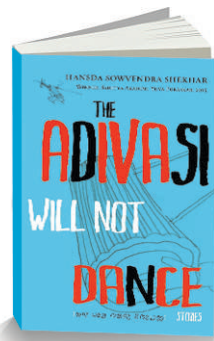
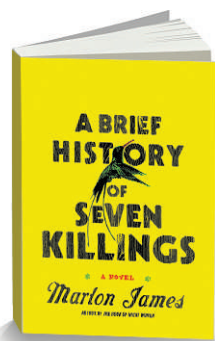
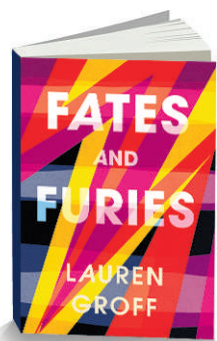
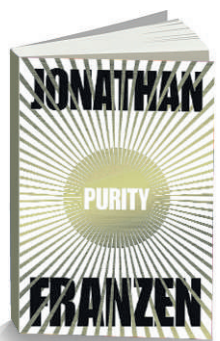


Sunday Herald books

A new chapter for the new year

"We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words on them ourselves. The book is called Opportunity, and its first chapter is New Year's Day."
— Edith Lovejoy Pierce, writer

BEST OF 2015



Flowers in the flood

SHREEKUMAR VARMA gives us a lowdown on the dynamic literary scene this year that saw some impressive titles and some that left the readers high and dry...

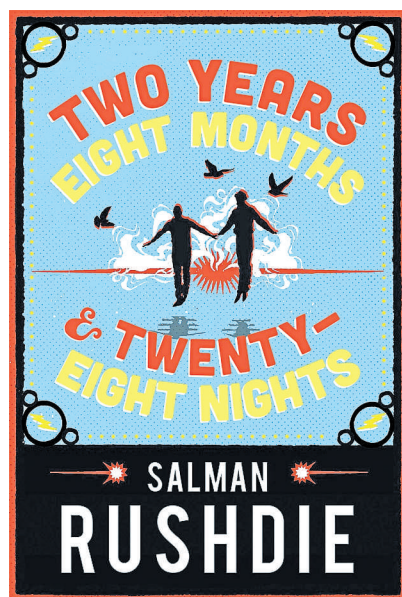
It's extremely tempting to not limit our list to 2015 releases alone, but include other books as well that I read this year. I hereby succumb to temptation.

Mid-year I reviewed 2014 Nobel Prize winner Patrick Modiano's books *The Night Watch* and *Ring Roads* in these pages. I wrote then: "He works like an illusionist only to bring you an abstract truth, to give you the essence of time, character." He was essential reading this year, showing how a writer's simplicity can later get complicated in your mind; the unravelling is your education.

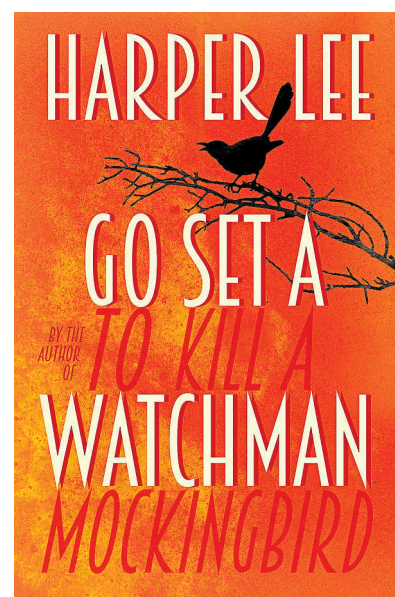
Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, which won this year's Booker, tells of the attempted assassination of singer Bob Marley two days before a concert. The dark, bloody world he writes about is Jamaica in the 70s, with CIA, guns, gang warfare and local politics. The novel is a step removed from history, with made-up names and real events. *The Guardian*, after praising the book, adds that it is "slightly more impressive for its ambition than its accomplishment".

If *Brief History* wasn't so brief, and was filled with a chaotic babel of voices, Jonathan Franzen's new novel *Purity* is also a tableau of pieces and viewpoints. The eponymous heroine, unhappy with the name her mother wounded her with, calls herself Pip. And that isn't its only Dickensian quality. Franzen is a brilliantly inventive writer who works out a thrilling ride through timescapes and relationships. Definitely worth a read, especially for its quirky insights and deeply felt structure.

Wait, it's been a Salman Rushdie year



too, with his latest *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*. And he's as fabulous as ever—with his Peristan, separated and sealed from our world, and heroine Duniya whose many unique descendants are the fruits of her relationship with rationalist Rushdie, who has this ideological run-in with, hold your breath, the Ghazali of Iran. It's the thousand and one tales all over again, Rushdie's own brush with death as a fearless storyteller looming large, his love for Bombay enmeshed in Geronimo the gardener. A profusion of characters and stories consume and dis-



play Rushdie's dazzling procession of concepts, wit and conceits.

Every once in a while a legend resurrects to grant us a much-awaited boon, classic writer with a new book. In most cases, they disappoint; expectations are huge and varied, and certainly in the case of sequels, readers fiercely possess favourite characters and their prospects. This year, it's Harper Lee with her *Go Set a Watchman*. Interesting thing is, though its events happen after the characters of her iconic *To Kill a Mockingbird* have grown up, it was written before that book, so it isn't a sequel.

It's an odd situation that we should consider before reading the book. Those who grew up loving Atticus and Scott will be disappointed, to say the least. But then, this book was the real precursor.

For a different experience, there's Elena Ferrante's *The Story of the Lost Child*, last of her Neapolitan quartet translated from the Italian. This reclusive, pseudonymous writer has a faithful fan following.

And Lauren Groff's *Fates and Furies*. This is a hide-and-seek marriage rather like *Gone Girl* with its contrasting voices, mysteries and bodies that turn up. You might well enjoy her "messier, sharper fiction" (in the words of a character).

Hansda Sovvendra Shekhar has short stories this time, after the *Rupi Baskey* success. In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, he's able to say more about Jharkhand and Santals than he did with the novel. Shekhar's advantage is the ability to present the roughest emotion in graceful language, to show the slime beneath still, almost dead, waters. In the final story that gives the book its name, the land is stained black with coal, and the refusal to dance before the president becomes a definitive statement.

Another book I'll definitely recommend is *The Heat and Dust Project: The Broke Couple's Guide to Bharat*. Its easy, tongue-in-cheek style adds much to the descriptions of an amazing journey through the country on a budget of Rs 500 a day. Devapriya Roy and Saurav Jha take us to places we'd probably never go, concluding: "This is what the land teaches you, after all: you must let go, you must not let go." Almost making us pack our bags to go.

With no power, phone signals or places to go during the recent Madras flood, reading was an option. When there was light, I read a book. When light failed, I lit a candle, and later, my Kindle. Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* kept me going through the night with its sharp prose and vivid descriptions. It began with brilliant promise, but left a rather chaotic final impression.

A voice I discovered seven years ago while shortlisting entries for a workshop with Paul Theroux came up again. The story I'd read then is one of several stories in the book, *Sleeping With Movie Stars*. At the workshop, I told the author Gitanjali Kolanad, a Bharatnatyam and Kalaripayattu exponent, how her story had impressed me. Her remaining stories (read by candle-light) retain that spirit with their stark style and sensuousness reminiscent of a Kamala Das. Though the book is four years old, it seems to belong to this year.

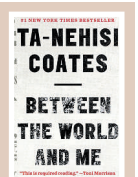
As you reach out in floodwaters for these swift-flowing flowers, you pick up but a few; the rest remain for whoever's looking.

RUNAWAY HITS

Between the World and Me

By Ta-Nehisi Coates

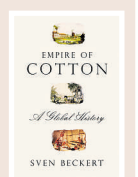
Structured as a letter to his teenage son, this slender, urgent volume is a searching exploration of what it is to grow up black in a country built on slave labour and "the destruction of black bodies".



Empire of Cotton: A Global History

By Sven Beckert

In this ambitious and disturbing survey, Beckert takes us through every phase of a global industry that has relied on millions of miserably treated slaves, sharecroppers and millworkers to turn out its product.



H is for Hawk

By Helen Macdonald

Macdonald, a poet, historian and falconer, renders an indelible impression of a raptor's fierce essence in this memoir. After the death of her father, she decides to raise a young goshawk, a brutal predator, in solitude.



The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World

By Andrea Wulf

Wulf revives our appreciation of this ecological visionary, reminding us of his insight: that the Earth is a single, interconnected organism.



One of Us: The Story of Anders Breivik and the Massacre in Norway

By Asne Seierstad, translated by Sarah Death

In this masterpiece of reportage, Seierstad, a Norwegian journalist, explores the dark side of Scandinavia through the life and crimes of Anders Behring Breivik.



The Door

By Magda Szabo, translated by Len Rix

In Szabo's haunting novel, a writer's intense relationship with her servant teaches her more about people and the world than her long days spent alone, in front of her typewriter.



A Manual for Cleaning Women: Selected Stories

By Lucia Berlin, edited by Stephen Emerson

This collection gathers 43 of Berlin's stories, introducing her as a largehearted observer of life whose sympathies favour smart, mouthy women.



Outline

By Rachel Cusk

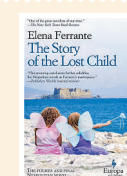
Outline is a string of one-sided conversations. A divorced woman travelling in Greece, our narrator, talks to the people she meets, absorbing their stories of love and loss, deception, pride and folly.



The Story of the Lost Child

By Elena Ferrante, translated by Ann Goldstein

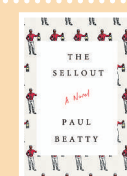
Like the three books that precede it in Ferrante's Neapolitan quartet, this brilliant conclusion offers a clamorous exploration of female friendship set against a backdrop of poverty, ambition & violence.



The Sellout

By Paul Beatty

This satire takes as its subject a young black man's desire to segregate his local school and to reinstate slavery in his home—before careening off to consider almost 400 years of black survival in America.



NON-FICTION

FICTION

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Shashi Tharoor

- **Flood of Fire** by Amitav Ghosh
- **Until the Lions** by Karthika Nair
- **Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights** by Salman Rushdie
- **Farthest Field** by Raghu Karnad
- **The Election That Changed India** by Rajdeep Sardesai



Shinie Antony

- **Karnakavitha** - Hindi poetry collection edited by Sourav Roy
- **Literally Yours** by Asha Francis and Chetaan Joshi
- **Meer** by Humra Quraishi
- **Shadow and Soul** by Nandita Bose
- **Why We Love the Way We Do** by Preeti Shenoy



Jerry Pinto

- **Until the Lions** by Karthika Nair
- **Nine** by Anupama Raju
- **Two years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights** by Salman Rushdie
- **The Syrian Jihad** by Charles Lister
- **The Light of his Clan** by Chetan Raj Shreshtha



Amish Tripathi

- **Indian Science & Technology** by Dharampal
- **The Beautiful Tree** by Dharampal
- **Shiva: The Great Lord of Yoga** by Dr David Frawley
- **The Way Things Were** by Aatish Taseer
- **Masterpieces of Urdu Ghazals** by K C Kanda



Rakshanda Jalil

- **Rest in Peace: Ravan and Eddie** by Kiran Nagarkar
- **Khirman**, Urdu poetry by Muztar Khairabadi
- **Firaq Gorakhpuri: The Poet of Pain and Ecstasy**, a biography by Ajai Mansingh
- **My Name is Radha: the Essential Manto**, translated and introduced by Muhammad Umar Memon

■ **Iqbal: The Life of a Poet, Philosopher and Politician** by Zafar Anjum

The one I enjoyed most was *Khirman*, a collection of poetry in five volumes by Muztar Khairabadi, published over 80 years after the poet's death. A collection of great beauty and immense variety, it represents the many moods of Urdu poetry.



Shashi Deshpande

- **The Testament of Mary** by Colm Toibin: This is about the last few days of Jesus's life and his crucifixion, seen through the eyes of his mother Mary. Brings home what familiarity has almost made us forget: what a terrible story it is, what a wonderful story it is.
- **This is the Story of a Happy Marriage** by Ann Patchett: After reading Patchett's *Bel Canto*, I can't resist any book of hers. This oddly-titled book is a collection of essays. It has much to interest a writer and a reader. Witty, yet serious.
- **A Spool of Blue Thread** by Anne Tyler: One of my favourite writers, her last few books were disappointing. In this story of all humans, a story of old age and how

the children and parents cope, she is back in form.

■ **Lila** by Marilynne Robinson: Follows on her earlier novels, *Gilead* and *Home*. It's an amazing feat of telling almost the same story through three different points of view. *Lila* has the same austere beauty as the earlier two books, but, perhaps, is less powerful.

■ **Room 000** by Kalpish Ratna: A medical mystery set in late 19th century Mumbai, the time of the great Bombay Plague, it is about the hunt for a terrible and elusive killer, the plague bacillus. Scrupulously true to the facts, it still reads like a fascinating story.



Raghu Karnad

- **Leaving the Atocha Station** by Ben Lerner
- **The Year of Magical Thinking** by Joan Didion
- **The Orphan Master's Son** by Adam Johnson
- **The Cosmopolitans** by Anjum Hasan



They're all great books, but *Until the Lions* was a revelation about the kind of pow-

er that can be held within lines of words. The book is a verse sequence that visits the perspectives of different female characters in the *Mahabharata*, each through a different poetic format. I don't read enough poetry, but I read this because I know the author, and remarkably for a book of poems, it won the Best Fiction prize at the Tata Lit Live awards this year. And it deserved it: The lines of Amba, for instance, are so intense it felt like they were faintly vibrating before my eye.

Ashwin Sanghi

- **The Girl on the Train** by Paula Hawkins: This one is simply unput-downable. Rachel takes the very same train into London each day, wondering about those who occupy the homes that she observes. But then she sees something disquieting one day and it results in a horrifying series of events.
- **Mecca: The Sacred City** by Ziauddin Sardar: Compelling and fascinating reading with incredible research. Tracing the history of Mecca from its origins as a 'barren valley' in the desert to its evolution as a trading town and sudden emergence as



the religious centre of a world empire.

- **The Girl in the Spider's Web** by David Lagercrantz: I was worried about reading this one. I wondered whether it would be possible for David Lagercrantz to maintain the Stieg Larsson DNA. He does, and brilliantly.
- **The Wright Brothers** by David McCollough: This account of the lives of pioneering aviators Wilbur and Orville Wright starts with their childhood and their exhaustive trial-and-error quest to enable man to achieve flight. Unputdownable.
- **Elon Musk: How the Billionaire CEO of SpaceX and Tesla is Shaping our Future** by Ashlee Vance: The personal story of Musk has all the trappings one associates with a great drama.

Favourite reads of 2015

