THE STORY OF MY ASSASSINS

TARUN J. TEJPAL

Based on actual events, The Story of my Assassins tells the tale of a journalist who learns that the police have captured five hitmen on their way to kill him. Landing like a bombshell on his comfortable life, just as he’s started a steamy affair with a brilliant woman, the news prompts him to launch an urgent investigation into the lives of his would-be murderers—a ragtag group of street thugs and village waifs—and their mastermind. Who wanted him dead, and why?

But the investigation forces him to reexamine his own life, too—to confront his own complex feelings about the country that crafted his would-be killers, as well as himself, his job, and his treatment of the women in his life.

Part thriller and part erotic romance, full of dark humor and taut suspense, The Story of My Assassins is a piercing literary novel that takes us from the lavish, hedonistic palaces of India’s elite, to its seediest slums. It is a novel of corruption, passion, power and ambition; of extreme poverty and obscene wealth, and it’s gripping from its first sentence:

“The morning I learnt I’d been shot I was sitting in my office on the second floor looking out the big glass windows at the yellow ringlets of a laburnum tree..."
“Deeply humane, raucously funny, dizzy with social and psychological insight! A masterful account of 21st-century ambition, inequality, and power from one of India’s most fearless writers.”
—Katherine Boo, author of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tarun J. Tejpal is a journalist, publisher, novelist, and founder of *Tehelka*, one of India’s leading news magazines that is renowned for its aggressive public interest journalism. He has been named one of India’s most influential people by *The Guardian*, *Businessweek* and *Asiaweek*.

Tejpal famously reported for *Tehelka* on the devastating corruption in India’s defense industry. The investigation cracked the closely guarded bastion of defense manufacturers and agents, and their military and political patrons, including some of the highest officials in the country. It led to the resignation of the defense minister—and to the death threats that inspired *The Story of My Assassins*.

A celebrated literary novelist as well as a journalist, Tejpal has won international critical acclaim. His debut novel, *The Alchemy of Desire*, received rave reviews, from the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Guardian*, and others, and was praised by Nobel Prize winner V.S. Naipaul as “a new and brilliantly original novel from India.” The book also won France’s *Prix Mille Pages* for foreign literary fiction, and Tejpal’s second novel, *The Valley of Masks*, was longlisted for the 2011 Man Asian Literary Prize.

Tejpal’s media enterprises also include book publishing—as the founder of independent publishing house India Ink, Tejpal was responsible for discovering Arundhati Roy and first publishing her Booker Award-winning novel, *The God of Small Things*.

Tarun Tejpal lives in New Delhi.
THE STORY OF MY ASSASSINS

Tarun Tejpal — 2012 Tour Dates

September 24 to 30 – UK
October 1 — Boston University, Boston, MA
October 2 — Politics & Prose, Washington, DC
October 3 — The Strand, New York, NY
October 4 — Asia Society, New York, NY
October 5 — Elliott Bay Book Company, Seattle, WA
October 7 — Book Passage, Corte Madera, CA
October 9 — Books Inc., Berkeley, CA

Praise for The Story of My Assassins

“Without doubt the best Indian book written in English. Driven in turn by stunning prose and a deep empathy with struggling India, this novel makes Aravinda Adiga’s Booker winning novel look dipped in treacle. This magnificent tome will be the India testament for many many years.”
—Binjoo John, author and critic

“Intrepidly conceived and ingeniously executed, The Story of My Assassins casts an intimate, often humorous, but always unflinching, eye at the squalor of modernizing India. Combining a fierce political imagination with a tender solicitude for the losers of history, it sets a new and formidably high standard in Indian writing in English.”
—Pankaj Mishra, author of An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World

“For the awesome story it tells and the stunning impact of its prose this is, quite simply, the best Indian novel in English I have ever read”
—Nayantara Sahgal, author of Rich Like Us

“This book is a must-read…extraordinary for its portrayal of modern society…shatters any illusions we may harbour of being tolerant and just…weaves an extremely powerful plot and tells it skillfully.”
—Businessworld

Praise for The Alchemy of Desire

“A fascinating analysis of 20th century India, a painfully accurate study of a writer in the writerly anguish of trying to write, and an endless Scheherazadian weave of stories-within-stories-within-stories — all in engaging and colourful prose, a literary crazy quilt of love, family, culture, politics and history.”
—Los Angeles Times

“A bold, sensual novel about art, inspiration and the disintegration of a relationship...Tejpal’s writing is unpredictable yet strikingly disciplined, and his explorations of matters physical and spiritual point out often painful truths.”
—Washington Post

“He has a compassionate eye and an instinctive understanding of the underprivileged, the simple and the dispossessed. The wretchedness of ordinary people’s is well caught, the tragedies, the telling detail and the convulsive changes the subcontinent has suffered over the past 60 years”
—The Spectator

“This Indian masterpiece is like a voyage down the Ganges, long and infinitely pleasurable; the only thing that worries you is getting to the end too soon”
—Le Figaro
Q&A with Tarun Tejpal, author of *The Story of My Assassins*

What led you to decide to write a fictionalized version of the events that happened to you after the Tehelka exposé? Why a novel rather than nonfiction?

Well, the novel is about much, much more than just the fall-out of the Tehelka exposé. The obvious factual aspects of the exposé were being dealt with by us in the normal journalistic way. The amazing thing the exposé did for someone like me—a chronic literary animal—is to open up an incredible hinterland of material, as becomes seldom available to writers of fiction: rare insights into the metabolisms of power, the underbelly of India, crime and politics, justice and spirituality.

In fact, as I marinated the teeming themes in my head, the challenge became finding a narrative voice and form that could wrestle down the endless complexities of India, of the material that was swirling inside of me.

No non-fiction could have made it possible to address this wealth of physical, moral, and emotional material. It’s why we still read and write the novel.

How has your career as a journalist and publisher influenced your writing?

Primarily, I’d say by keeping me viscerally connected to the real issues and people of India. I have come to live in terror of writers who write from high, lofty, isolated perches. In my experience they can create fine prose and neatly rounded narratives, but all too often too hollow, with no taste of sweat on them, no stench of the real. Being a journalist at *Tehelka*, more than being a journalist, ensures a rootedness that I have come to believe is priceless for any serious literary novelist.

Where—if anywhere—do you see your book fitting in to the tradition of Indian writing?

It is a crucial break from the old ways of seeing and writing about India—which have been very sanitized and two-dimensional and cut to please a Western palate. In a sense this is the counter-narrative on India: close to the bone and underbelly, gritty, deeply authentic, capturing the incredible polyphony, the multiple fault-lines, and the moral complexity of the subcontinent.

What do you think the future holds for political/activist writing in and about India?

We need much, much more of it. India has a million difficult stories waiting to be told. It awaits a legion of great writers.

“One of the most attractive Indian writers in English of his generation, he writes with a great deal of raw energy, inventively employing images which are at once sad, haunting, horrendously comic and beautiful.”

—*The Times Literary Supplement*
THE STORY OF MY ASSASSINS
by Tarun J. Tejpal
HarperCollins India
Price: Rs 495, Pages: 522

Elsewhere in the opening pages of Tarun Tejpal’s new novel, the narrator’s friend, whose sexual energy is only matched by her social angst, reads out these verses from an Oxford anthology of English poetry: About suffering they were never wrong. / The Old Masters: how well they understood/ Its human position; how it takes place/ While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.

Tejpal defies the moral straitjacket It is her postcoital Auden moment, though she prefers to call the poet by his first name Wystan. That sets her apart from the rest of us who come and go talking of Michelangelo—or reciting Eliot, or quoting Shakespeare. She is telling his “phalloo-foolish” friend, the “peashooter” suffering from the illusion of normalcy, that “the worst horrors take place around us while we go happily about our everyday lives.”

In The Story of My Assassins, we hardly hear the gunshot that shatters the idyll of normalcy and sets the pace of this novel, but we see through the cracks the horrors from where it originates. It is a world where life is nasty, brutal, dispensable. Where power is measured by violence and fear. Where India is a story devoid of the moral certainties that propel those who live by, well, Wystan Hugh. In the pages of Tejpal, it is a story masterly told.

It begins in Lutyens’ Delhi, where the narrator, an investigative journalist with a struggling magazine, wakes up one morning to the news of an assassination attempt on himself. Till now, he has been in a universe of rhythmic familiarity, populated by his family of unbearable banality; his editor and business partner who has the inspirational aura of a newsroom Lincoln; his friend who combines sex and sociology; his guru, “doctor of souls and physician of the practical”; and his surreal financiers whose driveways are marked by big-breasted mermaids.

Suddenly, protected by the state, he becomes part of a larger story with national consequences. He is the victim, the target, and his fate inseparable from the geopolitical destiny of his country. In the courtroom, he comes face to face with his assassins, five of them—Chaaku, Kabir M, Kaaliya, Chini, and Hathoda Tyagi, the leader who is an embodiment of “courage, loyalty and asceticism”. The novel takes wing when Tejpal rewrites the idea of victimhood in an India where the subterranean deceptions of power know no bounds.

[Continued]
As the narrative alternates between the dusklands of the killers and the urban make-believe of the journalist, we witness how the dynamics of domination reduces the distance between the worlds of the wretched and the privileged. *The Story of My Assassins* is powered by the overwhelming humanism of a novelist who defies the moral straitjacket.

As the story meanders through the darkest recesses of India, the killers turn victims and the “targeted” journalist becomes a pawn in a state whose law and justice system mimes the imagination of Kafka. It is the killers’ back stories, set in the brutalised countryside, that bring out the best from the storyteller, a natural at his peak. All of them are shaped to deadly perfection by the conspiracy of ancestry and the attitudes of a society that shows no mercy.

They are more than the artists of knife and hammer; they are antiheroes of detached action, immortalised by police files. Their stories provide some of the finest set pieces in the novel, ranging from ritual maiming to overpowering a King Cobra in the jungles of the North-east to video nights beyond the platforms of New Delhi railway station.

Tejpal is not picnicking in the proverbial Other India; he is not romanticising the essential savagery of the Indian countryside either. And he is too smart a storyteller to succumb to the temptations of biography, even though the narrator is a journalist and the magazine is desperately looking for a backer. The Story of My Assassins is an argument with power, a counter-narrative from someone who has been chosen by the state to sustain a lie. Four years ago, Tejpal wrote in his first novel, *The Alchemy of Desire*: “You had to find your words. You had to find your story.” The words here make the story of India a lot more interesting.

@ Copyright 2011 India Today Group.