

The merchant of legends

Ashwin Sanghi is a bestselling author who caught the literary world by surprise, says Tania Bhattacharya

Ashwin Sanghi doesn't look like a man with a double life. He puts in long hours at the family business, then returns home to disappear inside his study and metamorphose into a bestselling author.

Sanghi, who plunged into his family business at a young age, is now one of the most unlikely stars of India's literary firmament. Nearly 1.5 lakh copies of his second novel, *Chanakya's Chant*, have sold and that makes him one of India's most bankable writers. This month he's launching his latest thriller *The Krishna Key*, a Dan Browne-ish tale about a race against time to find Lord Krishna's most prized possession. His two earlier books are still selling well.

What's the secret behind Sanghi's success? "We don't need to dumb down our stuff. And it's important to know how far we can push readers," says the author.

Sanghi balances both careers with great ease. By day, he's a director at the Mumbai-based M.K. Sanghi Group, which has interests ranging from car dealerships to hospitality and manufacturing industrial gases, consumer finance and e-commerce, and by night, he's a writer of racy fiction. He looks after the automobile, consumer finance and e-commerce ventures.

But that doesn't leave Sanghi much time for other pursuits or even for long holidays. He's pushing ahead, however, with his literary career

by doing a PhD in creative writing from the University of Wales.

"I used to go to office with my father to learn the ropes of the business from very young age", says the 43-year-old writer.

But Sanghi had a determined grand uncle who would send him books every week from Kanpur—and ensure that he read them. This started when he was 11, and continued even after he went to Yale for his MBA. "I ended up with at least 400 books on his account," says Sanghi. He adds: "I was learning book-keeping at the age of 12 but it never stopped me from pursuing literature. Over the years, I grew to love the written word."

He has come a long way in the literary world from the time he self-published his first book, *The Rozabal Line*. To keep his two lives separate, he released it under the pseudonym Shawn Halgins—an anagram of his name. Now his second book, *Chanakya's Chant* is about to be turned into a movie. But Sanghi, who's an ardent history buff, insists that he only writes on subjects that excite him.

So, his new book, *The Krishna Key*, explores the possibility that Krishna may be an actual historical figure. "I was scouting for an idea for my next book, when a friend suddenly mentioned that 2012 is the year of the Kalki avatar of Vishnu," says Sanghi. He was gripped by this idea and began research immediately. While the plot is set in today's world, one can expect to travel back and forth in time, with generous chunks of history and nail-biting fiction.

Sanghi says that in-depth historical research is essential to develop the complex plots of his novels. And he's incredibly organised about his literary work. "After preliminary research, I zero in on an idea and then I spend at least four months exploring the topic and in plot-building. I jot down every single detail of the plot as bullet points per chapter and only when the skeleton is complete do I start writing", says Sanghi.

Even as a novice writer, he was not



Sanghi juggles life as a businessman and a bestselling writer with impressive ease

short on ambition. His first book, *The Rozabal Line*, revolves around the legend that Jesus Christ's tomb is housed in Srinagar's Rozabal Shrine. Sanghi says: "I grew obsessed with the idea and only read books on crucifixion theories, Rozabal and Jesus coming to India for a year. My wife then encouraged me to write a fictional story around the idea."

Once he got started, Sanghi pored through scores of books including Holger Kerster's *Jesus Lived in India*, *The Jesus Papers* by Michael Baigent and *From Christina to Christ* by

Raymond Bernard. The resulting novel criss-crosses the world, moving rapidly from India to Tibet and Afghanistan and from there on to Europe and even South and North America. It brings together catastrophic world events, prophecies and the world's biggest religions.

But like many other authors, Sanghi initially couldn't find anyone to publish his work. Finally, in desperation, he went on *Lulu.com*, a self-publishing site, and began to sell his book online. In six months he had sold about 1,000 copies and publishing house Westland offered to re-publish it. Westland also published *Chanakya's Chant* two years later. It's a contemporary potboiler centred around a modern Chanakya and deeply reflective of India's current political scenario.

Sanghi's huge success has surprised even his publisher. Says Gautam Padmanabhan, CEO of Westland: "While we believed that the books would be successful, we never predicted the level of success these have achieved. Sanghi skillfully weaves history and myth with contemporary settings to tell fascinating stories." According to the publisher, *Chanakya's Chant* has been in ACNielsen's top 10 fiction list since it was published. It also won the Vodafone-Crossword Popular Choice award in 2011.

Unsurprisingly, the book has been grabbed by Disney UTV (then UTV Motion Pictures). Amar Butala, creative director, studios, points out that the way *Chanakya's Chant* uses the past and the present is a largely unexplored space in Bollywood. "Sanghi has a great take on modern politics. He is well-informed, and has ended up delivering good stories," says Butala. The film's cast and crew are likely to be finalised by the year end.

So will *The Krishna Key* also grip the attention of readers? If Sanghi's past successes are anything to go by, it will definitely pack a punch.