

# Must-reads for 2016

Among them a book about an outsider in Kolkata who wants to belong

**A**S THE year draws to a close, it is usually a time to look back and look forward. Did you read all the books that you had promised yourself to read in 2015? I am sure, like me, you too have many misses, and a pile of books waiting to be read.

Recently, a journalist friend asked me to list my favourite books of the year, and what I was going to read in 2016! I read and graze through scores of books in a year but I would list some that are worth mentioning (you may take them as my recommendations, if you will): *A Doctor In The House* by Dr Mahathir Mohamad, *No Place To Hide* by Glenn Greenwald, *Intercession* by Isa Kamari, *Dream With Your Eyes Open* by Ronnie Screwvala and *Mecca – The Sacred City* by Ziauddin Sardar.

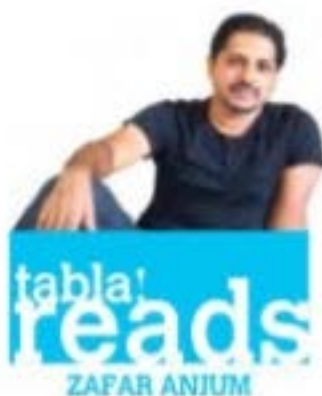
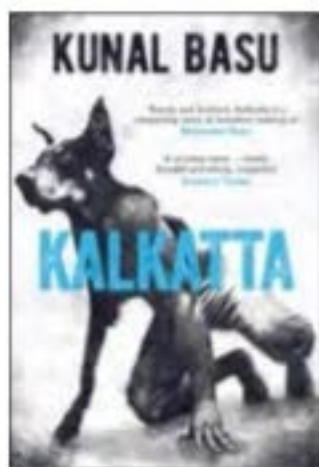
In 2016, I am especially looking forward to reading *Escape From Baghdad* by Saad Z. Hussain, *Tweet* by Isa Kamari, *Becoming Steve Jobs* by Brent Schilender and Rick Tetzeli, *Kalkatta* by Kunal Basu (right) and *Submission* by Michel Houellebecq.

First, I would like to talk about Basu's *Kalkatta* (below right), a novel set in the famous capital of West Bengal about a gigolo named Jami (Jamshed Alam), a Bihari Muslim smuggled into India from Bangladesh with his family comprising his parents and younger sister Miriam. Thanks to the regular Facebook updates of the author, I have followed the development of this novel over the last two years while Basu worked on it, researching the material in the ancient and dusty lanes and bylanes of Kolkata.

While the novel documents Jami turning into a gigolo, the turning point comes in his life when he meets an old colleague, Mandira. She has a young son suffering from leukaemia. Jami develops a deep bond with the boy at the risk of being exposed professionally. Deep down, Jami's story is the story of an outsider who wants to belong.

## Barkha Dutt's book runs into controversy

Journalists in India have been writing fiction and non-fiction for decades now and it has become even more common today, given the publishing boom in India. The late Khushwant Singh was a prolific scribe and novelist. M.J. Akbar,



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ZAFAR ANJUM



## One book from Singapore

MALAVIKA Nataraj, who lives in Singapore with her husband and two children and speaks Japanese, has published her first book, *Suraya's Gift* (Puffin, 2015). The book is about Surabi, a girl with a big imagination, who loves making up little stories.

I don't want to spoil the suspense for parents who plan to buy this book for their little ones but this is what the blurb says: "When a surprise visitor brings her a very special gift, she is thrilled. Her stories are about to get much more interesting! But Surabi soon realises that her writing may be more powerful than she thinks. Is it just her imagination? Or are things really not what they seem?"

Nataraj has been writing for nearly two decades. Educated in India and the UK, she started her career in advertising, and went on to work for a research and consulting firm in London. She became a freelance writer in 2007 and in 2008, she won an award at the Wimbledon Book Fest (UK) for her short story *Waiting*. Since then, she has been writing full-time.

When I asked her what she plans to do for the book in Singapore, she said: "As far as promoting the book goes, there are a few things like a writer's workshop for kids etc. that I am planning and the publishers are working on getting me involved in some school events, but I don't know the exact details of any of that as yet."



One for the children... Malavika Nataraj (top) has published her first book *Suraya's Gift* (above).

PHOTOS: MALAVIKA NATARAJ, KUNAL BASU, PAMI MACMILLAN, ALEPH, ZAFAR ANJUM

Tavleen Singh, Arun Shourie, Vinod Mehta and, more recently, Rajdeep Sardesai and Shekhar Gupta – they have all penned best-sellers.

Joining the ranks of such eminent scribes is Barkha Dutt, who has ruled the world of TV journalism in India for nearly two decades, along with the likes of Sardesai and Arnab Goswami.

Dutt's book (right) is titled *This Unquiet Land: Stories From India's Fault Lines* (Aleph). From covering the Kargil war to Maoist terrorists in India's red corridor to the Mumbai terror attacks of 26/11, in this book, Dutt recounts the stories that have left an indelible mark on her as a person and as a journalist.



Unfortunately, the book run into controversy due to trolling at Amazon.in by the haters of this spunky journalist. The book has attracted more than 800 reviews on the e-tailer's website in just two weeks and, according to one report, only 11 of the 847 reviews are by "verified purchasers", meaning that "almost 99 per cent of the people who have reviewed the book haven't purchased the book on Amazon". According to Dutt's Facebook page, a message being widely circulated on various WhatsApp groups, exhorting people to negatively review her book.

David Davidar of Aleph, the publisher of the book, said that this was a concerted campaign against the author and a lot of the reviews are personal and abusive.