

Decoding India's No. 1 thrill machine

Author Mukul Deva reveals his plotting methods, early influences and choice of companions for a literary dinner

India's leading thriller author Mukul Deva's latest book, *Assassins*, was released in the US before it was out in India, meaning he's on the cusp of global fame. His greatest hits so far include titles such as *The Dust Will Never Settle*, *And Death Came Calling* and *Saltim Must Die*.

Many of us acquired bad nail-biting habits while page-turning our way through Deva's

delightfully pulpy Lashkar series, which dealt with counterterrorism's unsung heroes. But I really sat up and took notice when I read his more recent Ravinder Gill series. In this he creates rounded heroes — and heroines too — who feel like genuine people. The juxtaposition of Gill's action-packed working days, handling national security matters, with simmering domestic troubles makes for riveting reading. Gill's upper-crust wife Simran isn't all that happy with his choice of career and the pay scale that goes with it. She feels he could have done better in life. Never mind that he's a genuine hero.

Besides, in *The Dust Will Never Settle* it turns out that Gill's main adversary is his estranged first daughter who is planning a terror attack in Delhi. *Assassins*, too, revolves around an attack in the Capital, this time to be committed by an old batchmate of Gill's. The high-stake plots are meticulously built up to give the reader very little breathing space. In short: unputdownable.

Meeting Deva in real life, I initially found him hard to slot. It was at a gathering of scruffy writers in Delhi, where he was the odd one out — dressed to the nines in an expensive business suit. Like James Bond walking into the wrong conference room.

As we get talking, he tells me that his schedule is to write for four hours every day. Each book begins with a two-page story idea, which he expands into a chapterised outline. Then he researches whatever is required. He adds, "I make sure that every technique I describe, which may have potential for misuse, deliberately has some flaws in it. A good example of this is the methods in *And Death Came Calling* that all have slight mistakes in them, so any attempt to use them will backfire quite spectacularly."

His own reading habits were kick-started by Mrs Dignum, his fifth grade teacher, and he read everything he could lay his hands on — initially he was heavily into Enid Blyton and Biggles, but soon the children's books were replaced by the thrillers of James Hadley Chase, Wilbur Smith, Ken Follet and Alistair MacLean.

Alistair MacLean? You do bring him to mind.

Really, Zac? Of course I read Alistair MacLean. I mean, seriously, who didn't, especially in those days. You think I resemble him?

Especially his later books like that one where the Eiffel Tower gets hijacked.

I take that as a compliment, though I dare say, I am better looking (laughs).

Did you have childhood dreams about becoming an action hero?

Actually I never imagined I would join the army. You see, I was a pretty scrawny, bespecta-

cles kid. That happened largely I think because I was a horrible student and dying to get out of school.

So how was your army stint?

I spent over 16 years in the Indian Army, which I finally left as a Major. My military experience gave me insights into terrorism and counter-terror ops, which I am sure you noticed in the Lashkar series. The army was a very exciting time, Zac, but the problem is that if I told you what we did whilst in the army, I would have to take you out and shoot you. We wouldn't want that, would we?

(At this point, I tactically change the subject.) What prompted you to switch careers and start writing thrillers?

I love thrillers and I am aware how hard it is to write them, given the detailing and technical construct required to put a good thriller together. This is also a genre which allows us to examine the complexity of the human mind, emotions and motivations. But when I wrote my first military action thriller, publishers told me that Indians don't write these. I had to remind them that the Mahabharata was written by an Indian, and if that is not a military action thriller, then what is?

The unputdownability: how do you do it?

Hmm... While creating the chapter-wise outline, I see to it that something as unpredictable as possible is happening all the time. Secondly I make sure the characters are as interesting as I can make them, and are always facing some threat, impossible situations and a taut deadline.

And your James Bond-style suits — where do you buy them? You get them specially stitched? Or are they available on Flipkart if I too want one?

Of course I get them stitched... Right here in Delhi. Though some of them I pick from Massimo Dutti.

Since you're dressed to kill, let me ask one last question: Supposing you're going to a literary dinner and could choose who'd be seated at your table, who'd be with you? And what would you drink?

At that last literary supper, I would love to have Lorelei Lee in front of me, Tagore or Shakespeare to my right, and Stephen King or Bhagwati Charan Verma to my left. And drink? Champagne, of course: the best bottle of Bollinger that money can buy. I am of course assuming that the publisher would be paying for it.

ZAC O'YEAH'S latest comic detective novel, *Hari, a Hero for Hire*, was released in October 2015



Action hero Armyman-turned-best-selling-author, Mukul Deva is a sharp dresser who likes his suits stitched **AGREY BHATT**