

There was money in spinning a mushy romantic story, a compelling thriller or a campus yarn. But mythology? Yes, mythological fiction is the flavour of the season, with Shiva, Krishna, Sita and Ravana popular as protagonists. You may ask, hasn't mythology been around for yonks? It has, but this time around, there is lots more in it for the reader than just a well-spun story. Besides philosophical, spiritual and moral insights, stuff that mythological accounts are renowned for, these new stories take liberties with the plot, often placing characters in a contemporary context. What's more, all the deep insight is no longer of the kind that sits heavy on your mind; they are reader-friendly and peppered with current jargon. For instance, you can pick up Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* and happily pass a few hours. At the end of it, you come away richer, for you have also picked up some friendly spiritual *gyan* from a fictionalised Shiva.

Shiva, Destroyer Of Evil

"I wanted to write about the philosophy of evil and what better way than to write an adventure with Shiva, the famed Destroyer of Evil Himself, as my hero," says Amish, glee manifesting in his voice on the phone from Mumbai. "I presented the philosophical part and the message of the Vedas as a part of the adventure, so that the reader naturally absorbs it," he adds.

He assures me this tradition of fictionalising mythology is not new. "Ved Vyasa classified the Vedas and wrote the *Mahabharata*, perhaps to present the Vedas in a more reader-friendly manner," he stresses. "So, it was Vyasa who sowed the tradition of storytelling to convey philosophy," he points out.

It's Money All The Way

The formula has gone down well. Westland, his publisher, reveals that Tripathi's books have sold 7,50,000 copies, yielding a whopping Rs 17 crore in revenue. "It equals the budget of a film," says Anushree Banerjee of Westland.

Mythological fiction is the new big money-spinner in the book publishing industry in India and across the world. As sales graphs are pointing north, revenues are running into crores of rupees

finds REENA SINGH

Best-selling MYTHS

That the Indic region has an old oral tradition of storytelling explains why there are so many versions of the *Ramayana* — there's Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas, the *Kamba Ramayanam* of Tamil Nadu and many more across the country, besides at least another 300 versions from Central Asia to Southeast Asia.

Now, the *Ramayana* is being retold from other points of view — from Sita's and Ravana's, for instance. Sita's story is being told by Samhita Arni (Penguin-Zubaan), who describes it "as a speculative-fiction-feminist thriller". In it, you have Kaikeyi in black chifons, cigarette smoke escaping in wisps from her mouth. "It's in a completely contemporary setting," says Samhita.

In the fairly new title *Asura*, that's

steadily climbing up bestseller lists, you have a fresh perspective on Ravana, "the story of the vanquished" from author Anand Neelakantan. It's the classic tale of the underdog, "the loser", and the human foibles that lead up to Ravana's downfall.

A Modern Classic

Says Swarup Nanda of Leadstart and Platinum Press, publishers of *Asura*: "It's a new interpretation of the epic and Neelakantan's version is extraordinary. When we saw the work, we were sure we had our hands on a modern-day classic. We've sold 17,000 copies in three months and have ordered 20,000 more." Neelakantan's fan mail includes emails from students, IIT deans, IAS

officials and professors.

Mythology has always been popular; legions of literature students and serious readers have devoured and dissected Homer's *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* — Greek tales filled with stories of legendary sea voyages and wars. But it was Dan Brown's trailblazers, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels & Demons* that merged fact and fiction to give birth to an exciting new genre — mythological thrillers — replete with adventure, mythology and romance, biblical references and epic journeys.

Thrills That Kill

Did these inspire the three mythological thrillers from Ashwin Sanghi? Sales of *The Rozabal Ling*, *Chanakya's*

Chant and *The Krishna Key* have crossed the three lakh mark already.

The Rozabal Line appears straight out of Dan Brown, but Sanghi says Brown wasn't his inspiration, "but visiting an Islamic shrine, Rozabal in Srinagar was. I had heard the folklore that the person buried underneath was Jesus Christ. Utterly fascinated, I spent a year reading 50 books on this. My wife suggested I try stringing the disparate facts into a coherent whole," he says. It was a gamble that paid off.

The irony is that Ashwin is a hardcore businessman. "Luckily, my grandfather was a voracious reader and would share a book each week with me. He would say Lakshmi was of little value without Saraswati! I struggled for 18 months to find a publisher for the novel and was rejected. I finally self-published it and this led to my being sought out by my present publisher," he says.

Devdutt Pattanaik, who describes

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himself as a mythologist, generally sticks to traditional mythology, but once in a while, tries his hand at fiction, too. He also writes newspaper columns drawing parallels between contemporary business situations and folklore.

In *The Pregnant King* (mythological fiction), he says, "My intention is not to create reality, but to represent thought processes..." When asked to comment on the new trend of popular mythological fiction for this story, he said he had been so besieged by questions on this topic that he didn't want to answer them any more! He was among the first in India to write modern mythological fiction, so should we read something more here — such as, 'perhaps the market is so saturated with mythological fiction that it's time to move on to another new genre'.... ■

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