

# Retelling the legends

A number of talented writers are delving into India's vast storehouse of myths to turn out fictional tales inspired by them, says **Tania Bhattacharya**

Meluha, a mythical land and it follows Shiva's larger-than-mortal-sized adventures. The book made it to the national bestseller list for three weeks soon after it was published by Westland last February.

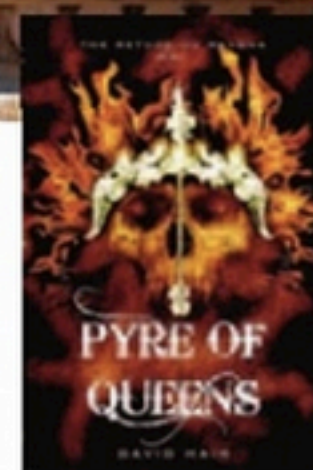
India has a mythological base that's second to none. But the huge repertoire of myths has never been harnessed in a big way in Indian fiction. In fact, revisiting the tales of *Panchatantra* or the battle of Kurukshetra was always limited to comics or Doordarshan.

Now, a number of talented writers are delving into India's vast storehouse of myths and turning

It is an epic tale that criss-crosses the globe all the way from India to Iceland. A team of Indian youngsters from Gurgaon battle evil with an Icelandic flavour. Thrown in for good measure in *The Book of Guardians: Fang of Summoning* is Vasuki, known in Indian mythology as the serpent king and Edasich, the orange star representing evil, which features extensively in Norse legends. The first in the *Fang of Summoning* trilogy, it was launched last September and the next book is scheduled for launch around Christmas.

Turn the page to *Immortals of Meluha*, which is based on the premise that Shiva was a real man and not a god. The story takes place in

Amish Tripathy's *Immortals of Meluha* is based on the premise that Shiva was a mortal and has sold 80,000 copies



Inspired by the spectacular landscapes of Rajasthan, David Hair decided to write a series of four books based loosely on the *Ramayana*



out fictional tales based on them. "As kids, we've grown up reading authors like JRR Tolkien. But there's never been serious fiction based on our mythologies," says Giti Chandra, author of *The Book of Guardians: Fang of Summoning*.

Take a look at Ashwin Sanghi who recently released *Chanakya's Chant*—a contemporary political thriller with a mythological base about a modern-day Chanakya, who chants the Shakti mantra to become powerful. Sanghi's earlier book, *The Rozabal Line*, takes as its point of departure the myth that Jesus is buried in Kashmir—in a shrine

Giti Chandra makes her debut in fiction with a story that draws heavily from Indian and Norse legends

called Roza Bal. "A younger crop of authors are writing commercial fiction, and are also reinterpreting mythology in a certain way," says Sanghi.

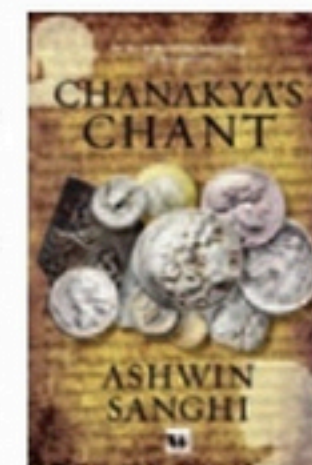
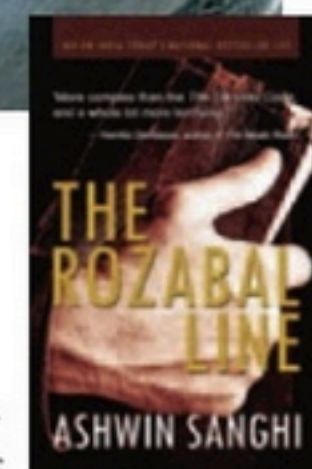
Or look at Devdutt Pattanaik, the author of books like *The Pregnant King* and *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. This is a retelling of the *Mahabharata* in a slightly different way because unlike the original epic, it takes into account all the folktales based on the *Mahabharata* that are prevalent across different Indian communities.

The old hand at the game is Ashok Banker who is still on a publishing spree that started in the 1990s. The 47-year-old author has recently published *The Slayer of Kamsa*, a dramatic retelling of the life of Lord Krishna and the first of an eight-book series, *Krishna Coriolis*. Other fresh releases include *Ten Kings*, a battle epic based on the Dasarajna war.

Even international authors are penning books based on Indian myths. Take David Hair, who now lives in New Zealand after spending three years in India from 2007 to 2010. Inspired by the spectacular landscapes of Rajasthan, Hair decided to write a series of four books, involving the *Ramayana*. "The reasoning that myths are a combination of history, allegory and religion was what I applied to the *Return of Ravana*



Ashwin Sanghi's *Chanakya's Chant* is a political thriller with mythological elements



series," says Hair.

The first book of the series, *Pyre of Queens*, was released last September and tells the story of an evil-sorcerer king attempting to be reborn as Ravana. The narrative flits between 8th-century Mandore (an ancient town north of Jodhpur) and modern-day Jodhpur.

Hair has followed it up with his second book, *Swayamvara*, released in February. Says the writer: "As the series continues, the plot-lines draw increasingly from the *Ramayana* and from events in Indian history."

On the other hand, Ramsay Wood—once a photographer, magazine publisher and importer—has retold the stories of the *Panchatantra*, in his book *Kalila and Dimna: The Panchatantra Retold Book One*, published in early 2010 (Wood's first *Kalila and Dimna* volume appeared in 1980). Wood says: "My aim was to share a symphony of