

How 9/11 Altered The Fiction Landscape In 13 Novels

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The moment Flight 11 tore open that gorgeous September morning, a marker dropped on the timeline of American history as unavoidable as Dec. 7, 1941. It no longer felt tenable - no longer felt tolerable - to create a story in our present tense that didn't acknowledge the singular, shared agony of that day. And yet who needed a fictional representation of the catastrophe we had all lived through and were still enduring? Why create an unreal version of the calamity that had hypnotized us into muttering, "It's unreal"?

As investigators picked through the wreckage in Manhattan, Arlington and Shanksville, Pa., the idea of a 9/11 novel sounded obscene in its redundancy, its obviousness, its galling superfluity. What would be the purpose of such a work of fiction beyond rank sentimentality or tasteless exploitation?

But if novelists were deterred, they weren't defeated. Although their nonfiction colleagues reached Ground Zero far earlier, fiction writers eventually risked treading on that hallowed space and integrating it into their own work. Some wanted to re-create the initial surprise of the destruction - not an easy feat when any description of a clear fall day was enough to make readers brace for impact. Others caught the planes out of the corner of their eye, so to speak, tracing the contrails of grief left behind. And a few novelists ventured right into the flames to imagine the unimaginable.

Their efforts were alternately profound, moving and earnest - some triumphs and some cringing misses. But within a few years, it was clear that 9/11 would leave an impact on contemporary fiction as deep as its impact on every other aspect of our culture. The selection of novels that follows gives a sense of the wide variety of approaches writers have taken over the past two decades:

- **"Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close," by Jonathan Safran Foer (2005)**

This devastatingly tender novel is about a precocious 9-year-old boy grieving the loss of his father, who died during 9/11. Foer traces the precedence of terror from New York to Dresden, Germany, and when words fail - as they must - a few of the novel's pages go entirely blank.

- **"Saturday," by Ian McEwan (2005)**

McEwan once said, "It could well be that the great 9/11 novel - if there ever is one - will be written halfway through this century." But he offered his own contender just four years after the attacks. The carefully crafted story is contained in a single day, Feb. 15, 2003, when a neurosurgeon in London sees a plane fall from the sky. Full of mundane activities and subterranean anxieties, it's a chilling representation of what it means to live in an era transformed by 9/11.

- **"The Writing on the Wall," by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (2005)**

The story about a linguist at the New York Public Library is a bracing reminder that the planes may have sailed out of the blue, but the 9/11 attacks traumatized some people who were already traumatized by earlier tragedies. Schwartz explores what it felt like to live in a city suddenly thick with markers of grief and loss.

- **"The Emperor's Children," by Claire Messud (2006)**

Contradicting claims about the death of irony, one of the best novels to incorporate 9/11 into its plot was about a glib coterie of cultural elites in New York. But then: "Look at that," one of them says while staring out a window. "It must be a bomb or something." In a flash, we know this story has crossed from satire to tragedy, into the trajectory of our own history.

- **"A Disorder Peculiar to the Country," by Ken Kalfus (2006)**

When the World Trade Center collapses, Joyce and Marshall Harriman have their own separate reasons to be grateful: She thinks her husband was in the South Tower, and he thinks she was on United Flight 93. Alas, they're both alive to continue tormenting each other. In this grimly comic novel, the Harrimans' failing marriage is an emblem of larger hatreds ripping the world apart.

- **"The Zero," by Jess Walter (2006)**

New York policeman Brian Remy survived the collapse of the towers, but now he's experiencing bouts of memory loss, possibly caused by a self-inflicted head wound. He's not certain what's happening to him, even as he gets roped into a mysterious government mission. This darkly satiric novel examines how a nation exploits its own trauma.

- **"Falling Man," by Don DeLillo (2007)**

Six years after saying in Harper's, "The

writer wants to understand what this day has done to us," DeLillo published a novel "to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space." The story involves a lawyer who barely survives the collapse of the towers and seeks out his estranged wife. The fragmented plot and abrupt style reflect a newly shattered world.

- **"The Reluctant Fundamentalist," by Mohsin Hamid (2007)**

In a cafe in Lahore, a Pakistani man tells an American about his once successful life in the United States before 9/11 and the resultant explosion of xenophobia. This emotionally complex story explores the conflicted feelings inspired by America's actions and suffering.

- **"Netherland," by Joseph O'Neill (2008)**

In this poignant, pensive novel, a Dutchman living in New York after the 9/11 attacks seeks relief from his loneliness by playing cricket. The game - a curiosity in America - provides a singular lens through which to examine the immigrant experience in an altered landscape.

- **"Next," by James Hynes (2010)**

A seemingly rambling day trapped in the mind of a dude who has sneaked away from his girlfriend in Michigan to apply for a job in Texas. Hynes's genius is the way he keeps the anxiety fueled by 9/11 in the margins until the story finally hurtles us down the asymptote of terror.

- **"The Lake Shore Limited," by Sue Miller**

(2010)

If Henry James had written about 9/11, he might have produced something like this thoughtful book. At the center is a young playwright who lost her boyfriend on Sept. 11 - just before she was about to break up with him. Saddled with that complicated grief, she struggles with how to represent feelings she isn't supposed to feel.

- **"The Submission," by Amy Waldman (2011)**

As construction finished on the real 9/11 Memorial, Waldman published this novel in which a similar memorial design competition is won by an architect who happens to be an American Muslim. It's a profound and unsettling consideration of how we sanctify our national suffering and who gets to be involved.

- **"My Year of Rest and Relaxation," by Ottessa Moshfegh (2018)**

In Moshfegh's acerbic novel, a miserable New Yorker uses drugs to avoid the world by sleeping for months. She awakens later in 2001, still wondering how to spend her time. Later, whenever she doubts that life is worth living, she re-watches a videotape of the planes crashing into the towers. She can see a woman leaping from the 78th floor: "She is beautiful," Moshfegh writes. "There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake."

-SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON POST

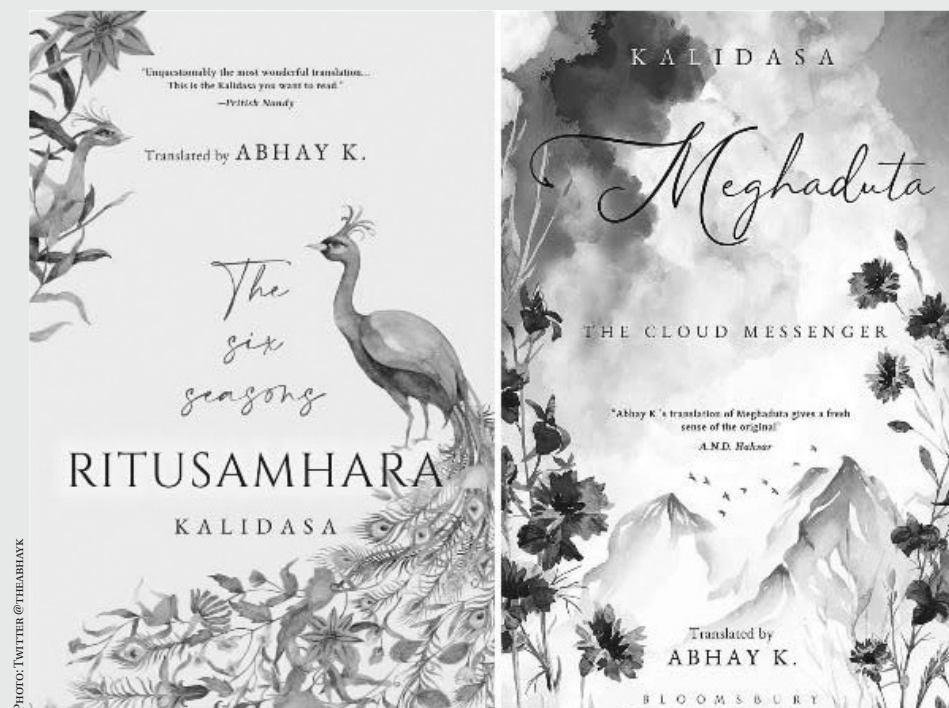
Poet-Diplomat Abhay K's Translation Of Kalidasa's 'Meghaduta', 'Ritusamhara' Win KLF Poetry Book Of The Year Award 2020-21

-NEW DELHI

Poet-Diplomat Abhay K's translation of Kalidasa's 'Meghaduta' (The Cloud Messenger), and 'Ritusamhara' (The Six seasons), published by Bloomsbury India, have won the Kalinga Literary Festival Poetry Book of the Year Award 2020-21.

Among the poetry books which have received the award includes Gulzar's "A Poem A Day" (Harper Collins, India), which also includes a poem 'Shantipath' by Abhay K translated by Gulzar into 'Hindustani'. Acclaimed writers Amitav Ghosh's "Jungle Nama"; Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar's "The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World"; Gopalkrishna Gandhi's "Restless as Mercury: My Life as a Young Man Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi"; Gulzar's "A Poem a Day"; Sandeep Bamzai's "Prinestan: How Nehru, Patel and Mountbatten Made India"; Shashi Tharoor & Samir Saran's "The New World Disorder", Bollywood actor Sonu Sood & Meena Iyer's "I am no Messiah" are among the prominent titles selected for KLF Book Awards 2020-21.

KLF Book Awards, established by KLF in 2021, opens up the opportunities to identify, recognise, acknowledge, encourage and honour the literary talents across genres, for both established and new writers. The objective of the KLF



Abhay K's translation of Kalidasa's 'Meghaduta', 'Ritusamhara' win KLF Poetry Book of the Year Award 2020-21.

Book Awards is to shape future literary icons.

During the KLF Annual Program at Bhubaneswar (December 10-12, 2021),

KLF Book Awards will be conferred based on the recommendations by an independent Award Jury.

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