

# A bookstore is a time machine—Zeenat Book Supply through the ages

Last week, one of Dhaka's oldest bookstores announced that they will be closing shop on May 1 after running for 60 years

**"Other times, I would catch thieves who came in to steal our books because they didn't have the money to buy them. We caught them, let them go, caught them again and again to quench their addiction to reading. Shei boi porar nesha."**

SARAH ANJUM BARI

Books are rooms. Books are spaces. Their stories may inhabit us, but we inhabit them just as much—from the gate of the front cover to the markings etched across its pages and the smells that seep into its soil. Each smudge, each stroke of ink is a landmark that transports you to a corresponding past. Much like walking down the street of your childhood home.

To most people who lived in or passed through Dhaka, particularly through the '60s and '80s, the cracking open of a weather-beaten spine may uncover a small seal stamped onto the bottom right corner of the book's front pages. 'Zeenat Book Supply Ltd. 190 Dhaka New Market. Dhaka 1205.'

A soft laughter. "Ashole amader dokaner lokra onek puraton manush toh, our staff have been working here for so long that they are partial to these old practices instead of the more cost effective stickers I keep getting for our books."

And so the memories come leaping back.

I think it was at Zeenat I first said, 'Wow, this Stephen King guy seems very popular.'

This past week, while hunting for readers

the late music composer Niloy Das.

Dr. Faustina Pereira, a human rights lawyer and academic, treasured the monthly trips to New Market with her mother in the 1970s. "As a young girl, I would save paisa by paisa, my precious allowance money from weekly chores", she says.

Aspiring writer Sameirah Nasrin Ahsan is to be found alongside her toddler at most children's storytelling sessions in the city's bookstores today. She says, "Zeenat was one of the few places we frequented, I vaguely remember going through books there with my mom closeby, there was a table fan there somewhere. I remember the sound of its gentle hum, the periodic rustling of paper as the fan slowly oscillated from side to side. After we picked our books, I remember reading them on our way back home, stretched out on my mother's lap, my senses filled with the sweet fragrance of new books and Maa's starched cotton sari."

"I realised that it was out of my budget", said Shahir Tasnim, another reader who frequented the store as a child with her mother, and returned during the Covid for a Milan Kundera title she couldn't find anywhere else. "The owner could tell that I really needed the book and he gave it to me for less than half the price."

quotes soon shed away to make room for awe.

**Please don't tell our mother!**

A bookstore is a unique site of community building, one of the few places where a child can feel their tastes are as important, as worthy of commanding physical space as an adult's, while a grownup can revel in the whimsy that a child enjoys while listening to stories. Bookstores make space for diversity—of interests, of backgrounds—and also for dialogues manifested by time travel. That all those anecdotes surrounding Zeenat are nearly identical speaks volumes about the kind of space it created for its clients. In much of Bangladeshi culture preceding the last decade, fathers were painted as an aloof figure who brought in the family finances, while mothers reigned only in matters of the domestic front. But these memories tied with Zeenat testify to times, spanning back years and decades, of both parents nurturing their children's intellectual curiosity, their emotional development and, therefore, their agency.

Perhaps even more precious in these accounts is the proof that so many different people can harbour such similar, overlapping memories and sentiments, despite all that may separate them across age, class, interests and experiences. In this last respect, the culture at Zeenat seemed to bleed into a community role all but absent in Dhaka—that of the library, which wipes out the capitalistic undertones of a bookstore's operations.

This is what occurs to me when I spend an hour and a half on the phone on Monday night, listening to and laughing at the history of Zeenat Book Supply shared by store owner Syed Faisal, who took charge of the shop after his father passed away in 1993.

"Two young brothers—they are all grown up and quite well known now—they would sneak out of their home when their mother took her afternoon nap."

He continues, "They would run to Zeenat, pick up books from the floor and read as much as they could while sweating profusely in the heat. They scrambled back home before they would get into trouble, their sandals flying. Please don't tell our mother, they would tell me."

"Other times, I would catch thieves who came in to steal our books because they didn't have the money to buy them. We caught them, let them go, caught them again a few days later. They came back again and again to quench their addiction to reading. Shei boi porar nesha."

We talk about the beginnings of the store in 1963, about Faisal bringing in the first Ladybird children's books to Bangladesh, about learning to sense clients' taste in books, and the shifting reading practices brought over by technology.

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PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

most meaningful memories at one of Dhaka's oldest bookshops in New Market, I expected to chance upon something like a Quality Streets box of chocolates, varieties and all. But stories command their own trajectories, and the memories I gained access to are, across a spectrum of ages and backgrounds, all the same.

"My mom used to buy books from there whenever she took us to new market", says music journalist Milu Aman, who has recently authored books on Bangladeshi rock music and

And then there are the stories of how Zeenat helped readers discover canon—Archie Comics, DC and Marvel comics, *Nancy Drew* and *The Famous Five* for Dr. Pereira, Stephen King for Toronto-based author of *The Storm*, Arif Anwar, Joyce's *Ulysses* for Milu Aman, and discounted leather-bound editions of Wordsworth, Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf and *The Little Prince* for Nodi Tabassum, a lecturer at Southeast University. Whatever concerns I felt at the similarities of these

## TALESPEOPLE SPIELS

### At least we tried

Sehri Tales is an annual flash writing challenge brought to you by the Talespeople group. This is the final instalment in a series on creative writing

ABAK HUSSAIN

If fiction writers are blessed with slightly larger imaginations than the rest of the world, then so is their capacity for grudges, pettiness, beef. Let's face it—it takes a certain narcissism and an absurd amount of self-belief to think readers will stick through with you, page after page, to the bitter end, especially in this day and age when so

much content is easily accessible. If a writer bores you for even a fraction of a section, a click of the mouse or a gentle upward swipe of your thumb can transport you to something else, something more interesting. In this unforgiving world of readers, writers want to be read—more than anything else. The narcissism can enter into an uneasy marriage with crippling anxiety, self-doubt, and self-loathing. No wonder so many writers were famously reclusive (Salinger, maybe Coetzee), and a considerable number of them wanted to have their manuscripts never see the light of day (most famously Kafka).

Writing, at the end of the day, is a solitary activity. Unlike the film director, who commands a large budget and an army of cast and crew, and is practiced in the art of compromise, a writer's task is much simpler—stare into a blank page and write something worth reading. This is terrifying, even for the best of writers, and really the most private of acts. Sharing one's work, whether it is through publishing the old-fashioned way, self-publishing, bringing out an ebook, or simply posting a vignette on social media, can be daunting—a bit like undressing in public.

Even worse can be the experience of sharing your work with other writers, opening yourself up to their feedback, counting the number of likes. If you put your heart into a piece, and it gets not a single heart react when you post it, the experience can—well—break your heart. Writers' groups or communities can seem oxymoronic for such a lone wolf trade, and yet, we always keep coming back to them. Such is the pull and power of community—it can transcend all the pettiness and make us all better.

So on the one hand, there is the cinematic image of the writer—antisocial, lonely, maybe with a drinking problem, wallowing in self-doubt, typing out copy after copy, crumpling up pieces of paper and tossing them in the bin. On the other hand, there is the enormous popularity globally of literary festivals, writers' retreats, MFA programs—and this popularity is only growing. New forms of community will no doubt emerge in the coming years, all as a counterweight to the solitary world of creative writing. With the Talespeople community, and the Sehri Tales challenge, we tried to do something along those lines. The response has gone beyond what we had imagined, so maybe it was worth it. A big thank you to all of our participants and partners for coming along with us in this ride so far, and to the core Talespeople moderators for working so hard to pull off this crazy month-long Ramadan writing challenge.

Abak Hussain is a journalist, and a Director of Talespeople.

## THE SHELF

# 5 lightweight books for your hometown commute this Eid

MEHJABIN BIVA

For many Dhaka residents, the festivity and excitement of Eid starts the very moment they start their journey to their hometown to spend the Eid holiday with loved ones. In this year's sun-sational summer heat, the journey can be either of two things: you either pleasantly reach your destination while enjoying the sunlit rural landscape, or you spend the entire time badly craving teleportation powers to avoid the heatwave. In both situations, an enjoyable read can be a good companion to improve the travel experience. These lightweight and unpudownable books can be carried with comfort on the commute.

BANIYULALU

Shibabrata Barman

Baatighar, 2019

*Baniyulalu* is an anthology of 11 startling short stories that perfectly combine the logical aspects of science fiction and the surrealism of fantasy. From multiverses, sentient robots to extraterrestrial life and time travelling, the book covers numerous concepts that explore possibilities and impossibilities

taking place beyond our known world. The way the stories are told, by integrating the mysteries of nature with theoretical science, provides readers with an immersive experience, all while keeping them grounded.

AYNA

Abul Mansur Ahmad

Ahmed Publishing House, 1935

When it comes to Bengali satire, Abul Mansur Ahmad's *Ayna* is one of its kind. The classic is a collection of seven short stories, all of which shed light on some of the most deep-rooted societal issues. The witty



but lightweight narrative captures themes of religious hypocrisy, communal riots, socio-political crises, stories of opportunists etc. Even though it was first published in 1935, the book has remained timeless due to its topical relevance.

ZUBOVSKIY BULVAR

Mashiul Alam

Prothoma Prokashon, 2011

*Zubovskiy Bulvar* is a book named after a street in Moscow along which there once resided one of the largest translation agencies of the world, Progoti Prokashon or Progress Publishers. They translated

and published various books of science, arts, politics, classics, and children's literature in about 60 languages, but had to close down due to the Soviet Union's collapse. The book reminisces the golden days of Progoti Prokashon through its fictional protagonist Soumen Roy, who leaves Bangladesh to work as a translator in the publishing house. The nostalgic narrative and simple prose are what make this book a readers' favorite.

KALO BOROF

Mahmudul Haque

Shahitya Prakash, 2007

*Kalo Borof* is a cult novel that tells the reminiscent tales of Abdul Khaled, a fictional college teacher in newly independent Bangladesh. It is said that Mahmudul Haque drew this novel from his own experiences and the tide of emotions he had to navigate during 1947's India-Pakistan Partition. The book revolves around the recollections of Abdul Khaled's Pre-Partition childhood days in suburban Calcutta and the invisible scars he inherited as a witness of the Partition. It is a brilliant blend of spellbinding descriptions of nature, poignant memories of communal riots, and

nostalgic childhood chronicles.

An English translation done by Mahmud Rahman is also available, titled *Black Ice* (Harper Perennial, 2012).

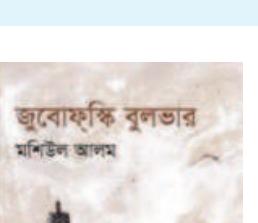
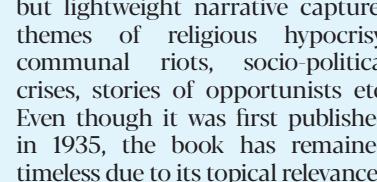
MORON BILASH

Ahmed Sofa

Khan Brothers, 1989

*Moron Bilash* is a work of political fiction that revolves around the conversations between Fazle Elahi, a dying minister, and his spineless minion, Mawla Baksh. The minister decides to confess all the misdeeds he has engaged in during his lifetime at his deathbed and admits to doing them with a clear conscience, but puts the blame on society to justify himself. The sharp, merciless recollection of his past startles someone as morally weak as Mawla Baksh. Through the contrast of these two characters' dilemma and confidence, Sofa brilliantly portrays the picture of our society where immorality and wrongdoing, not justice or ethics, are the keys to rising.

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