

People

The Transience of Time

By Nadia Kabir Barb



Here we are already hurtling our way into the second month of 2025. Before we know it, Easter eggs will be on display, gracing the shelves in shops. Summer, or the lack thereof will be a point of debate; too hot, not hot enough. Soon the russet and golden hues of autumn will envelope our trees and hot on its heels, Christmas decorations will flood the shops while ‘Last Christmas’ and ‘All I Want for Christmas’ will be played on loop. Let us not forget the relentless marketing and merchandise of Valentine’s Day and Halloween that will be thrust upon us in between all of this.

It’s a cycle that reminds us of the passage of time, a passage that seems to accelerate as we age. Youth carries with it a sense of invincibility, where time feels like an endless luxury. But as the years go by, we begin to realise that time is, in fact, our most precious commodity. It is something we

can never get back, and learning to value each fleeting moment becomes more important with each passing year.

As a writer, time has become both my friend and my nemesis. Procrastination, however, is the arch enemy, constantly skulking in the shadows intent on derailing my writing process.

Having been a columnist for almost thirteen years with the Daily Star, Bangladesh, writing “Straight Talk,” and serving as an Op-Ed journalist for over two years at the Dhaka Tribune, I have often found the challenge of producing a weekly article to be insurmountable. The relief that comes with meeting a deadline is quickly followed by the realisation that the next article must be written almost immediately.

While deadlines can provide the necessary impetus to complete an article or work, they bring in their wake a level of stress and anxiety. One of my favourite quotes is by

writer Douglas Adams who said, ‘I love deadlines. I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by.’ And there have been times when I have had to email my editor, cap in hand, asking for an extension. Late nights and early mornings typing away on my laptop scrambling to submit the article while managing the demands of three children was as much of an adrenaline rush as any extreme sport.

In 2014, after suffering a stroke and spending a week in the ICU, followed by a heart intervention, I was given the “time” to reevaluate my life –time that, for a while, I had almost run out of. My stroke consultant prescribed six months of rest, making deadlines and work out of the question. He suggested I do nothing taxing, even if it meant getting bored. Being confronted with your own mortality offers a unique perspective on what truly matters.

During my period of reflection after my stroke, I read *The Alchemist*

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by Paulo Coelho, a book that profoundly influenced how I viewed life. It taught me the importance of following one's personal legend – the unique purpose each of us is meant to fulfil – and to trust that the universe will guide and support us on our journey. In the story, Santiago, the protagonist, leaves behind his familiar life to seek his dream, learning along the way that true fulfilment comes from pursuing what resonates deeply within us. The book also emphasises the need to live in the present moment, to recognise the signs the universe provides, and to trust that everything is connected and happens for a reason.

Reading had always been a passion and becoming a writer, a dream. But life often gets in the way of dreams, and I had put off writing fiction in the naïve belief that I could always do it later. My stroke was a wake-up call and one I decided to answer. In 2015, I took the plunge and began my journey as a fiction writer. My weekly column became a fortnightly one, and it turned into balancing act: writing articles based on facts while creating short stories where my imagination was allowed to take the reins.

What I quickly realised was that short stories aligned closely to the format I was familiar with. My

articles had a limited wordcount within which I had to provide my readers the crux of the topic. Similarly in short stories, each word and each sentence has a purpose. The synergy between the two formats resulted in many of my stories addressing social issues, often reflecting topics I had covered in my column.

I also learned that the publishing industry moves at a snail's pace. Everything takes time. Two years after writing my first short story, which was published in The Missing Slate, an international literary magazine, and other works of fiction subsequently featured in various magazines and journals, I had enough stories to compile into a manuscript. Thus, my collection of Truth or Dare was born, published in 2017 by Bengal Lights Books and launched at the Dhaka Literary Festival.

In 2022, a friend and fellow author who had read Truth or Dare, suggested I try submitting to a UK publisher. I researched independent publishers and was drawn to Renard Press and their ethos. Taking a cue from The Alchemist, I sent off my submission. After three months

of waiting –during which I nearly gave up hope –I received an email requesting the full manuscript. Two months later, with bated breath, I learned that Renard Press were interested in acquiring Truth or Dare, and an expanded version with eighteen stories was published in 2023.

A short story is like a sprint while a novel is more akin to running a marathon. I had always shied away from embarking on what felt like a long-term commitment. In my mind, novels were unwieldy beasts unlike the more manageable short stories.

In 2020, when Covid brought the world to a standstill, I decided to start a novel. Instead of following a rigid outline or plot, I began writing with just an idea and characters in my head. This approach firmly placed me in the camp of “pantsers” (writers who create by the seat of their pants), as opposed to “plotters” –writers who meticulously plan every aspect of their story before they begin writing. Plotters tend to outline each chapter, develop detailed character arcs, and often know the ending before they start. By contrast, pantsers usually allow the story to unfold organically,

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trusting the process to reveal where the plot will go.

By 2021, I had finished the first draft of my novel *Walk in My Shadow*. I submitted it to the Bridport Prize Peggy Chapman-Andrews First Novel Award as an exercise in self-discipline, aiming to stick to a deadline. It came as a complete surprise when the novel was longlisted.

What I had failed to realise is the amount of time it can take to develop the first draft into a polished and final version. When I say “final”, I mean the point at which a writer must step away from the manuscript to avoid over editing and losing the essence of the story through constant second guessing. In other words, it is at the stage when the manuscript is ready to be sent to an agent or publisher. Four years later, after countless revisions, feedback, and self-reflection I believe, or rather, hope that I have finally reached that point with my novel.

It can be disheartening when the writing process itself takes so long, and that is just the beginning. After finishing your manuscript, the next stage, finding an agent to represent you or a publisher willing to take on your work, can be equally time-consuming. Agents receive hundreds of submissions,

and it often takes months to get a response. Once you secure representation, the agent typically works with the writer to refine the manuscript further before submitting it to publishers. Even after securing a publishing deal, the process does not end there. There may be multiple rounds of edits –structural, copy, and line edits –that can take months to complete, ensuring the manuscript is ready for publication. Altogether, from submission to the final book hitting the shelves, this journey can stretch anywhere from a year to two years or more. The timeline is long, and patience is essential, but each stage is crucial to getting your book into readers’ hands in the best possible form. Given the nature of the profession, writers are both optimists and masochists.

The time it takes to write a book can vary greatly depending on factors such as the length of the book, the genre, and the individual writer’s process. For example, fantasy and sci-fi novels are often much longer than books in other genres, which can impact the writing timeline. Additionally, the level of procrastination or the writing habits of the author can play a significant role.

On one end of the spectrum, John Boyne, author of *The Boy in the*

Striped Pyjamas, famously wrote his novel in just two and a half days. At the other extreme, J.R.R. Tolkien took sixteen years to complete his epic *The Lord of the Rings*. Ray Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451* in a mere two and a half months, while F. Scott Fitzgerald took about two and a half years to finish *The Great Gatsby*. Audrey Niffenegger completed *The Time Traveler’s Wife* in four years, and J.K. Rowling took six years to write *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. Both Margaret Mitchell, author of *Gone with the Wind*, and J.D. Salinger took ten years to finish their iconic works.

To quote Paulo Coelho, “At that point in their lives, everything is clear and everything is possible. They are not afraid to dream, and to yearn for everything they would like to see happen to them in their lives. But as time passes, a mysterious force begins to convince them that it will be impossible for them to realize their personal legend.”

Time is precious. For me, this means embracing the journey of my first novel, knowing whatever will happen, will happen. In the meantime, I will use my time to continue my adventure and bring my second novel to life, from imagination to paper.

Nadia Kabir Barb