



Deepti Singh

A bibliophile friend has a bookshelf in his house, which, if you're a crime fiction addict, will make you think you have died and gone to book heaven. Whether it's a Harlan Coben or a Stephen King or a John Grisham or a Stieg Larsson, you will find international authors and crime fiction titles jostling for space there.

But lately, there has been a sprinkling of *desi* crime fiction as well. Ankush Saikia's *The Girl From Nongrim Hills* sits next to Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, while Aditya Sudarshan's *A Nice Quiet Holiday* finds Hakan Nesser's *Hour of the Wolf* as its neighbour. "Indian authors and crime fiction, really?" we wonder aloud, to which he replies, "Try them, some of them are really good." And that is when we realise, that something has changed in the world of publishing. Indian authors are no more being considered pariahs in the world of crime fiction writing.

FASCINATION FOR THE DARK SIDE

When journalist Mark Manuel decided to write a book, choosing the crime fiction genre was no-brainer for him. As a journalist, he started his career covering the crime beat, and not only knew everyone from the top cops to the *hawaladars*, he was well familiar with the police procedures as well. Hence, his novel, *Morya Re!*, probably the first police procedural novel here.

"After Bollywood and cricket, what fascinates people is crime and it's everywhere — on the front page of newspapers and every time you switch on the tele-



Ravi Subramanian

vision. It doesn't just have to be about murders and rapes. There is corporate crime, political crime and so on. One always wants to read about crime as long as it doesn't involve them. You like the thrill, the chill of fear that goes down your back when you read about such people. The dark side is always fascinating," he says.

REASON FOR LACK OF MASS APPEAL

For somebody who has been writing books for the past nine years, author Novoneel Chakraborty has realised why crime fiction, as opposed to romance, does not appeal to many people. "Crime as a genre, is intelligent. You cannot write dumb things in a crime novel — the way the story proceeds, the way it ends. A romance, on the other hand, is inherently emotional and I think

as Indians, we have a thing for emotions rather than intelligence. So at a mass market level, the consumption of crime fiction will always be lesser than romance," says the author who wrote the popular *Stranger Trilogy*, thrillers packed with romance.

Author Ravi Subramanian seconds his opinion. "What is the beauty of romance?" he asks and answers the question himself. "You don't really need to think. A thriller, on the other hand, needs you to be focussed on the story to catch the red herrings and not to miss those fine twists and turns implanted by the author, which will be connected at a later point in time," he says. For readers who have not grown up on the genre, that's a little difficult to get a hold of.

The author of several bestselling banking thrillers, such as *If God Was a Gamer*, also points out that while there is nothing lacking in the quality of writing



Novoneel Chakraborty



Ashwin Sanghi

when it comes to crime fiction in India, it is the lack of exposure that new writers face. "If you go to the Amazon crime thriller page, you will find that out of the top 12 authors listed there, 10 are international and only two are Indian — me and Ashwin Sanghi. That, to me, is not at all indicative of the quality of writing here, which in my opinion, is very good," he says. It is this lack of exposure, believes the author, that leads to people going to bookstores and by default, buying international titles.

FILLING THE GAP IN THE MARKET

However, there has been a slow and steady change in the publishing sector in the past decade or so, that has led to Indian authors to believe that there is scope for not only crime thrillers, but also other genres in the commercial fiction space. Author Ashwin Sanghi explains that the publishing industry in India has grown up. "Till about 10 or 12 years ago, if you were a crime thriller writer of Indian origin, there really was no space for you, because the Indian publishers were not looking at commercial fiction seriously

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NOTCHING UP THE CRIME QUOTIENT

CRIME FICTION BY INDIAN AUTHORS MAY STILL BE IN ITS NASCENT STAGE BUT IT'S JUST A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE IT BECOMES THE NEXT BIG THING



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NOTCHING UP THE CRIME QUOTIENT

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For the longest time, the publishing world in our country was dominated by multinationals, and most of them had a list of authors from abroad that they were very happy to push. If you were an Indian wanting to write commercial fiction, they would wonder if you had your head screwed on properly, because frankly, publishing in India was looking at the next Arundhati Roy, not the next Stephen King," he says.

The scenario now, he believes, has changed significantly. "The entire space of commercial fiction writing in English has been given importance by these very publishing houses. Plus, there are homegrown publishers like Rupa, Westland and Jaico, all of whom are realising that commercial fiction actually does sell," he adds.

Millie Ashwarya, Editor-in-Chief of commercial books at Penguin Random House, says that the genre of crime writing in India is growing and can grow still in the future. "There has been a gap in the market in terms of crime writing and this space can be filled with existing and new writers of crime. International crime writers are still very popular in India with a loyal readership base. Having said that, the market is big with a substantial scope for Indian writers to build and expand their audience," she says, adding that they publish both crime fiction and non fiction with published as well as debut writers. "I see crime non fiction growing too as I feel readers are interested in reading works of true crime like *Aarushi* by Avirook Sen, crime reportage, and well researched books on the Mafia," she says.

Millie tells us that they have an imprint with S Hussain Zaidi, called Blue Salt which specialises in crime fiction and non fiction. "Several exciting titles are a part of it. We recently published *The Stardust Affair* by Bilal Siddiqi, and *The Six Minutes of Terror* by Nazia Sayed and Sharmeen Hakim. An exciting new crime non-fiction title *The Bhais of Bengaluru* is going to be released this month which has been written by seasoned journalist

Jyoti Shelar. We also publish Ravi Subramaniam, Ashwin Sanghi (who we have published with James Patterson) and Juggi Bhasin in this segment. We are committed to this genre and make constant efforts to discover new authors in this segment," she reveals. Novoneel Chakraborty's *Forever is a Lie* releases soon as well. Westland has Upendra Namburi's *8 Hours* ready for release this month, while Simon & Schuster India published *Bombay Fever* by Sidin Vadukut in August. HarperCollins India, too, is gearing up to release *The Trickster* by Vinaya Bhagat, *A Closetful of Skeletons* by Tanushree Podder and *Ms India Murders* by Gauri Sinh.



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Ravi Subramaniam,
Author

DELVING INTO UNEXPLORED AREAS

While out-and-out crime thrillers and murder mysteries are certainly on top of the mind, this gradual change in the way the publishing industry in India works, also explains why there has been a surge even in other genres in the commercial fiction space, as well as sub-genres within the crime fiction area. "There are Indian authors writing in spaces like detective fiction and police procedurals. Then there are others who are exploring the paranormal and horror categories, something which we have not seen earlier in English writing. There are many genres and sub-genres being experimented with these days,"

Ashwin points out.

Novoneel, for one, is quite grateful for this phenomenon. "I write a very mixed genre. I'm neither a hardcore crime writer, nor a hardcore romance writer. But while in my books, you will find murders, you will come across love stories as well. I don't know what to call them but to make it easier, it's safe to put them under the romantic thriller category. Fortunately, it has paid off, because there are very few people attempting that," adds.

POTENTIAL FOR MORE

Having said that, there is still scope for a lot more. And that potential, according to Ravi, has to be created. "There is a market. People will read if the books are available and kindle their interest. It is a sad state of affairs that there are two crime writers, Ashwin and me, who sell in significantly large numbers, and the gap between us and the next level crime thriller writers, in terms of sales, not in terms of quality, is significantly high," he says. The author points out that while the writers who came in before 2010, made a name for themselves, after that, the discoverability of new crime writers has gone down. "So even today when we have so many writers, they are not being read. We need a Surendra Mohan Pathak in English crime writing. We just need one standout example and the market will change. People read, you just have to get them hooked on to thrillers," he says.

For that to happen, the author suggests that we need a number of crime writers being sold at railways stations and shops in semi urban and rural places across the country. "They need to be given a dose of simple (as opposed to simplistic) thrillers, which they can read without taxing their brains. You have to go to that level of readers, give them simple plots, and expose them to crime writing. Slowly, as they start reading more, they will graduate to reading more evolved thrillers and crime fiction," he says. We guess these guys agree with Stephen King, when he writes, 'Murder is like potato chips; you can't just stop with just one!'