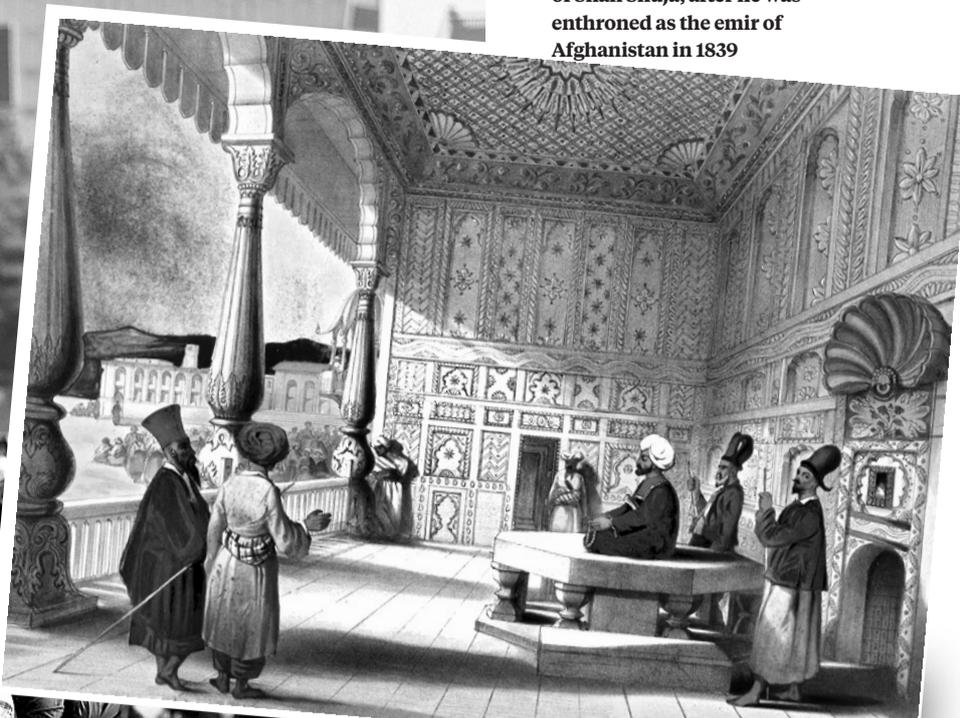


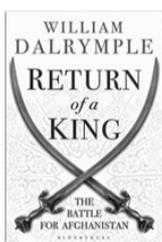


MEN OF ACTION: Bal Thackeray's hold over Mumbai was reconfirmed in death; a lithograph of Shah Shuja, after he was enthroned as the emir of Afghanistan in 1839



Picks of DECEMBER

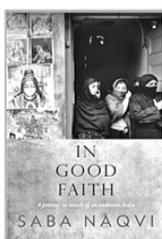
A racy history of Afghanistan and biographies of Bal Thackeray and Rajinikanth figure on our list of ten titles to look forward to next month



RETURN OF A KING
Author: William Dalrymple
Publisher: Bloomsbury

Dalrymple's unabashedly popular history of Afghanistan has a memorable cast of

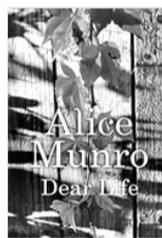
characters, offers a shrewd and swift summary of the blood feuds that marked its history, and draws on the autobiography of Shah Shuja to retell the stark story of the First Afghan War. Along with the political gossip, Dalrymple's narrative is peppered with a running commentary on ways to despatch your enemies — invite them to a meal and blow them up with gunpowder, cut off a ear, a hand, the nose and assorted bits and bobs, throw them in dungeons and forget about them. Kipling had it quite right: "When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,/ And the women come out to cut up what remains,/ Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains/ An' go to your Gawd like a soldier."



IN GOOD FAITH
Author: Saba Naqvi
Publisher: Rainlight/Rupa
In Good Faith begins with an examination of a village of *patuas*, painters of scrolls, who identify as

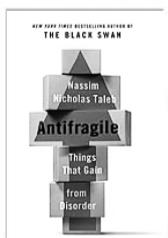
both Hindu and Muslim. Their story will come together with many other stories of faith — from Sufi shrines becoming temples, to the televangelists who have taken over from Brahmin priests — that make a far more complex portrait of India's often-invoked syncretic traditions of faith. Naqvi, an accomplished journalist, chooses broad strokes to make her point. Though a more detailed and deeply considered analysis would have been welcome, Naqvi's openness to experience and her curiosity are infectious. This book is an illuminat-

ing reminder that the Indian view of faith is a broad river.



DEAR LIFE
Author: Alice Munro
Publisher: Knopf
"When you live in a small town you hear more things, about all sorts of people," Alice Munro said in an

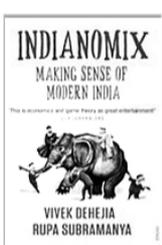
interview to *Paris Review* once. "In a city you mainly hear stories about your own sort of people." Almost all of Munro's short story collections contain many worlds; and reading Munro's stories is often like catching up with people you imagine you have always known, except for the small inconvenience that they are fictional. *Dear Life*, which includes 14 stories, some of them close to autobiographical, is a reminder that she may be the greatest living writer of our time.



ANTIFRAGILE: THINGS THAT GAIN FROM DISORDER
Author: Nassim Nicholas Taleb
Publisher: Random House

Taleb's black swan theory — major events that come as a surprise will be rationalised, often inaccurately, in hindsight — is perhaps one of the most influential ideas of the last decade. *Antifragile* has an interesting premise: fragile people avoid disorder and disruption, robust people handle both with elan, the antifragile thrive on disorder and unsettling change. This is a difficult read — following Taleb's ideas spark from one synapse to another as he rockets back and forth in time — but worth it if you can keep up. If there was such a category as self-help for really intelligent people with very short attention spans, this would be its Ur-text. Get used to the

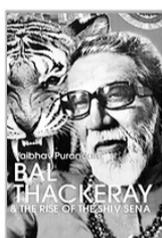
unpredictability and shifting nature of the world, says Buddhism; embrace the volatility of the world and find a way to use unpredictability, says Taleb.



INDIANOMIX: MAKING SENSE OF MODERN INDIA
Author: Rupa Subramanya, Vivek Dehejia

Publisher: Random House Unlike most of the Big Indian Books, which should

all be subtitled "In Which The Author Explains India To You Very Carefully And Slowly", *Indianomix* scores by taking a completely different approach — using the authors' curiosity and their interest in economic behaviour to examine Indian life. They start with Indian Standard Time, move on to altruism and auto-rickshaws, and ask serious questions about whether eclipses actually affect the markets. There's plenty of desi-style Freakonomics here, and this book promises to be as entertaining as their journalism and other writings.



BAL THACKERAY AND THE RISE OF THE SHIV SENA
Author: Vaibhav Purandare
Publisher: Roli
Vaibhav Purandare, a Bombay-based journalist, didn't

time his biography of Bal Thackeray to coincide with the death of the man who used fear to rule Bombay, but he and Roli will probably have a bestseller on their hands. Purandare wrote a history of the Shiv Sena, *The Sena Story*, that came out four years after the terrible Bombay riots of 1993, and observed that the party's attacks on non-Maharashtrians were born out of the belief that the inclusive approach was not working, and that more drastic measures were needed. Expect competent reporting and some Thackeray Lite gossip, such as his fondness for the number 13.



THE YELLOW BIRDS
Author: Kevin Powers
Publisher: Little, Brown

From the first sentence onwards, Powers establishes that *The Yellow Birds* will be stacked alongside *The Thin Red Line*, *The Things They Carried* and other war classics. Powers did a stint as a machine-gunner in Iraq, and *The Yellow Birds* follows Pvt John Bartle's stumbling progress through the seven circles of hell known as a tour of duty.

"The war tried to kill us in the spring," *The Yellow Birds* begins, an iconic first line from an iconic first novel.



ADI PARVA
Author: Amruta Patil
Publisher: HarperCollins

The epic chose her, not the other way around, graphic artist Amruta Patil said in an inter-

view. *Adi Parva* is one of the most intelligent retellings of the Mahabharata, undertaken by an artist and writer who has spent almost a decade with that great myth. The graphic form allows Patil to go with some depth into the many layers behind the Mahabharata, and to offer her own interpretation.

THE LAST WAR:

Author: Sandipan Deb
Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Many of the recent, bestselling riffs on Indian mythologicals have been disappointingly shallow, reducing them to little more than action sequences with improbably costumed actors. Deb's *The Last War*, in complete contrast, fuses the Bombay underworld with the epic. If Francis Ford Coppola had directed *The Mahabharata*, this is what you'd get.



RAJINIKANTH: THE DEFINITIVE BIOGRAPHY

Author: Naman Ramachandran
Publisher: Viking
For a brief while, Rajinikanth's face graced Tohato *garam masala*

chips in Japan, and it is said that he also had many fans in Germany, where one of his Malayalam films was released as *Der Geisterjager*. My only encounter with the superstar was at a safe distance: I passed through his legs on a trip to Chennai, and the driver stopped to take a picture of our cars travelling through that giant Rajinikanth cutout. Naman Ramachandran's biography promises to unveil the softer side of the icon: Rajinikanth uses his farmhouse as a spiritual retreat and tips cabbies generously, for instance. Along with the rags to riches story, we hope he'll include a few Rajinikanth jokes. Which other superstar has counted to infinity, twice?

Compiled by Nilanjana S Roy
("Picks of..." provides a selection of books to look out for in the coming month and appears on the last week of each month)