

THE SHELF

The best that we read this year



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

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STAR BOOKS REPORT
We asked the DS Books editors and contributors about the books that most moved them this year. Here is what they had to say!

Shah Tazrian Ashrali:
The only nonfiction book I have completed and admired this year was *China Unbound: A New World Disorder* (Hurst, November 2021), a chilling account of China's prominent rise to global dominance. It exposes the reader to the inhumane realities of those living under an oppressive regime whose ghosts linger within and across borders—from Turkey to Australia to the USA and Canada. The book is a testament to the phenomenon that, in the age of AI and globalisation, a government can get away with monstrosity if it harnesses its economic potential well.
On the fiction side, while I spent most of my time reading stories online (especially on *Adda* and *The New Yorker*), I enjoyed whatever I read, in a very scattered fashion, from Jamil Jan Kochai's *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories* (Viking, 2022). "Playing Metal Gear Solid V",

"Occupational Hazards", and "The Haunting of Hajji Hotak", stories from the collection that are also online on the *New Yorker*, were a true delight. Loaded with non-orientalist and non-Islamophobic Muslim representation, these stories are powered with a language that will sing in your head while at the same time showing you immense suffering.
Yaameen Al-Muttaqi:
A Murder at Malabar Hill (Penguin Random House, 2018) is not the best whodunnit I've read—that honour goes to a Poirot or a Feluda, I am undecided which. But what it lacks in mind-boggling twists, it makes up with sheer deshi magic.
Set in early 1900s Bombay, Sujata Massey pulls no punches in introducing a Western audience to colonial India, and therein lies its charm. Massey is intimately familiar with the culture of upperclass Bombay, and the issues within that class, especially in the lives of the women, and she navigates it with grace and tact—never condoning that which we know to be unjust nor admonishing to look better to the white gaze. Through our protagonist, Perven, she pulls us into a time so richly realised

it seems more like a memory. Perven is immediately likeable, and flawed, and her sleuthing is always fun to follow, even when it becomes a bit predictable. The supporting cast, especially the women, truly do carry the story in a way I am yet to see in any Agatha Christie.
Sarah Anjum Bari:
Two books blew my mind this year—Elif Batuman's novel *Either/Or* (Penguin Press, 2022) a sequel to *The Idiot* (Penguin Press, 2017), and Olivia Laing's *Everybody* (Penguin Press, 2017). Campus novels are a weakness for me, and in *Either/Or*, Batuman revisits Selin, the Turkish-American protagonist of *The Idiot*, who is now a sophomore at Harvard. Guided by Kierkegaard's philosophy, Selin explores the borders between living life for pleasure and for morality; she dips her toes deeper into travel, language, and fiction, and fumbles through sexual awakening. She is funny, deadpan, and increasingly confident.
If Batuman's second novel is quietly empowering, Laing's nonfictional account of how freedom embraces and eludes bodies is loud, loud strength. Laing wants her readers to "imagine, for a minute, what it would be like to

inhabit a body without fear". This imagination takes her through the lives of Marquis de Sade, Sigmund Freud, Susan Sontag, Malcolm X, Nina Simone and others whose bodies have fought for and symbolised freedom in its diverse forms—political, psychological, sexual, and intellectual.
Kaisar Kabir:
One of the best books I read in 2022 is undoubtedly *The Martian* (Crown, 2011) by Andy Weir. If you haven't heard about the book, you probably know about the movie starring Matt Damon. Mark Watney is stranded on Mars because of a bad storm. While his crew is hurrying to their ship as the storm worsens, Mark is hit by flying debris and his life signal reading shows him to be dead to his crew. Unable to go back without risking their lives and avoiding damage to the ship, his team leaves him on the planet.
Mark is now all alone and injured. His enemy: the entire planet. His best weapon of survival: his perseverance and his witty outlook on the whole 'man vs. Mars' situation. They say attitude is everything.
Fahmida Sharmin:
In the 23 essays of *Paath: Shobdo O*

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kaleidoscopic memoir that charts her attempt to write a biography of the legendary New York School poet, one that the revered art critic Peter Schjeldahl, her own father, started some five decades ago.
Calhoun writes tenderly about the poet, who loomed large over her childhood and whose oeuvre acted as a secular scripture, a manifesto for a life in the arts; whereas her own experiences, living under the shadow of an acclaimed figure, became somewhat of a cautionary tale. She reconciles these two contradictory impulses, and writes a book that's as alive as O'Hara's poems.

OPINION

How I learned to tackle big books

HRISHIK ROY

"I finished re-reading *The Brothers Karamazov* in 6 days," I remarked with a false sense of vanity.
While my colleagues at the Daily Star Books were surprised to see me write a thought-piece on Dostoevsky after finishing both *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* in a span of 11 days, it is a pretty common feat for me to read long books in a small span of time.
My reading ambitions began from a very early age. Being the son of a primary school language teacher, I was acquainted with the various literary figures and their works as soon as I could read full sentences. As a matter of fact, one of the first books I read was an unabridged version of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* back when I was in kindergarten. In my household, the act of reading was not a hobby you developed, it was something sacred—a ritualistic exploration of knowledge.
Therefore, books soon became an integral part of my life—from the comfort provided by the Puffin classic edition of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* to the thrilling suspense provided in the old copies of *The Hardy Boys* I would scavenge from the second-hand bookstores in Paltan.
But, I think the biggest reading challenge I ever took was back in the seventh grade, when my interest in

theology had peaked and I decided to read *The Bible* to explore different religious viewpoints. It took me more than a month to finally finish reading the book as the dense and tedious literature was full of complex analogies which had to be deciphered, as well as a lot of classical references which had to be understood.
After I was finally done reading it, no book seemed challenging to me. My interest in classical literature and philosophical texts increased, and I found myself reading other big classical texts with a decent reading speed. Soon, it took me less than 4 days to finish reading Dante's *Inferno*.
Nowadays, the pressure from A Levels has made it difficult for me to read books as my busy schedule does not allow me to sit with a particular book multiple times. However, I have come to realise that one way to avoid

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this problem is to read bigger books at very long stretches over multiple days.
This means that if I am planning to read a particular book, I will keep my schedule free for the next three, four or five days (depending on the size of the book), just so that I can read the book throughout those days. This allows me to read for long hours without breaking my attention span, as it is often difficult to bring yourself back into the



HERE'S WHAT YOU READ THIS YEAR



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN AZAD

reading spree if I am not engrossed enough.
Therefore, what allows me to read big books in a very short amount of time is devoting my entire time to finishing the book while halting other tasks. To be fair, this is indeed a risky business as one might have other important personal or professional commitments which

they might end up avoiding due to them being very engrossed in a particular book. It is often easy to get lost in the intricacies of Plato's cave or the drama of *Pride and Prejudice*.
Reflecting upon my experiences, I think it is safe to say that some of the biggest books I have read have impacted my thought-processes the most. While it may seem

intimidating and daunting, the key is to read books which you will genuinely enjoy reading, whether it is *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Idiot*.
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