

Fact meets fiction

Myths and history shaped him as a writer, says author Ashwin Sanghi who will be in Chennai for *The Hindu Lit For Life* in January 2014

His journey in the literary field began as Shawn Haigins in 2007. And now, with three best-selling historical thrillers under his belt, entrepreneur-turned-author Ashwin Sanghi is co-writing a crime thriller with James Patterson, the world's highest-selling thriller writer. He talks about the intricacies of mixing fact and fiction and how his interest in myths and history has helped shape him as a writer.

When he was pursuing a Masters in Business Management at Yale, Ashwin wrote a column for the monthly magazine of the University and it was well-received. He returned to India and joined his family business (MK Sanghi Group), wrote some business-related articles in journals and realised that that was killing his passion. "Writing was my route to creative expression and I needed to write about the things that interested me," he says.

Germ of an idea

In a few years, Ashwin was intrigued by two books, *Holy Blood Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln ("The notion that Jesus may have left behind a bloodline came to me because of the book") and Holger Kersten's *Jesus Lived In India*. "I was fascinated with the idea that Jesus could have been inspired by Buddhism and that he may have drawn



THRILLED TO WRITE Ashwin Sanghi

much of his spiritual learning from here. I began to wonder whether I could marry the two theories. A chance trip to Srinagar and an unscheduled visit to the Rozabal shrine resulted in research and the book."

In 2007, *The Rozabal Line* was published under his pen name. "By the time I completed my novel, I had already been in business for over 20 years. The decision to use a pen name was nothing more than a desire to compartmentalise my life. However, I had not thought about an appropriate pseudonym and since there's an abundance of anagrams in the novel, the idea struck me: why not use an anagram of my name? Hence, Shawn Hai-

gins." After this came *Chanakya's Chant*, based on Mauryan history and *The Krishna Key*, which weaves the Vedic age and *The Mahabharata* into the plot. *Chanakya's Chant* won the Crossword-Vodafone Popular Choice Award, and UTV-Disney acquired the movie rights to the book. The novel remained on AC Nielsen's India Top-10 for over two years.

The Krishna Key went on to top the A.C. Nielsen all-India fiction rankings within the first week of its release. Forbes India included Ashwin in its Celebrity India 100 Rankings in 2013.

Ashwin feels that if an author derives more satisfaction from the journey

than the destination, it is not difficult to write this genre. "With *Chanakya's Chant*, I spent most of my time reading the *Arthashastra* and an English translation of the *Mudrarakshasa* (a Sanskrit play based on the life of Chanakya, written by Vishakhadatta in the late 4th Century).

For *The Krishna Key*, the research was far more extensive because it involved a parallel enquiry into *The Mahabharata*, *The Harivamsa*, as well as legends surrounding key geographical markers in Krishna's life story. As a thumb rule, for every day that I write, I spend two days on research, which is why I take two years to finish a book,"

says Ashwin. He adds that the fact-fiction ratio in his books is almost 50-50. "The two cardinal rules for writing in the genre are to be thorough with research and approach the topic with respect, since some of these issues involve personal faith," he adds. He also says that the deeper one delves into mythologies across civilisations, the more the parallels one can draw. "Every civilisation has a flood myth — Noah, Gilgamesh, Dwarka... Take the 'A' out of Abraham and put it at the end and you get Brahama. Who was Abraham's wife? Sara. And who is depicted as Brahama's consort? Saraswati."

Ashwin is not just co-authoring a book but is also working on a business thriller. "The work with James Patterson is provisionally entitled *Private India* and is a crime thriller set in Mumbai. My next independent novel, *Sialkot Saga* is a business thriller," says Ashwin.

ANUSHA
PARTHASARATHY

