

THE SHELF

Books for different types of READERS ON EID



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

This one is for the readers who reserve that one highly-anticipated book to be read later, specifically on Eid. It could be a tear-jerker or a potential five-star read, or it could be a book featuring Muslim characters/Eid itself.

NUR-E-JANNAT ALIF

Eid-ul-Azha is right around the corner, which entails delicious meals, family gatherings, and a little extra downtime between all the Qurbani preparation and feasting. It is also the perfect excuse to, at long last, pick up that book you have always meant to read or dive into something fresh and fun. Whether you are into buzzy new releases or comforting old favourites, here are five books for different kinds of readers to enjoy this Eid.

The one with a new book on every chaand raat

THE PARIS EXPRESS
Emma Donoghue
S&S/Summit Books, 2025

For the reader who starts a new book every chaand raat, *The Paris Express* is a thrilling and immersive option to

help them persevere, even after the initial novelty wears off. Inspired by the infamous 1895 Montparnasse train crash, *The Paris Express* is a gripping novel set aboard a speeding train filled with a diverse cast of passengers. As the locomotive hurtles toward destiny, lives intertwine—members of parliament race to a crucial vote, a medical student fears for a dying girl, a secretary champions the future of moving pictures, and two train crew members navigate double lives. Meanwhile, a young anarchist plots a shocking act, setting the stage for an unforgettable journey of ambition, secrecy, and fate. Donoghue, known for her compelling narratives, captures both the external journey and the emotional undercurrents of her characters, making it the perfect book to kick off your Eid reading. Whether you are reading under the moonlight or

in the comfort of your home (fatigued from a rough day at the gorur haat), this novel's suspenseful plot and richly developed characters will keep you hooked from beginning to end.

The one who hides away with a book to avoid responsibilities

THE FRAUD
Zadie Smith
Penguin Press, 2023

Eid-ul-Azha arrives with its fair share of duties—dividing the meat, cooking the food, managing the guests, and yes, cleaning up after the Qurbani. But if you are the type to quietly vanish into a corner with a book while others are elbow-deep in Eid chaos, *The Fraud* is your perfect alibi. Set in 1873, the book follows Mrs Eliza Touchet, a sharp-witted Scottish housekeeper to fading novelist William Ainsworth. A sceptic by nature, she questions everything—from

her cousin's literary talent to Charles Dickens' morality and England's veneer of respectability. Meanwhile, Andrew Bogle, a formerly enslaved man from Jamaica, becomes the key witness in the sensational "Tichborne Trial", where a butcher from Australia claims to be the heir to a grand estate. As the trial grips England, Mrs Touchet and Bogle navigate a world of deception, class struggles, and hidden truths. The ideal festive read—one to flaunt while you immerse yourself in its captivating and nuanced tale.

The one with the 'Perfect Eid Book'

THE BOOK OF GOLD LEAVES
Mirza Waheed
Viking, 2014

This one is for the readers who reserve that one highly-anticipated book to be read later, specifically on Eid. It could be a tear-jerker or a potential five-star read, or it could be a book featuring Muslim characters/Eid itself. We recommend you seek out *The Book of Gold Leaves* by Mirza Waheed. *The Book of Gold Leaves* is a poignant love story set in war-ravaged Kashmir. Faiz, an artist who delicately paints papier-mâché boxes in Srinagar, crosses paths with Roohi, a young woman yearning for a love that transcends time and conflict. As violence looms over their world, their romance unfolds—a tale of passion, fate, and the heart-wrenching choices war demands. As the novel blends the every day with the extraordinary, it offers a perfect reading experience during Eid's quieter moments, when you might want something both uplifting and contemplative. With its emotional depth and timeless appeal, this book promises to resonate long after you have turned the last page.

The one with a book for the food coma

CODE WORD ROMANCE
Carie Walker
Berkley, 2025

After an indulgent Eid meal, when you are too full to move but not ready for a nap, you need a book that is deeply engaging but not too demanding (we both know you will be fast asleep by the

end of the minute). Max is an average woman, struggling with a mountain of debt, working odd jobs, and living an ordinary life. That is, until she discovers she bears an uncanny resemblance to Sofia Christensen, Europe's youngest female prime minister. When Sofia receives a credible death threat, the CIA sees an opportunity and makes Max an offer she cannot refuse—impersonate the prime minister during her annual trip to Italy, and they will pay her a life-changing amount of money. But the mission is not without its dangers, assassins are closing in, and Flynn, Max's former lover who broke her heart years ago, is assigned as her handler. Let's be honest, you can already see what is coming next!

The one who brings a book to every dawat...just in case

GULLIVOR ER SAFARNAMA
Abul Mansur Ahmed
Prothoma Prokashon, 2024

Just in case you need a break from the endless chatter and want to dive into something sharp and witty instead, *Gullivor er Safarnama* by Abul Mansur Ahmed, first published in 1969, is the ultimate companion for moments when you crave a clever take on society wrapped in humour. Unlike typical political rants, this satirical travelogue takes you on a journey through fantastical lands that reflect the real struggles of Bengal: division, corruption, education woes, all served with a generous dose of irony. What makes this book a joy to pull out, whether at a gathering or in quiet moments, is its blend of laughter and insight. Ahmed's keen observations and biting wit make you ponder, while his warm love for society shines through. Plus, it is a subtle flex that shows off your brains to the catty relatives (not saying you have any)—always satisfying.

Nur-E-Jannat Alif is a gender studies major and part-time writer who dreams of authoring a book someday. Find her at @literatureinsolitude on Instagram or send her your book/movie/television recommendations at nurejannatalif@gmail.com.

INTERVIEW

Embracing the bizarre and 'An Eye and a Leg'

An interview with the Commonwealth Short Story Prize regional winner on surrealism, self-doubt, and finding her voice

STAR BOOKS REPORT

The Asia regional winner of the 2025 Commonwealth Short Story Prize, Faria Basher, in an interview with The Daily Star, opens up about her journey from lifelong reader to emerging writer. She reflects on the creation of "An Eye and a Leg" (Granta, 2025), a surreal and darkly humorous story that challenges the cultural narrative of the "expiring woman". Through reflections on doubt, identity, and literary influences, she speaks about embracing the bizarre, letting go of perfectionism, and the liberating power of writing on her own terms.

You mention being a longtime reader but a fairly new writer. Can you tell us where your love for books began, and what pushed you to finally start writing?

I've been an avid reader for as long as I can remember. I was a bit of a misunderstood child, but always found a lot of understanding in literature. I don't know if I can pinpoint a time or place my love for books began, per se; I think it's something that's just always been innate to me. My father has quite an inclination towards literature too, and is a published author in Bangladesh, so it's possible I inherited some of that from him.

Having that regular exposure to good literature definitely played a part in my journey to becoming a writer. I always knew that at some point in my life, I wanted to try my hand at writing, but I was held back by things like having not taken the academic route to writing, self-imposed perfectionism, and a touch of impostor syndrome. Writing became something I put on the back burner for many years. I kept saying to myself, "Not yet." In retrospect, I don't regret the waiting too much, because I think things worked out for me exactly when they were supposed to. But I do regret the self-doubt.

What has it meant to you to have your work recognised by the Commonwealth Foundation? Has this recognition



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

influenced or added new energy to your writing journey?

I'm eternally grateful to the Foundation for their recognition of my work. I've always had a bit of a unique way of looking at the world, which has often left me on the fringes of a wider collective. I knew while writing it that "An Eye and a Leg" was a weird one, that it might not be easily understood or easily-liked. I wrote it anyway. So to ultimately receive that institutional validation—to know that the preliminary readers and judges resonated with my worldview and my surreal little story—is absolutely priceless.

In terms of my writing journey, making the regional winner has definitely motivated me to keep my writing momentum going. I'd ideally like to avoid resting on my laurels. I want to keep reading, keep learning, and

keep developing my writing capabilities.

In exploring the trope of the 'expiring woman', what personal insights or real-life observations informed your approach to this theme?

I think it's a universal experience, and especially in South Asia, for a woman to hit a certain age and be bombarded with subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) nudges towards marriage and starting a family. This commodification of women, the reduction of an individual down to her marriageability and childbearing capacity, always seemed to me like a great tragedy. It's dehumanising, and a great disservice to women's personal aspirations, talents, and liberties. I've always refused to internalise anything that contributes to my own oppression, but I'm in a personal

and socioeconomic context where I'm able to do that. Many don't have that privilege. When I hit my mid-20s, I began to critically examine the idea of the "expiring woman" or the "old maid" trope that's so prevalent in various forms of media. Who wins by commodifying women and who wins when women begin systematically commodifying themselves? Who benefits when a woman races against the invisible clock in her head? My search for the answers to these questions led me to write "An Eye and a Leg".

How did you find the balance between dark comedy and the unsettling themes present in 'An Eye and a Leg'? How important is humour to you when writing about heavy or uncomfortable topics?

I knew I had a message to get across in "An Eye and a Leg"—and I was never going to

compromise on that. So keeping it intact, I gave myself the space to play around with elements of humour, surrealism, and a bit of body horror. I didn't want to write a regular, run-of-the-mill melodrama; the world has enough of those. What I did want was to shock my readers, make them laugh, cry, and ultimately have them reconsider everything they've been conditioned to believe in since birth. I wanted to write what no one has ever written before. Saras Manickam, Judge for the Asia Region, said that my story was "without hysterics, without playing to victimhood", which indicates to me I was successful in what I set out to do.

I believe all tragedies are, at their core, hilarious. The best tragic works of literature are ones that incorporate humour so cleverly that you can't even tell it's there. It's a tragedy when we quell women's ambitions and aspirations for the sake of marrying them off, but it's also hilarious, I think, in how we approach it. In the imaginary, socially-constructed timelines we assign them. I personally will always incorporate some humorous and outlandish elements in anything tragic I write; it's how I offset the seriousness of it.

Where do you hope your writing takes you, both literally and creatively, in the next few years?

As I mentioned, I'm eager to keep this momentum going, but at the same time, I'm going to pace myself. I'm not in any rush. I'm just the instrument through which my stories tell themselves. There's a few works in progress I'm looking forward to completing and submitting to various competitions and journals within the next year or so. After that, who's to say? All I'm certain of at the moment is that while I might have what it takes to be good, I'd very much like to become great.

This is an excerpt. Read the full interview on The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature's websites.