A true storyteller

Ashwin Sanghi about how his books came into being and what he cooks

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It became clear during an interaction with Ashwin Sanghi as to why he is among India's highest-selling English fiction authors having written three independent novels, "The Rozabal Line", "Chanakya's Chant" and "The Krishna Key" in addition to co-authoring "Private Eye" with James Patterson. He is a born storyteller.

Meeting the author at Café Uno in Shangri-La's Eros Hotel on a sunny winter morning, one instinctively asked as to what drew the businessman to writing. Ashwin never wrote either in school or college. "I was a voracious reader but my writing was confined to academics. In fact, my English teacher once chided me, 'You think commas are to be sprinkled like salt and pepper'." Approaching his 30s it dawned on him that he could say many things on paper which he could not verbalise. "Being a businessman I was expected to write business-oriented articles which I did and these appeared in mainline newspapers. But honestly, I was bored of my writing."

Egged on by a friend to pen his thoughts on platonic relationship he did so under the pen name Shawn Haigins. "I had a blast writing it and discovered a new me. Without inhibitions I could say what I wanted. I felt liberated and reborn." Once bitten there was no looking back. The turning point was a meeting with a clairvoyant who informed that his maternal grandfather, who had passed away, was a tad disappointed with him despite fulfilling all his duties since Ashwin was not reading and writing. "I was told that he wanted me to write a book and include his name in it and that it will do well. This was followed with a visit to Rozabal shrine in Srinagar –– where I picked stories about a second body buried under the first one which was rumoured to be that of Jesus. I got obsessed with it." He discussed all this with his wife, who summed it as "cosmic nudging to do more." Immersing himself into reading all he could on the subject he wrote what he describes as a "19,000-word academic paper".

"I gave it to my wife to read who informed me the next day that after reading a few pages she fell asleep," admits Ashwin. "I rewrote it, made it interesting and fast-paced and converted it into a novel 'The Rozabal Line', by Shawn Haigins." Why the pen name? "I did not want to hurt my father who was always keen that I joined the business and stuck to it."

Undeterred by the moderate success he went to on to write "Chanakya's Chant" and "The Krishna Key". Ashwin, who describes himself as a writer of crime thriller with a theological twist, quips, "In the last 10 years from being known as a businessman who wrote I am now called a writer who also does business."

Finishing his diet coke, the writer moves on to aglio olio pepperoncino spaghetti pasta with extra cheese. "Though I like Italian cuisine, it is the *desi dal chawal* and *kichiri*, which win hands down. I also love South Indian fare especially the spicy and pungent *rasam* and the *medu vadas* fried golden brown. Top it with piping hot coffee and heaven has arrived!"
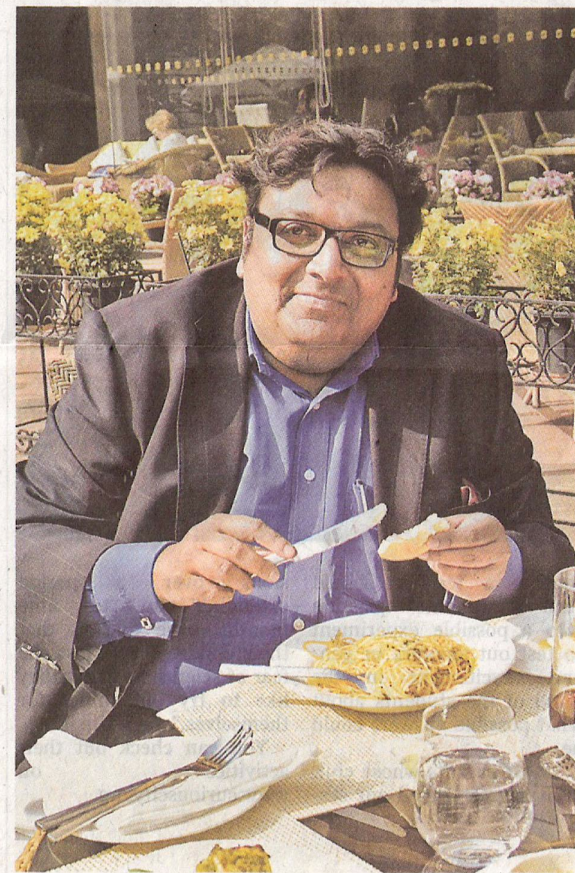
On his first break in India while pursuing his post graduation in business administration at Yale School of Management, he learnt cooking. "I grasped how to make rice, *dal, aloo ki sabzi, zeera aloo, gobhi* and *kadi* in that short span. On return, I carried the necessary spices and other ingredients," he narrates. Over the years he added pasta, omelette including the Spanish one and *biryani* (learnt from his Pakistan friend) to his list. "I won't go hungry as long as material to cook is there," he assures. He finds writing and cooking quite similar. "At a personal level both are an individual effort using different components. Tweaking them you make it your own. At a social level stories and food are shared with those around you so it must be appealing and relatable."

Equally passionate about street food he picks *pao bhaji* at Sardar in Mumbai as his favourite. "You will die for it and you will die if you eat it everyday," he comments. "Though I do try local cuisine while travelling I do not experiment too much and stick to the tried and tested."

Moving under the sun shade to sip the green tea he explains his reason for writing his latest book "13 Steps To Bloody Good Luck" (Westland). He mentions in the book of a relative who told him that "in life 99 per cent is about good luck....and the final one per cent is bloody good luck".

This apart he was equally fascinated when somebody queried as to the need to work hard. "I was always intrigued by luck and intended to write about it. It is while chatting with my architect about rain harvesting that I hit upon the contextual framework," he expounds. In his first non-fiction foray he critically examines luck, its different aspects highlighting 13 attitudes and approaches that helped lucky people to raise their flow of opportunities, recognise valuable ones and respond to them effectively. "I have drawn from the lives of , Pandit Ravi Shankar, Rajinikant, Narendra Modi."

Aimed at wide cross section of readers , Ashwin does not want them to perceive it as a mantra for success. Instead identify and exploit points which they possess while working on those they don't. Why include happiness as the 14th step? "It is most important to know what you have and feel blessed for it. Comparisons will lead to unhappiness."

On what made him a successful writer Ashwin chuckled and said: "If you can spin a yarn half the battle is won. You should know how to lie but it should be as close to truth as possible. On a serious note, I attribute 90 per cent of my success to my maternal grandfather, Ramprasad Gupta and maternal granduncle, Ramgopal Gupta. The former was a storyteller who narrated several tales to me including the ghost ones. The mix of fact and fiction influenced me. The latter gifted me books on all genres and made me write about them."

HIS TIME UNDER THE SUN *Ashwin Sanghi* PHOTO: MEETA AHLAWAT