

GRAZIA INTERVIEW

Behind the Writer's Desk



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As *Private India* by Ashwin Sanghi and James Patterson hits bookstores, Sanghi tells us what we should expect when two bestselling authors collaborate

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Ashwin Sanghi

Thrillers – they aren't the easiest genre to break into. They need a lot of research, a tight storyline and lots of plotting. And India has not seen that many thriller writers either – ones who really break the mould and offer something substantial with an Indian sensibility. Most of them are restricted to pulp fiction in vernacular languages. But of the few who've made a mark on home turf, Ashwin Sanghi stands tall.

His acclaimed books, *The Rozabal Line*, *Chanakya's Chant* and the very popular *The Krishna Key* are proof that thrillers in India are a massive draw. "There is a great demand for pulp fiction, action and storytelling in India. Our biggest book sales happen at railway stations – people love reading fast-paced thrillers, that's my reader right there," says Sanghi.

Sanghi is an entrepreneur by profession and his first book *The Rozabal Line* was actually self-published. His second *Chanakya's Chant*, a modern-day political thriller, went on to win the annual Crossword Popular Choice award, and UTV-Disney has acquired the movie rights to it. His third book *The Krishna*

Is a writer's desk a key to his mind?

Key, shot to number one on the AC Nielsen all-India fiction rankings within the first week of its release.

This month he raises the bar with a cool collaboration with James Patterson, the famous creator of the *Private* series. Their newest venture, *Private India*, is as suspense-ridden and gripping as what you'd expect as a combination of Sanghi and Patterson's minds.

When we met Ashwin Sanghi at his plush South Mumbai house, we discovered that his affection for thrillers and the craft are really his most powerful arsenal in making this genre work in India. His workspace is nothing but a desk with a lone Mac on it – he's clearly missed the memo on how writers come with messy desks. His desk is meticulous and overlooks a garden that in Mumbai can only mean a luxury. Over coffee, he tells us about his love for maintaining a virtual desk on his computer. He is attached to his iPhone and reads on his Kindle. His cozy and minimalistic abode is missing a big showcase filled with books. His shelf is embedded inside the Kindle. His work is saved in excel sheets and his mailbox boasts memos and inspiration that he collects and sorts into folders and drafts. That's impressive, especially if you've gone in expecting a 'typical' writer, with unkempt hair and desk to boot.

As a businessman, Sanghi nails the dressed-for-work look – with a trademark smile, niceties (he offers us coffee or cookies at least once every 15 minutes), and neatly pressed trousers and a work shirt. His sense of humour as he pauses between questions is bang on time. But mostly, what we loved about him is his humility, his matter-of-factness that somehow makes sure we know his priorities. He gives us a real insight into the mind of a thriller writer – from his own ideas to Patterson's approach.

GRAZIA: How does it feel to work with a legend like Patterson?

ASHWIN SANGHI: We essentially share the same DNA – we write thrillers. So it was easy working with him. He is meticulous in his approach. He sees things in a very simple way. The problem with us (Indian writers) is that we tend to go overboard to show off our language skills while writing. We

say, "He expanded, he approached, he reproached...", we never just say, "He said...". That's the kind of simplicity you get with Patterson. I developed Santosh Wagh, head of *Private India*, the Mumbai branch of the world's finest investigation agency. The story idea emerged here and then Patterson added his mastery at storytelling to the book. He is probably the only author who has sold more books than any other author in the thriller genre in the last three years.

G: How did the collaboration happen?

AS: I got the offer on the *Private* series through my publishing house. Patterson's *Private* series goes from country to country and his protagonists change too – now his view has extended to India. I've written thrillers that are deep-rooted in mythology, this time it's about writing a contemporary thriller. That was it – I wanted a challenge and I enjoyed this.

G: What did you learn from writing with James Patterson?

AS: I learned that nothing beats formula. Patterson is quite fanatical about formula. And then, there is the quality of writing. Minimalism rules this boat. His usage of words is exact – less is more. What's impressive is his amplification of characters; they are larger than life, heroic, brave and over-the-top. He's also great at building conflict in the plot – impressive stuff.

G: What are your views on books in India currently?

AS: India still needs to pump up its commercial fiction space. The younger readers are looking for Western ideas, but they want it packaged into Indian sensibilities. There is also a certain disdain for commercial fiction, which needs to change. But our market is mature and we need to keep a few things in mind: We need to stop being wordy. We also need a strong base to create memorable Indian characters, like the Secret Seven or Sherlock Holmes. It's a shame because we are a country of storytellers, most of our scripts and *vedas* were passed on orally. Commercial writing in India has come full circle now – we have ignored our own history and culture. And so the need arises to put together books with Indian sensibilities

in an easily digestible package. It's closest to a non-Englishman writing in English. We need to get over our Colonial hangover. It's important to write like we think, talk and live. Surely we can do that.

G: When do you write?

AS: I work in a family business and I write, which means that I dedicate my days from 11-6pm to my business. I write either early morning at 6am or late at night after 10pm. I also end up spending evenings reading up and researching. Saturdays and Sundays are for social engagements. I am usually social so I get to write (laughs).

G: What research goes into writing a thriller of international proportions?

AS: Discipline and research: Two things that really help write a story. I dedicate enough time to develop the first plot so the story flows through seamlessly. I use a complicated software called Excel (laughs) and I put in stuff chapter-wise, conflict-wise and plot-wise – it's an elaborate plan but it works. I send myself voice notes, e-mails, Instagrams, anything that catches my eye to keep myself updated in my research. When it's crunch time, I have all my research in my mail already.

G: Who has motivated you to write?

AS: My granddad used to be a great storyteller. He imbued the storytelling genre in me. My granduncle bought me books every week. He was inspirational because we would discuss each and every book. He opened my mind to possibilities and that's reflected in my writing. My mother introduced me to pulp fiction and thrillers. My dad was a businessman, so from him, I got marketing skills, like when my book comes out, I need to know how we market it, what we do, what we put out etc. I watched *Silence of the Lambs* in college and that changed my life. Only the edge-of-the-seat thrillers can make you feel like that. I wanted a piece of the action.

G: What is your future plan?

AS: I am writing a small self-help book series; it's all about inspiration. My new book *Sialkot Saga* is close to my heart. And for now, it's *Private India*; looking forward to it very much. **Private India (Random House) hits stores this month**