

# Presents from the past

**TRENDS** As a nation grows confident, its people become more interested in their own history. That may be why historical fiction is a raging fad in India today

It's not easy to classify a book as historical fiction in India today. A look at the current bestseller lists in India is sure to throw up a few famous names: *The Immortals of Meluha* by Amish Tripathi, and *The Empire of the Moghul* (series) by Alex Rutherford, *Chanakya's Chant* by Ashwin Sanghi, *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and almost always something by Amitav Ghosh. Two of these are retellings of mythological themes, while the others, which have been on the lists for at least a year now, are all, in one way or the other, set in a time and place in Indian history.

Authors such as Amitav Ghosh, (famous for *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, and *The Sea of Poppies* and the ongoing Ibis Trilogy, almost all of which have won literary awards), according to the Blossom bookstore, Bangalore, are staples for the city's book-reading crowd. "His works are steady sellers. But recently, I see that mythology-based books such as *The Immortals of Meluha* and *The Palace of Illusions* are selling a lot more," says Mayi Gowda, proprietor, Blossom book store. He credits the sales to the 'modern format' that the authors follow.

## Formulated in a phrase

It's difficult to put works such as *The Immortals of Meluha* and *Chanakya's Chant* under the historical fiction category. Even their authors, Amish Tripathi and Ashwin Sanghi, are not happy classifying their works exclusively under this category. But they do agree that they have made a conscious attempt to keep their writing style 'modern'.

"By setting my books in the Indus Valley Civilisation and calling it that, rather than the traditional name 'Jambudweepa', I have tried to make the stories more relevant, so that people can connect to them," admits Amish. But the real reason his books fly off the racks, he feels, is because Indians are now keen to explore their roots.

"As a nation grows more confident, its people become more interested in their own history. At the same time, people are not



**STALWARTS ALL IN HISTORICAL RETELLINGS** (clockwise from top left)  
Amitav Ghosh, Manreet Sodhi Someshwar, Ashwin Sanghi and Amish Tripathi

interested in taking a history lesson, so they like to read something which draws from history and crafts an engaging story out of it," he says. "Twenty years ago, historical fiction was written either from a subservient or a defensive perspective, both of which come from a space of insecurity. But today's historical fiction comes from a space of relaxed confidence, which people are drawn to."

Though he says his works are more political thrillers rather than historical fiction, Ashwin Sanghi makes similar observations about the genre's popularity. "For the longest time writers have been writing for a global audience. But today's

books are written for an Indian audience. A Western audience might not appreciate *Chanakya's Chant* because of its dependence on history and ancient statecraft," he explains. "My book is a modern-day thriller set on a bedrock of history. My primary object is to entertain, not educate."

Contemporary stories with historical plots, therefore, seem to be the order of the day and Manreet Sodhi Someshwar's *The Taj Conspiracy* is one of the latest additions. Steeped in Mughal history, the thriller is the first of a trilogy. And Manreet's reason for writing a book that falls broadly under the genre of historical

fiction is quite straightforward.

"I am a history buff. My second book, *The Long Walk Home*, published in 2009, is the first fictional examination of the 20th century history of Punjab. History, therefore, has been a part of my storytelling and is an inextricable part of *The Taj Conspiracy*. I guess this fascination for history has to do with the small town that I grew up in, Ferozepur, which is located on the border of India and Pakistan and has witnessed Partition, three Indo-Pak wars and the Khalistan movement. It is impossible not to be touched by history when the air of the place you grow up in is suffused with its stories."

Much of Indian historical fiction is set in the Colonial or the Mughal era or during Partition. For instance Amitav Ghosh's work is set in Colonial India and Salman Rushdie's Booker prize-winning *Midnight's Children* is set in the period of Indian independence (post-Colonial and Partition). Are stories now moving away from traditional historical fiction, blurring the lines between genres like fantasy, mythology, crime and politics?

Paul Vinay Kumar, Editor of Westland books, says, "Historical fiction as a genre has been vastly underdeveloped in India, which is ironic considering how interesting and diverse India's history is, and also because our glorious past is systematically invoked by everyone as a pointer to our glorious future. I am a big fan of Amitav Ghosh, and Alex Rutherford. I wish there were more writers writing like that," he says, observing that a variety of sub-genres like Madhulika Liddle's historical detective novels, and historical romance are becoming popular.

Manreet adds "The immense success of some recent books — the Meluha trilogy for instance — might give this impression, but it could also be a fad. I guess we'll have to wait and see how the genre grows."

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