

COLLABORATION

Two of a kind

Best-selling writers James Patterson and Ashwin Sanghi team up to bring the 'Private' series to India

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To call James Patterson a best-selling writer is an understatement. With a backlist of more than 130 books—his output is often as many as nine titles a year—he is also among the US' most prolific authors. The lifetime sales of all his books are greater than the combined figures for the works of Stephen King, John Grisham and Dan Brown. Soon Patterson is set to make a splash by bringing his *Private* series to India in a collaborative venture with Ashwin Sanghi, who has a strong home-grown following himself.

"I have not been to India yet," says Patterson on the phone. "Only seen it in the movies." He hopes to visit next year, though his latest "American-style mystery for Indian readers" is on its way. The book, *Private India*, is part of the popular series featuring ace detective Jack Morgan, who runs Private franchises across the globe (the titles of the novels—*Private London*, *Private Berlin*, *Private LA* and so on—suggest the geographical range of the series). In *Private India*, a serial killer runs amok through the city of Mumbai, clocking up eight victims, with the ninth being saved in the nick of time by Morgan and his team, led by Santosh Yogan, an unlikely private investigator with a severe alcohol problem.

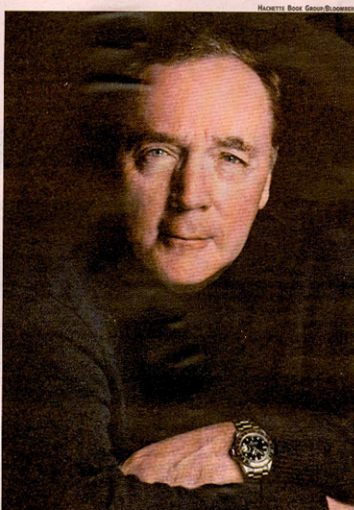


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"Patterson wanted the idea to come from me," says Sanghi whose novels, *The Rozabal Lin* and *The Krishna Key*, are considered to be India's answer to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Lost Symbol*, respectively. "Usually, I tend to work out an outline before starting a book, but in this case, it stretched to 15,000 words," he adds.

Patterson cannot but emphasize the importance of this preliminary exercise. "A lot of writers do no work hard enough on it," he says disapprovingly. "The plan of the novel is the most crucial part of writing. It is the stage when their imagination is on fire."

Once the blueprint was fully sketched out, the actual writing did not take too long. Within a few months, Sanghi had 90,000 word down—which Patterson reduced to 75,000. At close to 450 pages, the book is chunky, but a complete page-turner. "My pacing is very different from other genres of crime writing," says Patterson, "a lot opposed to the intellectual premises



Maximilian Baur/Contrasto

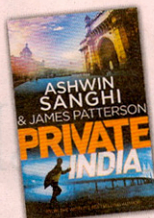
Teamwork James Patterson (above) has worked with a series of other writers, the latest being Ashwin Sanghi (left).

of the British school or the sociological focus of the Scandinavian writers, my plots work in a lot of emotions, the heat and passion."

"My interest has so far been to keep alive the mystery, the clue to the unanswered question," says Sanghi. "But in this book, the entire thrill had to come from the action, from the moment." Almost all the chapters in *Private India* run for no more than a few pages, galloping ahead through explosive twists in the plot. "A James Patterson novel is all about fireworks," says Sanghi. "We don't know what will set off what."

Indeed, little do we know, when we start the book, what a bizarre roller-coaster ride it will turn out to be.

From ritual murder cults like thugs to communal violence, to brutal crimes against women, to personal vendetta, to the sleaziness of the political classes, to the seamier side of showbiz, to numerology, to match-fixing—there is no dearth of masala in this concoction. Add to the list a plot to blow up Mumbai by Pakistani terrorists and the venal machinations of the police, and what you get is a rather grim portrait of the



Private India:
Random House India,
448 pages, ₹350.

A detailed outline, says Patterson, is the most crucial part of writing a successful crime thriller

world's largest democracy. Certainly not hearty encouragement for non-Indian readers to plan holidays in this country.

The Patterson phenomenon is not a simple reflection of his literary prowess. A persistent criticism of his work pertains to the sensational and simplistic plotting. Far from the sophistication of a book by King or Grisham, his books are conceived for those who like to get through a novel in the course of a flight or during an afternoon at the beach. It may not be an exaggeration to compare the act of consuming a Patterson thriller to that of making one's way through a helping of junk food: quickly engaging and instantly gratifying.

Easy as this may sound, the Patterson brand is the careful handwork of the man himself, whose writing career was preceded by one in advertising. Although his first book, published in 1978, sold a modest 10,000 copies, it was *Along Came A Spider* (1993) that gave Patterson the big break. Over the years he consolidated his image

with several popular mystery series—*Women's Murder Club*, in which a group of women solve crime in San Francisco; the *Alex Cross* series, named after an African-American homicide detective in Washington, DC; and the *Michael Bennett* series, where the eponymous hero, a Manhattan-based detective, is a widower with 10 multiracial adopted children, are some of the best known among his corpus.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Patterson has broken out of the mould in several other ways as well. In spite of his success as an individual writer, he chose to work with collaborators from across the world—a practical decision, given the volume and frequency of his output. He also wrote for young readers, a decision sparked by the aim of getting his son interested in books.

"One summer when he was 16, I told him he would have to read every day," says Patterson, "unless he wanted to live in the garage." Soon after, he launched the hugely popular *Maximum Ride* series, about a generation of genetically mutated children who are part human, part bird. To this day, he visits schools and funds reading programmes for children, among the several other charities that he runs with his wife (recently, Patterson promised \$250,000, around \$2.5 crore, to indie book stores in the UK and Ireland to promote reading among young people).

"Writing for adolescents allows me to be funny," he says—to step out of the mode he is most commonly associated with: gruesome murders and graphic violence. "The other night we were out for dinner and someone asked my business manager to describe me in one word," he says. "And he came up with 'efficient.'"

It's hard not to see the merit in the description.

Private India will be out on 21 July.