



MEETING HEMINGWAY'S GHOST

Author publisher David Davidar recounts a Cuban holiday spent battling a marlin much like the Old Man of the sea

FLASHBACK

David Davidar

Celebs pick their favourite picture

When you have been addicted to books for as long as I have, a lot of things take on literary associations. And so, when my wife suggested a holiday in Cuba some years ago, I did not dwell on its legendary mojitos, cigars, rum, Cadillacs with tail fins, mobsters and molls. I thought instead of *The Old Man and the Sea*, which was written in Cuba in 1951, and is thought by many to be Ernest Hemingway's greatest published work. For those who don't know the novel, it tells the story of a legendary Cuban fisherman, in his eighties and down on his luck, who has gone for a long time without catching a fish. Then, one day, far out to sea, he hooks a giant marlin, and spends a long time battling it. I'm not going to tell you how the story ends, but, in short, sharp sentences, the master creates a work of art that is elemental.

Havana was magical. The Habaneros and Habaneras were lively and fun, and the absence of loud American tourists, made it one of the most relaxing places we'd visited. The rum slipped smoothly down our throats, the cigars complemented the cocktails to perfection, there was music on every street corner, and once you got past the obvious tourist traps, there was much to savour in that astonishing city painted in the faded colours of the evening sky. Hemingway was everywhere. We visited bars named after him, where we drank cocktails he'd made famous, and we visited places he had lived and worked in. The only part of the Hemingway experience we hadn't immersed ourselves in was big game fishing. It seemed like a lot of work.

But we were in the country that had inspired the finest work of fiction featuring a giant fish, bar Moby Dick, so on the last day of our holiday, we set off into heaving sapphire blue seas from the auspiciously-named *Hemingway Marina*. A couple of hours later our enthusiasm had dwindled. My friend, David, had caught a respectable mahi-mahi, but that was it. Nothing was biting, and the captain of our boat said our time was up, and he was turning back. Sunburned, and quite morose, all of us sat staring



vacantly into the cresting waves. Then, one of the lines at the stern began hissing into the sea at a furious pace, we'd hooked something. "Marlin" the captain said, though how he could tell I didn't know, because whatever was on the line was close to a kilometre from the boat, and very deep down. I was tied into the fighting chair, handed the humming line, and given some very basic lessons in big game fishing, which essentially seemed to be to keep the line taut, but not so taut that the fish could snap it when it took off on one of its furious runs, and keep reeling it in whenever I could.

Half an hour later the fish seemed no closer, nor did it seem in the least tired, whereas my arms ached, I was hot and sweaty, and my head and eyes hurt. But when the captain and David offered to take over I refused. This was my fish, I was either going to land him, or lose him. A little while later the marlin jumped (apparently they do this every time they are hooked). And as that great fish, arced out of the water, blue as the sea and grey as the sky, over one hundred kilos of muscle and bone, I finally understood every last nuance of Hemingway's masterpiece.

— As told to Aruna Rathod



In his good books

Author Ashwin Sanghi engages in an intricate conversation with literature student Akanksha Ramagopal about the facets involved in the art of writing

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When Akanksha Ramagopal read Ashwin Sanghi's award-winning novel *Chanakya's Chants*, she fell in love with his gritty writing style and gripping narrative. So when she heard that her favourite contemporary Indian author was coming to town to read out excerpts from his latest offering — *The Krishna Key* — she was delighted at the prospect of meeting him.

After having done a lot of background research on the man, a well-prepared Akanksha is confident and poised before the interview. She spots Ashwin browsing through a few bookshelves and introductions are made. "I'm a student of literature and eventually see myself writing," she says, to which Ashwin beams, "Inshallah, it will happen. I hope to read your work someday."

Akanksha pops the first question, "Sir, you graduated in economics — a subject far removed from writing. When was the author in you born?" Ashwin recalls, "More than writing, it was my grandfather who awakened the reading bug in me. He was a voracious reader and would keep lending me books from all genres. But yes, I hadn't penned anything beyond 1,000 words till I got down to writing the manuscript of my first book." After a brief pause, he continues, "But you know, I've always believed — a novelist never attempts to write, or 'craft sentences', it's all about wanting to tell a

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bloody good story! And once you know the story, the words automatically flow in a consistent structure of paragraphs and chapters."

Akanksha nods in agreement and asks, "All your books are set in mythological tones, and have a very 'Dan Brown' pattern to them. Was that a conscious decision and has Brown been an inspiration?" Ashwin, who has now warmed up to the young lady's smart, well-thought-out questions, explains, "Brown is a trendsetter of theological thrillers. He made these otherwise dry tales fascinating! It would've been impossible not to be influenced by him. As for my own interest in the topic, it's the overlap between mythology and history that sets my adrenaline pumping. You see, mythology can be defined by a simple paradox — a lie that tells the truth. If you want to revisit the world as it was 5,000 years ago, there's no material to refer to. You have to depend on mythology, and keep wondering how much of it is real or fictional — basically peel the onion to reach its centre."

Remembering an amusing anecdote, he grins, "I recently visited this temple in Kolkata, where devotees worship Amitabh Bacchan! So instead of an idol, they

have Amitabh's picture, and every evening, they read out this chant called 'Amitabh Chalisa'! I got me wondering — what if all the mythological characters we read about were all just 'great icons' at some point and their images simply got embellished over the years? Will people wonder if Amitabh was a real man or not 500 years from now, when you and I won't be there?"

An enthralled Akanksha moves on to what she finds the most intriguing part of Ashwin's works — his characters. "Do they simply come to you or do you flesh them out beforehand?" she asks curiously. "I usually have every chapter roughly plotted out before I actually begin to 'write' it, so the main characters are ready, but the others are developed along the way. Also, I believe in multidimensional characters with ambiguous dispositions — the kinds whom the reader won't be able to pin down as being good or bad," Ashwin smiles. As an aspiring writer herself, Akanksha wonders where Indian authors stand on the contemporary literature scene today. "Be it Vikram Chandra or Salman Rushdie, authors today don't write with a Western perspective just to fit in — they're not shy about expressing themselves as fundamentally 'desi'. I'm glad that words like *Puchka Paani* and *Jalebi* have entered books. English is, after all, a language marked by adaption and evolution!" Ashwin bids adieu, but not before gifting an elated Akanksha a signed copy of his new book.