

Catharsis and crime fiction

Christoph Ernst talks about how he uses history to fuel his writing, and the art of the crime novel

SHOUMJOIT BANERJEE

German historian and crime fiction author Christoph Ernst brandishes what he calls 'a mastodon cell phone' before settling down to talk to us. A mastodon is a large extinct mammal, so you get the idea how the phone looks. Besides, he has studied history in Hamburg and New York, so you might say he has more than a passing interest in artefacts. "One of the pleasures of being a writer is that one can willfully possess a prehistoric cell phone which effectively obviates unnecessary social chatter," he quips.

The tall 58-year-old, a dead ringer for the late actor Jack Palance, is an accomplished writer who generally shies away from the literary lime-light, his interests range from vintage cars to film noir. Ernst was recently in Pune for a series of creative writing workshops on the craft of crime fiction at the invitation of the Goethe Institut-Max Mueller Bhavan.

The usual suspects

Ernst cites the works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and James Cain, the holy trinity of hard-boiled American crime fiction, as formative influences. "James Cain, especially, has had an indelible influence on me. Mildred Pierce and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* are models to be emulated for any aspiring crime fiction neophyte"

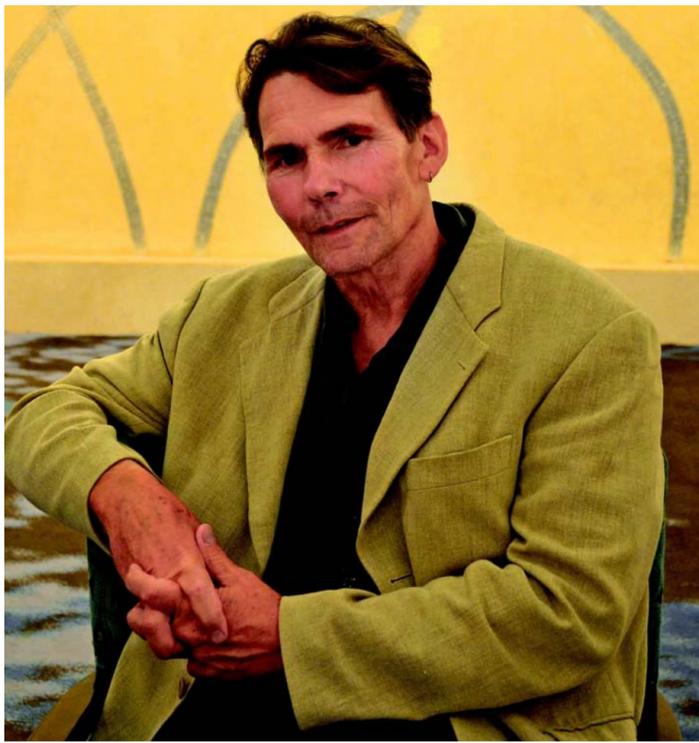
In the last decade or so, lovers of crime fiction have consumed a lapped up Scandinavian crime fiction, including the wildly popular works of Henning Mankell and the late Stieg Larsson. Nordic noir, as it is sometimes called, also spurred a renaissance in the German *Krimi-Roman*.

The resuscitation of German crime fiction began with then first-time writer Andrea Maria Schenkel, whose 2006 novel *The Murder Farm* (*Tannod* in German) sold more than a million copies in Germany alone and was later translated into 20 languages. Schenkel's book, a slice of dark social history, is a slim, 150-pager, which recounts the gruesome axe murder of a family in 1920s Bavaria and opens a window to the bigoted, parochial Catholicism of Southern Germany where Hitler first made his mark.

Like Schenkel, lawyer Ferdinand von Schirach — the grandson of Nazi Youth leader Baldur von Schirach who stood trial in Nuremberg — made waves with *The Collini Case* (*Der Fall Collini*, 2011), a courtroom thriller in which he based a character on his grandfather to investigate the burden of guilt.

The noir lens

For Ernst, the *Krimi-Roman* or crime novel is an ef-



REFLECTING HISTORY: For Christoph Ernst, the crime fiction novel is a prism through which to dissect a country's past. — PHOTO: DIVYA SHARMA

fective and subtle prism through which to dissect and detect a country's past. "My first book was a non-fiction one, which featured a series of interviews with survivors of labour camps, especially the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen in northern Germany. The interviews were a revelatory experience and I married my grounding as a historian to the entertaining genre of crime fiction to tease out the complexities of our turbulent past."

Many innovative German authors have used the genre to deal with the country's guilt-racked past and tackle the dual scars of the Second World War and the legacy of Stalinist Communism. "There's definitely a trend in German crime fiction to employ history to dissect the scars of the past. German crime fiction is certainly more exciting now than it was in the 1980s or 90s, when the stories were much lighter. The *Krimi* today is darker and more meaningful, albeit eschewing complexity at times."

Scars of the past

Ernst, through his 'Jacob Fabian' novels, probes deeper than his hallowed contemporaries, dealing with universal questions such as the immense psychic weight of accumulated time, the elusiveness of justice, and the unreliability of memory in an incisive way.

"The name 'Jacob Fabian' owes its origin to author Erich Kastner. It is taken from the 1932 Weimar-era classic *Fabian*, which explores a crumbling society,"

(Kastner is most famous for his enduring 1929 children's classic *Emil and the Detectives*.)

Ernst says about his creation, "My objective is not merely to create yet another quirky 'private eye' series, but rather use him to probe into the deepest recesses of German history."

In *Ansverus-Fluch* (*Curse of Ansverus*), Fabian stumbles onto the mystery of a murdered man who had discovered the mummified body of a Slav lady, who in turn was murdered nearly 1,000 years ago at the same site where a St. Ansverus was stoned to death in 1066 C.E.

Fabian, along with a pastor, urgently looks up the history and stumbles upon a secret society, the Brotherhood of Ansverus, which still exists and has helped move some Nazi war criminals out of the country as late as 1946.

The novel then goes deeper, back to the days before the First Crusade, and examines the relations between Germany and Russia, the Teutons and Slavs, and obliquely traces the problems when Hitler waged his *rasenkrieg* ('race war') against Stalin's Soviet Union.

"The book operates at multiple levels: as an unobtrusive narrative of relations between Germans and Slavs, and the paring away of the myth of local martyr St. Ansverus, which was deliberately created by a medieval Germanic elite to rally arms with the objective to appropriate more land from the Slavs. You could liken Ansverus to an 11th century Horst Wessel [the Nazi youth

whose death was exploited by the party for political propaganda]."

In Ernst's 2012 novel, *Dunkle Schatten* (*Dark Shadows*), an elderly lady, who goes to reclaim her property expropriated by the Nazis in 1938, is found dead under mysterious circumstances. The story covers a vast swathe in history as its finely-etched characters cope with the ideological ravages of Nazism, East German Communism and even left-wing anti-Semitism. Passages from the book were read out at the recently concluded Pune International Literature Festival, 2016, to wide applause.

Another novel, *Kein Tag für Helden* (*No day for heroes*, 2008), sees Fabian confounded with the success of a celebrity author who is accused of plagiarising the work of a novelist banned by the Nazis in 1938.

With his brilliantly unconventional plots, Ernst's novels hew closer to the British crime fiction tradition than the Nordic one, resembling the masterpieces of Josephine Tey or the best books of Anthony Price, whose David Audley novels often deal with the legacy of a tumultuous past.

Yet, his books have regrettably not found an English publisher. Ernst's books may not be catnip for the commercial market; his novels are grounded in historical research.

But more importantly, they ask tougher questions, questions which his fellow genre authors might shy away from at times.

A is for art

A pair of eyes peer out from the cover of *Eye Spy Indian Art* by Khoda & Pai. The book, which recently bagged the runner-up award for the best printed children's book at the Publishing Next Awards, is a window to India's modern art movement.

Beautifully produced, *Eye Spy* looks at the evolution of modern art history and introduces young readers to prominent artists of that time. "In this book, we highlight elements of art, perspective, size and proportion, and symbolism, through featured works," says Vanita Pai, who co-authored the book with Ritu Khoda, founder of the Artist Foundation. "We bring in conceptual thinking. It is interdisciplinary. It is written for middle school kids who already study Indian history and are old enough for offline and online research," she says. What makes the book unique is not just the amount of research that's gone in, but also the way it



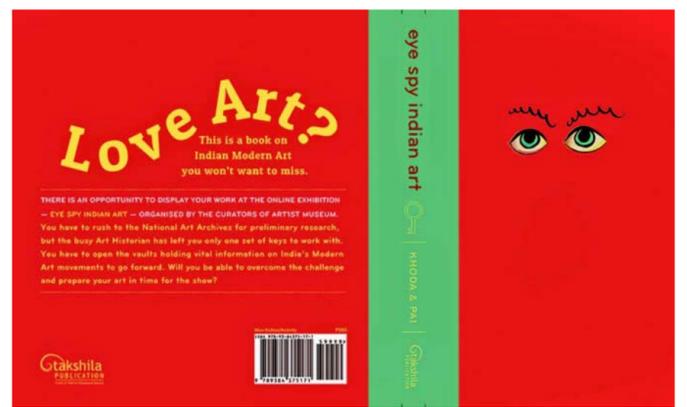
Bijal Vachharajani

has been interpreted through design. Each chapter is crafted thoughtfully; you have to find different keys and guess what art movement you'd be reading about. Pages need to be opened carefully as they reveal hidden information, reproductions of artwork are produced vibrantly, and questions are posed in a manner that encourages children to think, explore, and marvel at the works before them. "Children enjoy tactile activity," says Pai. "So, we build in a great number of flaps, foldouts, stickers, and die cuts, besides drawing and painting exercises."

For instance, to get children to appreciate the quality of line work by Nandal Bose, right atop the painting *Untitled* (*Esraj Players*) is a tracing paper where budding artists can trace the figure of the musician.

In *Untitled* (*The Village Cow*), readers have to flip the transparency sheet on top of the painting to understand how adding or removing strokes can alter an artwork.

And Gulammohammed Sheikh's *Alphabet Stories II* is cut into layers, and as you turn each flap, the writers pose questions about your perception of the painting. Each caption also reveals the material used, the size of the work, and the year in which it was created.



MAKING ART FUN: The books have flaps, foldouts, die cuts and stickers to engage children through tactile activity. — PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Play is the central idea in both their books, *Eye Spy* and *Raza's Bindu: Art Explorations*. "We want our books to be fun," says Pai. "We pushed our designer to go with the final cover of *Eye Spy Indian Art*, which does not carry a title, only die-cut sockets with a pair of eyes peering through. We were convinced kids would love that." Pai says that the minimalist cover became a talking point; one parent wrote to them saying that his child was pretending the cover was a mask.

Designed by Ishan Khosla Design, *Eye Spy Indian Art* has been edited by Meera Kurian. Psychology professor Tanu Shree Singh, the founder of Reading Raccoons on Facebook, helped analyse design elements from a child's perspective.

Deconstructing artists isn't an easy task, but Pai and Khoda are very much up to the challenge, collaborating with experts, wading through tonnes of research, and organising workshops with children.

"We begin work keeping in mind our objectives: generate awareness about Indian art and artists, enhance visual literacy, help develop a language of art in our audience, and this process of discovery should be fun and not a chore," says Pai.

The authors said that their books, so far, have focused on modern Indian art. For the *Art Explorations* series, which focuses on artists, they plan to feature abstract artists Ram Kumar and Ambadas Khobragade in the future. "We have had the privilege to meet [S.H.] Raza and Ramkumarji," says Pai. "India's modern artists witnessed the struggle for Independence and the turbulent aftermath. Their art reflects a search for identity, a return to roots, and evolved accordingly. Their life stories are very inspiring. Raza, as you know, passed recently and this has been our foremost concern. Very few modernists remain and it would be a pity if their art

goes unappreciated by later generations. We started with Raza because his vibrant art greatly appeals to children, and also because when you bring pen to paper, what emerges first is a *bindu*," says Pai.

The series stemmed from a mutual concern shared by the authors that despite learning art in school, most children don't know the names of Indian artists or enough about Indian art. "We decided to make books that would instil a sense of pride and heighten awareness about our rich visual art heritage," says Pai. "So all our work is interlinked. Through our art education programme, we are trying to change the way art is taught in schools, and through our books, we aim to increase art awareness among Indians."

Bijal Vachharajani writes about education for sustainable development, conservation, and food security. She's the former editor of *Time Out* Bengaluru.

FOUR EVENTS YOU SHOULD NOT MISS

1

Gig: Raxon

Electronic artist Raxon, who was judged Best Dubai DJ in 2013 and 2014 by *Time Out Dubai*, will perform in the city tonight. An Egyptian born and raised in the UAE, Raxon's time spent as a resident DJ for Audio Tonic in Dubai has exposed him to a wide variety of sound and quality dance music. Raxon's signature sound is of driving bass-heavy house and techno. In Mumbai, he will be supported by Goan musician Varun Fernandes and K-os Theory. Entry fee before 10.30 p.m. will be Rs. 300 and Rs. 500 thereafter.

Time: 8.30 p.m. onwards
Venue: AntiSocial, Khar West
Phone: 65226324



2

Film screening: Mathilukal

The NCPA-NFAI Flashback Series will screen the 1989 Malayalam film *Mathilukal* (*The Walls*) this evening. The film is based on an autobiographical novella by Kerala writer Basheer and is directed by Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Set in a prison cell in the 1940s, it's a love story between the imprisoned Basheer (Mammootty) and a woman from the neighbouring prison compound. Admission is on a first-come-first-served basis. NCPA members will get preferential seating till 6.20 p.m.

Time: 6.30 p.m.
Venue: Little Theatre, NCPA, Nariman Point
Phone: 66223737



3

Art: Siji Krishnan

Hyderabad-based artist Siji Krishnan's show uses the simplicity of watercolour to great effect. The starting point of this exhibition is *Lullaby*, a series of frames with images of a father on a cot, playing with an infant daughter. These delicate images evoke the vulnerability of all image forms that exist in the deepest layers of our experiential memory. The act of painting becomes a process of extracting forms from a pool of fluid sensations. The show is on till October 29.

Time: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Venue: Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke
Phone: 22023030



4

Exhibition: Textiles of Gujarat

Colour and intricate embroidery dominate the traditional textiles of Gujarat. This exhibition brings you the best of textiles in the form of contemporary and vintage textiles. It includes the everyday *bandhani* and embroidery, to more decorative home accessories. Learn about traditional embroidery like *rabari*, *suf*, *khaarek*, *paako*, *jat* and *mutava*. The show will include two workshops on *rabari* (on September 24) and *appliqué* (September 25) techniques. For more information, visit insider.in

Time: 11 a.m. - 7 p.m.
Venue: Artisans', Kala Ghoda
Phone: 9820145397

