

Playing By The Book

A novel writer is led by the tale in his head and not by the title on the business card, says Pankaj Molekhi



ABOVE AVERAGE: IT Professor Anilbala Bagchi



THE REDDISH LINE: Author Abhinav Sanghi



THE ZOVAFACOR: Ad professional Anuja Chaudhan

TO MOST of us, the word "writer" evokes an image that is akin to a frail body in a tweed jacket, an unkempt beard and a riot of salt & pepper hair—a typical Mend of Orhan Pamuk, VS Naipaul and JM Coetzee. But Ashwin Sanghi, 40, fares miserably on this scale in spite of *The Rozabal Line*—a moderately successful, 400-page thriller set in Kashmir to his credit and his another work of fiction ready for the press.

Sanghi does not write to earn a living. Instead, he heads a family business, associated with automobile, real estate and industrial gas manufacturing, which employs staff in excess of the 1,000-mark. It is anybody's guess how he finds time to research, write and market his books. "If you are passionate about something, you will find time for it," says Sanghi, adding with a quip: "But it does worry me what IIT won't get enough time if my works become very popular. I am sure I would not be ignoring my business life, which is essentially bread & butter for my family. I am a *panch Maruti* businessman." For once, his generous gift appears to be in line with his financial pursuit.

Sanghi's first book didn't flow as easily as his forays in the automobile industry. "The idea to write a book first came to mind in 2005-04, on a trip to Goa," he says. The BlackBerry addict wrote about 25,000 words during the break but wasn't pleased with the outcome and abandoned writing for a while. "The next idea came in the form of a thriller about the Rozabal shrine in Kashmir. The topic of Jesus' resurrection and his passage to

Kashmir has been dealt with in at least three dozen books, all of which I read thoroughly. I decided to belt out a thriller woven around all the information which was scattered on the subject and present them in a pacy style." The idea clicked, and *The Rozabal Line* sold over 20,000 copies in multiple editions.

Sanghi's experiences echo with Anish Tripathi, an IIM-C graduate who heads marketing & product management at IDBI Federal

So what drives a successful businessman or a professional to scribble an imaginary tale? "It's generic in me. Every time I see a news item in a paper, I start imagining a story on it," says Sanghi

Life Insurance. Tripathi's *The Ironwails of Mohaka*, much like Sanghi's book, is a mix of mythology and history. Interestingly, when Tripathi set about to write his first work of fiction he followed a management mantra he was used to meeting corporate targets. "I created an excel-sheet file, and drew up sections, sub-sections that defined plot, characters and the central thread," says Tripathi, smiling at his learning curve. "Also, there were deadlines to finish each column and everything neatly arranged, as in a PowerPoint presentation. It didn't work at all." What did work was his persistence of his passion, not only in writing but also in seeing it

go through the press. Finally, when *The Ironwails*... came out in print, it created a minor ripple at bookstores across the country.

Similar challenges lay before Anilbala Bagchi, whose *Above Average* has often been repeatedly compared with Chetan Bhagat's *The 360° Rule*. However, though Bagchi likens the two works as an apple and an orange, "It was very difficult finding a publisher. It took me two years from the point when I had finished the first draft of *Above Average* to the point when I signed a contract with HarperCollins, India," says a soft-spoken IIT Delhi alumnus. "When you are a first-time writer, most people pick up your manuscript expecting it to be junk. When that happens then nine times out of ten you will get rejected because if someone is looking to find faults then faults will be found. It isn't easy to get a foot in the door." According to Bagchi, the idea to write a fictional work requires less research and more imagination. The idea to write *Above Average*, for example, sprang from a short story he had written about a local guitarist. "I quickly realized that the stories I was telling were all related to ambition and upward mobility. From this realisation came the idea that IIT should come into picture, which was an unusual one at the time because Chetan hadn't yet published *The 360° Rule*."

There are cases where the success of a work of fiction led to a professional finding full-time vocation in writing industry. Advaika Kala, who wrote her debut 'Chalk & Cheese' and is working on the sequel and Anuja Chaudhan, who recently published *Family Business* after her successful stint with *The Zoya Factor* (2008), are two such names. Kala worked as a trader with Orinda and Taj group before she realized that the

transition from a successful novel would see her through decently. Chaudhan, an ad professional for 15 years, too has found solace in the written club. There are bureaucrats who have wedded pen to write fiction and made a name for themselves. Diplomat Vikas Swarup, whose *Q&A* was turned into *Slumdog Millionaire*, IIS officer Sadima Shanker who wrote *Never A Dinosaur*, and JP Das who drafted a right to information bill in Orissa, generated critical praise for *A Three Horsemen*, are a few examples.

So what drives a successful businessman or a professional to scribble an imaginary tale? "It is generic in me. Every time I see a news item in a paper, I start imagining a story on it. That's how my mind works or reacts to my surroundings," says Sanghi. Others too find writing an obsession. "There is a story to be told, or it keeps boiling inside," says Tripathi. Like, as they say, is stranger than fiction on indeed.

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