

Of terror in our time

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By Narendra Nag

Blowback by Mukul Deva HarperCollins, Rs 199

When I finished reading Mukul Deva's *Blowback*, the blasts in Pune hadn't happened. At the time I was torn between a sense of disappointment with the writing, and respect for the author's chutzpah. After German Bakery, everything changed.

Let me start at the beginning. Whenever I read Robert Ludlum, or Tom Clancy, or (especially) Frederick Forsyth, or any of the many writers who thrived in a world poised on the brink of destruction during the Cold War, I always enjoy the fact that the story they are telling could have been true. That the conspiracy could be real. If you think about it, all conflicts breed stories where the storytellers take clear sides — where the good side, the right side, is obvious. But the conflict in our part of the world hasn't given rise to a lot of stories. Sure there are books by policy wonks and defence experts that are read widely by policy wonks and defence experts. But I haven't come across an Indian author writing in English about terrorism the way Deva does.

A little background might help: Deva is a retired Indian Army officer. Which may be why the soldier in him carries on waging war with Pakistan, the ISI and all the terror outfits that threaten India in *Blowback*, and the two books that preceded it. Deva's stories feature a special unit of the Indian Army doing the sorts of things you read about in *Commando Comics*. The main characters in *Blowback* are two lovers — one a secret agent, the other a militant who has come to his senses. Both are Muslims and their love for each other is eclipsed only by their love for their nation.

The book picks up where the previous book, *Salim Must Die*, ends. Off to a roaring start, we quickly assemble a cast of cardboard characters neatly divided into those out to either kill anything that moves, or protect everything that moves.

The story races across the border from Pakistan into India and then to Varanasi, Surat and Jaipur. The setting are the bomb blasts that tore through these cities a few years ago. If you remember, there were a number of bombs that didn't go off in Surat, and a few that did. This book's protagonists are responsible for the bombs not going off. The line between fact and fiction are blurred here, as it should be in any good thriller. After all, what's the point of a book about daring, clandestine military operations and spies that doesn't have the reader believing that this is fact parading as fiction for foreign policy reasons. Nod nod, wink wink.

Before the blasts in Pune, I thought this was an okay book. It wasn't great because it didn't force me to read it at one go. Good thrillers always make me stay up all night. For one, the pace of the book gets affected when Deva starts to make political points

about what India's strategy should be — a matter that is obviously very close to his heart. Secondly, the characters just aren't well developed enough. This is a shame since he's had three books now to give them some meat and bone. What's entirely missing from the book is a negative character you can understand, whose reasons for doing what he, or she, is doing make some warped sort of sense. Great thrillers always have a villain with shades of grey who makes you fear for the hero's life. I can't help but wish Deva would spend more time fleshing out characters from a more intimate perspective. Then, perhaps, his dialogue wouldn't sound so stereotypical. It's probably not fair to compare Deva's Iqbal and Ludlum's Bourne. But comparisons will occur to any fan of this genre.

That said, I would still ask you to read Blowback, and the books that precede it: Lashkar and Salim Must Die. If nothing else, they introduce us to the conflict we are all currently a part of. His books may not be high-brow examples of scholarship, but they do offer some insight into a war against terror from the perspective of a soldier — I use the word soldier to describe anyone who doesn't have the freedom to allow for a more liberal interpretation of a conflict of this sort. And when you find his perspective uncomfortably simplistic, remind yourself that it's only a thriller.

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