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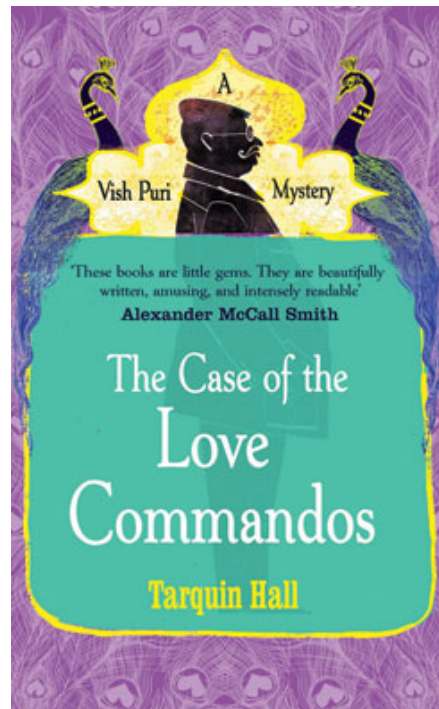
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DIY publishing

Devapriya Roy puts a british-indian book to the stereotyping test. Plus, a scandal and Self-publishing tips



Last summer, I remember following an engaging debate. Biographer and contemporary historian Patrick French rued in an article the “rough hierarchy” that has “formed among Indian critics”. In his opinion, at the very bottom of the writers’ pecking order, just above the phenomenally bestselling 100-rupee books with titles like ‘You Hurt My Heart’ or similar are “foreigners who have the temerity to write about India”.

A week later, author Aatish Taseer responded to French, concluding, rather controversially, that “Patrick French... is right: there is defensiveness these days, there is over-sensitivity and perhaps a degree of xenophobia too. In a country which has bended so easily to the will of foreigners in the past, and where foreigners are still invisibly able to occupy positions of great power, both politically and intellectually, a little xenophobia is not such a bad thing.”

Let me confess, then, that after a lifetime of living and breathing literature written in English — and often produced in the Anglo-American world — I too have trained myself, if not in a little xenophobia but in caution. As a result, my oversensitive radar is quick to pick up the following words in the subtitle/blurb of a westerner-authored piece or book: caste system, exotic, patriarchy, mangoes, colourful, corruption, succulent, new India.

At this point, I see you widening your eyes to say, ‘But isn’t this all true of India?’ To which I say (my hands flapping about excitably) yes, of course it is true, but there is something to be said about context and readership and stereotyping and the demands of geopolitical games.

I am also likely to start throwing random terms at you hysterically: due diligence, neo-colonialism, orientalism, decolonisation blah blah blah until kingdom come. So let us delicately sidestep that minefield for now.

What I really meant to emphasise through this very long preamble is that I put Delhi-based Brit author Tarquin Hall’s detective fiction *The Case of the Love Commandos* [Arrow Books, Rs 499] to this acid test, involving all

the above theoretical vacillation. Not in the least because the theme of the book involves an inter-caste love story, between “untouchable” Ram and the daughter of corrupt, evil, womanising feudal landlord Vishnu Mishra. And I am happy to report that in my opinion, the book works well enough.

Hall’s Dilli-Punjabi protagonist Vish Puri, India’s Most Private Investigator, is not only an immensely likeable and original character, with both panache and style, he is surrounded by a cast that is quite inimitable: from Elizabeth Rani, his secretary, to his *khukri*-wielding Dalit-feminist associate Facecream *urf* Lakshmi *urf* Love Commando (the Love Commandos protect and rehabilitate couples from disparate castes and religions who have got married in spite of parental opprobrium) and finally, the redoubtable Mummyji, Puri’s mother, who often takes it upon herself to do some detection work.

Alexander McCall Smith had broken new ground in the genre of the cosy mysteries, often simply called the cosies, when he set his delightful *No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series in Gaborone, Botswana. One might say that in some ways Hall’s series is in this vein; there is a quote by McCall Smith on the book jacket to confirm this. However, while McCall Smith’s books are gentler, kinder and far less political, Hall’s noisy north India is hectic, far less cosy.

The plot is thick with twists and turns, and in addition to the finely evocative scenes in Delhi, Agra and Lucknow, redolent with the aroma of rich greasy Indian food (in another cosy mystery aside, Hall includes a few recipes at the end), there are scenes set in the archetypal UP village of Govind, with its caste segregations, absentee school teachers and midday meal scams.

The subplot snakes up to the Vaishno Devi temple, where Mummyji is acting upon her own hunches. And thrown into the cauldron where the old battle between tradition and modernity is being fought alongside new political battles, where Dalits, Brahmins, Thakurs and Yadavs keep coming together in different electoral configurations to grab power, there is the new India of steel and glass industrial areas. In one of these is a swanky research facility that is headed by a super-villainish Swede (I sort of liked this touch since I tend to be suspicious of Sweden’s whole squeaky clean vibe) scientist under whose aegis evil pharmaceuticals are taking advantage of illiterate villagers. Vish Puri must get to the bottom of it all.

The book is funny, pacy and readable. There are a few generalisations at times and Hall lapses into Britishness once in a rare while (for example, in New Delhi Station, we spot Puri reflecting on how the British-built Indian Railways had given Indians the sense of living in one nation. Elsewhere, he considers how the Great Indian Wedding is in bad taste in a poor country) but one can live with these.

Finally, it is the authenticity of the characters rather than the incidentals of plot that make the book and the series so eminently readable. I shall wait for the further cases of Vish Puri and might drop into his Khan Market office one of these days, right above Bahrisons, just to say hello.

Devapriya Roy is the author of The Weight Loss Club and other titles



Margaret Mitchell received 38 rejections from publishers for *Gone With the Wind*.

J.K. Rowling was shown the door more than a dozen times before *Harry Potter* came out in 1997.

Stephen King’s manuscript was shot down 30 times before *Carrie* finally saw light of day.

Closer home, Amish says he stopped counting after 20 rejections and decided to self-publish *The Immortals of Meluha*. Three years later, his *Shiva* trilogy has mopped up Rs 43 crore and counting.

Authors of every size, shape and story have been crawling out of the woodwork in India and many are being lapped up by established and budding publishing houses. But now one needn’t even wait around for a publisher. Self-publishing companies and websites have been offering their services to anyone bitten by the writing bug. One such platform is offered by the big daddy of the book business — Amazon.

Kindle Direct Publishing or KDP is a self-publishing tool that lets writers publish for Kindle, Amazon’s reading device, as well as for Kindle for PC and mobile devices. Here’s how:

Upload text in one of the compatible formats detailed on their website.

Download tools like KindleGen, Kindle Plugin for Adobe InDesign, or Kindle Previewer to make your book look all spiffy.

Pick a royalty programme (either 35 per cent or 70).

Decide your price (be er, realistic). And bam! You’re a published author.

This is what Rasana Atreya did last year when she wanted to publish her book *Tell a Thousand Lies* about a pair of fraternal twin girls, one dark-skinned, the other fair, in “colour-conscious” India. “My book was shortlisted for the 2012 Tibor Jones South Asia Prize. I also had a publishing contract. Yet, I chose to self-publish. My friends thought I was crazy to let go of a publishing contract, something writers can spend a lifetime chasing. But I had been watching how other indies (ie independent writers) travelled on their own self-publishing journeys, and I wanted to see how I would fare. I’m happy to say, this was the best thing I ever did!” says the Hyderabad-based writer. “I haven’t sat down to do a count, but I sell 400-600 books a month in the

UK, slightly less in the US. I sell about one to five books a month in India, Canada, Mexico,” she added.

With KDP, on the upside you get published by an industry biggie and can take advantage of its reach, branding and marketing network. The royalty programmes are quite simple, though we suggest you pay attention while reading the terms and conditions and specifications like territory rights and competitive pricing.

You get to decide your own price, though it has to be within \$0.99 and \$200. In India, you can sell directly in rupees. If you already have a physical format of your book, you can link its sales to your KDP account or sign up for Amazon’s print-on-demand service called CreateSpace, like Rasana. Also, KDP supports graphics in .GIF, .PNG, .BMP, and .JPG formats, so your book can be interactive as well as pretty.

But KDP — and most other self-publishing platforms — does not offer editorial services, so you are pretty much on your own on the content. And as any writer will tell you, good editors are worth their weight in gold. But if you believe in your story, just go for it!

Samhita Chakraborty



Boy loves girl. But boy can’t marry girl. Girl’s father is same as boy’s father, so boy is girl’s half-brother. #heartbreak

But turns out boy’s father is not the real father, so boy is not really girl’s half-brother. #reunite

Boy happy. Girl happy.

And this is just one plot of Scandal Point. Written by Fahad Samar, [HarperCollins,

Rs 250], this one is a real dud, worse than the worst ’80s Bollywood movie. Yes, that is possible.

Scandal Point traces the ups and downs of two macho hunks, Ricky Roy and Gautam Goyal. Sons of famous fathers both, Ricky’s dad is yesteryear superstar Kapil “King Cock” Kumar. Kapil wants to give Ricky the ultimate launchpad. A nationwide heroine hunt is launched. The script is decided. Son is to be cast in the remake of dad’s superhit Pardesi Pardesi. You already know the drift of his love life aka beautiful NRI Rhea Zaveri. Refer opening lines.

Gautam Goyal is son of Dharmesh Goyal, London-based tycoon restaurateur. Gautam is in rehab. He falls in and out of lust easily. An ego battle with his sister Rani, who turns Rana by the time the book ends, peppers his life, other than the Kansal sisters who come to his bed and go.

Scandal Point traces the series of scandals that hit the two boys. Some seriously twisted turns take place in the tale — some are love related, others career. All are filmi.

It’s a gossipy read. Whodunnit in parts. There are no merciless murders so it isn’t a whodunnit in the typical sense. But when a book is supposed to be based on “society” and Bollywood, the mind starts wandering. Who? Honestly, by the end of the book, you don’t care. One. Bit.

Shradha Agarwal