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AUTHOR'S CORNER 14 Jul, 2014 14:54 IST


'You Can Either Tell A Good Story Or You Can't'

No amount of rich vocabulary or delicate sentence structure can compensate for the lack of a great story, says Ashwin Sanghi who has collaborated with James Patterson for his next thriller

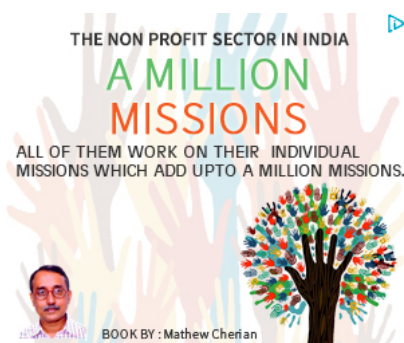
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How did the idea of collaborating with James Patterson come up? And why him?

A dear friend who has read all three of my books and works for Random House suggested my name to her colleague who handles James Patterson's books. Given the fact that all three of my previous titles have been thrillers with short chapters, compelling pace, and unexpected hooks every few pages, traits that are amply evident in James Patterson's writing, the fit seemed a natural one. James

has co-written several books and the arrangement was not a new one for him.

What kind of timelines and other logistics did it take to make this happen?

We discussed the issues involved for about a couple of weeks and topped it off with a formal agreement rather quickly. It was all rather sudden. There were less than three people involved in the paperwork and structure. While I cannot reveal to you the specifics of the financial arrangement, what I can tell you is that it involves a fixed fee plus a share of royalties in certain markets.

How do you find the task of co-writing a fiction work? What is the kind of changes in schedules, etc., both of you had to make to achieve this?

The process of collaborating was a new one for me. James provided a guideline as well as an existing set of international characters that need to be woven into my story. Using his guideline, I developed the initial plot outline. We discussed the outline in detail and froze it after amendments. I then proceed to write the first draft while James wrote the final draft. All this happened with periodic interactions over e-mail. Once both James and I were done with the story, the editors at Random House took over. The entire process took around 15 months. Working with James has been a refreshing experience. My focus has always been on research and plot while the Patterson formula is pace and character. This book has given us a chance to combine our respective strengths and present something that represents the best of both. That, to my mind is the key benefit. The challenges were communication — given the geographic distance between the two authors — and the need to present a single voice in the final product.

Is there much pressure on you as an author now, now that not only you are collaborating with an international author but also the fact that JP is so popular and widely known across the globe?

Not really. I have always worried that I would be boxed in... compartmentalised. I get bored rather easily and I need to keep finding ways to reinvent myself. Private India was a chance for me to do something different. There is some history and mythology in Private India too, but it does not occupy centre stage. The collaboration with JP was a chance to do something different while reaching out to a global audience.

How do you think this collaboration plays upon the Indian fiction writing scenario?

Commercial fiction writing, in general, did not take off for many years in India primarily because of our snobbish attitude towards such writing. Most Indian authors were busy churning out literary fiction and publishers continued actively searching for the next Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, or Jhumpa Lahiri. They could hardly be bothered with finding the Indian equivalent of Robert Ludlum, Frederick Forsyth, Jack Higgins, or Tom Clancy. Satyajit Ray would not have given us Feluda if an Indian market for mysteries, suspense, adventure and thrillers did not exist. It's sad that we allowed ourselves to cede space to foreign authors in these genres. I am happy to see that this is changing rapidly now. We should have our own versions of Miss Marple, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, Sherlock Holmes, and Hercule Poirot. I hope that this collaboration will fuel that process.

What are the things you think he has learnt from you and vice versa?

Writing thrillers is not only about inspiration and imagination but also about craft (or technical dexterity). There are a few simple rules that make a Patterson thriller: amplify character traits — make them larger than life; eliminate fluff; build twists and suspense ever so often; never compromise pace; build conflict until the very end. There are some chapters in this book that are just about a paragraph long. It stems from the Patterson style of saying absolutely nothing that does not advance the plot. That is the key takeaway for me from this collaboration: less is more. On the other hand, my research, passion for the unexplained and my love for history and mythology, I would imagine, would have been possible takeaways for JP.

You wrote 'The Rozabal Line' and 'The Krishna Key', which had mythology as a framework. Now with Private India, you have co-written contemporary thriller. How has the transition been for you?

Even though Private India is a mainstream crime thriller, it is inspired by my deep respect for the power of Shakti. I have always wondered why we worship the sacred feminine in our temples but wantonly desecrate that very symbol in our daily lives. That is the key Indian element in this book, and the link between the writer of mythology and the writer of a contemporary crime thriller. In that sense, I have not looked upon this project as something very different to what I ordinarily do.

Could you tell us something about your next book? Have you thought of writing non-fiction?

I have started writing my next independent title Sialkot Saga. If all goes well, I would hope to release it by mid-2015. It is my opportunity to discuss the world of business, finance and economics in the context of Indian history. As you know, I love page-turners and I hope that this one will be precisely that. As regards non-fiction, I am presently writing a series of books on topics that are close to my heart — simple observations that often do not get explored. I hope to release one of these next year.

Tell us a bit about your writing schedules.

I start my day at office rather late by 11 a.m. It is possible for me to do that because I own the business that I run. I am usually at work for 6-7 hours but I do not attend office on weekends. I usually write in the mornings from 6am to 9am, which explains why I have to start my day late. My evenings are usually spent reading and researching. I am an introvert by nature and have a close circle of friends whom I meet every few weeks. Other than that, I have virtually no social life. My life revolves around work, writing and my family. And honestly speaking, I like it that way.

Some of your recent reads...

The Reluctant Prime Minister by Sanjay Baru; Byculla to Bangkok by S. Hussain Zaidi; Narendra Modi: A Political Biography by Andy Marino; The Cuckoo's Calling by Robert Galbraith; And the Mountains Echoed by Khaled Hosseini; Gandhi Before India by Ramachandra Guha.

E-books or Paper format?

Asked which orchestra gave him the most pleasure to conduct, Zubin Mehta tactfully refused to single out any particular favourite, saying, 'What would a devout Muslim answer as to which of his wives he preferred?' Both e-books and printed books have their qualities. While I travel, my iPad carries over a thousand books for me and I bless the technology revolution. When I am in my home, I love picking up older books and leafing through them... it's rather comforting. Many books have stories and incidents connected with them. Many are significant because of who gave them to me. At those times I pray that the printed book will continue to stay.

What do you think makes for good reading or a bestseller?

My only concern while I am writing is whether the pages turn effortlessly or not. It was Hawthorne who said that easy reading is damn hard writing. I keep sharing chunks of my work in progress with my publisher and editor. My single question to them is "Do the pages turn by themselves or do you need to turn them?" At the end of the day, you can either tell a good story or you can't. No amount of rich vocabulary or delicate sentence structure can compensate for the lack of a great story.

Social media helps in reach and promos of books. What is the role of an author according to you in promoting a book?

The author is the best brand ambassador for his own book. If an author is unwilling to invest time in marketing and promoting his own work then why should he expect his publisher to be serious about marketing him? However, author activity can never be a substitute for publisher activity. The biggest piece of the marketing puzzle in India is distribution and that is a key ingredient contributed by the publisher.

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