

BOOKS & IDEAS

1,15,000



The number of e-books Stieg Larsson's millennium trilogy sold on December 25 & 26. *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* was Amazon's largest selling e-book on Christmas.

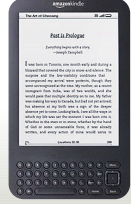
KIM'S BOOTY FOR THE KIDS

In the news for her wondrous derriere, Kim Kardashian could soon become an icon for children aged 9-11, thanks to the forthcoming Orion title, *The Kardashians: A Crazy Life*. Filled with photos, the book will deconstruct the fame enjoyed by Kim and her sisters Kourtney and Khloe.



KINDLE 3G BEATS POTTER IN AMAZON SALES

Sales of Kindle 3 on Amazon have overtaken that of *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows*, released in July 2007. That had seen one million pre-orders online, and has sold more than 40 million copies



MEDITATIONS OVER SINGLE MALT

Khushwant Singh's tale of three elderly men bonding over salacious stories and a transforming nation

KHUSHWANT SINGH'S most recent and — by his own declaration — last novel, *The Sunset Club*, ends with the Persian phrase *tamam shud* (It is done). There is another volume on my shelf that ends with the same phrase — Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*. And this is probably not just a coincidence.

On the face of it the work of both writers seems like a paean to wine, women and song. But scratch the surface and layers begin to reveal themselves; under the hedonistic veneer lie poetic insights, philosophical pronouncements, and an intellectual debate with life, death and God.

The club is made of three old men who meet every evening on a bench facing the *bara gombad* of Delhi's famed Lodi Gardens. The first is a Hindu, Pandit Preetam Sharma, a long retired bachelor bureaucrat who lives with his unmarried sister in a flat near Khan Market; the second is a Muslim, Nawab Barkatullah Baig Dehlavi, who lives in modern-day Mughal splendour in Nizamuddin, complete with *kebabs*, *phirni*, *begum* and *khidmatgars*; and the third is the bawdy Sikh, Boota Singh, obsessed with sex, alcohol and bodily functions. With his dyed beard, his soft cap instead of a full turban, his early years in England and work in the Indian diplomatic missions, his journalistic years, his love of Urdu poetry, his single malt with soda and ice, and the ambiguous alchemy of his personality — that of an agnostic Sikh icon — Boota Singh is roughly modelled on the author himself, or on his self-created image.

If there is any doubt it is removed by Boota's evening routine: "Though he lives alone, he is never lonely; he has a constant stream of ladies visiting him in the evening, when he opens his bar. He is a great talker and a windbag. He makes up salacious stories of his conquests, which keep his audience spellbound. He uses bad language as if it was his birthright.

When he is tired of company, he simply says, 'Now bugger off'."

Khushwant Singh takes us assuredly through one year in the lives of these three men, their meetings, conversations and debates. Each brings to the club his predilections, prejudices and passions — all expressed with such forthrightness that at times the narrative becomes a pungent

By Navtej Sarna

commentary on multi-religious India as the friends debate issues like the Babri Masjid, Godhra, anti-Sikh riots, caste and rising religious fundamentalism.

This is accompanied by their commentary and reactions to everything of significance that the newspapers report during that one year — bigamy, corruption, the Nano, shoe-hurling, court verdicts on sodomy, criminality and elections, the deaths of Norman Borlaug and YSR Reddy: in fact, it's a

passing show of modern India itself. These debates are enlivened with details of each man's days, his fears, his fantasies and his memories, particularly memories of sexual encounters that Baig and Boota trade in salacious detail when not in the more sanctimonious presence of Pandit Sharma.

All this is hugely entertaining but for me the novel is stitched together by Khushwant Singh's knowledgeable and poetic meditations on the changing seasons of



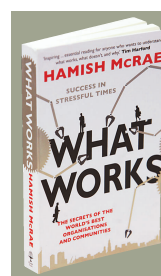
Delhi with each passing month. End January is the "time of flowers and the calling of barbets," in March "peepals, neems, kosams and many others denude themselves to don new garments," the laburnums in May are "a mass of canary gold dripping down like bunches of Kandahar grapes," the scorching month of June brings a wealth of mangoes, and in July "stormy moisture-laden winds shake trees and send their branches swirling like dancing dervishes ... peacocks fan out their tails, their wings palpitate with lust, they strut around their chosen peahens, raise their heads to the sky and scream *paon, paon*."

WITH SIMILAR delicate touches this true lover or Delhi goes on to describe the cool blue skies of October, the migrating birds and the coming of the foggy, bone-chilling winter. Snippets of poetry from Ghalib, Mir, Guru Nanak, Kalidas and other Sanskrit poets heighten the elegiac effect as the seasons pass and fade.

With its controlled structure and fluid language, *The Sunset Club* is a novel that any writer in the prime of his life would be proud of. Coming as it does from a 96-year-old, it is a true *tour de force*. And if it does pronounce *tamam shud* (which, frankly, I don't believe) on the writer's literary output, it would be a fitting last word.

— Sarna is India's ambassador to Israel and author of *The Exile*

life's brighter side for our own good



WHAT WORKS: SUCCESS IN STRESSFUL TIMES; The Secrets of the World's Best Organisations and Communities
HAMISH MCRAE
HARPERPRESS;
₹499
★★★★★

collective human endeavour of organisations and communities works wonders — in good and bad times.

The examples range from how a town like Edinburgh came to host

one of the biggest arts festivals of its kind in the world; how excellent traffic management has made Copenhagen a car-free paradise; how Harvard has become the world's top university; how mobile phones have dramatically changed the face of the African continent; how gambling — believe it or not! — has helped extend the life spans of residents of Hong Kong; how Zurich has been able to build the best drug rehabilitation centres; how Tokyo has become the safest megapolis on the planet; and how Australia managed to train some of the world's best sportspersons.

Readers in India will find two sections of the book particularly interesting. The first is on how life is amazingly well organised in Mumbai's Dharavi, Asia's biggest and the "world's best" slum, which the author says is much more than what was depicted in the film, *Slumdog Millionaire*. The second section is on Bangalore, on how the country's high-tech capital was able to convert its disadvantages into triumph. This section is relatively superficial in comparison to the one on Dharavi, based as it largely is on anecdotal evidence.

Incorrigible optimist that he

appears to be, more often than not, the author argues that none of his stories is a tale of perfection. At the same time, he claims that there are powerful common messages in his accounts that hold good for all of humankind, transcending barriers of class, nation, region and religion — to name just a few ways in which societies and communities divide themselves. He does, however, sound a bit starry-eyed when he states right upfront: "By any rational calculation the world is better placed now to make good choices about the future of our species and our planet."

There is much that is happening around us that would make one temper such exuberance with a large dose of realism. McRae reposes much faith in the magic of the marketplace. But because the impact of the recession is still not over, one remains sceptical of the ability of Western-style capitalism to sort out problems faced by the developing world. A racy read for those who prefer to ignore all that is unpleasant. Pessimism paralyses, writes the author — turn instead towards the brighter side of things.

— The reviewer is an independent journalist and educator