



New fiction

by
Eithne Farry



The Peacock Throne
by Sujit Saraf (Sceptre, £12.99).

THIS is Sujit Saraf's first foray into fiction and it's an ambitious debut. At more than 700 pages long, this sprawling novel teems with memorable characters and historical figures, plots and subplots. It opens on an ordinary day in Delhi, in the market lanes of Chandni Chowk, where Gopal Pandey, a

half-blind, illiterate tea seller is getting his stall ready for the day.

Business is interrupted by the news that Indira Gandhi has been shot by her bodyguards.

Indira's assassination ushers in a particularly turbulent period of modern Indian history, and Saraf sets about telling a bleakly comic tale of nefarious political double-dealing, murder, social unrest and religious rivalry, played out over a 15-year period.

Gopal and his estranged son are caught up in the violent upheaval, along with shopkeepers, street children, prostitutes and the journalist Chitra Ghosh. As Ms Ghosh observes, when Gopal finds himself standing for election, an innocent pawn in the machinations of cynical politicians, 'tragedy and farce [are] indistinguishable from each other'.

Saraf's rambunctious commentary on the nature of greed and mendacity is enthralling, but it's the lives of the ordinary people that provide the real drama in this huge novel.