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## 'Delhi Noir,' edited by Hirsh Sawhney

Terry Hong, Special to The Chronicle

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### Delhi noir

Edited by hirsh sawhney

(Akashic books; 300 pages; \$15.95 paperback)

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Whenever my kids start singing "Crazy Kiya Re," still one of their favorite songs after multiple trips to India, I find myself having to leave the room. Since reading the 14-story anthology "Delhi Noir," I can't disassociate the Bollywood hit from the police officer who hums the catchy tune after raping his latest victim a third time in the story "Hissing Cobras," by Nalinaksha Bhattacharya. Bad cops, angry victims, desperate addicts, heartless killers - according to this compilation, Delhi has got them all.

"Delhi Noir," edited by Brooklyn/Delhi commuter Hirsh Sawhney, is the latest in the Akashic Noir Series - published by New York's Akashic Books - which offers city-based collections filled with pulp fiction written by an eclectic mix of those cities' locals. The series debuted in 2004 with "Brooklyn Noir" and has since grown to include dozens of cities around the world, among them San Francisco.

Lift the tourist-ready gloss off most cities and you'll discover the corruption beneath. Amid Delhi's signs of a world-class economy - upscale malls, sprawling subdivisions, luxury import cars - Sawhney writes that "the everyday depravity and anguish of Delhi life remains confined to news copy." Good crime fiction by Delhi dwellers, Sawhney adds, is near impossible to find because "[a]ny insight into their hometown's ugly entrails would threaten their guilt-free gilded existence.

All that death and destruction make for disturbingly entertaining reading - perfect to throw into the beach bag.

Sawhney has gathered writers "willing to see Delhi as it is," dividing their stories into three

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parts mimicking "three popular slogans that are tattooed across the city": "With You, for You, Always," the Delhi police motto; "Youngistan," a spoof of Pepsi ads designed to target India's 200 million young people; and "Walled City, World City," a newspaper campaign urging Delhiites to forget the city's complicated past, riddled with fatal riots and colonial history.

If you're to believe Part I's five stories to be at all representative, you'll be hard pressed to find an uncorrupted cop anywhere. Police power proves more important than upholding any laws in Radhika Jha's "How I Lost My Clothes," although power plays backfire on abusive cops in Ruchir Joshi's "Parking." Citizen justice is sometimes the only answer to keeping order in Irwin Allan Sealy's cleverly plotted "Last In, First Out," while the Bollywood-humming cop meets his match in the above-mentioned "Hissing Cobras."

In such a society, the youth don't fare better in Part II's "Youngistan": an orphan student services bored housewives in Mohan Sikka's "The Railway Aunty," new arrivals are quickly apprised of the violent history of their student lodgings in Siddharth Chowdhury's "Hostel," and hardened children are as conniving as adults in Meera Nair's "Small Fry."

With such an abundance of bad cops and dissolute youth, laws prove irrelevant in Part III. A journalist can't publish his important expose in Sawhney's "Gautam Under a Tree," journalists and aid workers differ on whom to believe in Tabish Khair's "The Scam," easy money corrupts a poor man in Uday Prakash's "The Walls of Delhi."

"Delhi Noir" has no lack of true-to-life characters getting twisted, mangled and discarded. Which is why, like the proverbial train wreck, even as you cringe, you won't be able to look away.

Terry Hong is media arts consultant at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program. E-mail her at [books@sfchronicle.com](mailto:books@sfchronicle.com).

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