

for sympathy, mini-breaks in other minds; but here, there's only one kind of self to slip into, it's not a particularly interesting one, and very little happens while you're there.

It's preposterous that Schiff should have made herself seem so boring, because this collection often reveals an abrasive comic talent that ought to be allowed to roam

monstrously. In 'http://msjiz/boxx374/mpeg' (the title is a video file name), a young woman reflecting judgementally on her dead father's porn preferences wonders what masturbatory inspiration would be appropriate for the terminally ill: 'Girls of the Herman D. Weiss Center for Radiology and Oncology? Bald Sluts? Barely

Breathing?' I want to read the story suggested by those titles, not the story wryly satirising the kind of woman who imagines them. Writing what you know is a pity when you could be writing much more interesting things that you've made up.

*To order this book from our partner bookshop, Heywood Hill, see page 25.*

NAKUL KRISHNA

## Creative Destruction

### The Association of Small Bombs

By Karan Mahajan

(Chatto & Windus 276pp £12.99)

A small bomb goes off in a Delhi market, but the first lines of *The Association of Small Bombs* do not so much report this event as assume it. The novel uses the bombing as a fulcrum, around which it traces both the backstory and the aftermath. Karan Mahajan, for whom this second novel marks a scaling-up of ambition from the wry middle-class comedy of his first, *Family Planning*, concerns himself in turn with the bomb's victims, survivors and makers. By the novel's bitter, disenchanting end, it is unclear which of his characters falls into which category.

The bomb leaves the Khuranas, a Delhi couple who struggle to combine their liberal attitudes with an instinctive middle-class snobbery, mourning their two small sons. Their sons' slightly older friend survives, carrying the trauma of the bomb into adulthood. The psychosomatic pain in his wrists prevents him from becoming a programmer; he finds himself drawn to an austere, strait-laced Islam. We also get the stories of the bombers, radicalised not by religion but by the daily humiliations and violence to which they are exposed in the densely militarised region of Kashmir, treated by every passing soldier and government official as potential fifth columnists.

Mahajan was born in Connecticut and grew up in New Delhi. He shows a keen sensitivity to political psychology, well aware that oppression is just as likely to make people stupid as saintly, that neither grief nor anger can cure pettiness or lust. He also knows that the terrorist, no less

than his victim, is flesh and blood. Most of all, Mahajan writes in the knowledge that people can find pleasure and meaning in many things: politics, pornography, programming, prayer. Even the making of the fool-proof bomb, that agent of destruction, is in its way a creative endeavour.

In all this, several distinct subcultures are convincingly evoked: those of small towns, middle-class neighbourhoods, law courts and left-wing activism. Mahajan is strongest in the middle-class world of the Khuranas, capturing accurately the flavour of their 1990s English, which remains defiantly its own dialect (people say 'reached' for 'arrived'; T-shirts are 'hep' rather than 'hip'). Indian readers of Mahajan's class and generation will infer exactly the Khuranas' political sympathies from the fact that they read *The Hindu*, *Asian Age* and *Outlook*.

There is something of the audacity of Jonathan Franzen in Mahajan's allusions, confidence and courage. Franzen can count on both a large readership of compatriots and the worldwide reach of American culture. Mahajan – like other novelists working with non-Western settings – must risk daunting his readers with obscure foreign allusions. In fact, many things are left unexplained: readers will wonder, for instance, just what it means that one character has Urmila Matondkar as his pin-up of choice or what it signifies that another studied at BHU rather than LSR College. For once, and it is possible Mahajan takes a mischievous delight in

this, it is Western readers who will have to work hard to make sense of a system of hierarchy more byzantine than their own.

Would that this policy had been more consistently applied. All too often, Mahajan relies on some rather gauche explanations, informing us of the ideology of a political party, the results of a general election or the location and climate of a certain small town. A canny stylist would have found subtler ways of giving us the details we need. The periodic glosses are inelegant, dutiful and poorly integrated into a narrative otherwise willing to trust its readers' intelligence and intuition.

Mahajan's sentences teem with images that range from the precise to the rococo. A canal is described as 'speckled with a thousand ripply eyes of oil, tendrils of overgrown hypochondriac plants thrust deep into the medicinal murk' – a splendid construction that is slightly marred by being allowed to carry on into excess and incoherence. But elsewhere, Mahajan retains his control. One of his terrorists, a visitor from a much smaller mountain town, looks out of his car window onto a Delhi 'baked in exquisite concrete shapes', 'smashed together from pieces of tin and tarpaulin', offering 'no respite from itself'. A woman shrieks at him to move out of the way. 'You move, you witch,' he replies. We are building up to the old cliché of Delhi as a city of boorishness and violence. But Mahajan has something else in mind. 'Invigorated, he lit a cigarette, broadening his shoulders as he brought the light to the Gold Flake hanging from his lips. He had always enjoyed the rudeness of Delhi.' And why not: at its best, Mahajan's prose sings with novelty, sensuousness and empathy, keenly alive to many kinds of pleasure.

*To order this book from our partner bookshop, Heywood Hill, see page 25.*