

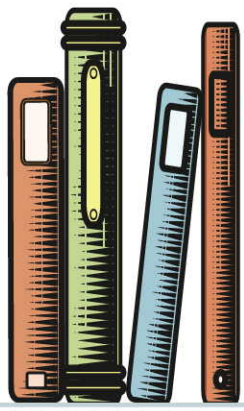
The Best Books of 2012



RAKESH BEDI

With monotonous regularity, every year brings at its start dire predictions of the death of the reading habit. The growing cult of the ebook, the Kubrickesque invasion of mind-deadening technology and finger-twisting gadgets and a general devaluation of culture and many other ill-defined and undefined spectres are always the root of these fears. But as the year fades out our hope in books is restored by writers who unfailingly produce stuff

that is redemptive and rallies readers towards it. 2012, too, started with the grim reaper lying stealthily in wait to pounce on the weary habit of reading, but as we go into 2013 the books the year produced renewed our faith and proved life-affirming for the indolent yet inquisitive addiction of the book. At ET, we believe in the Book and the list we give below is a kind of a bookend to the captivating fiction and non-fiction that came out this year. Read and enjoy...

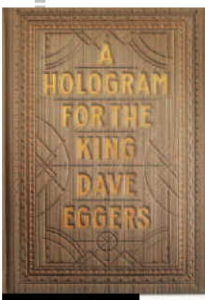
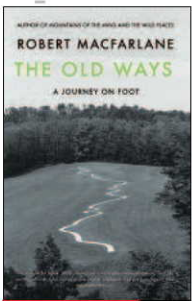


The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot

by **ROBERT MACFARLANE**

One walks to a station, one walks to a destination, but have you walked to stir some splendid prose? Cambridge don Robert Macfarlane does precisely that to put together his third book, making a kind of loose trilogy with his other two widely admired travelogues: *Mountains of the Mind* and *The Wild Places*. In *Mountains*, where he riffed on Samuel Coleridge apart from astonishing mountain landscapes, to *Old Ways*, which contains an astute section on the poet Edward Thomas plus soaring accounts of his peregrinations through the various routes of the British landscape, Macfarlane shows he is a wide-ranging writer

of huge talent and wonderfully evocative prose. British travel writing has been served richly by Patrick Leigh Fermor and Bruce Chatwin, and the young Macfarlane can be proudly abreast of them. WG Sebald, the genius traveller who mixed fact and fiction and used themes of memory to produce outstanding writing, is surely a model for Macfarlane, but his work is more life-affirming than the melancholic Sebald's.



A Hologram for the King

by **DAVE EGGERS**

Dave Eggers gave us the brave story of Zeitoun, the Syrian-American small-time businessman who rides out Hurricane Katrina in a small canoe in New Orleans and saves the lives of his many

neighbours. Coming after 9/11, Eggers' story had a deep resonance. Now, McSweeney's founder plants a middle-aged American in a hollowed-out city in Saudi Arabia who waits endlessly for a deal to close to change his life. Standing Pax Americana on its head, Eggers writes an eloquent parable about America's global standing in a tone that's nothing short of Beckettian. As the despairing businessman waits it out in Saudi, Eggers subtly underlines the absurdist hopelessness and decay of the vaunted American middle-class.

Far from the Tree by ANDREW SOLOMON

Andrew Solomon, in this book coming after his deeply penetrating study on melancholia called *The Atlas of Depression*, studied children with "horizontal identities" for a decade. Solomon, a gay father himself, writes about the cares and travails of families who raise children out of kilter with normality. As he goes about investigating and meeting families across the world which bring up children with traits they don't share with their parents, Solomon excavates the abiding love and immense sacrifice of the families which either emerge stronger or just fall apart while raising dwarfs, schizophrenics and transgendered children. In Africa, where he goes to study the plight of children conceived in rapes, Solomon narrates the painful yet touching stories of mothers whose children came into this world after a terrible, harrowing ordeal they suffered in the midst of callous, ruthless and primeval societies.



Telegraph Avenue by MICHAEL CHABON

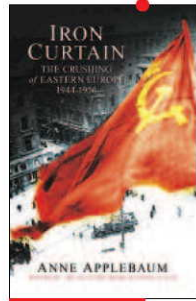
The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay announced to the whole world that there was no one better than Michael Chabon to take you on a rollicking ride through America. With *Telegraph Avenue*, he proves there's perhaps no one more talented than him to give you the American Story in all its bulging splendour and busting shadiness. Darin Strauss called it Joycean, and Chabon's Californian characters going through the usual rigmarole of race and class fighting their existential crises make it a treat almost worthy of the comparison. As in earlier Chabons, there are plenty of swinging references to America's pop culture laid out in prose so buoyant that some critics have already called the book the first Great American Novel of the 21st century.



Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956

by **ANNE APPLEBAUM**

In Andrzej Wajda's classic *Man of Marble*, a documentary filmmaker hunts for a Polish bricklayer who slaves to keep the Stalinist foundation intact. Wajda lays bare the shenanigans of Stakhanovites and the heinous and soul-destroying bureaucracy the over-achieving ethic engenders. Behind the Iron Curtain lay a humourless, morose society, afraid even of



jokes because, as George Orwell said, every joke by its nature was a "tiny revolution". Anne Applebaum's masterly history of the sullen and bleak Iron Curtain tells us how Soviet apparatchiks with their stringent rigidity leached life out of the countries they ruled with deep insecurities and even deeper anxieties. Jazz was banned in East Germany

because it had not sprung from the Soviet ideology. Clampdowns were swift on any trivial thing, even a pair of socks, that could threaten to send the deadening Stalinism into retreat. That the Curtain finally lifted, and with it the gloomy fog, helped stop a Marxian nightmare into becoming a (Groucho) Marxian dream!

HHhH by LAURENT BINET

Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazi butcher of Prague and organiser of *Kristallnacht*, was killed in one of the most courageous acts of resistance by Jozef Gabcik and Jan Kubis in British-ordered Operation Anthropoid, a bizarre name for an important, war-changing assassination yet apt for what it finally achieved. Laurent Binet, a French teacher and the son of a history teacher, won Prix Goncourt du Premier Roman for his debut novel in 2010. Translated competently by fiction writer Sam Taylor, Binet's historical thriller brings 1942 and "the most dangerous man in the Third Reich" tantalizingly close to us. Binet keeps intruding into the book with his Milan Kundera-like pronouncements on how difficult it is for a

modern novelist to resist the alluring temptation of making things up when dealing with momentous history. The hellish brutal Nazi machine and the heroic bravery of the Czech resistance are captured



brilliantly in Binet's racy style which meshes the honesty of a journalist with messianic aspects of fiction to create a knockout narrative.

THE YELLOW BIRDS

by **KEVIN POWERS**

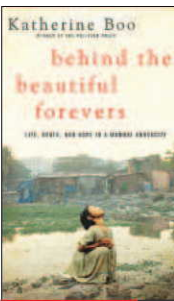
When you are 17 and serving the US army as a machine-gunner in Iraq, the idea that you may end up writing a searing, brilliant novel on the war never crosses your narrowly focused mind. But that's what Kevin Powers did with *The Yellow Birds*, instantly hailed as a classic of war fiction on a level with Tim O'Brien's Vietnam masterpiece *The Things They Carried*. Writing a heartrending tale of innocent and young friendship, Powers lays out, in poetic and rich detail, the burning and harrowing images of America's Middle East wars. As a debut, it's a remarkably gripping, affecting book that will stay with you for a long time.



Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity by KATHERINE BOO

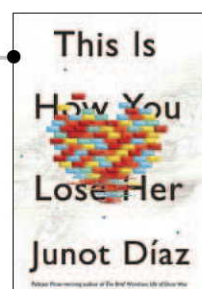
That it took an American journalist to write the best book on an Indian slum should be a constant source of shame for us. But we are used to it. After all, the best film on Gandhi was made by a British. Katherine Boo, a *New Yorker* writer and wife of Indian academic Sunil Khilnani, has written a spellbinding piece of reportage without an iota of romanticism on Annawadi, a Mumbai slum abutting the teeming city's airport. Not making the bedevilled poor look exotic, Boo goes deep into the divisions that exist in today's India, lurching between

the highs of humungous wealth and lows of scarring, punch-in-the-gut poverty. It's a book that should always be a key part of the discourse on Indian poverty because it's not a sentimental but a sagacious piece of writing with sharp insights into how the destitute eke out their blighted existences. Recently, Indian writers such as Aman Sethi and Sonia Faleiro have produced splendid books on the Indian underbelly. Boo's majestic, meaty book, which reminds of Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, is a splendid addition to the genre.



This is How You Lose Her by JUNOT DIAZ

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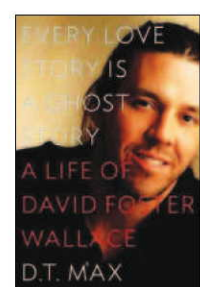
Yunior, the guy who speaks a language that many have called Spanglish, gets a reprise in Junot Diaz's third book. In fact, he has featured in all his books: *Drown*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and now *This is How You Lose Her*. But here in this collection of

magically addictive short stories, Yunior, part alter ego of Diaz, finds a seductive voice that keeps you enthralled with his irresistible dialect and unbridled, inventive dissing through the nine stories making up this inventive assemblage. Diaz writes about the sweet and sour tugs of the family history and cultural mores, and about the endless, insuperable difficulty of loving oneself in a language that's entertaining and tantalizing at the same time. It's a grave loss to the literary world that Diaz, a born storyteller, is such a slow writer, but no one would mind if his magnificent output continues to be as electrifying and intimate as this collection of shorts.

Every Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace by DT MAX

by **DT MAX**

DFW, as the great David Foster Wallace was called, once had defined Updike as "a penis with a thesaurus", opening a rift with America's towering post-war writers such as the waspish Updike and the "monstrous" Mailer. But DFW, a brilliant student and a



terrific tennis player with a fetish for Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis, had the talent to take them on. For the post-Raymond Carver generation, he is almost like god. Battling severe depression all his life, DFW killed himself at 46, bringing to a sudden and shocking end a stupendous career

marked by path-breaking books. DT Max, a *New Yorker* staff writer, tells his sad story in a deeply researched biography, which gives us the man, his prodigious gifts and his stunning works. At the end of this riveting book, DFW almost becomes "maximally likeable".