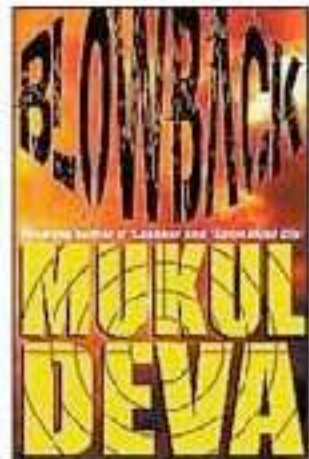


A fun thriller straight out of the headlines



BLOWBACK
Mukul Deva
HarperCollins, 2010,
pp 368, Rs 199

Early on in *Blowback*, a mysterious tribal leader assembles all of the tribes fighting for jihad and outlines a radical plan to them. They listen, awestruck by the brutality and originality of the plan, and elect him as their leader. A few months

later, the plan is put into action. You the reader wait to see what dastardly ideas the terrorists have. And it turns out that they're... putting bombs in crowded places in Indian cities.

Yes, it is brutal and effective, but your average Indian reader is bound to find this revelation a bit anti-climactic. We know this is happening today, and due to the hard work of our investigative agencies, we also know some part of the planning. Reading about almost exactly the same thing in a thriller makes it seem like some sort of investigative journalism. Where are the devastating nuclear bombs, the almost-unbelievable terror plots, the top-secret

biological weapons?

Once this bit of disappointment is digested, though, the book grows on you. After all, some of the terror attacks of recent times would have been unbelievable a few years back. Some of Frederick Forsyth's writing doesn't seem quite so comfortably imaginary anymore. Deva's writing could be looked at as something closer to real life, immediate, something really plausible and right-out-of-the-headlines.

The writing style adds its impact — Deva's big strength is the smoothness of his prose, crisp and fast-moving, and you never get distracted from the story by the writing. It all feels like a good piece of reportage

rather than an action thriller.

In addition, the main protagonists are generally well drawn and plausible, if slightly larger-than-life. The different people in Force 22, the elite unit around which the events of this book (and Deva's previous two books, *Lashkar* and *Salim Must Die*) revolve, feel well etched out, with their individual weaknesses, passions, and history, and some of them evolve through the book.

If the character development fails anywhere, it is in the bad guys. Without an exception, all are totally evil and monomaniacal — no trace of doubt and no understandable motivation for their viewpoints. You could substitute the low-level

terrorist recruits with the tribal leader mentioned above with no difference to how the story would proceed. The best action thrillers take the time to show how the villains got where they are, and what the world looks like from their viewpoint — this book doesn't.

Unfortunately, there are a few segments where the storytelling isn't up to par. The ending takes on a Bollywoodish touch, with true love, *maa-ki-mamta* (mother's love) and tragedy taking over the proceedings instead of the expected rivetting action sequence, leaving a bit of an off-taste for the reader. Another weak segment is a several-page-long discussion between senior Indi-

an officials and the Prime Minister about the growth of terrorism. Deva uses this scene to list all of his ideas to solve the problem, one after the other, ending the sequence with the comment that things will now improve since the Prime Minister has heard these ideas. Any smart editor would have cut this sequence, since it is nothing more than a tirade by the author.

Overall, the book succeeds at being a fast-paced, entertaining, genre thriller, in the vein of works by dozens of other western writers. Just like those other books, though, it also disappears from your head after you're finished, leaving no real impact on you.

SUDARSHAN PUROHIT