



FESTIVAL REPORT

An initiative of the Crime Writer's Forum of South Asia

In association with India Habitat Centre and Siyahi

Powered by Investigation Discovery

New Delhi

17-18 January, 2015

The first edition of the Hindustan Times Crime Writers Festival began on January 17 and ended on January 18, 2015. The festival featured two days of soaking in the world of crime, suspense and high thrills with sessions on plots, styles, films and characters.

Festival Directors: Namita Gokhale and Lady Kishwar Desai

Festival Advisors: Ashwin Sanghi and Priti Paul

Creative Director: Alka Pande

Country Partner: Norway

Producer: Siyahi

The festival had a smorgasbord of options for the crime fiction lover. Sessions, readings and workshops ran simultaneously, ensuring that there wasn't a dull moment at the event. The highlights of the festival included the participation of writers from Norway, Sweden, UK, and France; a walk down film history with super sleuth Byomkesh Bakshi; the loyal fan following of prolific Hindi thriller writer Surender Mohan Pathak; and filmmaker Dibakar Banerjee's workshop on scriptwriting.

THE PROGRAMME

DAY 1

The first edition of the Hindustan Times Crime Writers Festival was held at the India Habitat Centre, Delhi. The workshops were held at Oxford Bookstore. The festival was inaugurated by Festival Directors Namita Gokhale and Lady Kishwar Desai, Festival Advisors Ashwin Sanghi and Priti Paul, Creative Director Alka Pande and His Excellency Ambassador Eivind S Homme.



Namita Gokhale spoke about the conception of the festival, which happened “on a cold and windy London day, over eleven cups of tea, cookies and croissants”. She said that while crime fiction was often underestimated, it was a barometer of society. In an increasingly irrational world, crime fiction upheld fact, proof, rational thinking and

served as the perfect way to understand the human condition. It also chronicled the battle between our higher and lower selves and laid bare our inner compulsions. She welcomed all the writers to the festival, in particular thanking Surender Mohan Pathak for being there. Noting all support that the sponsors had extended to the festival, she also thanked Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie and all the legendary crime writers for entertaining readers over the centuries.

Lady Kishwar Desai remarked that it was apt that it was on a foggy cold morning that the festival began, adding that one could almost imagine Sherlock Holmes emerging from the fog and joining the crowd. She hoped that this edition would be the first of very many, this being India's first niche literature festival. The geography has moved, she said, noting that it is not only the Nordic countries, UK and the US that are producing stellar crime fiction. Expressing a hope that India would become part of this movement, she mentioned the efforts of the Crime Writer's Forum of South Asia in nurturing new talent in the region.

His Excellency Ambassador Eivind S Homme too remarked on the chilly morning, saying that it felt a little like Norway. On behalf of the country

partner Norway and NORLA, he said that he was glad that they were able to bring popular author Nils Nordberg to the festival. Reflecting on why his country and the other Nordic nations were known for dark and horrific crime fiction, he said maybe it was a result of all those long winter nights. It was nice to sit at home with a book and find that the crime is solved at the end, unlike in real life. He added that crime fiction was intrinsically imbued with a sense of justice and victory, but readers would have to wait till the end to see their triumph.

The charming ambience of the India Habitat Centre led Alka Pande to remark that it was a pleasure to have a literature festival held out in the open with natural beauty enhancing the experience, rather than sitting in an enclosed hall. It also was a reflection of the feminine power driving the festival, she said.

AMPHITHEATRE, INDIA HABITAT CENTRE

WINTER MURDERLAND

Nils Nordberg introduced by Ashwin Sanghi

Audience: 100



Ashwin Sanghi introduced the session by quoting Jack Reacher's creator Lee Child: The way to write a thriller is to ask a question in the beginning and answer it at the end. So, he said, he would start with a question: "What makes Nordic fiction so compelling?" For the answer, he turned to Norwegian writer and crime fiction expert Nils Nordberg.

Nils challenged the audience to look beyond stereotypes about the Nordic countries by showing a sunny street in Norway, a shot taken at

midnight. Between the cold dark winter and the endless summer days, the region exists in a space between light and dark.

Reminding the audience that there was something inherently subversive about crime fiction, he said that the genre first emerged in countries with strong democratic conditions. This allows the writers to be indirectly skeptical of society and challenge society.

While most believe that the Nordic Noir wave began with Stieg Larsson, the region had a long tradition of the genre, with a Norwegian author penning a crime novel before Edgar Allan Poe's *Murder in the Rue Morgue*. Riding on the latest wave were authors like Henning Mankell and Jo Nesbo, who have been translated into several languages. Nils explained that reaching English speaking audiences is a hard challenge for a Nordic writer.

While a cop is the traditional hero of many Nordic novels, journalists, psychologists and private investigators now have leading roles. Of contemporary fiction, Nils said that there was a deplorable increase in violence, with horribly mutilated bodies turning up constantly. In fact,

bodies in Norwegian books were almost four times as many as there were in real life.

Crime fiction reflected a society in turmoil. With urbanisation, alienation, racism, extremism, and rampant capitalism, cities have now become jungles where predators can lurk, he said. In Norway, these books often considered worst case scenarios. Touching upon on the other countries, he said that Swedish crime fiction featured domestic detective fiction, while Denmark preferred political thrillers. Iceland was all about police novels. He noted that a general trend in Nordic countries was to now produce books that are more similar to those written in English. The result is societies that seem familiar but are exotic.

What makes Nordic fiction so compelling is a question that may never answered, but Nils offered a glimpse into a crime fiction writer's mind. Most see something bad in society and write about it, he said, hoping to make a difference.

THE OTHER SIDE OF MIDNIGHT: SEXUALISATION OF VIOLENCE

Dipankar Gupta, Julien Vedrenne, Trude Teige, Lady Kishwar Desai in conversation

Audience: 100



How much violence in crime fiction is too much, Lady Kishwar Desai asked the panel. Norwegian journalist Trude Teige was of the opinion that gory details were not necessary to address gruesome crimes. French crime fiction expert Julien Vedrenne believed that as a reader, you can be happy to see that other people are as unhappy as you, noting the strong voyeuristic streak that all of us have.

Dipankar Gupta was dismissive of the blood and gore style of writing. "Splashing the book with blood and smut is done to hide a lack of professionalism," he said. Even so, he acknowledged that some crimes appeared more brutal than others. "When a woman is violated, it is more visceral than when a man is. Women serve as the moral barometer," he said. Trude chimed in with bestselling Jo Nesbo's proclamation - Brutalised women sell books, dead men don't. "You can't argue with success," she said.

Julien however pointed out that a writer is an artist and an artist doesn't ask such questions (whether putting so much violence in a book might influence readers). He recounted an anecdote about Picasso to illustrate his point. A German tourist admiring Picasso's *Guernica* turned to the artist and said, wow, you did this! Picasso replied, "No, you did." It was a reflection of society that crime fiction showed, he pointed out.

Crime fiction has changed in many ways from the days of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. "Earlier, the main protagonist was the detective; now, it is the victim," said Julien. Crime novels now also raise socio-political issues and deal with previously taboo topics. Trude says

that while writing, she asks herself: "What is that which I have knowledge about and what are the issues I can tackle using the voice I have?"

Some things, though, remain the same. Dipankar says, "Crime fiction focuses on logic, not morality. It isn't a general character but a specific individual that plays the central role. In a crime novel, ethics triumph over everything else."