

House of Horror

A crafty tale succeeds in making a hero out of a villain



FAMILIES AT HOME

by REETI GADEKAR

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■ **By Bunny Suraiya**

In a macabre coincidence linking it to current headlines, the investigation on which this police-whodunnit centres is the murder of the daughter of a Delhi family by the name of Talwar. Who is the murderer? A member of the family? Or a servant? The investigating officer, Additional Joint Commissioner Nikhil Juneja, is in the hot seat, as he is pressurised by the commissioner to close the case fast, and with the minimum amount of embarrassment to an influential family.

Juneja, the estranged scion of a rich industrialist, is a bundle of contradictions: 'A colonial education and a policeman, an Indian and intelligent, 40 and alone'. He is also cynical, corrupt, and power-addicted. And yet, as he struggles to reconcile his westernised upbringing and leisure pursuits with the sordid, sweaty realities of his life as a Delhi policeman ('The future held Indi-Pop, Bollywood, chicken tikka and milky masala tea'), the skill of the writer makes you actually like him, sympathise with his predicaments and laugh along with him as he extracts a savage humour from the situations in which he finds himself and his own, often derailed, thinking processes.

This is no mean feat. To successfully turn the reader's mind in favour of a villain calls for superb craft and empathy, and a keen understanding of the society. Gadekar has a superb ear for dialogue and a gift for discerning the ridiculous in Delhi's social scene. As Juneja roisters up and down the city he loves and hates in equal measure, stalking into homes, lives and families in quest of booze, sex, freebies and, of course, the murderer, the reader goes along with him, fully enjoying the company of this unlikely hero, who makes you befriend him despite yourself. ■