

Where's Inspector Ghote?

Vikram Doctor, Mumbai, 22/8/2010

There were two pleasures in reading an Inspector Ghote novel. The first was the charm of abandonment to the ritual of the classic detective story, with its strict format of set-up – murder – clues & confusion – resolution; a tiny vision of order restored to contrast with a real world in which it rarely was. It was, as H.R.F. Keating, Ghote's creator and a notable crime fiction scholar, once wrote, "a temporary map for its readers out of the chaos of their surroundings."

The second pleasure with the Ghote books was that this most British of literary was set in Bombay (definitely not yet Mumbai). Novels set in this city, by Indian or foreign writers, are now common, but Ghote's heyday was in the late '60s and '70s, when Salman Rushdie was still an advertising copywriter and Gregory David Roberts was, by his account, committing the crimes in Australia that caused him to escape to Bombay. Books that mentioned Bombay were either Raj-era melodramas or grim tales of Indian poverty.

Yet these books were neither, but were just enjoyable detective novels, featuring a much put-upon, yet resolute officer of the Bombay Police Force, doing his job in recognizable places, like the zoo where, in *Inspector Ghote Plays a Joker* (1969), he investigates the mysterious killings of flamingoes donated by the American government. It was an audacious enterprise, and part of the ritual of reading Ghote was to shake one's head in wonder and say, "he did all this without ever visiting Bombay!"

It is true that the number of people who can remember doing this must be small and diminishing, because the Ghote novels have not been available in India for years. They are only found in second hand book shops or tucked away in club libraries. Yet Keating, who lives in London, has continued writing new Ghote novels, though he took a break in 2000. In an email interview he says that he took his editor's advice and started writing about English detectives, and that was his focus for several years.

Besides, Keating knew things had changed: "Bombay has changed so much in recent years which is the reason I don't write about Mumbai." This is an indirect admission of the work that went into researching Ghote. Keating has written that he started writing them for both practical and thematic reasons. The practical one was because, having started by writing novels set in England, he found they didn't sell in the lucrative American market. He decided to try somewhere entirely new, and India seemed to be unusual enough.

The thematic reason was his interest in philosophy (Keating's second novel *Zen There Was Murder* (1960) had a Zen Buddhist theme). In the preface to *Inspector Ghote, His Life and Crimes* (1989), he wrote that he wanted to do a book titled *The Perfect Murder* that would be "a commentary upon the problem of perfectionism", and that led to the setting because "one of the few notions I had about India was that things there were apt to be rather imperfect..." At which point, out of nowhere, he received the image of a man who had "a certain naivety, which should enable him to ask the questions about the everyday life around him to which my potential readers might want answers..."

This was Inspector Ghote, or almost. Choosing India was a lucky decision because London was full of people with Indian experience, like Wally Olins, the founder of design firm Wolff Olins, who as a young man in Bombay in the early '60s had run the ad agency that would become today's Ogilvy. "He put me right in one very important thing, the name for my Inspector whom I originally wanted to call Ghose which as a Bengali name would have been entirely wrong," says Keating. (He kept Ghote's feisty wife, Protima, a Bengali, explaining it as a college romance).

Even then, the Ghote book would probably have been a one-off, but unexpectedly, *The Perfect Murder* won the top crime writing award, the Golden Dagger, and that got it an American publisher and decent sales. Keating realized he had a potential series and set about researching it meticulously. Apart from Olins, who he consulted about details, Keating bought Indian newspapers, went to Indian films, read every book he could find on Bombay, including lurid crime novels, and collected street maps. It all went into voluminous folders that were, along with Keating's very professional writing skills, the reason for the authenticity of the books.

Eventually, after about 10 novels, Keating did visit Bombay. Actual exposure was a bit overwhelming: “It took me a while before I started planning my next Ghote,” he admits. But ultimately he feels it made things easier once he had seen the everyday details of Bombay life. He came back a few more times, once to play a bit role in the Merchant-Ivory film of *The Perfect Murder*, and once for a BBC documentary where he met “the head of Crime Branch who was extraordinarily helpful.” The city’s Police force is not entirely flawless in the books, but on the whole, the effect cast by Ghote is so benign that perhaps the Police should have done more to promote the books!

Then again, one can’t quite see Ghote in the world of encounter specialists. Keating, who still reads Mumbai novels and enjoys Vikram Chandra in particular, probably knew this, which could be why, when he ended the series, he discarded all his folders. Yet Ghote wouldn’t leave him. Keating found himself writing on the inspector again, but this time cannily decided to do it as a prequel. *Inspector Ghote’s First Case* (2008) starts in Dadar in 1960 with Assistant Inspector Ghote opening the letter that promotes him to Inspector and transfers him to the Crime Branch.

Sadly, this book, and the next, *A Small Case for Inspector Ghote?*, haven’t come to India. Keating speculates that the style is no longer fashionable, but that can’t be entirely true because in their combination of unusual setting, low key charm and occasionally harried, yet humane detective it resembles nothing so much as the hugely successful Precious Ramotswe books set in Botswana. Alexander McCall Smith, writer of that series, is an admirer, writing that, “The Inspector Ghote books are hard to come by now but are quite exquisite, gentle novels that should find their place on any list of good crime fiction.”

With a recommendation like that, perhaps it is time that, almost half a century since the first Ghote books came out, a new generation of readers brings him home once again.

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