

# TehelKa

BOOKS

ASHWIN SANGHI | 45

AUTHOR

## 'Our rich storytelling tradition needs to be made palatable to the modern audience'



**ONE OF** the most popular names in the mythological fiction genre in recent times, Ashwin Sanghi speaks to **ASAD ALI** about his love of the genre and his upcoming collaboration with James Patterson.

EDITED EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW

- You co-authored *Private India* with James Patterson. How has been the whole experience of working with him?
- Patterson's work follows a formulaic approach but even within the constraints of that formula it's like an art form. It was refreshing to work with him; it gave me the opportunity to work on commercial fiction instead of historical or mythological fiction, which is what I usually do. So, to that extent, it's been a sound learning experience. James has a terrific formula going for him and it's nice to be a part of that.

**How do you ensure that such a formula works consistently for so many books?**

I think the answer lies in what James has done himself for a lot of his books — he's co-written books with so many authors. So the creativity quotient always remains fresh. For example, I would, as an Indian, bring an element of Indian culture and history into the book so the story becomes entirely unique. Hence, even though the basic framework might be similar in his books, the treatment of plot and the stories are widely different.

**How difficult is literary collaboration, especially in a genre like thriller? And how does an author collaborate, creatively and otherwise, with another author?**

Creativity is a very personal construct, so when you co-create something, it tends to become difficult. Having said that, James was quite forthright and humble in his approach. He had sent me a guideline of work areas since the book is part of the popular *Private* series, and hence, there are already certain expectations. So he sent me a list, which mentioned the aspects I needed to develop such as characters, plot, etc. Once I got this guideline, I worked on the plot for a month or two. The plot outline went into almost 12,000 words. Once that was done, James went through it to ensure that the pace of the

story remained similar to others in the series. After this, I wrote out the initial draft in four instalments. The first draft was accordingly re-written by James. And it was only the third draft that was finally handed over to the publishers. So though there were no collaboration issues, it was slightly more time consuming than usual.

**How different is the approach to crime thrillers from mythological fiction? Do thrillers give more leeway in terms of facts and figures?**

There are certain differences in approach. In this particular novel, there are four chapters, which are about a paragraph long each. That is typical Patterson — if there isn't something that advances the plot, then don't say it. He can afford to just have a paragraph-long chapter. Then you have conflict-building. In such thrillers, the conflict has to continue to build for over 80 to 90 percent of the book, climaxing towards the end. Again, in mythological fiction, the characters have to be amplified and made larger-than-life than normal novels because the good and evil has to be brought out more clearly. So these are the kinds of aspects that need to be addressed in both the genres.

**Who were your literary influences?**

I had a stream of books coming from my grandfather, which ranged from Charles Dickens, Paramahansa Yogananda, Annie Hill to Vladimir Nabokov. On the other hand, my mother loved bestsellers. Any Jeffrey Archer or Robert Ludlum would be passed on to me by her. I grew up on these two paddle streams of books coming at me! So I don't know who has influenced me more. I think my ideas come from the kind of books my grandfather gave me but my writing sensibilities definitely came from my mother's selection of books.

**Why is there a sudden upsurge in books surrounding historical fiction/myths in the Indian market?**

The upsurge can be attributed to the fact that India has tonnes of stories that can be retold. We have a rich tradition of stories and that just needs to be made palatable to the modern audience. Also,

there's a whole generation, which has grown up without having access to these kinds of stories. I grew up with my grandmother telling me mythological stories but today's generation doesn't have that advantage because of time constraint, lifestyle and, of course, the breakdown of joint families. My generation reconnected with its roots through parents or grandparents, and today's generation is reconnecting through these books.

**Was it a conscious move on your part to choose this genre because you thought it will be commercially viable?**

Frankly, when I started writing, I had no idea it will actually stretch enough to be a book. I was on a trip to Srinagar when I saw the tomb of Rozabal. A story immediately formed in my mind and I spent a year reading up on the topic. I had all these theories that I wanted to weave together into a coherent story. I thought I will treat it as an academic paper, but when I reached about 10 or 15,000 words, I realised it needed to be a much bigger story. And that was how *The Rozabal Line* developed. So all the issues of what will publish faster, which leading bookstores it will find space in, the number of copies sold or royalties, were very far from my mind at that time.

**'I wanted a pseudonym because I wanted to differentiate my literary pursuits from my business side'**

**Some of Patterson's books have been adapted for the big screen. Which one of your books do you think is most suited for adaptations?**

*Chanakya's Chant* had been picked up by UTV, but the issue we faced at the time was developing a proper script for it. The problem with Bollywood is that producers and directors want ready-made scripts. Adapting a book takes a bit more effort than simply getting a great tailor-made script on your table for a film. One needs to read and understand

the book to ensure if it's fit for celluloid space, and that's a bit of a challenge now. But even so, *Chanakya's Chant* is ideal for Bollywood, I think. As far as television is concerned, discussions are still on regarding *The Krishna Key* but nothing's been finalised yet.

**You are working on a business thriller next. What's that all about?**

Yes, it's called *Sialkot Saga*. I was born into a proper business family and somehow I wanted to focus on that aspect — about how business families evolve, how generations take over, the internal dynamics of such families. But I wanted to explore these issues in the context of a changing India. And it's set in 1946 so that element of history is also there, in addition to the suspense theme.

**Have you ever weaved your own personal life experiences in your books?**

That will make for a very boring read and I will have a tough time managing the pace of the plot. A guy, who goes for his MBA at 21, comes back and joins a *baniya* business in which he works for 20-odd years, and then suddenly realises that he wants to be an author — there's no plot of interest there at all!

The pseudonym of Shawn Haigns that you started off with, was it just another random anagram? It has a typical Western ring to it. The Western-sounding anagram wasn't intentional at all. I was simply playing scrabble and put all the letters on the board one day, and started jumbling them up. And since I was a fan of Jack Higgins, I thought that I should keep a pseudonym that sounds somewhat similar. I wanted a pseudonym more because I wanted to differentiate my literary pursuits from my business side. I wanted a situation where if someone googled Ashwin Sanghi, the business profile would be highlighted. But if someone googled Shawn Haigns, it will only be my writing out there on the web. But, of course, I had to stop with that eventually because of complications both in terms of marketing the book and other publishing constraints.

asad@tehelka.com