

'Delhi lends itself to a crime thriller'

Ashwin Sanghi describes his latest collaboration with James Patterson as singing a duet

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When two master storytellers, Ashwin Sanghi and James Patterson come together, the readers expect nothing less than a gripping page turner. Their second collaboration "Private Eye" (Penguin), which is set in Delhi and revolves around illegal organ transplant, is a potent mix of murder and corruption at the highest level. The story is reflective of the times we live in and has all the elements of suspense and thrill. The book is a part of the Private series which Patterson has written with big names from different countries.

Sanghi, in an interaction, talks about the collaboration, the changing tone and tenor of page turners and how he manages writing different genres.

Edited excerpts:

On how the book came into being and the experience of co-writing with James Patterson

The first book co-written by James Patterson and me was set in Mumbai, so this one had to be in Delhi. And frankly, Delhi lends itself to a crime thriller. Delhi's political intrigue, wealth, and exploding population make for the perfect ingredients in this endeavour.

It's always a pleasure to collaborate with James Patterson. He has the knack of instilling the extra chills and thrills that keep one on the edge of the seat.

Moreover, given that this was the second book that we collaborated on, the process became even easier because we understood the



MEETING OF MINDS Ashwin Sanghi; (right) James Patterson

specific strengths that each one brought to the mix.

On the process of collaboration and ensuring uniformity in storytelling

The starting point is an outline. The outline usually comes from James Patterson but in both the India-based books he left the outlines to me. The outline tends to be a roadmap with every twist and turn plotted in. This outline is then discussed between both

writers and a revised outline that incorporates changes is drawn up. The first draft of this story was written by me but the

second and third drafts were written by James Patterson. I would say that I bring the story idea, the research as well as the Indian touch to the story. James Patterson brings his uncanny ability to amplify characters and stretch the suspense.

Luckily for us, we both love thrillers. Our specific ways of achieving those thrills in our books are slightly different but the objective is similar. Considering the fact that a story like this one goes through three draft and another three stages of editing, both writers have adequate opportunity to reflect and comment on the other's work. I like to see this as singing a duet instead of singing solo. A duet involves two people singing different notes but the end result is harmonious.

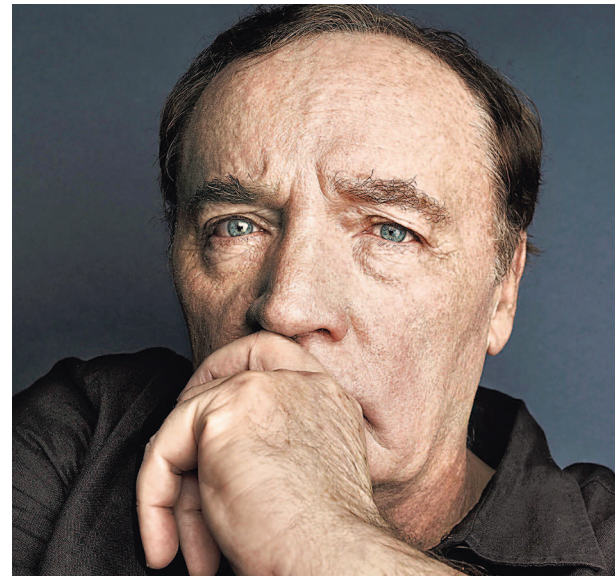
On respective strengths of the two

authors

Writing thrillers is not only about inspiration and imagination but also about craft. This is something that one realises working alongside James. There are a few simple 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. Research and plotting are my strengths. With James, it's about further refining the story so that it is almost Zen minimalism. But with that comes a certain darkness that is perfect for thrillers.

On the research for "Private Delhi"

As you know, most of the 'Private Delhi' story revolves around a fictitious



hospital called the Delhi Memorial Hospital. I visited several hospitals to get a "feel" of how they operate. In addition, I was also able to have a detailed interview with a private investigator who operates in Delhi. His inputs were invaluable. I was also able to chat with a couple of police officers who helped me in terms of procedures and policies.

On the realistic depiction of Delhi without losing out on global appeal

There is an old proverb which says that if you are going to tell a lie, then lie as close to the truth as possible. Depicting a realistic sense of Delhi allows the reader to experience a fictional story as though it is almost factual, from the front pages of your newspaper.

Crime thrillers such as this one have global appeal and are written for audiences everywhere, including India. 'Private India' was #1 on the India Nielsen Bookscan but was also #5 on the Sunday Times UK list and #6 on the New York Times list.

On portrayal of nexus between politicians-bureaucrats and business-

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men in the book

It's a symbiotic relationship. A marriage of convenience. I wanted to elaborate on this theme in the book because it almost defines the social character of New Delhi. Breaking the nexus is next to impossible because the levers of power are controlled by the very elements involved in that nexus.

On vigilantism being offered as a possible solution in the book

Oh absolutely. I simply wanted to highlight the fact that if a society fails to deliver timely justice to its people then we run the risk of increased vigilantism.

On how thrillers inspire and are inspired by

real life incidents

It's a two-way street. Thriller writers absorb ideas from the front pages of newspapers and use them in their stories. Often, the absorption happens in reverse gear. But yes, crime thrillers these days have to be "real". They have to be accurate. In that sense, they do raise some awareness even though the primary objective is to entertain the reader.

While this book was being edited, an illegal kidney racket was busted in Mumbai. Similarly, there was another story of a woman's body being found in a suitcase on a railway platform. A few years ago there were the gruesome Noida serial murders in which elements of cannibalism were alluded to. Many of these stories were indeed influences.

On how page turners have changed over the years

The significant change is the human attention span. This has declined dramatically in the last 20 years. The key challenge is to hook the reader early on and then provide adequate incentive to turn the pages. If you notice, chapter length has diminished considerably in today's thrillers. This is primarily due to the lowered attention span. A recent study showed that readers tend to give up on a book around page eighteen. That's scary. Most thriller writers have this uppermost in their minds.

On straddling between different genres of writing

I love it. I can't imagine how utterly bored I would be if I were only to write in one specific genre. It would be the equivalent of having a soup and sandwich every night of your life for dinner. It is a challenge to switch gears from time to time but that's what makes my life interesting.

