

FOR GRAZIA, INDIA - THE COLUMN 'WHAT GETS MY GOAT'

That's easy - literary fiction writers and critics who look down their noses at popular fiction. Now, that precious little band of people really, really get my goat! 'It's just not literature,' they scoff whenever the subject of commercial fiction comes up, quite forgetting that it's the brisk trade in paperbacks which allows publishers to indulge in the high-cost production of abstruse literary books that can only have a minuscule-print run and modest sales.

And why the snottiness anyway? Surely people are free to make their own choices. Authors aren't exactly competing with each other, after all, and readers aren't thinking 'literary?' 'commercial?' when they pick up a book. Most of us read quite eclectically and surely all of us would readily acknowledge that it would be difficult to eat biriyani everyday. If, having gorged on a literary feast heavy with symbolism and laced with allusion, I later fancy the plain dahi-chaawal of an undemanding romance, I expect to be able to wander into a bookshop and find exactly what I need. Not have some literary guru tell me what I should and shouldn't be reading. For heaven's sake, even my parents never dictated what I should read when I was little, even though – looking back now – I realize that those copies of Austen and Dickens strewn carelessly around the house, tripping me up as I wandered past with nose stuck in a Mills & Boon, were probably not accidental.

To clear any possible misconceptions, it's not as if popular fiction writers write badly, or are incapable of tackling difficult themes. Marian Keyes' latest thumping best-seller in the UK ('This Charming Man') is about domestic violence, only packaged up in her characteristically confident and charming blend of romance and comedy. My own new book ('Secrets & Lies') – being touted in Britain as 'chick-lit' – explores, among other things, subjects such as bullying, the tribal behaviour of schoolgirls and the damaging power of past guilt. Not exactly the stuff of rom-coms but try telling that to a lit-fic critic who will refuse to get past the cover.

Even if a book were offering only the lightest of pleasure, unmixed with deep agendas or social issues, SO WHAT, I say with my chin jutting out.

I'm aware I'm now edging into belligerence but don't even get me started on literary prizes! When, oh when will people stop asking me why I haven't yet won the Booker? And why, oh why is that the Booker remains the only prize Indians are bothered about? Granted, we've done rather well out of it, India's list of Booker winners being a long and glittering one. And more power to them. But Indian authors have won other prizes too and why was it that no one stopped to cheer when, for the first time ever, a delightful book set in Vizag ('The Marriage Bureau for Rich People' by Farahad Zama) won the Melissa Nathan prize for romance writing in the UK?

We're snobs, through and through, that's what it is. And there's no snob worse than a literary snob, in my view. I speak as an ex student of literature, who revelled in the prose of Homer and the poetry of Shakespeare back in college. But I'll be damned if I'm not allowed to unfurl my wings and soar literary skies, enjoying the feel of both high winds and low ebbing currents under imagination's wings.

A Grumble in GRAZIA

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It was Ustaad Sultan Khan who put it best, I believe. When asked why he, as an acclaimed classical musician, was stooping to compose and sing for Bollywood, his reply was genuinely baffled. 'But how dull the garden that grows only one sort of flower,' he said.