

At ease in his plush Mumbai home, author Ashwin Sanghi is gradually getting used to the life of a best-selling writer in the times of publicity and fancy book-releases. Given easily to sharing anecdotes, Sanghi muses about the fact that dealing with a photographer is much harder than writing a thriller.

His book, *The Rozabal Line* (see box), first published in 2007-08 is now being published for a mass Indian audience, a long journey from the time when the book, a self-published effort was only available on Amazon and book websites.

"That's the hardest part for a first-time writer. It's not the writing of the book or the research, but finding a publisher willing to believe in it and take it on is difficult. Eventually, after almost a year of approaching publishing houses, I just went ahead and self-published the novel and it went on the market, through websites like Amazon."

Published under a pseudonym of Shawn Haigins, *The Rozabal Line* caught the attention of Hemu Ramiah, owner of Landmark, and the company sought Sanghi to publish an edited version under his name. While initially hesitant about the switch, Sanghi came around to it.

"Publishing under a pen name was my way of separating my life as a writer from my life as a businessman or the way other people know me. But when Westland came into the picture and offered to publish the book, I realised that Shawn Haigins and Ashwin Sanghi are two very different identities and it would be impossible to connect with the larger audiences with two very different names."

Walking *The* line

Ashwin Sanghi, author of *The Rozabal Line*, shares memories of the 20-year-long journey that culminated in the bestseller and finds much amusement in his being an unconventional Marwari *bania*.

Text: Rachna Shetty

Photographs: Samantha Da Cunha

The 20-year wait

The journey of *The Rozabal Line*, in a sense, began 20 years ago, when Sanghi picked up a book *Jesus Lived in India* by Holger Kersten. "I read the book out of curiosity but was fascinated by the subject: the idea that Jesus survived the crucifixion and settled in India. It drew me in and I started reading whatever I could find on the subject after that. I then read a book called *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail* and the branches of study related to Christ's bloodline. It was fascinating for someone like me, who always had a keen interest in history."

When he did eventually start writing the book, Sanghi opted for fiction based on historical fact and mythology for the simple reason that the subject needed to be approached from a different angle. "All the books that I had read so far, while being informative, were very dry. It wasn't something that could easily be understood by an audience yet uninitiated in the subject."



WRITER'S BLOC



Nothing to lose

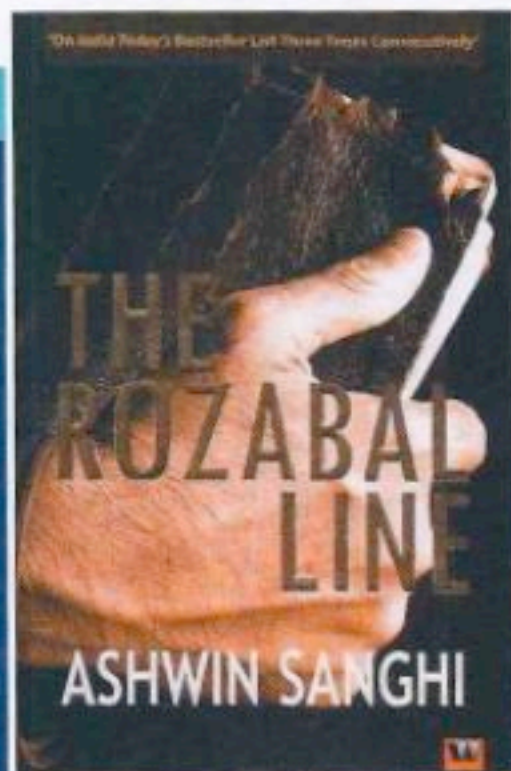
Sanghi also relished the challenge of a first-time writer. "It means having no rules. I had nothing to lose when I started writing it. I could follow a completely different pattern of story-telling jumping between generations and timelines, basically do whatever I wanted with it. I was happy with the reactions that I got, some people wrote back saying they enjoyed this jump-cut kind of story-telling while others said they just put it down because they couldn't follow it very well."

"Working on the second book, though, has come with its own set of rules. People have read the first one, there are expectations from the audience and the publishers as well. It has made me rein the format in a little, try and balance the need to tell a story in my way without making it completely inaccessible to the reader. The second book has made me mellower, in that sense."

THE ROZABAL LINE

The Rozabal Line is Sanghi's first book which was published under his anagrammatical pseudonym of Shawn Haigins. The book deals with the theories of Jesus Christ's survival of the crucifixion and his links to the Kashmir in India and the theory that he is buried in the Roza Bal shrine in Srinagar.

The first edition of the book was self-published, and was later picked by Westland Books, who brought the book to the mass-market. The book stayed on the India Today Bestseller List for 12 weeks and attracted comparisons with *The Da Vinci Code* for its basic theme and style of treatment. The book popularised the Roza Bal shrine in Srinagar and also drew attention to similarities in the plot to the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai — a correlation that Sanghi spoke out against and denied.



All in the family, mostly

Ask Sanghi about the response within the community and he chuckles away as he says, "A few days ago, I was attending a family wedding and I was the circus act there, constantly surrounded by curious people who wanted to see the guy who had written a book on Jesus Christ! My wife, Anushika, had a good time watching it all from a distance."

On a more serious note, Sanghi, who is also a businessman involved with the family's various industries, says that literary creativity is a genetic gift from the maternal side. His maternal grandfather, Ramkumar Gupta, was a literary scholar and an Urdu poet who influenced Sanghi in a big way.

"When I was a kid, he would give me a book to read every week and I would have to come back to him and tell him my thoughts on it, whether I liked or disliked it and why it was so. As kids, it's quite normal to not be drawn to reading and it was the same with me. My grandfather noticed that the books he gave were piling up. So then he came up with a better system. When he went back to Kanpur, where he was based, he would post a book to me every week and I had to write about it to him in a letter. Only after he received that letter would he send me a new book. This system continued for a good 12 years, which included my education in the United States. He held my hand and taught me to write." 🌟

