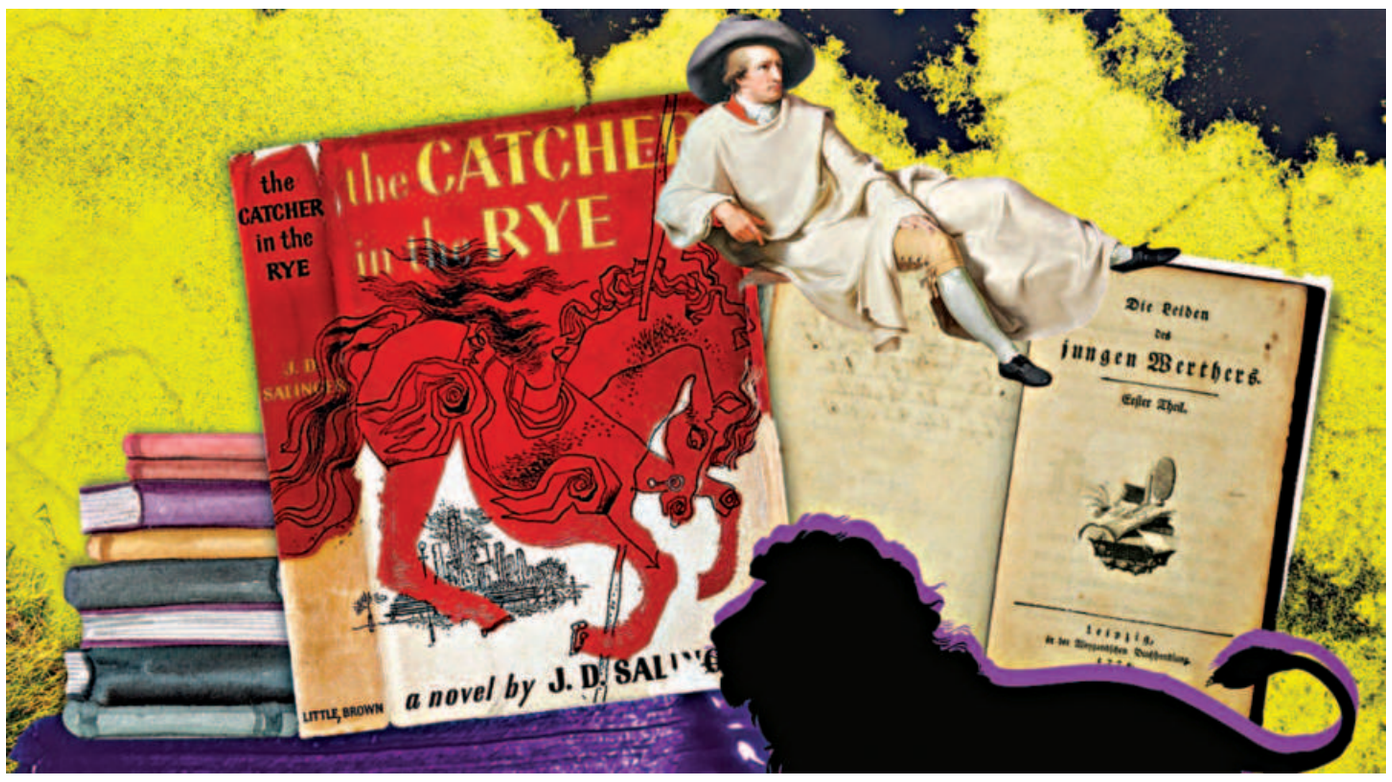
Can a book really cut so deep that it can inspire you to take your life?

ABAK HUSSAIN

Right after the publication of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1774, the literary world of Europe was gripped by a kind of *Werther*-fever. It was a bizarre cultural phenomenon never before witnessed: Copies flew off the shelves, pirated editions started to come out within a few years, scenes from the novel were being painted on to porcelain.

A strong case can be made, then, that *Werther* was the "big bang" that made room for the modern concepts of the "best-seller," literary piracy, and novel-based merchandising. Europe's porous borders made it easy for the book to seep into other countries, and translations appeared fast, delivering forbidden thrills to people in the privacy of their homes at a time before radio or TV.

In retrospect, we can perhaps make the argument that Goethe was the first "international literary celebrity." But with that kind of fame and importance, often there is the unbearable burden of knowing that your words can affect, *really affect*, those who read them–and this is especially true for young, impressionable minds who are still grappling with who they are; minds that are likely to latch on to a charismatic protagonist, and not merely learn from them or draw inspiration, but *emulate* them.



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

I felt that my overall awareness and critical faculties were levelling up ... but. But nothing was transporting me quite in the same way. Even Marlon James, who I consider to be one of the most searingly powerful prose-stylists of his generation, failed to fully immerse me into a new world the way Narnia once had.

When a tragic hero is to die for

Every glittery surface has a dark side, and so it was with the Werther phenomenon. Those familiar with the novel will know *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a brief, epistolary novel about a love triangle, a romantic failure, and a mental tailspin that culminates in Werther's tragic suicide. Goethe, at the time not yet 25 years old, wrote the novel primarily to exorcize the pain and confusion he felt upon the suicide of his close friend Jerusalem.

The book is so short that it should be called a novella, really, best read in one sitting, and Goethe wrote the whole thing in a matter of four or five weeks. And yet, as goes the popular history, this was the book that made hordes of young men dress up like Goethe–yellow waistcoat, blue tailcoat–and lose themselves to Werther-like sentiments, and kill themselves.

Along with the easily spotted Werther outfit, it is said that a copy of the novel was often found at the scene of the suicide. Clearly, this was never the author's intention, though it did add a kind of morbidly sexy aura to Goethe's reputation.

It was not until exactly 200 years later, though, that sociologist David P Philips used the term "Werther effect" in a rigorous, academic context to describe copycat suicides and the phenomenon of observable spikes in suicide following any celebrity suicide or media reporting on such incidents. Much of our contemporary media training regarding sensitivity in dealing with such subjects, particularly in news reporting–though Bangladeshi media is still at its infancy in this regard–goes back to Philips's research, as does the practice of placing trigger warnings on certain content.

Nobody forgets the first time

It is best not to underestimate, then, how deep a book can cut when in the hands of a young person hungry to be influenced. I was lucky though–Goethe's works did not reach my hands in the early blooms of youth. Certainly, I was already susceptible to bouts of Werther-like romanticism–refusing to go out and play or get sunlight, brooding in a dark corner writing reams of unreadably bad poetry.

There was much else that I read, though, much of it I was certainly too young for, but it is impossible for me to regret ever reading anything. There is no doubt that some books hit differently when younger and are best read early: I remember my father handing me a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* when I was 16 and telling me Holden Caulfield was the same age as me. The teenage me had his mind blown, and indeed felt a strong identification with Holden: *That's right!* I thought, like Holden says, everything is so phoney! But then I grew up bit by bit, and while I still have great fondness for Salinger's novel, the nature of this appreciation has changed.

I now see the book as a cool, funny piece of YA, where the protagonist is a bright yet naïve kid whose innocence is about to be crushed under the weight of reality as he hits adulthood. Holden could be my own child, I sometimes think, and I want to protect him, but I know that desire is also futile, because all of us have to grow up eventually. Salinger never published a sequel to *Catcher*, but if he did, I fear we would see a middle-aged Holden Caulfield, his soul crushed and dreams faded, working maybe in the service sector, saying "have a nice day" with a phoney smile pasted on his face. What a horrible thought.

Making it to adulthood is a Faustian bargain

Werther, though, took a bit of time to reach my hands. Well into my thirties, I finally got around to him, and this time I had on cynicism-tinted glasses and a practically professorial level of objectivity. I chuckled and rolled my eyes at Werther's histrionics, I sighed at his naivete, I finished the book, tossed it aside, and muttered "what a drama queen."

This newfound sense of adult detachment, however, gave me perspectives and a sense of appreciation I could not have had if I had run amok with the young-Goethean sense of romantic tragedy that, in the end, robs us of self-control and drowns us in sentiment. I had to grow up as a reader to understand how it was that Goethe grew up as a writer.

I read his book on maxims and aphorisms, and learnt that even before Nietzsche, Goethe was the true boss of the Twitter-style one-line zinger. I read his erotic poetry, including the very dirty *Roman Elegies*, I dove into both Part 1 and Part 2 of the intimidating dramatic epic *Faust*, and then onto *Italian Journey*, a travelogue where the master poet, in the throes of a full-on midlife crisis, goes to Italy for creative rejuvenation, and takes rigorous notes on matters as mundane as the waste management system of Venice.

The best journey is where the view changes

In youth, there is so much we try to read, or half-read, particularly if we have books lying around the house. You never can tell if a certain book will hit hard and become the intellectual foundation for the person you are to later become.

As we grow up, in a way, the books that shaped us in our early years change, even though the words remain exactly the same. As children, our brains have that magical ability to deep dive into a world, and the world of a book we love is so much more for us than just a book at that age–it's real. When Lucy first walked into Narnia from the back of a wardrobe, I was not thinking: "Nicely written, Mr CS Lewis!" I was, like so many other children, completely and utterly absorbed in the story, in the universe that was being presented to me.

Jump-cut to my thirties: As a grown-up in search of epic fantasy, I bulldozed through the Harry Potter books (already too old to identify as a Ravenclaw-for-life or put down Hogwarts as my alma mater on my Facebook info page), *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, all of *A Song of Ice and Fire* till date, as well as the richly detailed fantasy worlds of Patrick Rothfuss, Joe Abercrombie, Brandon Sanderson (terrible writer but great world-builder), and Marlon James.

I felt that my overall awareness and critical faculties were levelling up ... but. But nothing was transporting me quite in the same way. Even Marlon James, who I consider to be one of the most searingly powerful prose-stylists of his generation, failed to fully immerse me into a new world the way Narnia once had. I am wiser, but I am less enraptured. Everything is illuminated, but something is lost.

Maybe it's for the best that one does grow up, and that past a certain point, your maturity makes it impossible for a book to cut so deep that it can inspire you to take your own life. Or mimic the hero's sartorial choices, for that matter.

Abak Hussain *is a journalist, and Contributing Editor at* MW Bangladesh.