



EMILY BRONTË PAID £50 TO HAVE *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* PUBLISHED, AND THE FIRST VOLUME OF POEMS CO-AUTHORED BY THE THREE BRONTË SISTERS SOLD TWO COPIES WHEN IT FIRST APPEARED

For *Private Delhi*, bestselling author Ashwin Sanghi has collaborated with internationally renowned crime writer James Patterson. In an interview, Sanghi tells ANANYA BORGHAIN about the state of crime writing in India

CRIME, CONSCIENCE, CONSEQUENCE



For this book, you have worked with a new publishing house other than the one that has published your individual best-sellers. What challenges did you face and how did you handle them?

Actually, James Patterson and I have worked together on *Private India* before we did this one, *Private Delhi*. The publisher in both cases was Penguin Random House. As regards challenges, there were none that were significant. Whenever one is working in partnership with someone else one needs to invest a substantial amount of time on the plot so that both authors knew exactly where they are supposed to be going with the story. This is critical in order to coordinate activities and ensure tuning. But storytelling remains pretty much the same irrespective of whether one does it solo or as part of a partnership. That is where the real challenge lies.

How did this association happen?

In 2013, James Patterson's London-based publisher reached out to me and asked whether I would be interested in penning an India-based thriller along with the master storyteller. This led to the first book that we wrote together, *Private India* (2014). At that time, I was slightly concerned that I would be attempting something different from the beaten path. After all, my previous books were thrillers but thrillers with an abundance of history and mythology.

Private India, on the other hand was meant to be a purely contemporary crime thriller. The mere fact that we have followed up *Private India* with *Private Delhi* is testament to the fact that our collaboration has worked.

Had you read Patterson's work before working together?

I was familiar with Patterson's work having been a big fan of his Alex Cross novels, particularly *Along Came A Spider*, *Kiss The Girls, Jack & Jill* and *Cat & Mouse*. However, I had not read any of the books in the *Private* series when I signed up with him. I made up for it by reading some of his *Private* novels (this included *Private Berlin*, *Private Games*, *Private London* and *Private No.1 Suspect*) before getting down to work on *Private India*. I also read a couple more in the series (*Private Vegas* and *Private Down Under*) between the *Private India* and *Private Delhi* projects.

Reading more of Patterson's work made me realise that writing thrillers is not only about inspiration and imagination but also about craft. This is something that is enforced working alongside James. There are a few simple Patterson rules that make a good 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. Achieve these few objectives and you should have a delicious thriller.

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 from this collaboration: Less is more.

How did you both distribute the work? What was the brainstorming process like and how long did it take?

James Patterson 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 plot outline. We discussed the outline in detail and froze it after amendments. I then proceeded to write the first draft while James wrote the final draft. All this happened with periodic interactions over email. Once both James and I were done with the story, the editors at Penguin Random House took over. Working with James has been a refreshing experience on both occasions. 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. The fact that there are two voices allowed us to create harmony.

I spent around four months writing the plot outline. It was one of the most detailed outlines that I have ever written. The time spent on the plot outline included research into Delhi, the human organs trade in India and the medical malpractice. In all, we took around 15 months, including research, plotting,

writing, rewriting and editing.

Crime writing in India is still not a genre that is as well received as, say, literary novels or historical chronicles. Why is this so?

There are several reasons. First, Indian publishers did not encourage submissions in the thriller genre. They figured that there were international authors of repute who could fill the gap. Second, given the sorry state of our police infrastructure, intelligence services, forensic capabilities, it became difficult for writers to develop stories that sounded real. Third, Indian writers still believe that writing comes from the heart rather than the head. That approach works for literary fiction and romance but not for crime writing. We need to understand that the discipline of research, planning and plotting is far more important than the actual writing of a thriller. These reasons ensured that we did not have a robust crime thriller market in India. In the US, UK, Canada and Australia markets, crime thrillers dominate the bestseller lists while in India it is romance and mythology that dominate. I believe that we are at an inflexion point. Indian crime writing will catch on eventually.

When you read Stieg Larsson, Gillian Flynn, Lee Child or Paula Hawkins, you are reading about alien countries and people. There is something make-believe, almost like the innocent little English village of Agatha Christie. With Indian thrillers, you are reading stuff that you can relate to. For example, we see pristine

laboratories in CSI but that is not the case in India. Morgues in the west are not as filthy as the ones we have here. Police investigation and medical examination also work rather differently.

Do you think vigilantism can be an answer to India's numerous social and legal problems? It's a complex country because not only it suffers from population explosion but because most people are involved in some form of corruption or the other.

Vigilantism is not something in and of itself and can never be an answer to the country's problems. It is a product of poverty, inadequate policing and a flawed criminal justice process. Vigilantism will rear its ugly head if we do not adequately address these causes. I am not justifying vigilantism, I'm simply providing the solution to snuffing it out.

Were you worried that it could be interpreted that you are presenting violence as a tool of justice through a vigilante anti-hero?

Not at all. All my books deal with characters that are neither perfectly black nor white. In that sense the antagonist in *Private Delhi* is also a bundle of contradictions. I find that most people who I meet in the real world are a combination of good and bad traits. I'm thus surprised when popular fiction tends to present characters as entirely one-dimensional, a tad Bollywoodish, wouldn't you say?

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