

DECCAN HERALD

Backyard murders

The essence of Mumbai city is reiterated through the characters in the latest crime page-turner by the Patterson-Sanghi duo, writes

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The writers have impressive credentials. Patterson has written 95 novels since he started out in 1976 with 19 consecutive No. 1 *New York Times* bestselling novels, and holds *The New York Times* record for most bestselling hardcover fiction titles by a single author, a total of 76. Sanghi has made a name for himself as a writer of Indian 'conspiracy thrillers'. So what have the two cooked up together?

Not surprisingly, it is about a series of murders committed in Mumbai by a killer who leaves behind intriguing clues. All the victims are female, and they are strangled with yellow scarves. The killer also leaves behind props which have obviously played no role in the actual murder. The first victim, for example, has a flower tied to one of her hands and an ordinary fork to the other. A toy Viking helmet is tied to her toes. One of the other victims has a dozen hard-boiled eggs arranged in an oval around her body and the thermostat in the room turned to the maximum. There is also a strand of hair left behind at each murder scene. The CCTV images, wherever available, do not reveal the face of the murderer.

Trying to solve the mystery of this serial killer is Private India, the Indian unit of the USA-based detective agency founded by ex-marine Jack Morgan, whose backstory of how Private came into being is narrated in the epilogue. Private India is headed by Santosh Wagh, who has lost his wife and son in a car accident and is trying to forget the nightmare with glasses of Black Label and an intense focus on the case at hand.

Other members of the investigating team include Mubeen Yusuf, the forensic expert; Hari Padhi, the computer whiz who can hack into any account; and Nisha Gandhi, Wagh's head-turningly attractive assistant in her mid-forties. ACP Rupesh Desai, representing the Mumbai police, too makes brief appearances from



time to time.

The characters who propel the drama are persons who have been connected to the victims at some stage of their lives: Nalin D'Souza, the Attorney General of India; Akash, the high-profile hairstylist to celebrities; Munna, the underworld gang lord; Nimbu Baba, the archetypal Indian god-man; and a lowly engineer of Xylon Security, the agency that handled CCTV at four of the murder locations.

There are false leads and unexpected twists; one major surprise development being the revelation about the prior romantic involvement of Jack Morgan with Lara Omprakash, the Bollywood star-turned-director and one of the murder victims. Didn't the thugs in British India use yellow scarves to strangle their victims? Didn't Hari Padhi's original surname of Paradhi feature in the list of criminal tribes prepared by the British in 1871? Doesn't the DNA of one of the hair strands found on a murder victim match that of Attorney General Nalin D'Souza?

There is a kind of action climax towards the end, staged at a Parsi tower of silence, amidst the macabre setting of decomposed carcasses and vultures flying overhead. But the key to solving the case naturally lies in what the esoteric props left behind at the murder scenes mean. "Give me one murder to solve and I will show you an enigma," Santosh Wagh says to himself after the second murder. "Give me two, and I will show you a puzzle to solve." This is where Sanghi's skills in combining historical, theological and mythological themes come handy. This melds seamlessly with Patterson's skill in intricate plotting. Of his craft, Patterson himself says, "He is simply more proficient at dreaming up plots than crafting sentence after sentence."

This is quite evident in the writing, which is devoid of any stylistic flourish or individual signature. The characters too are largely etched in broad strokes, having been picked from newspaper headlines to start with. Page-3 parties, swanky spas, Bollywood shooting locations, the under-

world, a mismanaged orphanage, prostitution rackets and criminal-turned-politicians paint a Mumbai that offers no surprise.

There aren't any genuine surprises either in the way the story unfolds or the manner in which the case is cracked. While the connecting thread that ties up the murder victims and the mysterious props is inventive enough, the motivation for the murders is not particularly convincing. But in spite of these failings, the book is never short of a page-turner, thanks to uncomplicated writing and competent plotting. To help matters, the chapters are short, some as short as two pages, and each page contains merely 200 words or so.

So, while it takes no effort to finish the book in two or three stretches, you won't remember much after finishing it — not any of the characters, nor any locale; not any particular episode, nor the story as a whole. This one is strictly for the hours you spend waiting for your flight to be announced or similar such interludes.

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