

## The fictional Liszt

What was it about Liszt that made women faint and fight each other?

"My biography is more to be invented than written after the fact" — so wrote Franz Liszt, and so it has proved to be. Many interpretations of his life, some extremely thorough and scholarly (Alan Walker's) and some more imaginative yet highly entertaining (Sacheverell Sitwell's), have appeared since his death in 1886. Now, the bicentenary of his birth in 1811 brings another chance to reassess the life of this great composer, pianist and musical innovator.

Often associated purely with virtuosity, Liszt has never received either the musical adulation heaped on his friend Frederic Chopin, or the sympathy shown to Robert Schumann, sufferer of torments. (Both these giants of the Romantic school

celebrated their bicentenaries last year — Chopin receiving far greater attention than Schumann.) Chopin and Liszt spent much time in Paris together. Chopin's mistress, George Sand, had been introduced to him at a party by Liszt's mistress Marie d'Agoult — Liszt warned Chopin about becoming involved with "man-eating" Sand, but despite this the four often travelled together.

Liszt was benevolent and charitable throughout his life, pioneering the "masterclass" as we now know it, never charging for his lessons and paying for a Beethoven monument in Bonn when funds had run out. But for some reason we still find it hard to like him. It could seem to the outsider that he had it all. A long life, prodigious pianistic talent, and more lovers and female attention than many men could

hope for. And possibly an ego to match. Liszt was essentially the first 'pop star' musical celebrity, and as "Lisztomania" swept across Europe in the 1840s he grew used to, and often bored with, a life of public adoration.

Women repeatedly fainted during his sold-out concerts and fought over his silk handkerchiefs and gloves; some even kept his cigar butts in their cleavages for months in order to have a little piece of the great virtuoso near their hearts. For his part, he was always particularly drawn to women of a higher social standing than himself: his two major love affairs were with aristocrats — Countess Marie d'Agoult (the mother of his three children) and Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, both of whom left their husbands to be with him.

And then there is the matter of his devotion to God. A devout Catholic, he had a lifelong struggle with religion; he joined a Parisian seminary aged 17, and in his later years took minor holy orders and became known as



Franz Liszt

Abbe Liszt.

Many facets of his life are open to question. John Spurling's fictionalised biography, *A Book of Liszt*, takes the composer at his word and interprets, through fic-

tive conversations and scenarios, much of Liszt's life to great effect. Creating a series of 15 'postcards' written from a variety of viewpoints by people prominent in the composer's life, Spurling draws the reader into Liszt's extraordinary world of women, music and God.

You get a real sense of the frustrating yet fulfilling time that Liszt and the countess spent together after they eloped to Switzerland to escape the gossip of Parisian society. The detailed description of the music he wrote under Marie's watchful eye (including the first book of *Annees de Pelerinage*), and of her insatiable yet understandable jealousy of both his talent and numerous women, is highly imaginative. ("Franz, it is not being your mistress that I object to," Marie once said, "... I object to being one of your mistresses.")

The last chapter, in which Liszt takes his final train journey to Bayreuth to see his daughter Cosima (married to Wagner) and reflects on all that he has

achieved and neglected — namely his children — makes for poignant reading: Spurling bases these pages to great effect on Liszt's setting of *Via crucis* (the Stations of the Cross).

*A Book of Liszt* alternates between chapters of fictionalised and true memoirs, and chapters that resemble a script from a play (for instance, a conversation in which Liszt tells Wagner he disapproved of Cosima marrying him). More theatrical than scholarly, it will appeal to anyone who enjoyed Benita Eisler's similar approach in her novel *Chopin's Funeral*. Those wishing for an in-depth, less fractured study should look to Walker's three-volume biography, but if you are happy with a lighter insight into Liszt's life then Spurling's book offers many pleasures. It fully inhabits the world of Liszt, and is a tremendous achievement.

Guardian News Service

**A Book of Liszt: Variations on the Theme of Franz Liszt by John Spurling (460pp, Seagull Books)**

## The incorrigible cheesiness of the great Indian hall of fame

By Sayandeb Chowdhury

Sarnath Banerjee, who pioneered the graphic novel form in India did commit one mistake. If not in his debut work *Corridor*, he kind of excelled himself in his second novel, *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, a rollicking, lip-smacking, throat-bursting satire on *babu* life in 19th century Calcutta that was full of the clever, rip-roaring humour that Sarnath has made his own.

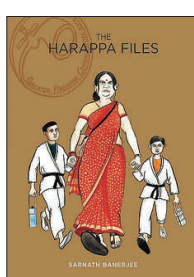
*Barn* was loosely based on the mood of a seminal work on Calcutta's low, colloquial life in mid-19th century — *Hutum*

*Panchar Noksha*, written by a distinguished man of letters, Kaliprasanna Sinha. Banerjee's novel about despondent native elite who, flushed with wealth, invented the most absurd and obnoxious ways to get rid of it, so embodied his signature style and tenor that it was always unlikely that Banerjee will be able to surpass it anytime soon.

No wonder the prologue to his latest, *The Harappa Files* says, "After writing *Corridor* and *The Barn*, Banerjee went through a period of silence wondering about the point of it all. Having promised his editor never to write another graphic novel, he returned to her office three years later with a manuscript of 'loosely bound graphic commentaries'."

This may be true or may well be part of Banerjee's tongue-in-cheek way to explain the architecture of this book, which he calls 'the old way (s) of telling pictorial stories.' Either way, after *Barn*, it will be no disservice to him or his art to call *The Harappa Files* somewhat of a disappointment. This is never to say that the book cannot stand on its own. In fact it does and does quite well.

The picture stories or the portmanteau narrative form that he employs, frees Banerjee from the logic of the novel's continuous narrative and arms him to the tee to poke fun at



**The Harappa Files**  
Sarnath Banerjee  
HarperCollins  
Pages 215  
₹499

individual characters and situations which, his fans and readers will be happy to know, he does with characteristic relish and abandon.

The book begins with the 33rd meeting of a secret think tank which goes by the name of GHRRR or Greater Harappa Rehabilitation, Reclamation and Redevelopment Commission. This think tank consists of the "colonels and admirals of society who operate from the nether regions of the government's subconscious." Monastic follow-ers of French Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan might protest here saying that there is nothing called the subconscious (and instead only the ocean like unconscious and what we call consciousness) but that is not the point here. The point is that the country is on the brink of great hormonal changes, the enormity of which must be recorded and preserved. Hence, one Sarnath Banerjee is summoned by the GHRRR to pen the types and mythologies that are seriously endangered. It is similar to reading the social mythologies in ways made fashionable by French cultural theorist Roland Barthes, only that Banerjee laces the idea with an unflinching sensibility that is both witty and astonishingly perceptive. The result is thoroughly rewarding.

It is impossible here to go deeper into the actual samples of his pictorial stories but it will suffice to say that you and I, when the evening is spread out against the sky, can identify with more than a few of this samples from your neighbourhood, or even from the topography of our collective pasts.

But Mr Banerjee, be rest assured, GHRRR is welcome to record India's million stereotypes but given its famed syncretism, India's stereotypes are surely going to survive much more into the future than we could imagine, even if the hormonal changes lead to a menopausal stasis.

## When Dom met Jatin in Sweden

by Madhusree Chatterjee

Word compositions by one of India's top poets, Dom Moraes, and lyrical lines by Jatin Das have come together to showcase "a summer in Sweden" at the Swedish Embassy in New Delhi.

Twentythree years ago, artist Jatin Das invited friend Dom Moraes, the poet and the writer from Goa, to accompany him to Sweden to "capture the flavour of a northern summer through the colours of a painter and the words of a poet".

"Dom and I went to Sweden. Dom knew everything about Sweden, I did not know anything about Sweden. He told me about Alfred Nobel — and about the dynamite and matchboxes," the artist said, recalling the trip which culminated two decades later into an exhibition and a book, *Jatin Das and Dom Moraes: The Summer in Sweden in 1988*. The exhibition — hosting 70 pencil, ink and charcoal sketches by Das and handwritten poetry by Moraes, who died of cancer in 2004 — opened at the Swedish embassy in the capital on Wednesday.

"We travelled by road, by train and by air to millions of places. We even rode a fantastic catamaran and I met innumerable artists, poets and writers. I sketched all of them. Dom wrote poems that were later published in his book, *Serendip* in 1999 and I made 100 sketches," the artist recalled.

Das reminisced that "it was around this time of the year (in June) in 1988 that the two went to Sweden".

The painter and the poet began their journey from the island of Gotland. "There was a special invitation to the birthday party of Ingmar Bergman (the legendary movie-maker) at Faro. We were given a special permit to go. Dom refused to go — so I went alone. Later, I visited one of Bergman's assistants, who lived in a windmill. The place was a little fisherman's hut with long grass. It was like a 17th century setting," the artist remembered.



Das and Moraes continued right up north till Lapland — where "the duo saw crafts by Lappish artists".

Faces come alive in Das' compositions — more than the landscapes. A sketch of Swedish artist Halldé Hallden in ink on paper captures the meditative profile of the bearded painter, who was known for his nature-scapes and semi-abstract drawings. A peace worker Kersten Blomberg, whom Das became rather fond of, inspired him for both art and poetry. An ink sketch of the smiling peace worker is accompanied by a poem Das wrote as an ode to the lady, "the gates of the Baltic Sea open with your big eyes, smile..."

Line sketches of local pottery and traditional Swedish kitchenware by Das are complimented in verses of Moraes in a poetry series, "Barrows", which delves into the turbulent history of Viking land and the poet's personal angst.

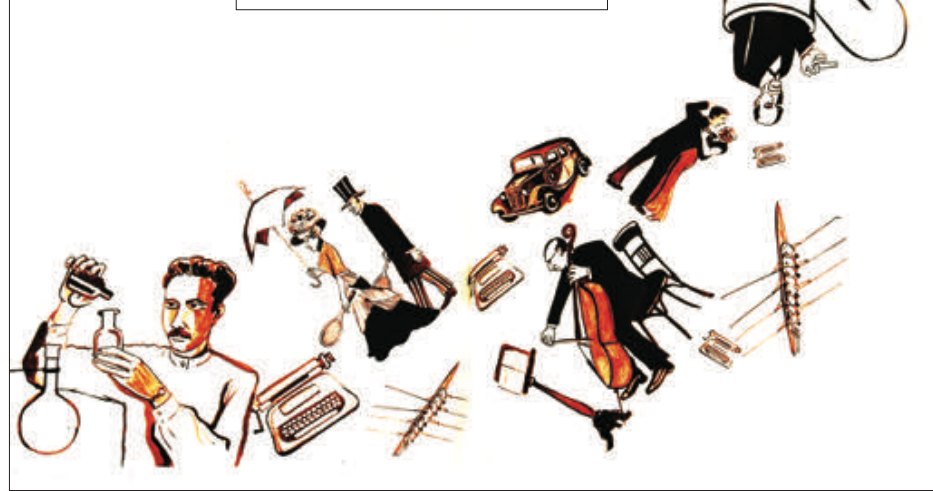
"... The Danes did nothing for years/After 20, they came/ Berserkers with horned helmets, bellaxes, torches flaming/ The tower, stone, could not burn/ But I could and I did..." the poet wrote in the first of his "Barrows" series.

Moraes may be missing, but Jatin Das, who will revisit Sweden next month for his solo show July 17, is trying to "locate all those the poet and the painter met in 1988" to relive the "summer of '88 in Sweden".

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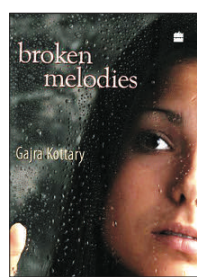
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### Broken Melodies

Gajra Kottary  
HarperCollins  
Pages 279/ ₹ 299

By Samabrta Sen



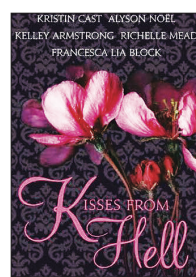
This book is about how parental conflict and a dysfunctional household can damage the innocence of childhood. Niyati was seven when she understood that her parents were not happy with their marriage. A working

mother and a philandering musician as a father, who churns out a gob of philosophical trash in a jiffy, is definitely not a dream childhood. The only constant factor in her life is her ten year elder sister Nisha. Later she is separated from her as well due to another sudden jolt of revelations. The narrative is crisp and has evidently gone through some fine editing. Kottary, who started out as a journalist, has been successful in bringing out the plight of the growing up years of a child who is uncertain about her life and what course it will take in the future. The novel is set in Delhi and the author keeps adding sufficient twists to keep the narrative exciting. The eternal search for happiness and family is what keeps coming back to the readers through the course of this novel.

### Kisses from Hell

Various Authors  
HarperCollins  
Pages 262/ ₹ 250

By Ayesha Sultana Mohiuddin



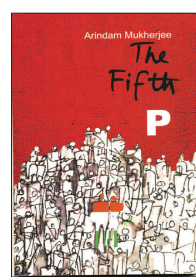
Are you bored of Edward Cullen, Jacob Black and their constant bone of contention, Bella? Still in love with vampire stories but you can't find anything new? Well this book might just make it easy to fall in love with the undead

once again. *Kisses from Hell*, collection of five short stories, is all about love amid vampires. *Sunshine* by Richelle Mead is a teenage love story of college going ethereal Cullen-like-handsome boys. Take a typical Mills and Boon kind of guy and add fangs and supernatural powers to him and bingo you get Mead's perfect hotch potch. Alyson Noel's *Bring Me to Life* is delightful but very predictable with the often told vampire story retold again. Kristen Cast's *Above*, is a heart rending story of a human girl who after being abused and maltreated by her parents finds refuge and love with a vampire. Kelley Armstrong's *Hunting Kat* chronicles a mad experiment about hybrid vampires. The last and the best is *Lilith* by Francesca Lia Block. On the whole a collection that many of you will like.

### The Fifth P

Arindam Mukherjee  
Indiana  
Pages 153/ ₹ 195

By Supreet Singh



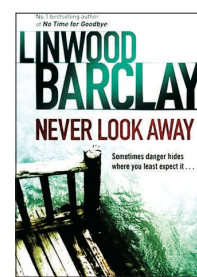
*The Fifth P* reveals the mind of a man who is inquisitive, analytical and well-read. As a conversationalist, Arindam Mukherjee would be entertaining and would be able to throw light on current world affairs. But alas! Writing a book and

holding discussion sessions does not necessarily go together. A corporate executive who has worked in Indian and international multinationals, Mukherjee strives to explain how 'the fifth p' or people have come to influence and be influenced by a market dominated by product, price, place and promotion. It charts the years from the ascent of USA after the First World War to the current glory of India in the global map. While Mukherjee has tried to combine history, management and criticism, the book has become a lamentable piece with nothing new to offer. Producing such thin volumes with the ambition to enlighten the layman on management principles, mass psychology and economic developments is a futile effort because better books have already been written.

### Never Look Away

Linwood Barclay  
Hachette  
Pages 516/ ₹ 295

By Arindam Basu



*Never Look Away* is a small town story with a big impact. David Harwood as a reporter of the only newspaper in his hometown north of Albany, New York. Barclay's long career with the industry lends credibility to the intrigues that lay

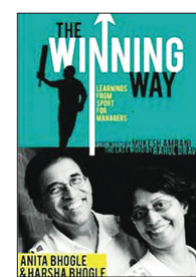
within the daily — *Promise Falls Standard*. The story begins with a trip to a local amusement park. David is hoping to spend a good day in a carefree manner with his son Ethan to dispel his wife Jan's recent depression. But then Jan disappears. What happens next is a series of events that points to David being responsible for Jan's disappearance. Now David must track down a myriad of confusing clues to clear his name and possibly find his wife.

The story begins as a whodunit and continues in the same manner for almost a third of the novel, before we get a series of clues which tell us who could be behind the disappearing act. Then on its literally never looking away for David as he hurls from one twist to another till we reach the climax.

### The Winning Way

Anita & Harsha Bhogle  
Westland  
Pages 196/ ₹ 200

By Utsa Talapatra



*The Winning Way* weds the two worlds of sport and management, which at some point are conjoined with similar core traits like competitiveness, dynamism, uncertainty, strategy, execution and team work. The authors have nar-

rated light but interesting anecdotes from the corporate world and also from various sport arenas like cricket, football, basketball and even badminton, throughout the book. Unlike other management books with complicated professional jargons, this book connects instantly with the readers primarily because of its easy and simple language. The authors talk about successful brands, from Cadbury to Sachin Tendulkar, and their tales of victory.

Almost each one of us relate to sports effortlessly and the authors have successfully used this affinity towards sports to render an insight into the world of management and teach the basic formulas of *Winning* through the right attitude, the passion to excel, continuous improvement, sustenance and above all failure.