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PLOT, SET, GO

A wide-ranging plot peppered with snappy dialogue and strung on speed makes this thriller set in present-day Mumbai absolutely riveting By ZAC O'NEAL



Q&A: ASHWIN SANGHI

Vodafone-Crossword Popular Choice Award-winning author Ashwin Sanghi is a man who moves from triumph to triumph. He made an ambitious debut in 2007 with *The Rozabal Line*, in which he did to Kashmir what Dan Brown did to Scotland in the global megaseller *The Da Vinci Code*. The book virtually flooded bookstores, evidence that Sanghi's takes on India's past have plenty of fans.

Seven years later Sanghi is releasing his fourth thriller, this time co-authored with James Patterson. For those who have managed to miss the Patterson section in bookshops, he's the current master of commercial pulp and has sold upwards of 300 million books worldwide. To jog your memory a little, Patterson's most popular character is the 22-book-old forensic psychologist Alex Cross—a couple of the thrillers have been made into terrific Hollywood films, such as *Kiss the Girls* (1997) and *Along Came A Spider* (2001). Patterson has an interesting authorial project: he finds it tedious to write his books himself, and instead spawns the ideas and works in collaboration with other writers, which explains how he has been able to produce about a hundred

titles in thirty years, in contrast to the average writer, who might need a hundred years to produce thirty. Wikipedia implies that around 5 per cent of all hardcover books sold in the US come from the Patterson factories.

The 'Private series' concept is about a global detective bureau called Private, and the books in the series are co-written with writers from various countries who provide the local element—such as Mark Pearson (*Private London*), Mark Sullivan (*Private Berlin*), and Michael White (*Private Down Under*). For *Private India*, Sanghi was roped in to add local flavour by Patterson's publishers,

who had read and liked his earlier work. So what does this curried thriller taste like?

After a few hours of racy, breathless, non-stop reading, my first thought is that it is nearly impossible to tell which parts

of *Private India* are by Sanghi

and

which

(if any)

may be

written

by Pat-

terson

—so well

has Sanghi

mastered the

international

thriller style of writing. It's

all there: the short chapters

typical of Patterson's

pacing (some as short

as three sentences), first

murder on page 2 with lots

more to follow (averaging

one death per forty pages),

snappy no-nonsense

dialogue, and a constant

focus on speed, and speed

again, so that one barely

notices the passing of

time. Ergo: Comfortable

reading if you're stuck in

an airport or travelling on

a slow train.

Here Sanghi proves his

versatility by handling a

contemporary theme in a

thriller set in present-day

Mumbai. A misogynist

serial killer is on the loose,

strangling various famous

socialite women Thuggee

style with a yellow scarf,

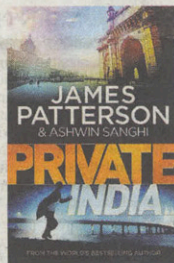
and adding ritualistic elements to the crime scenes. The main detective is Santosh Wagh—head of the Private detective bureau's India operations. In good detective novel tradition, he's a semi-recovered alcoholic, working out of a top secret agency located above a bar in Colaba. Apart from Colaba, we're taken to every famous and infamous location in Mumbai: from Bollywood studios to Chowpatty Beach, the overcrowded Arthur Road Jail and Kamathipura's dingiest brothels as well as the five-star hotel dos and yoga studios and hair spas of the rich. And then there are Dickensian style beggar syndicates, fake gurus, Mujahideen operatives planning bomb attacks and cricket spot-fixers, to name a few masala ingredients in this wide-ranging plot.

Enter Jack Morgan, the US-based director of the international Private agency, all set to have an affair with Bollywood star Lara Omprakash, who, before we have time to experience any steamy romance at all, has already become another victim of the serial killer. Private's team of experts, Hari, Nisha and Mu-

been, work over time surveying crime scenes and performing autopsies in their private state-of-the-art labs, competing against the bungled official investigation headed by the overworked Assistant Commissioner of Police, Rupesh, old friend of Santosh's turned foe.

The good news is that the pace rarely relents, with each of the over one hundred chapters pushing the plot another step forward. Even the info dumps, geared towards explaining India to foreign readers, are handled almost unobtrusively. The only problem is that with so many narrative elements, and two separate but intertwined revenge side plots directed against Santosh Wagh, I occasionally forget what the story is about. Ah, but then I remember it again: top-class time-pass, that's what it is.

A misogynist serial killer is on the loose, strangling famous women Thuggee style with a scarf and adding ritualistic elements to the crime scenes



PRIVATE INDIA
AUTHOR: ASHWIN SANGHI &
JAMES PATTERSON
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