

FINANCIAL Chronicle

So how does a literary collaboration work, really?

I DO not for the life of me understand literary collaborations. Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, for example, co-wrote that huge best-seller *Freedom at Midnight*. How did they do it? Did one write a chapter and the other, the next? Or did one write the first half of the book and the other wrote the second half? Even if they agreed on plot lines and developments, how did they match styles? After all, a writer is nothing if he doesn't have a unique way of expressing himself, each person's style being a product of his reading, his vocabulary and his thought processes.

I thought of this when my friend Ashwin Sanghi, the immensely successful writer of *The Rozabal Line*, *Chanakya's Chant* and *The Krishna Key*, told me that he was collaborating with James Patterson on a book. Patterson is a publishing phenomenon, and people who have read his *Along Came the Spider* rave about it. Apparently he writes six books a

year(!) and if you think that must be a factory line, you can't be far wrong. For *The Private* series which he has been writing recently, he works with a different author in each country, and for his book set in India, the choice of co-writer is Ashwin. Not bad for an 'accidental' writer, one who was destined by family connections to balance books rather than read them (this line).

How did the collaboration work? Apparently like this: Ashwin wrote the plot outline of a crime thriller set in Mumbai, in which the protagonist Santosh Wagh is racing against time to catch a serial killer. Patterson then worked on this outline, adding bits here, taking out bits there. "The changes he made were amazing, and they really made the book," Ashwin, modest as ever, says. The two writers then inter-acted via email and Skype, before Ashwin began to work on the first draft. Once he was done, Patterson did a second draft which then went to the publisher.

LETTER FROM MUMBAI

ANIL DHARKER



TWIN DEAL: James Patterson (left) and Ashwin Sanghi (right)

The book was launched last Sunday over brunch at the Oberoi rooftop. Ashwin obviously has many friends because the place was so jam packed, I wasn't sure whether the drink I was sipping was mine or my neighbour's.

"Is James Patterson here?" I asked Ashwin. Apparently Patterson told Ashwin, "I will come for sure. Once you have sold half a million copies." Has he sold that many even of *Spider*? I doubt it, which explains why we have never come to India.

Incidentally, that reminds me of another writer who set his books in our country without ever coming here. That was an Englishman, HRF Keating who wrote the *Inspector Ghoti* series. His knowledge of India came from reading the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, then the most prominent magazine in the country. (When I became its editor, I got a rather charming hand-written note from Keating.)

I wonder what the collaboration

will do for Ashwin. (Besides making him richer than he is, I mean). Will it make him a different writer? Will it be better or more formulaic? The moment I ask this I know it's a redundant question because given Ashwin's intelligence, he will learn from Patterson's experience, pick up a hint or two, and discard what is superfluous.

It struck me at the brunch that the buzz around the book is also the realisation that Indian publishing is flourishing in a world where it is the doldrums elsewhere.

New writers spring up from everywhere; all of them find publishers, and the sales graphs go up and up each year. There are, inevitably, quality issues but the thing about books is that once you develop the habit of reading, it stays with you. Some readers never develop a taste for serious writing, but at least a few do. They do not necessarily become more rounded human beings, but they do get more out of their lives than others.