

THE ONES THAT COUNTED

From what was a noisy year in publishing, **Rashmi Vasudeva** curates, in no particular order, the Indian and international titles in fiction and non-fiction that managed to rise above the din

NON-FICTION

Autocracy, Inc: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World by **Anne Applebaum**
Originally published in 2024, the book gained a new audience in 2025 with the release of its paperback edition, coinciding with global elections and a rise in democratic backsliding. Applebaum's critical and sharp tracing of how modern autocrats collaborate across borders through money, technology, surveillance and disinformation reads like a veritable thriller. Its timeliness is almost worrying. A great synthesis of investigative journalism and her deep understanding of geopolitics, the book gathered much critical acclaim, and for good reason.

Mother Mary Comes to Me by **Arundhati Roy**
This is what the hacks called the 'publishing event' of the year, and its reception in both Indian and international markets quite matched the pre-release hype. With her signature lyrical prose and imagery, in *Mother Mary*, Roy blends religion, political history, and her own raw memories to write a book that is perhaps, in many ways, too intimate and tender to handle. Interestingly, it was praised for its stylistic restraint, something Roy is often accused of not adhering to in her political essays and novels.

The Zorg: A Tale of Greed and Murder by **Siddharth Kara**
Siddharth Kara returns with his second deeply researched work after the Pulitzer-nominated *Cobalt Red*, his investigation into child labour and everyday violence in the Congo. In *Zorg*, he reconstructs the horrific voyage of a slave ship and the massacre of enslaved Africans that eventually sped up the abolitionist movement in Europe. Kara's strength lies in his ability to weave deeply human tales of greed and violence with the so-called 'colder' issues of economic interests outpacing moral values and modern systems of exploitation.

Speaking of History: Conversations about India's Past and Present by **Romila Thapar & Namit Arora**
A far-reaching conversation between two eminent historians, the book examines how India's past is researched, interpreted and disputed in public life. It translates complex academic arguments into clear, readable prose without flattening their nuance, helping readers understand why history continues to be a site of intense political and cultural struggle in the present. A must-read in these times of contested histories and post-truth anomalies.

Apple in China: The Capture of the World's Greatest Company by **Patrick McGee**
A deeply reported work of corporate and geopolitical journalism, the book traces how Apple's growing reliance on China transformed not only the company's business model but also the architecture of global manufacturing. Drawing on extensive reporting, it reveals the hidden interdependence between technology firms, labour systems and state power, and the political compromises embedded in modern supply chains. Many critics have praised it as the year's defining work on global capitalism.

Called by the Hills by **Anuradha Roy**
Anuradha Roy excels in blending storytelling and lyricism, and what better place to do so than near the Himalayas! The book delves into the author's relocation to the mountains, her growing bond with the landscape around her, as well as the local communities and the daily rhythms of solitude that she comes to love. This is nature writing at its best, evoking a sense of yearning and guilt, for it makes you deeply consider our responsibility towards our natural world.

Things in Nature Merely Grow by **Yiyun Li**
A raw and haunting memoir of loss and motherhood, this work emerged as one of the year's most widely examined nonfiction titles. Li eschews comfort, approaching grief with measured philosophical insight and unflinching honesty. Her narrative has influenced ongoing discussions about how personal sorrow and resilience are expressed in modern literature.

A Sixth of Humanity: Independent India's Development Odyssey by **Devesh Kapur & Arvind Subramanian**
A seminal work of economic history, this book reinterprets India's post-independence path as a unique and ongoing experiment in development. Merging macro-economic analysis

with political commentary, it examines how policy decisions, institutional frameworks, and social priorities have shaped the nation's growth. It also offers a comprehensive account of the challenges and achievements that have defined India's developmental journey.

We Do Not Part by **Han Kang**
A haunting and lyrical exploration of friendship, memory, and the echoes of historical trauma. Set on Jeju Island, the novel traces the enduring impact of the Jeju massacre through intimate, dreamlike sequences, blending personal emotion with historical weight. Its poetic narrative and deeply felt character work make it a standout in contemporary fiction.

Dream Count by **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**
A sweeping literary novel that interlaces the lives of four women across Nigeria and the US, examining friendship, inequality, privilege, and resilience. Adichie's nuanced characterisation and deft storytelling illuminate the complexities of personal and social ties, making it an essential read for its richness and scope.

Heart Lamp: Selected Stories by **Banu Mushtaq** (translated by **Deepa Bhashti**)
This collection of short stories, originally in Kannada, illuminates the everyday lives, struggles, and resilience of women in India. With elegance and empathy, each story captures the textures of community, personal desire, and social tension, highlighting the power of regional narratives brought to a wider audience.

Audition by **Katie Kitamura**
A tense, psychological narrative centred on an actress confronted by a young man claiming to be her son. Kitamura's precise, controlled prose explores identity, perception, and the boundaries of truth, crafting a story that is as unsettling as it

is compelling. Its depth and psychological subtlety make it a defining novel of the year.

The Beast Within by **Rudraneil Sengupta**
A gripping crime novel set in Delhi, weaving a haunting murder investigation with social insight. Sengupta's narrative examines caste, class, and justice while maintaining suspense and emotional depth, marking it as a standout work in Indian crime fiction.

Flesh by **David Szalay**
An expansive narrative connecting episodes across the life of a Hungarian man, exploring desire, mortality, and the human experience. With formal inventiveness and emotional intensity, the novel offers a sweeping view of life's pleasures and challenges, solidifying its place among 2025's most ambitious works.

Railsong by **Rahul Bhattacharya**
A richly layered literary novel following Charulata Chitol as she leaves her railway township for Bombay, navigating personal growth against the backdrop of political and social change. Bhattacharya's elegant prose and intricate portrayal of individual and national transformation make this a compelling, immersive read.

A Guardian and a Thief by **Megha Majumdar**
Set in a near-future Kolkata, this novel intertwines the lives of a mother and a petty thief whose fates collide over a stolen passport. Majumdar's story combines moral complexity with human resilience, examining hope, survival, and the choices that define us, making it a deeply resonant literary achievement.

The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny by **Kiran Desai**
Quite the most talked-about literary novel of 2025, Kiran Desai was a favourite to win the Booker this year. Although the novel did not eventually win, the sweeping saga that follows Sonia and Sunny, two Indian immigrants whose life throbs with the ache of displacement even while they criss-cross loves, continents, cultures and aspirations, is an enchanting read. Desai's prose was uniformly praised for its restraint and elegance.

The Dream Hotel by **Laila Lalami**
Much lauded for its blend of speculative dystopian sensibility with urgent political issues, this was longlisted for the 2025 Women's Prize for Fiction. The novel tells the story of Sara Hussein, a Moroccan-American museum archivist and mother who is detained by a mysterious government agency. What initially looks like an anomaly stretches into a nightmarish ordeal. Lalami's take on AI surveillance feels eerily close to reality, despite the dystopian setting, or perhaps because of it.

Books to watch out for in 2026

Some books begin to gather a quiet hum of anticipation long before their release. From literary fiction to reported nonfiction, these forthcoming titles offer a glimpse of the ideas, voices and stories set to shape our reading in the coming year. As always, blame us for judging by the cover and do not blame us for the list being (again) in no particular order.

The Complex by **Karan Mahajan**
From the author of *The Association of Small Bombs*, this novel traces the lives of an Indian couple moving between India and the United States as their personal choices unfold alongside political unrest. With his trademark acuity, Mahajan examines questions of belonging, displacement, and the sacrifices ideology demands.

Make it Up as You Go Along by **Shefali Shah**
Among the many memoirs set to be released in 2026, this title stands out for

A World Appears by **Michael Pollan**
From the bestselling author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, this ambitious work turns to consciousness, arguably the most profound and unsolved puzzle in science and philosophy. Drawing on neuroscience, psychology, and lived experience, the book is expected to blend rigorous reporting with intellectual wonder, making complex ideas accessible.

its promise of candour. Written by one of India's most respected actors, this memoir tackles everything about the glitzy world of Bollywood, including ageism, love, being a working woman in the industry today, sexism, etc.

Vigil by **George Saunders**
This promises to be a bold new novel from the Booker-winning author (Lin-

coln in the Bardo). *Vigil* blends existential inquiry with Saunders' signature humane voice, telling a layered story about mortality, redemption, and the afterlife. It promises both experimental structure and emotional depth—a must-read for literary fiction fans.

How to Talk to AI by **Jamie Bartlett**
Do we all need this book or do we? This promises to be a timely guide to understanding artificial intelligence, all its capabilities, risks, and societal impact, written in accessible language for a broad audience. As artificial intelligence continues transforming work, creativity, and ethics, this book aims to

The Secret Lives of Murderers' Wives by **Elizabeth Arnett**
You've heard of the men who kill, but what about the women who loved them? It's a baking hot summer in 1960s California, and three women have formed an unlikely friendship. From the outside, Beverly, Elsie and Margot lead idyllic lives, but behind the false smiles and glittering pools lies the truth: their husbands are some of the country's most notorious convicted killers. When a string of local killings hits the news, the women, underestimated and overlooked, are hurled into an investigation of their own.

demystify the technology shaping our lives and our future.

What We Ask Google by **Tim Hartford**
Ever wondered what goes through other people's minds—their silly questions, their inner anxieties, hopes and dreams? In *What We Ask Google*, the company's Data Editor Simon Rogers explores insights

from the world's biggest dataset: an epic snapshot, two decades long and counting, of our collective brain. What it reveals about us might surprise you.

The Last of Earth by **Deepa Annapara**
A richly imagined historical novel by the acclaimed author of *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* about two outsiders in nineteenth-century Tibet, blending adventure, empire-era politics, and cross-cultural encounters.

Anappara's evocative prose and deep research promise a sweeping narrative that highlights lesser-told histories within the Indian literary orbit.

In The Shade of Many Trees by **Kadambari Devarajan**
Nat Geo explorer Kadambari Devarajan uses seven trees from her *paati's* garden to lead her reader down endlessly fascinating rabbit holes into a reckoning with history, the natural world we are tied to, childhood

nostalgia, and unmitigated climate change. Using seven trees—the coconut, the peepul, the guava, the gooseberry, the sandalwood, the neem, and the moringa—from her grandmother's garden as windows, she takes each to explore social, economic, cultural, and ecological angles of conservation.

After Nations by **Rana Dasgupta**
As American hegemony unwinds and autocracies rise, the nation-state system is unravelling, leaving billions insecure. In *After Nations*, Rana Dasgupta traces how this system emerged—from ancient empires to modern tech giants—and why it's failing today. Urging a reimagination of citizenship, law, and economy for our global, fragile era, this is a bold, urgent analysis of the world's political unravelling and what might replace it.

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