

Indian thrillers have a mostly male audience

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Renuka Bisht in TwinkleTwinkle | India | TOI

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When Ashwin Sanghi first went to the publishers, he was told that his background of business, bania and marwari was pretty strange for someone looking to become a thriller writer. They told him, we have a Dan Brown so we don't need an Ashwin Sanghi.

Since then things have changed dramatically and the Times Litfest panel titled 'Crafting the Indian Thriller' was testimony to this. Here Sanghi shared the stage with Ravi Subramanian, Mahendra Jakhar and moderator Satyarth Nayak, all of whom have tasted success with their thrillers.

More tellingly, a lot of the youngsters in the predominantly young audience said enthusiastically that they too are planning to become thriller writers!

Still, the panel agreed that only the surface of the thriller genre has been scratched in India. Sanghi said that although we now have the banking thriller, the mythological thriller and so on, "We need a lot more super specializations" – such as romantic, psychological and medical thrillers, suggested Subramanian.



Unfortunately, Subramanian went on to rue, "In India we don't read thrillers we read authors." Which is to say that people go to the store and ask for the latest Sanghi or Subramanian, not the new thriller. Nayak chimed in, "Readers have a lot to answer for!" Just as writers are evolving, readers also need to evolve, agreed Jakhar.

Faced with the proposition that thriller writing is more craft than art, the panel didn't take offence. In agreement Sanghi quoted the Lee Child formula: "Ask a question at the beginning and answer it at the end." He also laid out three formula essentials. The first paragraph should suck in the reader, the last paragraph of every chapter should be a page-turner, and the last paragraph of the book should be an advertisement for the next one. Subramanian added a fourth ingredient: A twist at the end.

To the proposition that thrillers are entertainment, Jakhar alone raised a pained protest. He said he doesn't want to be just a madari, or monkey man. Fearlessly he told the audience, "I want to slap you, kick you at times." Citing the example of how rapes continue to happen despite the Nirbhaya uprising, he said he wanted readers to think, "Are you an automaton in this diseased society? Are you even diseased?"

But for all its visible success, this genre seems to be suffering a demographic disadvantage. Subramanian said the likes of mythology and romance have much greater readership in India. And on top of it, thrillers have a largely male audience.

Traditionally women read more than men so the maths is stacked against the thriller.

The riddle of the oldest thriller in the world was also solved. Sanghi said it's Little Red Riding Hood of 1697. The walk through the forest, the big bad wolf... there's a fresh thrill every couple of wages.

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Having journeyed to journalism via a career in academics and a doctorate in media studies from the University of Florida, Renuka Bisht now has the great ple...

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