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Tackling the Topic of Terrorism

It is our belief and that of many of our fellow writers that it is the province, indeed the duty, of artists and writers to mirror, explore, meditate on and reflect the society in which they find themselves. While the subject of terrorism has certainly been a hot topic in the news and in feature articles, in 2005 little had been written about it in the literary fiction genre in Australia.

When we first proposed the idea for a collaborative volume of stories in 2005, we needed to decide on a theme or concept for the collection. Terrorist attacks in Bali and the arrest of Dr Haneef on terrorism charges in Australia were being discussed in various media. This assault on the Australian imagination naturally made us marvel at the public outcry, moving us to note and rue the contrast with the Indian situation. India constantly lives with terror, with some “happening” in some nook or cranny of the nation always making its momentary space on the front page. People agitate but for a brief moment before getting back to their lives in a devastating display of a tired acceptance of this “way” of life (or is it courage?) of which no one in the rest of the world takes notice, possibly because of the very “commonness” of the occurrence .

Talking about Bali gave us grounds for a more thoughtful airing of ideas about Kashmir, Punjab, the Mumbai blasts, this terrorist threat that perennially lurked all over the country. We came to realise that somehow our concerns were similar, that there was something that bound us together.

We felt it was time that some of our most prominent and best known authors, as well as some of our talented emerging writers, were approached to write about

this. We further asked that the stories take an apolitical, non-didactic, basically a no-blame approach.

Authors we approached warmed to the idea immediately. Some of our best known authors responded even though they were already working on books and did not have time to contribute to the anthology – some authors kept promising us a story right up until the deadline. We were delighted by the responses we received from highly respected and award winning authors from Australia and the Indian subcontinent who were consistently supportive; wanting to be an integral part of the project. Contributions came in from authors such as Tom Keneally, David Malouf, Rosie Scott, Susanne Gervay, Gulzar, Sujata Sankranti, Kiran Nagarkar, Salman Rushdie and Neelum Saran Gour; Yasmine Gooneratne agreed to write the Foreword.

It was clear that writers in each of our continents were keen to take up the challenge and tackle the subject with intelligence and insight. It is to their great credit that the authors of stories in this collection have avoided the stereotypes and looked beyond the predictable to create highly original, quality narratives that aspire to give the reader an insight into this current phenomenon.

Bolstered by the strong response, we approached publishers with our book proposal for *Fear Factor: Terror Incognito*. We knew we had something worthy of publication and some months later had a firm offer from Picador India to publish this important collection of cross-cultural narratives. Several Australian publishers showed initial interest and praised the high quality of the stories. Three agreed to consider the manuscript for publication. One came close to publishing but negotiations fell down. Fortunately, Picador Australia, who had already praised the high quality of the stories and the premise behind it, decided to go ahead and publish. The Picador India edition was released in October 2009 and the Picador Australia edition in March 2010.

This now published venture into the world of fiction from the two regions reveals the concern and sense of responsibility on the part of the writers to highlight the inhuman fallout that results from the unleashing of negativities like fear, hatred, greed, anger, bitterness, while not neglecting the common good that simultaneously exists. There is a distinct effort to understand terror, “this training

in the technology of murder”, in the context of the mundane, humdrum background of everyday existence: within the office, the home, the family.

As the stories reveal, there is nothing new about terrorist attacks, they have occurred throughout history in almost every part of the world. Indeed, Malouf’s story “Child’s Play”, where the first person narrative is used to gain imaginative access to the terrorist’s mind, is set in Europe in the 1980s. He told us that he thought he had said everything he wanted to say when he wrote “Child’s Play”. As a novella it was too long to republish in our volume, so Malouf offered to restructure parts of the novella into a short story especially for *Fear Factor Terror Incognito*:

This self-imposed isolation, as of a religious order, has no ideology behind it for which the religious life would be a proper model; it grows out of our work. There is something excessive, comic even, about those nineteenth-century anarchists who thought of themselves as a new breed of monks, above life and its ordinary conditions, abjuring alcohol and women and even denying themselves tobacco. We are workers, technologists; young people of good health, clear of spirit, and with no grudges, no phobias, no sense of personal injustice or injury, none of those psychological or physical defects that are so dear to the hearts of journalists and so comforting to their readers.

Andrew Y.M. Kwong’s story “Snake Business” is set in Communist China in the 1960s. Other stories, like Jeremy Fisher’s “The Liberation Centre”, are not specific about time and place; they could happen at any time in any place, including, sadly, the future where Tabish Khair has set his story “Missing”. These narratives span time and continents to help give further context to these dreadful and senseless acts.

In her Foreword to *Fear Factor Terror Incognito*, Yasmine Gooneratne writes:

This is a collection that hammers out a warning, and the reader would be obtuse who fails to hear and register its message. [...]The writers in the Bharat/Rundle anthology do not offer solutions. Instead, they lead readers along the hidden paths of an unfamiliar psychology to make their own discoveries. [...]In English and in English translation, uttered in many different voices like so many rockets launched from different points of a devastated landscape, there rises from the pages of this

astonishing book the sound that today drowns every other concern in all but the most remote and isolated parts of the earth...

For example, in "Compensation" (Meenakshi Bharat) a woman whose earlier hopes and dreams are blown away by fate finds a way to turn an explosion to her advantage:

The drab joy was shortlived. A loud compartment-shattering roar and she felt herself being thrown atop a lot of people. When she moved her head edgeways, she found she couldn't move her limbs.

Ayee, Ganpati Bappa, I am dead . . .

Much later, much, much later, she heard someone call out her name . . . "Sarla". With effort she opened her eyes and saw her husband kneeling down on her. She tried to pull herself up but couldn't. What was weighing her down? With horror she realized that she was pinned under the bodies of her co-passengers, some of whom she saw every day; most of whom she didn't know. Her husband tried to move them; couldn't. Exhausted, he sat down, waiting for help to come.

This, it would seem, is one of the many negativities let loose by violent, organized acts of terrorism.

In her story "An Eye for an Eye", Sujata Sankranti portrays a shocking terrorist attack and then the aftermath. Her story shows how disillusioned young men are persuaded, cajoled and indoctrinated until worn down by older fanatical warriors. She illustrates how one such young man, Aravindan, is duped into collaborating in an attack on the family with whom he grew up. She also vividly depicts the after-shock for everyone, including Aravindan, and convinces the reader that there are no winners in a terrorist attack:

Everyone knew Aravindan was just a pawn. But they were so shocked, they couldn't think of helping him in any way. Even Bharati Teacher, who had always been his champion and well wisher, hesitated to visit him in the jail. She was aggrieved, beyond words, at the way in which Aravindan had betrayed her trust..

Aravindan didn't go back to his deserted cottage which had been sealed by the police while he was serving his sentence. The townsfolk would never go anywhere near the cottage. It was contaminated and cursed. He found a home for himself in the open air. He lived under an old banyan tree that faced the public park where

children came to play football and cricket. He would eat only if someone was kind enough to give him some food. That too a banana or a piece of coconut. If a crow swooped down to pick at his food he would stare at it. He wouldn't even lift a little finger to shoo it away. It was strange. As though he had lost the very will to move his limbs, leave alone his mind. Bayonet butts, needles and electric shocks seem to have paralysed his mind, which had already been partly blunted at the abandoned sawmill. He wouldn't speak to anyone. Not even a syllable.

Each story has a distinct and authentic voice. The fluidity of the English language, its ability to convey particular times and places and the way in which it absorbs and adapts local flavour and colour, are evident in the way the language is used by the authors in each region. The Indian stories have a pronounced Indian accent with many "Indianisms", words and phrases commonly used in day to day conversation, including local idiom and words and phrases "borrowed" from other languages. Similarly, the Australian stories have an unmistakable Australian accent. In each case the voice and language of the narrative is vivid, evocative and gives the stories authenticity.

In "A Good Riot" by Janhavi Acharekar, the rhythm of language as well as the syntax and vocabulary are unmistakably influenced by the region:

Purushottam recalls his early childhood. Alternating between the crowded, squalid basti of suburban Bombay and the open fringes of Benares that he would visit once a year. Benares is a mela of sights and experiences. Of temples, poojas performed by his mother for his well-being, the Holy River, the ghats, the sadhus, the colours, the mithai, and games with his uncle Laxman. Here he is the centre of attention. His grandmother organized Pooja-paaths and kathas for them – readings from the Ramcharitmanas. His maternal cousins visit him from his mother's native Jaunpur. *Even his father does not beat his mother.*

And in "Small Mercies" by Rosie Scott, the tone, phrasing and style can be easily identified as Australian:

And here she was, all these years later, with Smith and men like him running the country. Rubbing it in was a joy for them – they had been a generation of dull kids, nerds, and they were getting back at the style and exuberance of the sixties. Theirs was the triumph of the grey ones, the nay-sayers, the haters, and their revenge was sweet.

While differences and commonalities are evident in this volume, the thread that connects the writers is that, whether Australian or Indian, they are equally disturbed by this linked assault on humanity. “Put together, [the stories] ... reveal the universality of the phenomenon of modern terror, as well as the universality of the artist’s protest” (Bharat, introduction, Bharat and Rundle, xix).

The authors of the stories in this volume do not strive for a definitive cause for or solution to terrorism but rather seek possible or probable cause and effect by exploring characters and situations that may lead to such outcomes.

Importantly, the authors do not glamourise terrorism or terrorist activities; rather they highlight the devastation, the aftermath not only for the victims but also for the perpetrators, for whom the reality of the act is often extremely far removed from their expectations or vision. These stories emphasise that there are **no** winners in a terrorist attack.

This volume is ground-breaking in that it is the first time a number of prominent and highly respected authors from Australia and the Indian subcontinent have collaborated to produce an anthology of stories that explore the theme of terrorism.

As famous Australian author Frank Hardy once said, in fiction you can tell the truths that must be told and cannot be told any other way. Contributing authors to *Fear Factor Terror Incognito* were asked to portray or express what it means to live in fear of terrorism or even fear of the threat of terrorism. These stories tell the truths that must be told. Each author eschewed stereotypes and sensationalism in favour of the individual and the personal. Each author though disturbed by this assault on humanitarian values that these acts of terror imply tried to understand them even to the extent of getting into the mind of the terrorist in an effort to understand imaginatively the motives behind terror. Nevertheless, the responses are varied, as would be expected from a number of authors willing to approach the theme from all angles taking all its ramifications into account. The acceptance, as against the disbelief of the Australians, is the most significant differentiating feature of the treatment of terror in the writing of the Indian subcontinent.

Working on this manuscript with the authors, translators, book designers, cover designers and publishers on two continents was an immense challenge. It took more than three years to complete the process of contacting authors; interesting publishers in our book proposal; organising translations of stories; collecting all the stories and Foreword; writing an introduction, editing and compiling the anthology; typesetting and proofreading the manuscript; liaising with authors, translators, publishers and the Australian Society of Authors for advice on contractual agreements, and constantly following up on the progress of publishing the volume of stories.

The end result has been extremely gratifying. To see the book published on two continents and to see it being so well received and reviewed in India and Australia is satisfying to say the least. Having edited this volume of stories, we can understand why the literary community is promoting stories from the Australian-Asian region as the future of literature. There will be a strong emphasis on Asian Literature in texts for the Australian Higher School Certificate Exam list.

According to Nury Vittachi, a member of the judging panel of the Australia-Asia Literary Award, Australia's newest and richest literary prize, "The future of our cultural entertainment will be here. We're looking for a new Asia-Pacific flavour, as that is a good pointer to what the new literature will be. There's a huge change coming very fast and this prize is giving a glimpse of that future" (Matt Buchanan, "Malouf's bracelet dazzles on a list of literary treasure", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 November 2008).

As a result of the Indian and Australian editions of *Fear Factor Terror Incognito*, Rundle was invited to speak at universities in Delhi in 2009 and to chair sessions and present at the Indian Association for the Study of Australia (IASA) 2010 Conference in Goa. Bharat and Sankranti toured Sydney and the NSW Central Coast in March 2010 to launch and promote the book and to speak at several literary events, including events at the University of Technology Sydney and the NSW Writers' Centre.

We look forward to more collaborative literary ventures between Australia and India, more stories in which writers will mirror, explore, meditate on and reflect the society in which they find themselves. This volume of stories

addressing the subject of terrorism is but one example of myriad ways in which we can collaborate and learn from one another. It is time to encourage further connections between our two countries, as well as fostering the ties that have already formed. While we can acknowledge and accept our differences, as English-speaking, post-colonial societies, democracies and members of the Commonwealth, it is clear that India and Australia have much in common.

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