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The impossibility of knowing

In conversation with Zia Haider Rahman

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Born in rural Bangladesh, raised in the UK and educated from Oxford, Cambridge and Yale Universities, investment banker turned human rights lawyer turned writer, Zia Haider Rahman had his priorities straight when he said, “I can't write for everyone.”

Speaking about the huge body of references that are highlighted in his first novel, “In the light of what we know”, he firmly refuted the complaint that the book is full of digressions in a stimulating conversation with Firdous Azim on stage on the third day of the Hay Festival 2014. “They all work, the digressions make the novel work and they also inform,” he said.

The conversation, like his acclaimed debut book, spanned a great number of subjects from the influence of mathematics and his previous professions on his work to his

connections to the Bangladesh he left behind in 1971, from the death of the novel to the challenges of being a “celebrity” author.

Candid and charismatic, if a bit jet-lagged, throughout the session, Haider highlighted the dilution of the content of novels. In the age of YouTube and quick “dopamine releasing” work, everyone seems to be writing novels with the subsequent film-script in mind. “A novel is meant to be interiorised, and I wrote my novel keeping that in mind; the novel is meant to be read slowly and not rushed through,” he said.

The book itself reflects parts of Haider's life, he admitted, although he refuted the comment that the character Zafar was based on him. The age old story of friendship between two men initially drawn together due to their foreign roots is, at the same time, a comprehensive study of modern nations, globalisation, identity and the economic crisis.

“When people tell me they want to write a book, what they really mean is they would like to have written a book,” he opined, adding that, for him, the process of writing was enough; everything that came afterwards – the contract, fame and critical acclaim – were incidental. “I was utterly depressed when I finished writing the book because for four and a half year, there was something that gave my life structure and meaning, and suddenly it was all gone,” he remarked. In fact, the constant travelling from one literary festival to another has made him restless because he longs to go back home and “just write”, he added.

The amazing turnout of audience and the eager hands in the Q & A session was a testament to how well the novel has been received. Asked if 1971 and Bangladesh's history figures in his writing, he ends with an observation which is very relevant, “Bangladesh has been struggling to talk in a civil manner about 1971.” Full of wit, charm and intelligence, the session was largely rewarding as the entire audience sat enthralled listening to the boy who left Sylhet during 1971.