

Hardcover: UK

SPECIAL REPORT

Thrillingly conventional

Despite its reliance on common devices of the crime thriller genre, John Verdon's debut novel is a page-turner

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Crime thrillers are like striptease acts. The subject in question begins fully clothed in largely irrelevant trappings, and then these are discarded one by one until the naked truth is finally revealed.

You could even make a direct comparison with pornography, a form whose primary aim is sexual arousal. Critics, and many writers too, have condemned pornography because its intention to arouse sexually is so different from, and often antithetical to, the usual aims of literature — to fascinate, inform, console, give a sense of the marvelous, and so on. It could therefore be argued that the crime thriller's aim of exciting and maybe frightening us is also surplus to what we expect from the best kind of books.

But this would be to ignore what you could call the thriller-element in numerous literary masterpieces. Aristotle even claimed that the essential aim of tragedy was to purge the spectator's emotions through pity and terror.

It's a literary genre, then, with a long history, yet it persists in feeling distinctly contemporary. Still, the modern thriller also has its conventions and traditions. The detective who has his own demons, that nevertheless don't get in the way of those presented by the case he's investigating, is one of them. Another is the detective who, though formally retired, returns to work to solve one last murder mystery. Both these elements are prominent in *Think of a Number*, the first novel by John Verdon, a former US advertising executive.

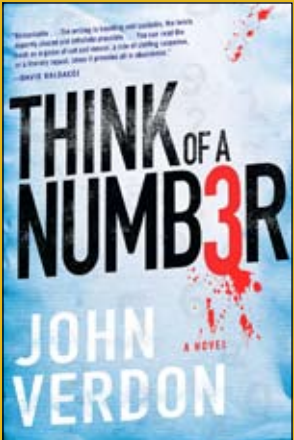
The book's action takes place in the Caskills region of upper New York State, an idyllic bolt-hole where the super-detective has purportedly retired to with his long-suffering wife. Autumn and the onset of a New England winter form the scenic backdrop to the story, with excursions into the far less charming Bronx area of New York, and to Connecticut.

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The story opens with an apparently impossible conundrum. The director of an upmarket New Age therapy center receives two death threats, each of which contains the instruction to think of a number between one and 1,000, and then open an envelope (in the first case contained with the original letter, in the second in his mailbox) and find there, seemingly incredibly, the number he's just thought of.

One of the characteristics of crime fiction generally is that it's ruthlessly materialistic and has no truck with easy solutions such as extra-sensory perception. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes was distinguished by this kind of logical, scientific calculation, as if he was representing the first, wholly materialist, generation after the presumed “death of God.” This makes it even more extraordinary that Conan Doyle himself went on to become a full-time advocate of spiritualism, as if he'd explored materialism to its outer limits and become dissatisfied with it. Holmes is even quoted in this new thriller to the effect that when you've eliminated the impossible you should start to investigate the improbable,

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THINK OF A NUMBER
BY JOHN VERDON
419 PAGES
MICHAEL JOSEPH

however unlikely it appears.

And so it is that the “think of a number” game does eventually get a pair of rational explanations, and just about the only ones imaginable. But a great deal of water passes under Verdon's bridge before that becomes evident.

A sequence of murders soon makes it clear that a serial killer is at work, with motives that initially can only be guessed at. Alcoholism, spooky poems written in red ink, taunting “evidence” left at the scene of the crime to baffle and mock the police, a phone message from the killer that's successfully recorded but leaves the cops none the wiser — all these contribute to a tale that's familiar in its trademark incongruity, but isn't the less gripping for that.

Meanwhile, at home on his gentrified Catskill farmhouse, the half-retired super-sleuth is plagued by memories of the death of his son, killed in a road accident by a hit-and-run drunk driver when out on a walk with his father. Relations with his taciturn but astute wife are frosty at best, a situation that's not improved by a return to work to confront the unexpected local murder.

Reading this undoubted page-turner makes you think that thrillers must be plotted backwards. The author constructs the crime or crimes, then thinks forward to the disconnections and inexplicable features that will be presented to his sleuth when he first arrives on the scene, backed, needless to say, by a posse of unimaginative, and even caricatured, police officers.

Given this scenario, you come to expect the culprit to be the least likely member of the author's assembled cast. This was certainly the way Agatha Christie worked, for example. But these days that, too, has become too predictable — yet I nonetheless fell into the trap by imagining that perhaps the detective's wife was the guilty party. I don't think I'm spoiling anything if I say that I was quickly wrong-footed in this naive solution.

The fundamental reason thrillers of this kind can be so unnerving is that the reader is led to think that perhaps there's a potential serial killer hidden somewhere inside him as well. This is because all manic crime of this sort is perceived as having its roots in some childhood trauma in the killer, and we all have those. So in a strange way you, the reader, are the one being pursued. You become scared as the detective gets closer and closer to solving the mystery because it's maybe you, and not the fictional killer, who he's really after.

Think of a Number is being offered by publisher Michael Joseph as its lead thriller of the year, and its novice author as a major discovery. All I can say about these claims is that this book certainly made sure I had time for thinking about little else while I was reading it. That it will one day be filmed seems a foregone conclusion.



Shelter

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

In Taitung and Pingtung Counties, World Vision has largely avoided controversy with its housing projects.

One reason could be architect Hsieh Ying-chun (謝英俊), who was commissioned by World Vision to build permanent and temporary housing for storm victims.

Hsieh and his team, Atelier-3, specialize in housing for the poor, particularly in rural areas struck by natural disasters.

He is best known for his work in the aftermath of the 921 Earthquake, when he helped the Thao (邵族) tribe, Taiwan's smallest Aboriginal group, rebuild its village at Sun Moon Lake. He has also worked in rural China, most notably with a Qiang tribal village in the aftermath of the Sichuan Earthquake of 2008.

Hsieh originally set out to create housing that was low-cost, easy to assemble and safe. His houses for World Vision in Taitung and Pingtung cost between NT\$750,000 and NT\$1.5 million each and are designed to withstand earthquakes and adverse weather, and were built using local materials, whenever possible.

But Hsieh's projects also stress collaboration and local participation. He prefers to hire community residents to build their own houses and help each other with the construction work.

And to a certain extent, future residents choose what materials to use. For example, one Paiwan Aboriginal village is keeping to tradition by using stone slabs for the walls of their future homes at World Vision's housing project at Majia Farms in Pingtung County.

Hsieh also has some loyal collaborators, among them Kao Chun-kuei (高春貴), a 42-year-old Thao villager from Sun Moon Lake who has worked with Hsieh since the

architect helped him rebuild his home after the 921 Earthquake. Kao now oversees the on-site construction of the 500 homes at Majia Farms.

He is also a devotee of Hsieh's work model, saying “if it's possible, I'll go wherever he goes.”

Hsieh's houses have a simple, quaint appearance with their long slanted roofs, but they also vary in appearance from village to village. Most have wood paneling on the outside, with some painted in colors associated with Aboriginal tribes.

Ling Yu-chia (凌瑜鈞) lives in a temporary housing project in Taitung County's Jinfong Township (金峰鄉) built by Hsieh, and says her community is “very satisfied.” The 37-year-old is among some 100 families in the area waiting for permanent housing organized by World Vision.

Ling says her fellow residents are appreciative of World Vision's willingness to listen to residents' wishes regarding the construction of their future homes.

She says while she likes Hsieh's design, some of her fellow villagers want to pursue other options for permanent housing. World Vision has been listening carefully to their opinions, Ling said.

And for Ling, whose guesthouse was destroyed by Typhoon Morakot, World Vision is already providing something that's just as important as housing: job opportunities. She now works for the group's community center for children and the elderly, and says that a program is underway to help farmers rebuild and switch to organic farming.

Jobs are something that Chung Yi-jui, the Tzu Chi representative, feels that critics of the charity's reconstruction effort and the media are not giving due attention.

“I feel that there are some experts in Taipei who should come down and have contact with disaster victims,” he said.



Top: A housing project in Taitung County sponsored by World Vision Taiwan and built by architect Hsieh Ying-chun.

Above: Tu Yao-shun and his daughter Tu Hsiao-huan, who lost their home to Typhoon Morakot and now live in housing provided by the Tzu Chi Foundation.

PHOTOS: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

“[The storm victims] are working hard every day for their livelihood, but the outside world is not reporting this.”

He points to the Tu family as an example. Typhoon Morakot spared a few hectares of their property, which they have salvaged to create an organic farm for jelly fig fruit, used to make the ubiquitous summer treat *aiyu* jelly (愛玉).

The Tus started selling *aiyu* jelly on their front porch at the Shanlin Great

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— Chung Yi-jui, Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation representative

Love Village last month. Tu Hsiao-huan says business is not quite steady yet — so far they've been making around NT\$5,000 a week.

Others in the neighborhood have also set up makeshift food and drink stands, and Tzu Chi volunteers and Shanlin Great Love Village's community center have tried to help boost business by directing visitors to their houses.

Tzu Chi has also opened up its activity centers in cities across Taiwan to Great Love Village residents to promote their goods, such as specialty foods and handicrafts.

Though the government and aid organizations have launched jobs programs, other potential problems loom on the horizon for Morakot survivors, including the issue of ownership rights.

Those that accept permanent housing own their new houses but not the land on which they sit, which still belongs to the government. And the “owners” cannot sell their houses; they are only allowed to pass them on within their families.

Then there's the murky set of government regulations regarding the storm victims' existing property. For example, if they accept permanent housing from the NGOs and the government, they give up their right to reside on their old land. However, they retain ownership rights and can farm the land.

For now, the Tus are relieved to have settled into a home and are anxious to see their organic jelly fig business grow.

“We can accept this,” Tu Yao-shun said of the Shanlin Great Love Village. “We're a little more at ease now.”

From the front porch, next to his drink stand, he pointed to the freshly planted trees lining the street.

“Once these trees grow bigger, then it will feel like home,” he said.

Softcover: US

The global war on small people

Amitava Kumar tells the story of innocent, insignificant folks entangled in the war on terror

BY DWIGHT GARNER

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

In Graham Greene's 1940 novel, *The Power and the Glory*, the unnamed protagonist, a “whisky priest,” utters the book's most resonant line. “Hate,” the priest says, “was just a failure of imagination.”

Amitava Kumar, a professor of English at Vassar College, picks up that sentence and runs quite far with it in *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Bomb*, his perceptive and soulful — if at times academic — meditation on the global war on terror and its cultural and human repercussions.

Kumar's book isn't especially long, but it is a many-tentacled beast. In part it's a deft survey of post-9/11 art, from its fiction and nonfiction (Kumar appears to have read everything) to its foreign films and obscure works of performance art.

At its heart, however, *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Bomb* — the excellent title is a riff on the title of Edmond Jabes' 1993 book, *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Book* — is about the ordinary men and women, brown-skinned in general and Muslim in particular, who have had their lives upended by America's enraged security apparatus. Kumar calls them the “small people,” and to them he extends his own impressive and trembling moral imagination.

Kumar — a Hindu married to a Pakistani Muslim — opens his book with a stunning image, a complicated moment he fights to see clearly through his own

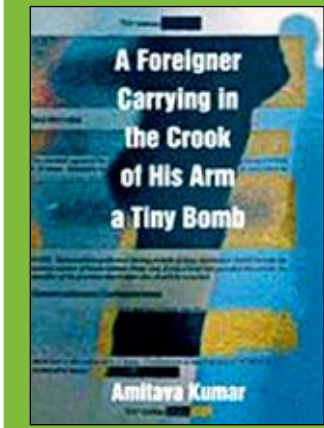
repulsion. He is watching a British television documentary about the spectacular 2008 terrorist attacks on various locations in Mumbai. Indian authorities managed to tape a telephone call between a young terrorist and his handler (“the voice of pure evil”) back in Pakistan, and the documentary allows Kumar to listen in.

“That saves me from the annihilating hatred, if only for a moment, is the voice of the terrorist on the other end,” Kumar writes. “When being urged to quickly set fire to the curtains and carpets in the opulent Taj Hotel, he is more interested in describing to his superior the rooms that he says are large and lavish. It's amazing, he says, the windows are huge here.” The young man has never seen flat-screen plasma television sets, so he tells his handler about the huge computers on the walls.

“Rightly or wrongly, I'm caught by the drama of the displaced provincial, the impoverished youth finding himself in the house of wealth,” Kumar continues. “He is using terrible violence to set fire to this palace of dreams but he is in a daze: a murderous thug who is a figure in the invisible machinations of people and plans that are larger than anything he can imagine.”

Kumar writes about many such men in this book, most of whom aren't terrorists at all but burglars and fools who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, or were, quite arguably, the hapless victims of entrapment. Kumar doesn't deny that there are bad men in the fundamentalist Islamic world, men worthy of the American military's

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A FOREIGNER CARRYING IN THE CROOK OF HIS ARM A TINY BOMB
BY AMITAVA KUMAR
217 PAGES
DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

attention. The problem is that we seem to be filling prisons with very minor characters.

He describes one man, imprisoned at Guantanamo, who was a cook's assistant for Taliban forces in Afghanistan. Kumar quotes one observer's bitterly funny observation: “OK. We have the assistant cook. Where is Mr Big? Where is the cook?”

One case Kumar pays close attention to is that of Hemant Lakhani, an elderly and somewhat delusional Indian-born British clothing merchant arrested after ostensibly delivering a shoulder-

to-air missile to an FBI informant in an Elizabeth, New Jersey, hotel room. The problem, Kumar writes, is that it wasn't Lakhani's idea to sell missiles.

He could never have produced one himself. The FBI found him an arms dealer, gave him the money to purchase the thing and took it to the hotel. The real argument against Lakhani, Kumar adds, seemed to be that “he had the immoral nature of someone who might be a terrorist.” Kumar likens this sad man to Willy Loman and writes about Lakhani's hatred of America: “Doesn't that hate also spring from a species of failure, a failure in which the United States is seen as having a hand?”

There are many small, tart observations in *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Bomb*. Kumar is particularly good on the literature that has emerged from America's recent adventures in the Middle East. He describes the Islamic terrorists in the work of novelists like Martin Amis and John Updike as “unreal and wholly unconvincing.”

The unpalatable truths in Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead*, a memoir of the Persian Gulf war, make that book more important and eye-opening, he writes, “than anything written by the likes of Noam Chomsky and the rest of the admirable antiwar brigade.”

Kumar's book is eccentric, and thus human, on multiple levels. While visiting Lakhani at a prison in Springfield, Missouri, he winds up one evening at a strip club called Teasers. When a dancer

asks what brought him to town, he tells her. She replies, “That's not cool.” She changes the subject by asking him a question he finds oddly inspirational: “So, how was your Fourth of July?”

At times this book is stiff and awkward, as if poorly translated. Kumar, writing from the left, is relentless in his critique of America's post-9/11 behavior, and his book will anger those who believe that the war on terror's collateral damage has been minimal or largely unavoidable. Kumar stacks his deck but only in the way an anti-death penalty debater would necessarily linger on the innocent people who have been executed.

Kumar returns again and again to his small people and his bunglers. He suggests that America, unaware of the image it is projecting in the Muslim world, has been the biggest bungler of all. He quotes the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, who asked us to understand “why millions of people in poor countries that have been pushed to one side, and deprived of the right to decide their own histories, feel such anger at America.”

A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Bomb carries in the crook of its own arm Kumar's plaintive appeal. If we're to bridge the perilous divide that separates us from those poor and unnamed people who resent us, we first need to see them, to look into their eyes. We need, Kumar writes, “to acknowledge that they exist.” This angry and artful book is a first step.