



Indian detective writers have got readers hooked and hungry for more, says **Samita Bhatia**

TRENDS

Detection will be the name of the game the next time you log onto the Penguin Books Indian website. Hit the button and get on with the innovative an online whodunit game that ties in with Kalpana Swaminathan's latest mystery, *The Monochrome Madonna*. Help Detective Lalli solve a murder that has taken place in a Mumbai apartment.

The online detection game is Penguin's latest promotional initiative that will draw you straight into the world of the book. The game, Penguin hopes, will push curious readers to pick up *The Monochrome Madonna*, a psychological thriller and murder mystery. Says Swaminathan: "I wanted to expand the so-called boundaries set in this genre."

Fast-paced Indian crime novels — replete with vicarious excitement, danger and detective-work — are moving stealthily into your lives,

John le Carre, Dick Francis, Stephen Hunter and Martin Cruz Smith may just get a gentle nudge on your bookshelves. For, an increasing number of Indian authors are hitting the trail and penning page-turners, relying on momentum and surprises to keep you hooked.

Swaminathan's *The Monochrome Madonna*, the third in her series with her central character Lalli, has the retired police inspector deal with what's perhaps her most challenging case yet. In *Holmes of the Raj* (Random House) by Dr Rajan Vithal, you'll find Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson in India on a secret mission in the service of Empire. They waded through adventures in Madras, Pondicherry, Hyderabad, the Central Provinces, Nainital and even Calcutta.

If Smita Jain's sassy *Piggies On The Railway*

(Westland) has private investigator Kasthuri Kumar and tracking a Bollywood crime, from Hachette India's stables there's Madhulika Liddle's *The Englishman's Cameo*. "I decided it was time to create an Indian historical detective," says Liddle.

Ashok Banker with his crime trilogy, *The Iron Bra, Murder & Champagne* and *Ten Dead Admen*, set the ball rolling for crime fiction in India in the early '90s. But then there was a distinct lull as Indian publishers were as wary of publishing crime fiction as Indian authors were of writing it. But all that seems set to change now.

So, Rajorshi Chakraborti's *Derangements* (HarperCollins), is loaded with unpredictability and suspense. He says: "Evoking an atmosphere and setting richly, precisely and economically so as not to hold up the story too much — was vital to the book." And his next novel, *All Together Now*, which is due for a 2011 release, is a crime story/thriller from the start, he promises.

Meanwhile Reeti Gadekar created Additional Commissioner Police (ACP) Nikhil Juneja in her novel *Families at Home* and her newest book, *Bottom of the Heap* (HarperCollins), is another ACP Juneja story. Gadekar, who's been living in Germany for the last decade,

says: "This time the truth is even more twisted and the intrigue murkier."

What are the ingredients for a great crime/detective story? Says Vithal: "Suspense from the word go. A good detective novel is addictive like Sudoku, and the mystery and the puzzle created by the crime must grab the reader from the first few pages. If the mystery sags, the reader will abandon the book." Vithal's next Book, *The Year of High Treason*, is about the Coronation Durbar in Delhi in 1911.

Penning the perfect detective novel



Clockwise from top left: Madhulika Liddle, Rajan Vithal, Kalpana Swaminathan and Reeti Gadekar

is also research dependent. Liddle's research for *The Englishman's Cameo* was largely historical and she spent hours walking through Shahjahanabad, on her own and on organised walks led by historians, academicians and conservation architects. She consulted a lot of books on the Mughals and the politics of 17th century Delhi. "Research is imperative to get the settings, characters, plot details and background right," says Liddle.

Shashi Warrior — who has three thrillers out with Penguin India — ensures that the plot and the characters in his books are credible.

Some of the research comes easy to him as his father is a retired soldier and he's travelled all over India and is familiar with weaponry and tactical thinking. "The plot and the characters in my books must be authentic. This means getting a lot of detail right, which means a lot of research," says Warrior.

Though Indian detective writing is a new territory for most publishers and the retail, Warrior believes that it's grown over the years.

Ravi Singh, managing editor, Penguin, says that the segment is still playing catch up: "The market for books as a whole has grown, so different genres are more visible than they were in the past. But the space for detective fiction, compared to other mainstream genres, is still small."

He adds that the market for English-language books in India is beginning to mature only now. Also, an overwhelming number of readers here still prefer detective fiction from the West over an Indian work. "That's because a lot of it is superior, of course, and there's the tendency is to draw parallels with international bestsellers. But fortunately, that seems to be changing," he says.

But Liddle adds that detective story-writers are beginning to step out. "Hopefully, the scene will be a lot rosier for writers — and readers — of Indian crime fiction in English in a few years time."