

Beyond money-making ideas! 10 books that left a lasting impression in 2022

Synopsis

This book, among other things, explains that often the solutions to our problems are already there in the world - at times in the human world, sometimes in nature and it is a matter of understanding how to structure the problem in order to borrow from other fields. Bullet trains can learn from owls, ads can borrow from ancient myth templates.



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Devina Mehra, Chairperson and Managing Director of First Global, is a gold medalist from IIMA as well as from Lucknow University where she broke several records. She had a seven-year-long stint at Citibank in Investment Banking & Corporate Credit/ Risk before becoming a member of the Bombay Stock Exchange in 1993 - her proprietorship which later corporatised and became India's leading institutional brokerage firm, First Global. She spearheaded First Global's globalisation over two decades ago, making First Global the first Asian (ex-Japan) firm to become a member of the London Stock Exchange and then the NASD.

First Global has since become a leading quantitative global asset management firm managing both PMS schemes in India as well as global funds.

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This year, the problem has been one of plenty. Out of the nearly 60 books that I read, at least 80% would be worth recommending.

Nevertheless, let me try, grouping them and at revealing enough to tantalise you into reading them.

There are three exciting ones which challenge our usual ways of thinking - a topic of eternal interest for me.

1. 'Everything is Obvious Once you know the Answer' by Duncan J. Watts

This book surprisingly tells us how using common sense can systematically mislead us.

After reading it you will be that much less inclined to give glib explanations of past events or equally neat predictions about the future.

You understand the sheer unpredictability of the final path of history which appears so inevitable in hindsight!

2. 'Anthrovision: How Anthropology can explain Business and Life' by Gillian Tett

This book talks of applying anthropological thinking for a diverse range of problems in the world.

We think of anthropology as study of remote tribes but it can be used to study all sorts of groups from computer buyers in Malaysia, copier repairpersons in Chicago or stock traders on NSE.

It can make the strange appear familiar and vice versa.

3. 'Evolutionary Ideas: Unlocking Ancient Innovation to Solve Tomorrow's Challenges' by Sam Tatam

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The second category is to do somewhat with geopolitics.

4. 'Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World' by Tim Marshall

How geographical features like rivers, mountain ranges, access to warm water ports all drive geopolitical

possibilities, strategies of nations, conflicts and much else.

You can also piece together how China is trying to control not just Asia and Africa but a lot more from South America to the Arctic Circle.

5. 'Price Wars: How chaotic markets are creating a chaotic world' by Rupert Russell

We, in financial markets, think of prices including commodity prices as numbers on a ticker tape, spreadsheet or on a chart and often forget that these represent actual goods with real world consequences.

Russell goes around the world, specially to many chaotic countries, facing everything from separatists to hyperinflation - from Ukraine to South America to Kenya and finds that commodity prices and markets from oil to food grain are behind a lot of the conflict and turmoil around the globe.

6. 'A Short History of Financial Euphoria' by John Kenneth Galbraith

Rereading of a classic. Short book.

Besides the stories of bubbles from history, it also sets a framework for why and how bubbles form and why they always repeat.

As the recent crypto burst shows, the lessons never grow old!

Coming to the unclassifiable.

7. 'Unflattening' by Nick Sousanis

It is a book that is almost impossible to define and summarize.

Mind-shifting - especially for someone like me who usually thinks in words & data.

Makes you question so much about vision, perception, thinking, meaning, language and education.

What we 'see' is also from a perspective, always has a filter. We can't help but see in relation.

Virtually every page makes one stop, shut the book & think a while...so budget for some uninterrupted time.

8. 'Wanderers, Kings, Merchants – The story of India through its languages' by Peggy Mohan

This book was both illuminating as well as disturbing in parts.

It is about the evolution of South Asian languages and has fascinating nuggets like what is the one thing that is common across all South Asian languages.

It also explains a critical fact about languages. Languages often don't evolve and disappear slowly: they can remain unchanged for centuries – but it takes only one generation of children growing up without a certain language as their first language for that language to deteriorate. That we could be the generation that kill our languages is a frightening one.

9. 'What If' by Randall Munroe

This book answers all sorts of hypothetical questions you didn't even know you had.

From the weird:

- What if you collected a brick of each element in the periodic element? (Answer: mayhem)
- What if you took a swim in a spent nuclear fuel pool? (Answer: Surprisingly, consequences aren't too bad)

To the merely speculative:

- If everyone had only ONE soulmate, what would be the odds of meeting them within a lifetime?

And on and on.

Many involve letting go of ONE physical world constraint and then assuming the rest of the laws of physics, chemistry and space hold.

The rabbit holes you fall into are wild and wonderful.

10. 'Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men' by Caroline Criado Perez

This is a book that shocked and angered me - that for virtually everything in the world, from urban planning to the design of seat belts or smart phones to testing of pharmaceuticals, the default human being in the world is always a man!

This results in not just inconvenience and unfairness for half of humanity but pretty drastic consequences for women's health and even their very lives.

It's an eye-opener.

Two other related books worth reading specific to the Indian context:

'Equal, Yet Different: Career Catalysts for the Professional Woman' by Anita Bhogle

And

'Lies Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden' by Nilanjana Bhowmick

Got back to reading essays after a long gap and would especially like to mention the delightful ode to reading & readers 'Ex Libris' by **Anne Fadiman** and the quintessential personal essay collection 'These Precious Days' by **Ann Patchett**.

Others almost made it in non-fiction:

'Tribe of Mentors'

- **Tim Ferris**

'When to Rob a Bank (Freakonomics blogs)'

- **Steven D. Levitt & Stephen J. Dubner**

'Partition Voices'

-**Kavita Puri**

'Doing Justice: A Prosecutor's Thoughts on Crime, Punishment and the Rule of Law' by Preet Bharara

Memoirs/ autobiography '**Pinjare ki Maina**' by **Chandrakiran Sonrexa** at the intersection on a literary life and a patriarchal home setup and '**Bichde Sabhi Bari Bari**' by **Bimol Mitra** (the author, amongst others, of 'Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam') about his friendship with **Guru Dutt**.

Hindi satires of the most superior quality:

'Kashi ka Assi' by Kashinath Singh, 'Baramaasi' by Gyan Chaturvedi, 'Dhan Yatra' by Mushtaq Ahmad Yusifi.

In the little fiction that I read, can recommend '**The Sense of an Ending**' by **Julian Barnes**, '**Intimacies**' by **Katie Kitamura**, the old classic '**Passing**' by **Nella Larsen** and the Hindi translation of Bangla novel '**Chorangi**' by **Sankar**.

And that, my friends should be enough to whet your appetite at least.