

Literature of the New India

BY PATRICK SMITH

LITTLE MORE THAN A HALF CENTURY after India gained independence from Britain in 1947, staggering statistics suggest how important India has become on the world stage. From a cradle of multiculturalism, religion, and learning to a British colony to the world's largest democracy, India is now an emerging superpower whose economy will soon surpass that of Japan. Within two decades, the country will have a greater population than China. Two decades after that, India will have more speakers of English than the United States.

The nonviolent protest of Mahatma Gandhi in the first half of the 20th century and the democratic leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru shortly thereafter still cast long shadows over the country. Change, however, is the watchword for India's future. Today home to more than 1.3 billion people living in a handful of major cities and nearly 700,000 villages, India offers much more to a quickly growing global community than Bollywood and cricket. Fueled by glo-

balization and the world's largest and youngest workforce, India is on the cusp of an unprecedented rise to economic prominence—and with it, major cultural influence and the social disparities that accompany wealth.

India's modern literature reflects its vast promise, its profound contradictions, and the mingling of cultures. The fiction and nonfiction titles presented below are rich in wordplay and big ideas, flights of fancy and future-leaning philosophies, and stories of assimilation and barrier breaking. Written by Indian-born authors, as well as foreigners looking at India from within and afar, and featuring Indians both at home and in the diaspora, our selections present only a small portion of a body of work of which India's Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel Prize winner in poetry in 1913, would have approved: "Where knowledge is free/ Where the world has not been broken up into fragments/By narrow domestic walls."

Fiction

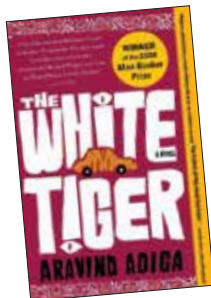
The White Tiger (2008)

By Aravind Adiga

◆ BOOKER PRIZE

Through letters to the soon-to-visit Chinese premier, Bangalore businessman Balram Halwai, the “White Tiger” of the title, relates his rags-to-riches story—and the story of class conflict in India. “Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness,” he writes. Born into the Darkness, rural areas of debilitating poverty, the uneducated but opportunistic Balram works his way up into the company of the wealthy (who live in the Light) when he becomes a chauffeur for a wealthy Delhi family. Though obsequious, Balram blisters with resentment and anger at the Indian elite as he witnesses their exploitation and corruption. As a “social entrepreneur,” Balram will do anything—even commit murder—to change his destiny.

The White Tiger is a parable of the “new India,” a rapidly growing global powerhouse of middle-class call centers juxtaposed against crushing class conflict and corruption. In contrast with other Indian authors, Adiga—who was born in Madras, immigrated to Australia, and currently lives in Mumbai—does not sentimentalize such conflict. Instead, like Richard Wright in *Native Son*, to which *The White Tiger* has been compared, he shows how savvy manipulators can rise above their poverty. See also Adiga’s short story collection, *Between the Assassinations* (2008). (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2009)



Half Girlfriend (2014)

By Chetan Bhagat

Hailing from the much-maligned state of Bihar, Madhav Jha, a country boy, seeks his fortune in Delhi. When he falls in love with Riya Somani, a beautiful, wealthy, modern girl who attends the city’s most prestigious college, he loses his cool. Riya will never be more than Madhav’s “half girlfriend.” The two part ways—Riya marries an old acquaintance and Madhav returns home to help his mother run a school there. When Madhav is tasked with making a presentation to Bill Gates, he has occasion to reconnect with Riya. And so their real story begins.

Arguably one of the most recognizable writers in India today, Bhagat, who was born in Delhi, has the magical touch in writing novels of the boy-meets-girl rom-com



variety that resonate with young, upwardly mobile Indian readers. Reviews of Bhagat’s work often refer to the “Bollywood formula,” while conceding grudging praise for “the biggest selling English-language novelist in India’s history” (*New York Times*). When Bhagat offered readers a preview of *Half Girlfriend*, the response was robust enough to crash his website. See also *What Young India Wants* (2012), a compilation of essays on Indian society, politics, and youth.

The Artist of Disappearance (2012)

By Anita Desai

In her 15th book, a collection of three novellas, Desai explores the difference between ancient tradition and modern capitalism in present-day India. In “The Museum of Final Journeys,” a resentful young administrator is assigned to a remote Indian outpost and spends his hours processing tedious property disputes. One day, he discovers a mysterious museum housed within an abandoned estate. In “Translator, Translated,” a teacher’s life changes forever when she is asked to translate a book written in Oriya, the language of her childhood. And in the title story, a documentary film crew stumbles upon a reclusive stone artist named Ravi.

Desai is one of the most distinguished Indian-born authors working today (born in Mussoorie, India, she now lives in New York). Her work has been short-listed for the Booker Prize three times—for *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). *The Artist of Disappearance* is an elegant, sweeping compilation that limns the lives of Indian society’s outsiders and outcasts. *The New York Times Book Review* praised this thoughtful, eloquent collection about “men and women who seek, gain, but fail to triumph in such moments and are left to play their own kind of solitaire, matching what was to what might have been.” (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2012)

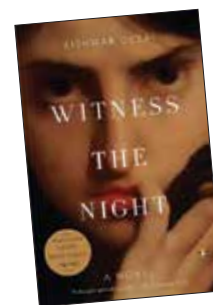


Witness the Night (2010)

By Kishwar Desai

◆ COSTA FIRST NOVEL AWARD

Thirteen people lie dead—poisoned, stabbed, burned—in the remains of a prominent Sikh family’s home in a wealthy Punjab enclave. The only remaining witness, a 14-year-old girl, Durga, is the prime suspect, but she’s not talking. The inspector general of Punjab invites iconoclastic social worker Simran Singh, who grew up in Punjab and now lives in Delhi, to gain Durga’s



confidence and to unravel the events leading to the horrific tragedy. But where will her inquiries lead?

An intense and finely crafted crime novel, *Witness the Night* is the debut for Desai, a journalist who has previously written on the issues of female feticide and infanticide in Indian communities. Straddling cultures (the author divides her time between London, Delhi, and Goa) and “employing the style of a tight, racy thriller, [to expose] deep-seated Indian prejudices” (Insiya Amir), Desai understands the inexorable influence of the ways of the past on a rapidly changing present. See also *Origins of Love* (2013) and *The Sea of Innocence* (2013), both featuring Simran Singh.

A Fine Balance (1995)

By Rohinton Mistry

♦ GILLER PRIZE

India, 1975. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi calls a “state of internal emergency” to quell the unraveling of the social structure as India fights to find a democratic balance in the decades following the country’s independence from British rule. The characters who play out this one-step-forward-two-steps-back tragedy symbolize the hopes and (often quashed) dreams of those living for the first time without colonialism—a Parsi widow who takes in her son’s schoolmate, two tailors who aspire to transcend the caste system, and a widow who seeks her own identity in Bombay apart from her traditional brother. All come together in a tightening spiral at once uncomfortable and affirming.

A magisterial whirlwind when published 20 years ago, *A Fine Balance* was a breakout book for Mistry (*Such a Long Journey* [1991]), who took the American publishing world by storm. “Mistry captures the spirit of people whose every small victory is followed by a crushing defeat,” John Moore wrote. “Not only a great story of human beings overcoming centuries of institutional prejudice to become friends, *A Fine Balance* is indispensable to an understanding of the roots of Indians who emigrate to this country.” Mistry’s most recent novel, *Family Matters* (2002), follows the domestic challenges of a middle-class family in Mumbai. From Mumbai himself, Mistry now resides in Ontario, Canada.

The Middleman and Other Stories (1988)

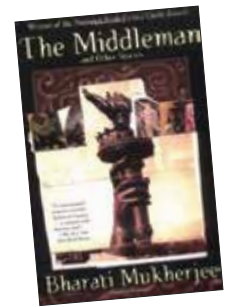
By Bharati Mukherjee

♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD

In this story collection, 11 characters from different walks of life struggle to make sense of cultures foreign to them. A Vietnam veteran returns to find that everything he left behind is gone (“Loose Ends”). In “Jasmine,” a Trinidadian girl navigates sexual politics in Ann Arbor, Michigan. A young Iraqi man becomes caught up in events in Central America that he cannot control in “The Middleman.” A

woman and her expat community in Canada mourn for the immeasurable loss of loved ones in a plane crash (“The Management of Grief”), ending with the woman’s observation—repeated, if not always spoken, in Mukherjee’s fiction—that “I do not know where this voyage I have begun will end. I do not know which direction I will take.”

For more than 40 years, Mukherjee has focused her writing on the lives of Indian immigrants in North America (she has lived in both Canada and the United States). *Middleman* is a beautiful example of how the author bridges the vast cultural gulf she saw in her own life. “After Bharati Mukherjee, America can never be the same. ... Mukherjee is a dazzling stylist—sharp, tough, spare, lyrical, bleak and comical,” Carol Treloar wrote. “She is powerful because she takes no moral high ground about multiculturalism or anything else.” See also *The Holder of the World* (1993).



The God of Small Things (1997)

By Arundhati Roy

♦ BOOKER PRIZE

In a nonchronological, multilayered narrative, Roy explores, through small life events, Indian history, local politics, and social tensions. Starting in 1969 in the southern state of Kerala, seven-year-old twins Rahel and Estha consider their family, in all its eccentricity, loneliness, heartbreak, and joy: their mother, Ammu; Uncle Chacko, a Rhodes Scholar who has returned to tend to the family pickle factory; the handsome carpenter Velutha, son of Untouchables. With the arrival of an Indian English cousin and her mother, things begin to change—not necessarily for the better—in a story as much a part of the magical realm of childhood and memory as it is the everyday world and the tragic events that can end childhood.

Roy, who grew up in Kerala, has gained recognition in the nearly two decades since her fiction debut as a master at examining life’s largest issues through the lens of the small. Bolstered by its epigraph from John Berger—“Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one”—*The God of Small Things* sings with the narrative, language, and mashed-up lives that characterize the best Indian literature. “Although Ms. Roy’s musical, densely patterned prose combines with the mythic power of her tale to create the impression of magical realism (her work has already been compared in India to that of Gabriel García Márquez),” Michiko Kakutani wrote, “the most fantastical events in *The God of Small Things* are not the products of a fevered imagination; they are simply the byproducts of everyday



passions.” See also *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), a collection of essays on global and local topics.

Further Reading

- A PASSAGE TO INDIA** | E. M. FORSTER (1924)
KIM | RUDYARD KIPLING (1901)
THE IMPRESSIONIST | HARI KUNZRU (2002)
INTERPRETER OF MALADIES | JHUMPA LAHIRI (1999)
THE NAMESAKE | JHUMPA LAHIRI (2003)
CYBERABAD DAYS | IAN MCDONALD (★★★★ **SELECTION**, July/Aug 2009)
A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS | V. S. NAIPAUL (1961)
MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN | SALMAN RUSHDIE (1995)
A SUITABLE BOY | VIKRAM SETH (1993)
SELECTED POEMS | RABRINDRANATH TAGORE (2004)

Nonfiction

Behind the Beautiful Forevers

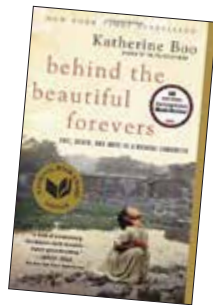
Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity (2012)

By Katherine Boo

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

Near Mumbai's bustling airport, surrounded by luxury hotels, the slums of Annawadi—a fetid patch of land of lean-tos and open sewers—are home to 3,000 residents. Only six Annawadians hold full-time jobs; the poorest dine on weeds and rats within sight of the city's wealthy tourist district. Between 2007 and 2011, Boo, an American Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and *New Yorker* staff writer, uncovered their stories. Her tale centers on Abdul, a Muslim teenager who supports his parents and eight siblings by selling garbage. By slum standards, the family is fairly prosperous. But when Fatima, a vindictive one-legged woman, accuses Abdul of beating her and setting her on fire, he learns there is little hope for justice within India's corrupt court system. Annawadi, Boo concludes, represents “a stretch where new India and old India collided and made new India late.”

The New York Times described Katherine Boo as “one of those rare, deep-digging journalists who can make truth surpass fiction, a documentarian with a superb sense of human drama.” Although the story she tells is true, the narrative plays out like a richly plotted novel, putting human faces on the tragic side of globalization. The stunning result neither judges nor preaches, but still manages to leave an indelible impression. (★★★★★ May/June 2012)



The Siege

68 Hours Inside the Taj Hotel (2013)

By Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy

The Taj Hotel, one of the most recognizable landmarks in Mumbai, is known for its opulence and appeal to the jet-set crowd. On November 26, 2008, the Taj and a handful of other sites around the city were the targets of a brutal attack by 10 heavily armed young Pakistani Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists. At the Taj alone, in just under 3 days—the 68 hours of the book's title—31 people were killed and hundreds more injured by the devoted mujahedeen whose heads were “filled with instructions to ‘kill relentlessly.’” Within the tragedy, though, the authors highlight individual tales of uncommon heroism and sacrifice—and in the aftermath, the resolve of a city and a nation to recover.

In their account of the 26/11 attacks, as they are known in India, British journalists and authors Scott-Clark and Levy (*The Meadow: Kashmir 1995—Where the Terror Began*, 2012) offer not only the specific (often disturbing) details of the siege on the Taj Hotel but also a sweeping narrative pieced together from hundreds of interviews and forensic files in a “a tragedy and a thriller with concussive human and political resonance” (*New York Times*).



City of Djinns

A Year in Delhi (1994)

By William Dalrymple

In India, the weight of history presses down on the present as in few other of the world's countries. Dalrymple, a British historian, critic, and art curator who has lived periodically in India since the 1980s, examines India's capital through its myriad incarnations, razings, and rebuildings (history records as many as 21) in “a portrait of a city disjointed in time, a city whose different ages lay suspended side by side as in aspic, a city of djinns.” Describing in exuberant detail the city's countless crumbling edifices and its markets teeming with ostentatious displays of wealth, its great historical figures and some of today's eccentric characters (including his Sikh landlady, whirling dervishes, British survivors of the Raj, and more), Dalrymple uncovers the mystical—and nothing short of legendary—history of Delhi.

With his “dry wit and an unquenchable appetite for history and architecture, [Dalrymple] brings the characters, mosques, temples and stories of New Delhi to life in a new and refreshing way,” Elisabeth Bumiller wrote about this novelistic travelogue. “He takes the reader from storyteller to monument to historical text and then back to the



streets, all the while driving further and further into history.” See also *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2009).

The Beautiful and the Damned

A Portrait of the New India (2011)

By Siddhartha Deb

Deb, who was raised in northeastern India and now teaches creative writing at New York’s New School, follows the stories of five Indians who run the gamut of what India can and will be in the 21st century. Profiles include those on Arindam Chaudhuri, the Delhi mogul and aspiring filmmaker whom Deb likens to Jay Gatsby; Esther, a biochemist and botanist who travels from her meager tenement to work as a bartender at a posh hotel; a farmer from a suicide-ridden village; and the “ghost workers” of India’s temporary labor market. “I grew increasingly interested in these apparent opposites—visibility and invisibility, past and present, wealth and poverty, quietism and activism—as I returned to India over the next few years and criss-crossed a landscape that was sometimes intimately familiar and



sometimes completely unknown,” Deb explains. “I wanted to write about the lives of individuals.”

Deb (*The Point of No Return* [2003], a semiautobiographical novel), writing with the creative eye of an artist, captures India’s contradictions. “Several journalists and commentators have previously dismissed the bluff cheer about India’s growth that has been peddled by authors like Thomas L. Friedman. The transformation of India has wrecked the lives of its farmers and has ripped open fresh gulfs of inequity between rich and poor,” Samanth Subramanian wrote. “But there is a nuance to even the direst of Mr. Deb’s pessimisms—an acknowledgment that India’s lives are newly precarious precisely because they could swing either the way of opportunity or the way of ruin.”

India

A Portrait (2011)

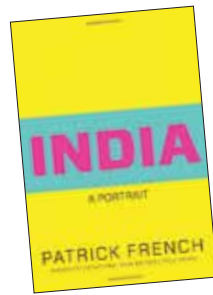
By Patrick French

“Much current thinking about India ... is the product of old knowledge and expectation,” asserts British historian and National Book Critics Circle Award winner Patrick French (*The World Is What It Is* ★★★★★ Mar/April 2009), and he endeavors to set the record straight in this review of postcolonial Indian history. Divided into three sections—Rashtra (Politics), Lakshmi, (Economy), and Samaj (So-



ciety)—French explores the many ways that modern India has grafted its long-standing institutions onto 20th- and 21st-century structures. Despite traditions of nepotism, corruption, and violence, India’s constitution has endured, and its democracy is secure. Its burgeoning economy, even with its jaw-dropping disparity between rich and poor, threatens to unseat the West’s, while Indians struggle to reconcile concepts of personal freedom and civil liberties with deeply rooted cultural prejudices. “India is a macrocosm,” argues French, “and may be the world’s default setting for the future.”

As India assumes a greater role on the world stage, it becomes increasingly important to grasp the forces that drive and define the nation. A shrewd observer and gifted storyteller, French distills India’s complexities to reveal the connections between those political, economic, and cultural forces. (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2011)

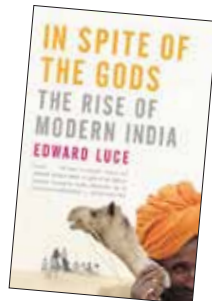


In Spite of the Gods

The Strange Rise of Modern India (2007)
By Edward Luce

The statistics suggest that what many Westerners think they know about India is at the least exaggerated and at worst just flat wrong. About 0.1 percent of India’s population—more than 1.1 billion (at the time of Luce’s book) spread across the world’s seventh-largest country by area—is employed in tech, and only 35 million people earn enough money to pay taxes. But even in a country where education is a hit-and-miss affair, India’s middle class turns out 10 times as many engineering students as the United States. In detailing India’s seeming inevitable rise to the economic elite, Luce also comments on the “strangeness” of that rise, through different means from any other superpower on the planet.

Luce, a British journalist based in Washington, D.C., has covered India for more than 20 years, including a stint reporting from New Delhi for the *Financial Times*, and his clear and insightful observations provide much-needed clarity on the direction of India in coming decades. “Luce is the best sort of foreign correspondent: amiable, courteous, curious and gently self-mocking. His admiration for India’s economic miracle and its entrepreneurial elite is as genuine as his dismay at the poverty of its villages and the corruption of its politicians,” Ben Macintyre wrote. “[His] sense of wonder runs through every word of his book.”



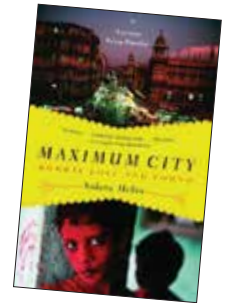
Maximum City

Bombay Lost and Found (2004)
By Suketu Mehta

♦ PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST

Mehta left Bombay in 1977, claiming New York, Paris, London, Iowa City, and New Brunswick, New Jersey, as home before returning more than 20 years later. Both native and outsider, Mehta brings a unique perspective to his study of the beating heart of India, a city of stunning poverty, an active criminal underworld, a wondrous Bollywood, and the countless hopes and dreams played out on the city’s streets. “There will soon be more people living in the city of Bombay than on the continent of Australia,” Mehta writes, giving some perspective to Mumbai’s vast resources and energy. “With 14 million people, Bombay is the biggest city on the planet of a race of city dwellers. Bombay is the future of urban civilization on the planet. God help us.”

Part travelogue, part sociological study, and part familial pat on the back to the uncle who drinks too much at the family reunion, *Maximum City* explores Mumbai’s varied hues and textures. “Giving depth and shading to such a complex subject, *Maximum City* is narrative reporting at its finest, probably the best work of nonfiction to come out of India in recent years,” Akash Kapur wrote of the book, “at least since the start of the miniboom in Indian writing for export, which has been notable mostly for its fiction.”



Further Reading

INDIANOMIX: MAKING SENSE OF MODERN INDIA | VIVEK DEHEJIA AND RUPA SUBRAMANYA (2012)

INDIA BECOMING: A PORTRAIT OF LIFE IN MODERN INDIA | AKASH KAPUR (2012)

FREEDOM AT MIDNIGHT | LARRY COLLINS AND DOMINIQUE LAPIERRE (1975)

HOLY COW: AN INDIAN ADVENTURE | SARAH MACDONALD (2004)

THE DISCOVERY OF INDIA | JAWAHARLAL NEHRU (1946)

THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN: WRITINGS ON INDIAN HISTORY, CULTURE AND IDENTITY | AMARTYA SEN (2005) ■