

Scent Of A Game by Raghav Chandra is truly an unusual thriller. In fact I wouldn't be surprised if it was the first one of its kind – a thriller set in the world of wildlife conservation. And Raghav Chandra, the author whose bio reveals him to be a keen observer of the tiger reserves of Central India has done a commendable job of opening up this hitherto unexplored territory in fiction.

By a strange coincidence I started reading the novel on The World Tiger Day and very soon I felt my heart sinking. The Save the Tiger campaign seemed that much more relevant as Raghav Chandra shows us that the true beast lurking in the forest is corporate greed and the human ego. And as long that is not going to be dealt with, tigers will be hunted down to extinction.

The novel begins with Ramachandra Prasad an NRI techie, trying to sell a tiger skin to a tout called Jugnu outside a *chai* shop somewhere in Jabalpur. Ram, the protagonist has inherited the skin after his father's death. However he has been entrusted to hand it over to the Conservation Department.

At the Forest Research Institute, he is unable to meet with the people concerned. Instead he meets Jugnu and thereafter almost as if through a cosmic pattern, Ram's life and circumstances change. From a highflying techie in a corporation in Silicon Valley owned by two Indians, he is shunted into jail for no fault of his. He is rescued by Feroze Goenka, whose business interests include making available tigers for tiger cloning farms in China. And there is the most mysterious Darbar or His Highness Abhimanyu Pratap Singh erstwhile Maharaja of Baikunthpur, wild life conservationist, epicure and a man of many parts. Except that one of these parts is in total contradiction to the man he portrays himself to be.

Then there is the alluring Sherry Pinto a vivacious investigative



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journalist with a pet mongoose and a love for wild life and the admirable Ganga, the forest officer. And finally there is Burree Madaa, a tigress who mysteriously disappears from Kanha tiger Reserve. Together all of them ensure *Scent Of A Game* makes a fast paced read where Ram, Ganga and Sherry have to combat an international poaching mafia that extends from Central India to Burma to China and beyond.

There are many admirable things about the novel. The premise itself is exciting, and as someone associated with wild life conservation the subject is of great interest to me. It is also obvious that the author is in full control of the detailing of various aspects of conservation and poaching. Several interesting nuggets of information come our way from thuggee practices to details of tribes in the region to the little known fact that Vyaghra is tiger in Sanskrit.

However, where the novel suffers is in the actual plotting and characterization. Except for Ganga and Jugnu with complexities that make them seem more real than two dimensional, all others lack in a certain textural value. In fact, even if Ram may be the protagonist of *Scent Of A Game*, it is Ganga and Jugnu who leave a lasting impression. And it is this that makes me think that what this book sorely needed was an editor who could have nudged the best out of this talented author and helped with the crafting to ensure that the flabby bits and irrelevant details were left out. The author is at his best when he gets to the actual description of action especially when it has to do with forests and wild life. Sample this: "He stooped to dilate the chital's eyes with his fingers. The luminosity had long since vanished; the eye fluids had dried as rigor mortis set in.

'This chital was killed at least twenty-four hours ago,' Ganga commented diagnostically, recalling with regret that though he had thought of a search, he had not insisted for it earlier.

'Possible,' Ganga looked down at the carcass with revulsion. His eyes fell on the battered rear end. 'Look these claw marks. The skin here has been ruptured with powerful claws. Tigers start from the rump...'

'If Burree Maada was poisoned, the hunters obviously tracked her for some time,' conjectured Karela. 'No city person would have that much time or patience. It was probably the Gonds.'

'No,' Ganga was emphatic, 'Primitive tribes like the Baigas and even the Gonds do not kill tigers unless it is a matter of survival. They have a symbolic relationship with them. Haven't you observed their paintings?'

Mint Chandran

'But Sir, why would the hunters leave the antlers?' Mango asked.
Nevertheless *Scent Of A Game* represents an interesting addition to the rapidly growing thriller genre in Indian English writing and I would be interested to see what emerges next from Raghav Chandra.

Anita Nair

