

Origin story

Worlds built by words and stories on our screens have kept us company in the best and worst of times. Debut author of the year, **Megha Majumdar** tells us about the films and books that sparked her first novel



GETTY IMAGES

As I write this in mid-April, my husband and I have been isolating in our Brooklyn apartment for a month. We have worn home-made masks, queued outside the grocery store, and heard the horrifying sound of ambulance sirens at all hours. In these grim weeks, I've found myself reaching for comforts—cooking (Smitten Kitchen's Portuguese piri piri chicken) and Netflix, to name two. Funny television hits the spot: old episodes of *Arrested Development* and *The Office*. I've been reading a lot too. A good book feels like the best way to be transported beyond our apartment walls in these socially distanced times. I'm reading a novel called *Beheld* by TaraShea Nesbit (Bloomsbury), set as far away from the present as possible, in the 17th-century colony of Plymouth, Massachusetts. Especially now, a book that completely absorbs the reader and frees them from the stress of the news cycle feels important.

Fiction has been an escape and immersion, a relief and a reminder that this is one moment in the long history of our survival. If my book keeps a reader company in the way that these books have invited me into their pages, I'll be happy. I grew up with movies, from *Baby's Day Out* (1994) to *Raja* (1992) to the *Apu Trilogy* (1955-1959), and the richness of cinema—I like to think—influenced how I wrote my debut novel, *A Burning* (Penguin Random House). What I loved in the movies—scenes with emotional leaps and falls; a sense of place, like a train with five people crowded onto a seat for three; surprises and twists—I wanted to conjure in my book.

CHASING DREAMS

I do not take a reader's attention for granted. So I wanted to say something about contemporary India, and I wanted to do it in a way that would entertain a reader. *A Burning* is about the rise of right-wing nationalism in India and three characters who chase big dreams despite all the barriers in their way. Lovely takes low-budget acting classes to fulfil her dream of being a movie star. PT Sir gets a taste of what it is like to have political power and learns how far he will go to gain more. Jivan gets in trouble for a comment on Facebook and watches her dream of ascending to middle-class life crumble, though she keeps fighting for it to happen.

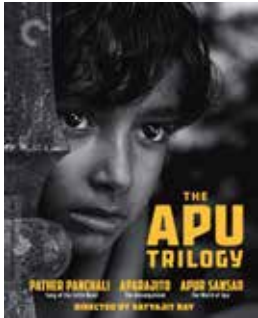
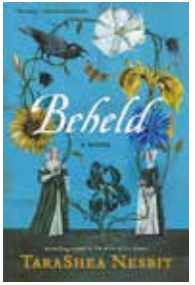
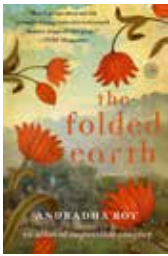
I started writing it from a place of alarm and anger. You don't need me to tell you that India has been changing in frightening ways. I wanted to look at individuals caught within those dangerous turns of society. There is a long tradition of fiction that engages politics in India. Right away, I'm thinking of Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy. The reason their work stays with us is not only that they commented with ferocity on the conditions of our society, but also that they created characters we grew to feel for.

IN OTHER WORDS

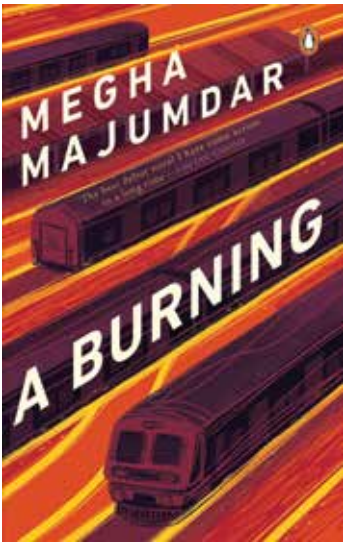
If you're looking to begin writing fiction, a central place to begin would be giving shape to a character: what does your character want? What are the obstacles in their way? After that, you might find it helpful to imagine where they live, how they look, what they do. Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* (Hachette India) begins with a beautiful, clean line which immediately opens up so many questions: "The girl came at the same hour, summer or winter." Who is the girl? Where does she go so regularly? And why?

A simple thought and the fictional world draws you right in. But it becomes real when it is complex. In Namita Waikar's novel, *The Long March* (Speaking Tiger), there's a scene where a boy accompanying his mother as she carries a heavy load watches two men upset the bundle on her head and laugh. Through the boy's anger, we see his devotion to his mother, his desire to protect her. And perhaps it reminds us of moments where we have failed to protect our own from some form of cruelty and injustice in the world. I've also loved the reportage of books like Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* (Random House India), and Snigdha Poonam's *Dreamers* (Penguin Random House). Journalism reminds me of how complex real-life stories are.

So much of writing, I think, is making room for a reader to bring their thoughts and experiences, their hopes and recollections, to the work. In that way, maybe every book is incomplete until a reader has opened it up. ■



"FICTION HAS BEEN AN ESCAPE...A REMINDER THAT THIS IS ONE MOMENT IN THE LONG HISTORY OF SURVIVAL"



FIRST-EVER
Majumdar's debut novel *A Burning* is published by Penguin Random House