



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

OPINION

Are you what you read?

I am against policing entertainment; I refuse to use the term guilty pleasure for anything (yes, even Emily in Paris) because if something is entertaining, guilt has no place in it.

NAZIA MANZOOR

Every semester on the first day of classes, I have a routine icebreaker for my English majors: “What is the one book you have read in class or otherwise that has left the biggest impact in you?” The answers are often charming, deep, silly, and even downright hilarious. For every *The God of Small Things* and *Crime and Punishment*, there are novels and comics and mangas that are wholly unfamiliar to me and then there’s the dreaded “I don’t really read”. This January, for instance, student after student kept mentioning Colleen Hoover’s latest as the most gripping book they have read. As the author’s name kept popping up and I struggled hard to keep a straight face all the while insisting that I am not judging, soft giggles and eventually roaring laughter erupted in the classroom. They knew I was judging.

What I meant to say is this: don’t *just* read Colleen Hoover, please and thank you. Reading habit is an intensely personal affair and it speaks to a person’s taste, family and environmental background, class position, place specificity, education etc. Reading is also an escape and how one chooses to escape the general drudgery of life is no one’s business but their own. And yet, few experiences in life can prepare us to be more sensitive, more inclusive, and generally kinder human beings than reading. Particularly reading stories about people, places, and experiences that are different from ours.

Growing up in 90s’ Dhaka, before smart phones and Instagram reels, before Netflix and YouTube, reading was the form of entertainment I preferred and frankly, easily had at my disposal. As a young girl, I devoured every *Teen Goyenda* and Sheba Prokashoni book

available and learned all about love and loss from Humayun Ahmed. Zafar Iqbal taught me about friendships, and I would like to think my brief interest in post-apocalyptic literature was inspired by both authors’ science fiction work. My teenage sensibilities were also shaped by the classics—I was consumed by Rabindranath’s short stories and novels, rereading certain lines and sections, and imagining what it must have been like to know the poet. I learned to love *Jogajog*’s Kumu but resented Sharatchandra’s heroines’ single-minded obsession with feeding their loved ones. I went on adventures with Kakababu and Feluda, and Shirshendu’s epic family sagas and Shomores’h’s complex women had me gripped. At 17, I already knew I was going to study literature at university because nothing else made better sense to me than getting lost in the world of words, feelings, unrequited love, unparalleled passion, pathos, humour, and tears. Standing underneath the massive trees in our school yard, hiding behind the staircase leaning against the dirty walls, my friends and I would spend hours debating scenes, dialogues, characters.

It was only in my teen years that I started reading fiction in English. My equally bookish friends and I would pool our Eidi and buy secondhand books from Nilkhet. Those were the years when we read tons of Mills and Boons and Sweet Valley High. And here is where the literature professor in me bristles against my Colleen Hoover loving students. I am against policing entertainment; I refuse to use the term guilty pleasure for anything (yes, even *Emily in Paris*) because if something is entertaining, guilt has no place in it. I am also never going to malign the reading of romance books or think of them in demeaning terms such as ‘chick lit’ or

‘women’s fiction’. Aside from the obvious profit made by these books written by women for women, disrespecting women’s reading choices is a form of minimising women’s experiences and labelling them as invalid and one should have no time for that.

And yet, popular fiction can promote certain destructive, reductive ideals for relationships. I know because I have read them. One book that has been trending on Bookstagram and is indeed a BookTok sensation is the Twisted Series by Ana Huang. The male protagonist is the “grumpy” to the female protagonist’s “sunshine” but that’s not the issue. There’s lying, violence, revenge, and utter devastation in the wake of their love story and if fan reactions are to be believed, fans are enthralled regardless. The frenzy reminded me of a viral video by a Bangladeshi influencer from a year or so ago where she is seen making fun of women who want to “fix the damaged guy”. My point being, reading hyper-fictionalised accounts of dreamy-unhealthy romantic heroes is great as long as we’re aware of the limitations of that portrayal. Such portrayals can propagate violence and reduce love to a mere act of possession.

As for the readers among us, perhaps occasionally we can pick up something other than viral TikTok sensations? To my students I eventually analogized that just as it’s not healthy to only consume junk food, one should challenge one’s palette by trying something healthier and dare I say, more refined. Sure, Alex Volkov sounds dreamy, but you know who else was dreamy? Velutha. Please, go look him up.

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POETRY

Postbox

STEWIE CHATTERJEE

i smile and greet, then shake and hug  
seldom do i trust  
peanut butter, jealousy  
and a bit of crust

golden tickets to the ball  
dancers mean no foul  
wolves then gather ‘round my soul  
packs that do not howl

thrust upon the will to live  
niceties and calm  
traitor to the foes of woes  
brothers lost to arms

obscure illusions of profound  
causes and revolts  
camaraderie is lost  
over frisky taunts

you feed the snakes and lick the wound  
i have done it too  
poisoned though i am, my love  
poison? that is you

freshly mown, my unkempt lawn  
salted drops of dew  
hues undress and coalesce  
into something new

thespians with tattered casts  
broken wings aloft  
sun, you’re nearly Icarus  
melting what is soft

your tongue, it tastes like caramel  
truth? your smelly socks  
name no names, i tell no lie  
i am a post box

Stewie Chatterjee is an urban nomad and aspiring writer currently based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Find snippets of their work: @stewiechatterjee on Instagram.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

TALESPEOPLE SPIELS

The magic of muscle memory

Sehri Tales is an annual creative flash writing boot camp hosted on Facebook during Ramadan every year by the group Talespeople. This is Part 3 of an ongoing series of creative writing tips based on the Sehri Tales experience.

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

I recently had the pleasure of interviewing the formidable Geeteera Safiya Choudhury who recalled her Karachi days as a young feature journalist, where, during her lunch breaks she would listen to agency girls discussing pitches and write up copy for ‘fun’. It turned out to be so much fun for her, she went on to found one of the country’s largest advertising agencies.

The magazine I currently work for is still in its baby startup stage, with a tiny staff and a miniscule roster of freelance writers. This means I’m frequently called in to fill in page gaps and take ‘emergency’ interviews at only a few hours’ notice. I’ve seen my husband Abak, a seasoned editorial writer, take a pitch and schlep out a polished piece in as little as an hour. And then there are some Sehri Tales veterans, who by now, can pump out mind-boggling tales within minutes of receiving the prompt.

This never ceases to amaze newcomers or non-professionals in the field, this ability for instant writing. Interestingly, while talent might determine the quality of the writing, and many of our Talers have these in buckets, the basic skill is



DESIGN: HRISHIK ROY

actually a result of something more mundane: consistent practice.

That’s right. Just like any skill in any field, technical or creative, writing is a muscle that gets stronger with consistent use. Just like jogging or lifting weights will gradually result in better muscle tone and fitness, so will reading and writing consistently, build on your writing skills.

I’ve seen it in myself, during the course of my first year of Sehri Tales, and all the subsequent years of repeating the challenge. Whether it’s poetry or prose, or creative non-fiction, I grow in confidence and flow after a month of doing it every night. I’ve seen it in Talers who are just starting out—with time, they are able to hit the word limits, produce more coherent stories and every year we add a new regular to our ranks. And, as I’ve mentioned in previous entries to this column, once you’ve built that muscle, you can put it to a variety of uses.

So keep reading, keep writing, and stay hydrated (you knew this was coming), and you’ll find yourself getting faster, more articulate, and more confident before you even realise what’s happening.

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is a writer, journalist, and the founder of Sehri Tales.