



BOOKED

So much to read

The year 2012 was definitely a year for book lovers as the number of published books, including translations, increased massively, notes **SHREEKUMAR VARMA**

Like a child squatting on a cluttered floor and reaching out to gather every toy to herself, we attempt but cannot encompass the growth and outgrowth of the year's literary production. A statistician or librarian may have better luck. So we reach out at random, to savour the highlights, try the hearsay, identify a general picture.

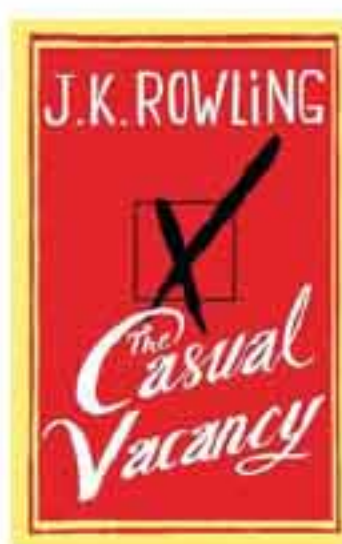
As the number of published books increases worldwide, including translations, with region and genre-wise favourites, it becomes difficult to get a grip on the entirety. (Which is disclaimer enough for such a year-end misadventure.)

2012 was a year I read much and wrote little, so a bit of my list can be added to the year's harvest.

The Man Booker being the beacon, Hillary Mantel with her double take heads our list. Sequels aren't often satisfying, but *Bring Up The Bodies* is testimony to Mantel's passion. Anne Boleyn's story is told with the same vigour and rawness that characterised her first win. Katherine Fulminating on Cromwell is a graphic example as she 'turns the great pages of her volume of rage, and puts her finger on just the right word' — which is 'contemptible'.

Will Self's *Umbrella*, a favourite that lost out, is an experimental novel whose story spans 90 years and springs from World War I. Few readers will crack the unrelenting word mazes of its narrative. Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* didn't make it to the short list, but I found it faithful to my Bombay of the 70s, its murky underside especially, though Thayil's deep voyage into the world of opiate dreams is something few travellers experience. He was on the Man Asian list as well. His writing is deeply dreamy and matter-of-factly narrative.

On the Man Asian long list is a book I reviewed, Benjamin's *Goat Days*. Based on a true story, it tells in starkly poetic narrative the story of a young hopeful whose Gulf dreams turn to ashes. Manu Joseph, who won the inaugural Hindu Literary Fiction Award, came out this year with his second, *The Illicit Happiness of Other People*, the story of a father's hunt for the reason for his cartoonist son's suicide. It's a more settled and deeper book with the humour well in place. Tie Ning's *The Bathing Women* is another Man Asian hopeful that takes four women from childhood to adulthood, tracing, in the process, China's progress from the Cultural Revolution to the new economy. The large Chinese pres-



ence in modern world literature is now an accepted fact.

Pow! by Nobel laureate Mo Yan is a slyly subversive political work that shows the might of Government officialdom pitted against the bewildered common man, surrounded by greed and illegal accumulation of money. Set in a village devoted to meat, it's about 'many bizarre events and many strange people', where the protagonist tells the story of Slaughterhouse Village to a Buddhist monk in a temple to the Meat God. *Pow!* speaks out in the time of China's censorship, hopefully a pointer to new easement (though its author is diplomatically benign about the book's true meaning). The positive sign is that books all over the world are being translated. Kyung-sook Shin's *Please Look After Mom* was a South Korean bestseller that was translated. A time for soaked hankies and severe introspection.

Ashwin Sanghi's *The Krishna Key*, Anita Nair's *Cut Like Wound*, and *Poor Little Rich Slum* by Rashmi Bansal and Deepak Gandhi, were interesting entrants.

Much awaited, Rowling's first adult fiction, *The Casual Vacancy*, doesn't disappoint as narrative, but the dark and messy goings-on in a small English town, running on for 500 pages with claustrophobically unredeemed characters, have drawn mixed responses. Inevitable comparisons with the world of Potter notwithstanding, the vitality of the telling keeps us going.

We had other biggies: a new Zadie Smith in *NW*, told in interesting styles, tracing human and geographical landscapes; Peter Carey's *The Chemistry of Tears*, that explores clockwork mechanisms probably at the expense of the human; *Skagboys*, Irvine Welsh's sequel to his cult work *Trainspotting*, though this one came out to very mixed responses. Anne Tyler, Toni Morrison, Martin Amis, Pat Barker (author of 1995's Booker winner *Ghost Road*) and Howard Jacobson

(2010 Booker for his *The Finkler Question*) all wrote, though none of them touched their previous heights. Then there's Ian McEwan and his spy thriller with academics, books and writing, autobiographical references and sex thrown in. Not everyone has a *Sweet Tooth*.

I reviewed Orhan Pamuk's *Silent House* for this paper, and it was the read of the year. Only his second book, it was a late translation, showing the Pamuk promise and also a taste of his remorseless monologues. *Speechless: a Year in My Father's Business* is an interesting account by James Button of his time as a speechwriter for Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. This isn't just about politics and the insecurities of statesmen, but a deeply human personal story that Button must tell to release his family ghosts. Colm Toibin's *New Ways To Kill Your Mother* is a collection of essays on writers. Why the title? "Mothers get in the way of fiction...The novel is a ripe form for orphans."

The previous year's hangover had *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Hunger Games* continuing to top charts, adding progeny and franchise, showing the world and, indeed, India the stuff of sales. Indian writers took note. It was difficult to keep track of the many 'easy' books that filled airport bookshops, as authors kept publicising their work through any media they could access, Facebook and YouTube being the best bets. Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* with its much-debated ending is exactly the kind of writing that people look for. A touch of mystery, a touch of sex, well-crafted and artfully placed. There were many new Indian authors. Cooking and travel were bestsellers as always, and so were feel-good spirituality and money-plotters. So what's new? It's the edge that matters. Like in Oliver Burkeman's *The Antidote-Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*. Or Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men* that's an amazing journey through many spaces, times and minds, a cross-worked modern fable that broods on science, philosophy and our times.

Was there a trend, a recognisable curve? Maybe in the increasing e-book consumption; though, hearteningly, books continued to be sold with online retailing burgeoning, more portals adding books to their menu. A new year of books is always interesting, and amidst the roar of the veterans, sometimes it's the dark horse whose neigh we hear.

