

Fear Factor: Terror Incognito

edited by Meenakshi Bharat & Sharon Rundle (Picador Pan Macmillan Australia)

RRP \$24.99

Reviewed by Hazel Edwards

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A timely book.

After the Sydney launch, with the insightful panel of Indian speakers and Australian contributors, I read *Fear Factor* on my flight home to a Melbourne suburb which has many Indian students attending the nearby university. Despite recent media hype, most are welcomed by their host families, and racial violence is rare which is why this collection is significant. It deals with fear and terrorism, but also the fear of fear.

The stark grey-black cover, with the image of a grenade or is it a 'fear spray', is most effective. This is the same cover used in the earlier released Indian edition. The bio notes are invaluable and indicate the cultural range. So is the 'Fear Syndrome' rationale by the compilers. I decided to read each story first and then look at the author notes.

High profile contributors include Thomas Keneally, Salman Rushdie & David Malouf but often it is the lesser known writers and unusual viewpoints upon terrorism and the associated fear, which have the greatest impact. This variety of viewpoint is the major strength of the collection.

The title concerned me because when I first heard the title said, I thought it was Terra...rather than terror...in other words the land of terror. Also appropriate.

Viewpoints of the fictional characters include an already dead ex-pat Indian woman, the customs official worried about her child's after school 3.30 pick-up time, while processing 'aliens' who parallel refugees or suspected terrorists and the 'fear' and resourcefulness of

a child caught in 'Snake Business' as people smuggling is called. The rationalisation of conscience of the pleasure seeking, hedonistic teacher of English in Thailand is well drawn in Susanne Gervay's 'Days of Thailand'. He doesn't want to think about the 'real' war or impact of terrorism.

Some short stories are extracts from longer novels, and at times, the longer descriptions evoke the Indian settings well, but others need editing. When there is an atypical viewpoint, and names from different cultures, close reading is required. The short satires are more effective in format, especially when sustaining the unconventional viewpoint of a terrorist or the 'burn out' in Rosie Scott's 'Tender Mercies' compassionate helper lost in the administrivia of asylum seekers. Jeremy Fisher's 'The Liberation Centre' was frightening in the juxtaposing of evil with everyday.

The stories are grouped in categories such as 'Betrayed Ideals', 'Under Duress, Ruptures' Estrangement' and Point of No Return.'

'Compensation' by Meenakshi Bharat, juxtaposes the opportunism which Mumbai bombing offers a dissatisfied woman with a banal life. Very tightly characterised and well written satire.

I'm glad I went to the launch. For me it always helps to match the speaker to the writer. Andrew Kwong, the modest doctor who had been a determined boy refugee from mainland China, was most impressive. So was the persistence of the compilers. Maybe on audio, these stories could reach a wider audience, stressing that no-one can be an innocent bystander to the banality of evil?

Or as class sets at upper secondary they could provide discussion for cultural studies. Several of the contributors are YA writers.

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Editor/Publisher Buzz Words
www.buzzwordsmagazine.com

Published 5 April 2010

