

### Review of 'Chain of Custody' by Anita Nair

We are historically a nation of literary snobs (blame it on our colonial past), and this comes into sharpest focus in the matter of Indian writing in English. Good, home-grown detective fiction was clearly never going to emerge in such an arcane but arid climate and fans of the genre had no choice for years but to rely on Agatha Christie and turn with considerable relief more recently to PD James, Martina Cole and a slew of excellent Scandinavian crime novels.

Thankfully, in what now seems like an age ago, Indian publishing woke up, blinking, to the glare of astoundingly successful commercial fiction titles when a certain Chetan Bhagat started selling in millions. But to be successful in that genre seemed to stubbornly demand a certain baldness of prose, language broken down to the most simplistic, conversational style and themes that never strayed too far from cheery campus comedies and heart-rending love stories. Nothing wrong with that, seeing how many people seem to relish it, and how many other writers that genre has spawned. But readers like me, longing for quality Indian commercial fiction, have sure had it hard.

Thank goodness then for Anita Nair's determination to turn her hand to as many different kinds of writing as possible. Her first work of detective fiction was 'Cut Like Wound', a book that I must confess to having missed. Fortunately, however, now comes a second Inspector Gowda novel which ignores the gleaming high-rises and corporate offices, diving instead right into the seedy underbelly of Bangalore's crime scene.

This is straightforward genre fiction following all the tropes that detective novels have long claimed as their own. Like Rankin's Inspector Rebus and Robert Galbraith's Cormoran Strike, we get given yet another hard-bitten, depressive cop, difficult to dislike despite his grouchiness and solitariness and adultery. What a relief, though, that he's Indian and not Scottish or Belgian and that we get taken to places so familiar (markets and warehouses and railway stations) and yet so alien, transformed via Nair's imagination to hives throbbing with criminal activity.

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Written by Administrator

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In a nod, perhaps, to Liz Salander, Gowda also has a young female assistant, way too sparky and useful to be called a 'sidekick' and a host of other quirky and likeable cops.

If I have a grouse, it lies not with the characters but with the crimes. While most crime fiction relies heavily on murder to draw its shock-factor from – the more gruesome, the better – Nair takes on the theme of child trafficking. Of course it's a legitimate theme, and one relatively untapped. In the Indian context, however, it takes on an urgency and importance that renders it more serious than material usually considered suitable to detective fiction. The joys of reading a crime novel lie in pitting one's forensic faculties against that of the detective and while Nair crafts a complex narrative involving a lawyer killed in his own home and a businessman devoted to his crippled wife but leading a dangerous double life, these characters are developed on the lines of those that usually people a literary fiction book.

When reading a crime novel, I want not to worry about the victims (reserving this emotional investment usually only for literary fiction characters) but give myself up wholly to the ghoulish pleasures of the genre. Most of all, I want to put aside the book when it is finished and not be haunted by it for days to come.

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