

When less is more

After Jack Morgan-reincarnated Private, a private investigation company, his fans have eagerly waited for him to unravel more secrets, especially as they are in distant lands involving pan intrigue. Morgan is one of the central characters created by the prolific James Patterson, whose books have sold more than 300 million copies and holds many publishing records. Interestingly, the series has also seen Patterson collaborate with a host of global writers, the latest of which is **Ashwin Sanghi**, a Mumbai entrepreneur and writer whose own bestsellers based on ancient Indian mythology have captivated his audiences. In an interview with **Suman Tarafdar**, he explains the hows and whys of this innovative collaboration



How was the experience of writing a book in collaboration? What were the challenges?

Working with James has been a refreshing experience. My focus has always been on research and plot, while the Patterson formula is pace and character. This book has given us a chance to combine our respective strengths and present something that represents the best of both. The challenges were communication – given the geographic distance between the two authors – and the need to present a single voice in the final product.

What was your role in structuring the story given that Private is already a global series?

Yes, it's true that this book is the eighth instalment of what is known as James Patterson's 'Private' series. This series is about a global detective agency that is called in to solve criminal cases that baffle the police. The fictional head of this agency is a charismatic chap called Jack Morgan. James Patterson has co-authored all

the books in the series thus far. All books in the series involve deadly criminals being hunted down by Jack Morgan's team in different parts of the world. Private India is simply an extension of that franchise to India. This particular story is set in Mumbai and attempts to convey the full impact of maximum city through Bollywood, money, mafia, god men, religion, business tycoons and politicians... that's precisely where I come in! 'Private India' is an Ashwin Sanghi story conveyed in a distinctly James Patterson format and style.

How does Santosh Wagh relate to Jack Morgan?

The only common figure across Private novels is Jack Morgan. All other characters have been developed from scratch in Private India. The central character is Santosh Wagh, a former RAW agent, who is the lead investigator. Dark and brooding, Santosh has many secrets hidden inside of him. Creating and fleshing out his character was by far the most interesting part of this project. I believe that Santosh Wagh's messed up personal life, the dark secrets that he carries, his incredible abilities and his background, put him in a space that is similar to Jack Morgan.

How did this collaboration come about?

A dear friend who has read all three of my books and works for Random House suggested my name to her



colleague who handles Patterson's books. Given the fact that all three of my previous titles have been thrillers with short chapters, compelling pace, and unexpected hooks every few pages, traits that are amply evident in James Patterson's writing, the fit seemed a natural one. We discussed the issues involved for about a couple of weeks and topped it off with a formal agreement rather quickly.

Given that your earlier novels have been largely mythology-based, how different was it to set this one in contemporary Mumbai?

True. My previous three books have been thrillers, but all have been with a historical, theological or mythological backdrop. This collaboration is an extension of what I have already been doing – writing thrillers – but with an entirely modern and contemporary backdrop. The DNA of a thriller remains unchanged even though the content may vary. Every sandwich is different even though all of them have two pieces of bread with a filling in between!

How was the discussion with James Patterson over the story? How often did you have to meet, and how long did the writing process take?

The process of collaborating was a new one for me. James provided a

guideline as well as an existing set of international characters that need to be woven into my story. Using his guideline, I developed the initial plot outline. We discussed the outline in detail and froze it after amendments. I then proceed to write the first draft while James wrote the final draft. All this happened with periodic interactions over e-mail. Once both James and I were done with the story, the editors at Random House took over. The entire process took around 15 months.

Given that structuring a thriller requires technical dexterity, how was the process of sharing the plot?

You are right. Writing thrillers is not only about inspiration and imagination but also about craft (or technical dexterity). There are a few simple rules that make a Patterson thriller: amplify character traits – make them larger than life; eliminate fluff; build twists and suspense ever so often; never compromise pace; build conflict until the very end. There are

some chapters in this book that are just about a paragraph long. It stems from the Patterson style of saying absolutely nothing that does not advance the plot. That is the key take-away from this collaboration: less is more. Given that both James Patterson and I were on the same page in terms of the fundamental character of the book, the process was effortless.

What aspects of India did you choose to highlight in this book?

Even though the story is a mainstream crime thriller, it is inspired by my deep respect for the power of Shakti. I have always wondered why we worship the sacred feminine in our temples but wantonly desecrate that very symbol in our daily lives. That is the key Indian element in this book.

What did the research for this book involve?

I usually spend months in the research of my novels but this one was different. History and mythology do not

constitute the core of this particular thriller even though they make appearances from time to time. Yes, I did some groundwork to make the novel feel 'real'. This included visiting a morgue, speaking to a private detective, interviewing a police officer and checking up on points of law with an advocate. In addition there were visits to key places in Mumbai that I wanted to describe. But the greater effort was on developing a detailed plot outline. This consumed far more energy and time than the research.

When is the book to be released, and what kind of promotions have been planned for it?

The book will be available in bookstores from 21 July onwards. The launch happens in Mumbai – the backdrop to the story – on 20 July. The book is then launched in the UK in August and in the US in November. Special offers have been made via online retailers but the primary focus will be on airports because this book is an ideal in-flight read. ♦

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