

Thrillingly Indian

SPOTLIGHT

Lashkar
By Mukul Deva
Harper Collins India
Price: Rs 195

Salim Must Die
By Mukul Deva
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While both books are complete in themselves, when read together, the plot lines make an instant connect because *Salim* starts where *Lashkar* ends... A review by anjana basu

example we learn that Al Qaida actually means 'the database' because it is a list of names and locations. Or we are told how a certain kind of heat seeking missile works. These explanations owe their inspiration to Tom Clancy who has been known to cover over ten pages describing the intricacies of weaponry. Deva on the other hand says that he details as much as is strictly necessary and tries to maintain the tautness of his plot lines.

If you take into account the fact that *Salim* went into print before 26/11 you may be

forgiven for thinking that Deva has a Nostradamus touch. *Lashkar* was around for people to have read, but he insists that he didn't pass on the idea of infiltrating a hostile territory by fishermen's boats to Kasab and his friends. In *Salim*, the conspiracy is a result of outsourcing by the ISI chief to a colleague in retirement who has access to a great deal of the ISI's infrastructure, which is something that did happen in the case of the Mumbai attack.

While both books are complete in

themselves, when read together, the plot lines make an instant connect because *Salim* starts where *Lashkar* ends. And of course, both novels share similar incidents and characters. In both Indian commandos skitter across the border and, in one case penetrate a safe house in Murree with seemingly glorious ease. *Lashkar* and *Salim* share the same villain, a retired Pakistani brigadier (no surprises there) with the single minded view of world domination that most villains subscribe to. And there is the central character of Iqbal who belongs to Deva's school in Lucknow and who has his dreams rudely shattered when his mother dies in a bomb blast in Sarojini Nagar.

Mukul Deva has the army background to make the details and the action realistic - though he does take care not to reveal military secrets because he doesn't want his work turned into bomb making manuals. He also exposes some interesting world views along the way - for example the revelation in *Salim* that the world is composed of Wimps, Nerds, Bystanders and Terrorists which is why everything is in the shambles that it is.

If there is something one can quibble about it is the lack of a viable romantic interest. The brainy Ankita unfortunately doesn't impress as a living woman and is far too busy being smart to be feminine - we only see her in the context of her computer. Much the same can be said for the other female characters, who seem to exist either to be victimised or take revenge. They have neat little labels but no passionate life. That is likely to give the books a restricted circulation amongst women who according to research are avid thriller buyers.

On the whole though, Deva's style is simple and the plot fast paced. While diehard activists may have quarrels with his politics, it's more entertaining to read the books for their sheer desi-touch thrill value. *Lashkar* and *Salim* will find an answering chord with many and both are bound to be made into films eventually and have multiplexes filled with patriotic cheers.

The reviewer is a freelance contributor

THERE are certain gaps in the Indian outflow of fiction - the detective novel for example and, the thriller. The reason for the latter has been a little difficult to comprehend considering the fact that in India we certainly live in interesting times. And, after the serial explosions and 26/11, life may not be as taken for granted again.

Now, however, the gap in the thriller field has been filled very effectively. Mukul Deva's two novels, *Lashkar* and its sequel *Salim Must Die* step into a territory that has become very familiar to everyone, whether in India or around the world: the clear and present danger of cross-border terrorism. The heroes and villains are the expected ones, with strategy and cross-border conflicts detailed as a result of painstaking research.

Mukul Deva proudly says he puts in four hours' research every morning - which was not really that necessary for *Lashkar*, but vital where *Salim Must Die* was concerned because the novel goes into global terrorism territory and throws up all kinds of dizzying international links that few readers would have imagined existed.

Along the way in both novels, Deva attempts to provide insights into the nature of terrorism, along with information on weaponry and terrorist vocabulary. For

