

Crime and reason (An Extract)

Popular crime stories depict what disturbs people. Here's what the books we read say about us

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One of my highly unscientific pet theories is that popular crime fiction in every country mirrors the collective psyche of its population. To put it in another way, a popular crime writer's stories reflect exactly what disturbs people, for readers have a natural tendency to gravitate towards books that address issues that bother them. This means that in ideal circumstances crime novels can be psychotherapeutically helpful and perhaps lower the mental healthcare budget. If any psychoanalyst out there has a better theory, you're welcome to email your suggestions to this newspaper.

Let's look at specific cases. For instance, Agatha Christie's popularity mirrored, in my view, the feeling of loss the British experienced when their empire crumbled. Her novels are essentially about preserving a conservative idyll of rural manors and



Captured: Our engagement with terrorism spills over into the books we read.

country chaplains in a world with no or little manoeuvring space for the lower classes (except in cases where the butler turns out to be the killer). Life in that bucolic world can be disturbed by a heinous murder but, in the end, order prevails.

In India, I've noticed that there's one subgenre of crime fiction that's doing better than others—namely the terrorist thriller. We are, of course, constantly reminded of this threat walking through metal detectors at railway stations, shopping malls and cinemas, or facing elaborate identity and address proof checks in order to

acquire a prepaid SIM card.

Moving to the sphere of tautly scripted pulp, plots are less inclined towards understanding the mindset of those who take to terrorism, but they do shed light on the complex logistics of preventing terror attacks. Just last year, Mukul Deva published the third instalment about the valiant men of Force 22, *Blowback*, in which the top secret counterterrorism squad foils yet another attempt to destabilize the country. Undercover operative Iqbal infiltrates a terrorist cell that recruits cannon fodder for bomb attacks and there are some highly memorable shoot-outs that spice up the drama. If you're hooked by the Lashkar series, the last book in the quartet is being published this year: *Tanzeem*, in which Iqbal goes for the final arm-wrestle with the foreign hand.

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