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Book Reviews: Popular Books Section



...ENGROSSING Sharma's Lucky Thirteen gets reviewed in our thirteenth issue! Thirteen is surely lucky for Sharma and Rajan, the protagonist of his novella, but alas it doesn't prove as lucky to this reviewer. His hard disk goes crashing as he begins compiling his thirteenth issue...

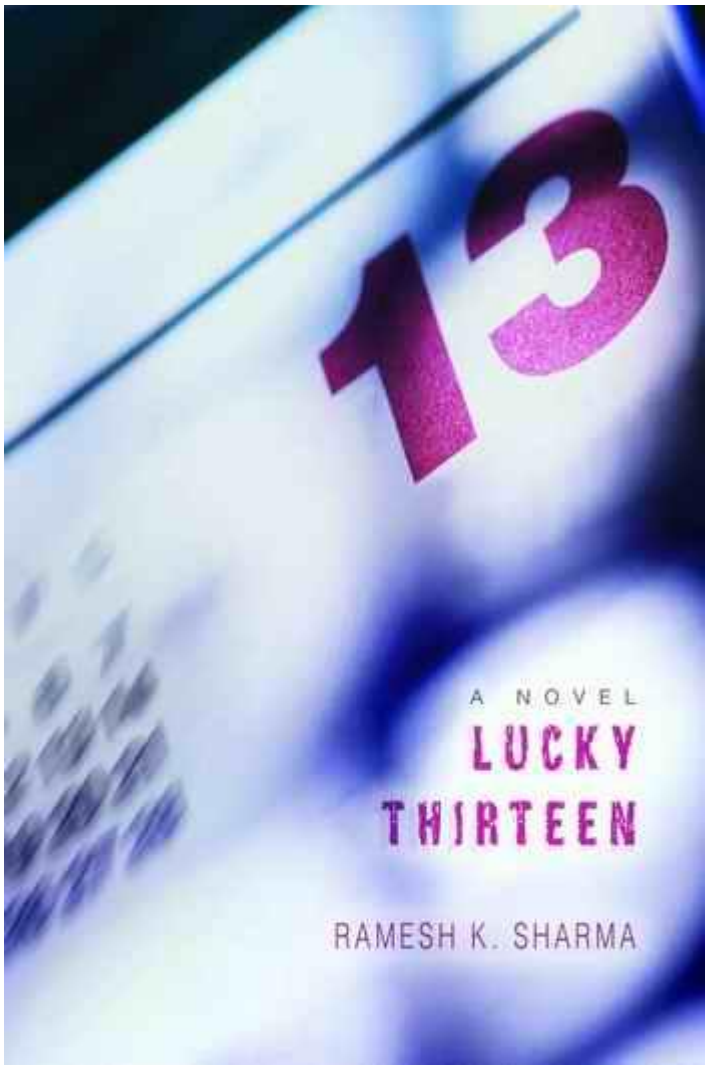
Lucky Thirteen *by* Ramesh K. Sharma. Paperback, 6" x 9".

iUniverse, 2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100, Lincoln, NE 68512. . , , , . Publication Date July 2006. 52 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0-595-39789-1 (pbk), ISBN-13: 978-0-595-84197-4 (ebk), ISBN-10: 0-595-39789-1 (pbk), ISBN-10: 0-595-84197-X (ebk). Price $8.95. Category: Fiction

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Triskaidekaphobia! The fear of 13! Many of us suffer from this fear. There is also a specific fear of Friday the 13th, known variously as *paraskavedekatriaphobia*, *paraskevidekatriaphobia* or *friggatriskaidekaphobia*.

Ramesh K. Sharma



Dr Ramesh K. Sharma is a Forensic pathologist teaching at All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. In his professional life, he has observed so many diverse aspects of human emotions ranging from beauty, love, passion, hatred to horror. He has tried to put them in words through his fiction.

Dr. Sharma is a prolific writer of serious literature too. He has written three technical books related to his specialty - Legal aspects of patient care (Modern Publishers, 2000), Concise

textbook of Forensic Medicine and toxicology (Elsevier, 2005) and MCQs in Forensic Medicine and Toxicology with explanatory answers (JayPee, 2006). In addition, he runs a highly successful journal of forensic medicine and toxicology at http://medicolegalupdate.org/

How did these fears begin in the first place? There is no unanimity among experts but it is believed widely that it is due to the fact that there were 13 people at the Last Supper of Jesus (Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, was the 13th to sit at the table). It is said if 13 people sit down to dinner together, all will die within the year. According to one version, the first to rise from such a dinner would die first and so on. Several mass murderers have 13 letters in their names: Albert De Salvo, Charles Manson, Jack the Ripper, Jeffrey Dahmer and Theodore Bundy to name a few (thankfully my name - Anil Aggrawal - just misses the unlucky number!). Ramesh K. Sharma - the author of this book - of course has no problems with 13. Count its letters if you don't believe me. I am sure Sharma, whose true name is Ramesh Kumar Sharma, abbreviated his name on purpose to get to 13, his lucky number. In this way, Sharma echoes the beliefs of the ancient Chinese and Egyptians (in the time of the pharaohs) who were among the ones who regarded the number as lucky.

John Roach writing for the National Geographic News believes that the phobia is rooted in ancient history. Among other things, he claims that $800 to $900 million are lost each Friday the 13th as a result of people avoiding travel, wedding plans, moving, and so on.

According to one view, the early man counted by his fingers and thus could count only up to 10. If he had to count bigger numbers he could use his two feet and could count up to 12. There was no way to count beyond that. The next number 13 was thus an impenetrable mystery and hence an object of superstition. This theory of course fails to explain why the primitive man forgot to count beyond 12 by say, his hands, ears, or may be nose.

View this book on Amazon

According to yet another view, the fear of 13 may be related to Norse mythology, which tells how the god Odin invited eleven of his closest friends to a dinner party at his home in Valhalla, only to have his party gate-crashed by Loki, the god of evil and turmoil, thus giving a total of 13 people. The legend further relates how Balder, one of the most beloved gods, tried to throw Loki out of the party, resulting in a scuffle and ultimately Balder's death with a mistletoe-tipped arrow.

...The story has all the trappings of a gripping crime fiction. There are fake kidnappings, money laundering, dead bodies, secret burials, exhumations - even postmortems...

According to numerologists, 13 is an unlucky number because it exceeds the so called "complete number" 12 by 1 and is thus inauspicious. The number 12 is considered "complete" for a number of reasons. It is a highly composite number (a highly composite number is a positive integer which has more divisors than any positive integer below it). There are 12 months in a year, 12 signs of the Zodiac, 12 gods of Olympus, 12 labors of Hercules, 12 tribes of Israel, and 12 apostles of Jesus. If you exceed such a good number by one, you surely are treading on an unlucky number. When a group of 13 objects is divided into two, three, four or six equal groups, there is always one leftover object.

Interestingly the question whether 13 is unlucky or not has come even before Supreme court of India. This cutting is from a leading Indian daily *Hindustan Times* of November 21, 2006, page 11 (Click picture to enlarge and read).



SC to decide if number 13 is unlucky

The number 13 appears in a number of places associated with bad luck. There are 13 witches in a coven. Many Christians believe that Cain slew Abel on Friday the 13th. The Turks so disliked the number 13 that it was practically expunged from their vocabulary. The fear of 13 is so bad in some places that hotels, inns and hospitals refuse to have a room number 13 - they just have room no. 14 after 12; some even miss the 13th floor, having a 14th floor after the 12th (to be sure, this may create confusion because 14th floor is actually the thirteenth. Higher floors would similarly be wrongly numbered. To avoid confusion 13th floor or room are often numbered 12b). The lifts in such buildings do not have a button numbered 13. Many cities do not have a 13th Street or a 13th Avenue. Airports routinely leave out Gate 13, and airplanes don't have 13th seating rows. When Indian Airlines Flight IC 814 was hijacked from Kathmandu to Kandahar (on December 24, 1999), many saw the role of unlucky 13 in it (8+1+4=13).

Does it come as a surprise then, that one of the most controversial of all medical papers was written by 13 authors! It was a paper published in the prestigious journal *The Lancet* on February 28, 1998, stating that the MMR vaccine was associated with autism in children.[1] So much controversy did it generate that the paper was partially retracted six years later.[2]

Many believe that if after the successful Apollo 11 and 12 flights to the moon, NASA had numbered the next flight as Apollo 14, it would not been doomed as Apollo 13 was. To cap it all, the case whether the number 13 is really unlucky or not, has even come before Supreme Court of India (see newspaper cutting from a leading Indian newspaper on the left)

Sharma of course does not believe in all this b*** s*** and considers 13 as his lucky number. He - in other words - is a triskaidekaphiliac, the one who loves the number thirteen. He wrote the book under review based on this belief. Sharma was kind enough to send me a complimentary copy (an Ebook version) and I read it off my computer screen in one go. Although I didn't believe so at the time of starting the book, the book is truly spellbinding.

Famous technical papers on the fear of number 13

You may be surprised to know that even scientists have been intrigued by the number 13 and have conducted serious research on this number. Their findings have been published in serious technical journals. I myself have a big collection of technical papers on the number 13 and I was

able to fish out at least 10 papers on this number from my vast collection immediately. Almost all of them are on Friday, the thirteenth. Interested readers may explore these papers, which I am mentioning below in Vancouver style. A click on the name of the paper would take you to the abstract of these papers published on the official pubmed site.

1. Radun I, Summala H. Females do not have more injury road accidents on Friday the 13th. BMC Public Health. 2004 Nov 16;4:54.

2. Smith DF. Traffic accidents and Friday the 13th. Am J Psychiatry. 2004 Nov;161(11):2140.

3. Kumar VV, Kumar NV, Isaacson G. Superstition and post-tonsillectomy hemorrhage. Laryngoscope. 2004 Nov;114(11):2031-3.

4. Nayha S. Traffic deaths and superstition on Friday the 13th. Am J Psychiatry. 2002 Dec; 159(12):2110-1.

5. Exadaktylos AK, Sclabas G, Siegenthaler A, Eggli S, Kohler HP, Luterbacher J. Friday the 13th and full-moon: the "worst case scenario" or only superstition? Am J Emerg Med. 2001 Jul;19(4):319-20.

6. Drife JO. Friday the 13th. BMJ. 1998 Nov 28;317(7171):1532G.

7. Veale D. Friday the 13th and obsessive compulsive disorder. BMJ. 1995 Oct 14;311(7011): 963-4.

8. Scanlon TJ, Luben RN, Scanlon FL, Singleton N. Is Friday the 13th bad for your health? BMJ. 1993 Dec 18-25;307(6919):1584-6.

9. Lester D. Personal violence (suicide and homicide) on Friday the 13th. Psychol Rep. 1988 Apr;62(2):433.

10. Pittman JA Jr. Doomsday: Friday the 13th of November, 1987 or Out of gas, the end of the world is coming. Ala Med. 1985 Jan;54(7):20-4, 26-7.

The story revolves around a young man Rajan who makes a phenomenal rise from rags to riches - his each step to success occurring on 13th day of a month. Gradually he comes to realize that 13 is his lucky number. Rajan of course is Sharma himself metamorphosed into a literary character. Sharma has chosen most of the other characters in his book from real life persons with whom he had interacted.

...Rajan, the protagonist of this story realizes that anything he does on 13th day of a month turns out lucky for him, so he plans a perfect murder on that day. Everything goes smoothly, till he makes a minor miscalculation...

So quick and so sure are Rajan's successes on 13th that gradually he becomes too overconfident and comes to believe that whatever he would do on this day would prove lucky for him. He falls in love

with his sexy secretary Nisha who is actually double crossing him. He realizes that towards the end of this novella and plans a perfect murder - naturally on the thirteenth day of the month.

Some complications occur on the day of the murder but he is still able to complete the murder and disposal of the body etc as the clock strikes 12 midnight (so that all work is completed on 13th itself. Rajan is acutely aware that he must complete everything on 13th to stay lucky). He is satisfied and goes off for a late night (or early morning 14th) dinner to a famous New Delhi food joint. Quite relaxed and contented with his achievement, he orders dinner. But the waiter refuses to serve him!

Why? You would be dumbfounded to know the answer. Rajan's downfall begins right from here. Why? Whooooosssshhhhh.....It is sooooooooooo unbelievable and fascinating. Great work Ramesh! Keep giving us such spellbinding fiction.

What is the review of this book doing in a serious journal of forensic medicine? Well, the story - coming from a senior professor of forensic pathology - is quite predictably full of incidents encountered commonly by forensic pathologists and scientists. There are kidnappings, money laundering, dead bodies, secret burials, exhumations - even postmortems (at - where else - the famous All India Institute of Medical Sciences, the premier institute where the author teaches), and calculations of time of death. Toxicology features prominently in the book too - there are secret plannings to kill by arsenic. Anyone with a passion for crime fiction is going to love this book. Several successful professors and writers of forensic pathology have previously done this experiment and written crime fiction related to forensic pathology. Bernard Knight is a famous example, who used to write crime fiction under the name Bernard Picton (Readers would note that both his real and pen name have 13 letters. Just a coincidence perhaps!). Sharma - who till recently was a successful writer of technical books - now turns to crime fiction and thus emerges as the new Bernard Knight of India.

Seat number 13 missing from a popular airliner (Click picture to enlarge).



Who is going to love this book? Practically everyone who can read English. The book is short, so does not demand a great expenditure of time. It is economical; at $8.95 it is a steal.

Interestingly it is the 13th issue of our journal, where the review of this book appears (please note this is the first issue of volume 7. We have two issues in a volume). And finally...it is not for nothing, I am writing this review on the thirteenth day of a month; may be it would prove lucky for me too! Have had no luck so far though. My computer hard disc (an 80 GB behemoth) crashed when I was compiling this thirteenth issue, causing a loss of huge data.

References

(1) Wakefield AJ, Murch SH, Anthony A, Linnell J, Casson DM, Malik M, Berelowitz M, Dhillon AP, Thomson MA, Harvey P, Valentine A, Davies SE, Walker-Smith JA. Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children. Lancet. 1998 Feb 28;351(9103):637-41. Partial retraction in: Murch SH, Anthony A, Casson DH, Malik M, Berelowitz M, Dhillon AP, Thomson MA, Valentine A, Davies SE, Walker-Smith JA. Lancet. 2004 Mar 6;363(9411):750. (Back to [citation] in text)

(2) Murch SH, Anthony A, Casson DH, Malik M, Berelowitz M, Dhillon AP, Thomson MA, Valentine A, Davies SE, Walker-Smith JA. Retraction of an interpretation. Lancet. 2004 Mar 6;363(9411):750. Partial retraction of: Wakefield AJ, Murch SH, Anthony A, Linnell J, Casson DM, Malik M, Berelowitz M, Dhillon AP, Thomson MA, Harvey P, Valentine A, Davies SE, Walker-Smith JA. Lancet. 1998 Feb 28;351(9103):637-41. (Back to [citation] in text)

the linked page (mailto:rksharma1@hotmail.com?subject=Read about your book in Anil Aggrawal's Internet journal of forensic medicine and toxicology&cc=rksharma1@gmail.com&bcc=dr anil@hotmail.com) to send an Email to Dr. Ramesh K. Sharma, the author of this book.

Other reviews of this book:


CITY 7

AIIMS doc pens murder mystery

46-year-old Professor Of Forensic Science Makes His Fictional Debut With Thriller

Review 1

Review in the Times of India, August 4, 2006 (Friday), page 7, by Abantika Ghosh. Click on the picture at the left to enlarge and read review. Or right click over the picture and click on "save link as" to save the review as a picture file.

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Editor's recommendation. This book is recommended by the editor.