

The Case of the Missing Servant

By Tarquin Hall
(Hutchinson)

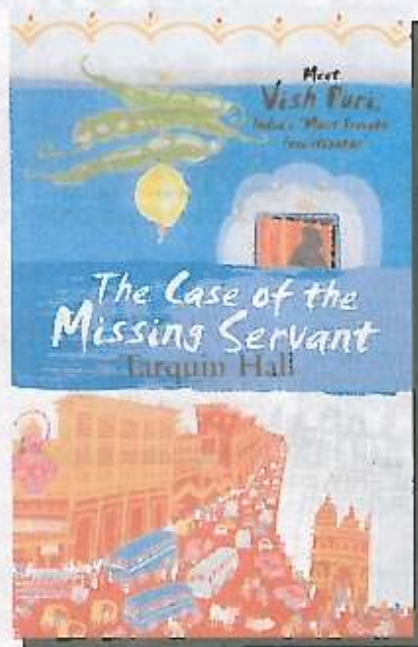
THIS INTRIGUING book is in essence a modern Indian take on the adventures of Agatha Christie's famous detective Hercule Poirot. In its pages we encounter Vish Puri, a private detective investigating a murder case in a society marked by inequality of wealth and the clash between traditional and western values

The detective certainly bears resemblance to his understated Belgian colleague: Puri prefers to remain very much in the background, using his analytical skills to solve problems, coupled with his talent to read people and of course his team of loyal employees.

The vibrancy and the vastness of the Indian sub-continent, combined with the appeal of a solid thriller, certainly raise curiosity.

When Puri is called to shed light on the disappearance of a servant girl, who is soon discovered murdered, he must draw on all his resources – especially as the likely culprit turns out to be a high-ranking official.

Supported by his team, they immerse themselves in the household, following different avenues that will eventually lead to the murderer as well as the true motives that



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remain hidden until the last page.

Puri is a classic chameleon, able to navigate his way around all situations, communicating and extracting the information he needs from people of all walks of life. The detective unearths family secrets, gets deep insights into the accused family's relationship with their servants, and peels away, layer by layer, the persona the accused and his family present to society.

The discrepancy between the lifestyle of the rich – with their domestic staff, expensive golf clubs and mod cons – and the often abusive lives of their servants creates an interesting backdrop for this crime story. And it's one that covers a huge territory, attempting to give an answer for every question that's been posed by the changes to Indian life in the modern era.

However, the characters and settings remain strangely lifeless and one-dimensional, which unfortunately shifts the otherwise cleverly constructed plot more towards a comic strip than a novel – something further underlined by the sometimes didactic tone, and the pet names Puri gives his employees. It's a shame that the richness of the culture and setting is not explored with more depth.



Isabel Roleff has written articles and reviews for various magazines in her native Germany. More information about her work can be found at irishwritersexchange.com