

## C R I M E F I L E S

# The Ashwin Sanghi formula

A flowchart-spreadsheet approach works best when writing thrillers.

**PHEROZE L. VINCENT**

**F**our novels wiser now, Ashwin Sanghi laid out his 12-point approach to writing a thriller, recently at the Crime Writers Festival in New Delhi. The philosophy behind this flowchart-spreadsheet approach is that successful commercial fiction need not be a work of literary genius. It will sell as long as the reader can be captivated and the writer keeps on track.

"Crime novels are not a great literary endeavour. It is a craft more than an art," he says. While the literary value of a book depends on the skill and imagination of a writer, Sanghi's formula is useful for rookies with a writer's block.

The first tip is to never start until you have the whole plot. In his latest, *Private India: City on Fire*, co-written with James Patterson, the outline ran to 18,000 words while the draft itself is 80,000 words. "The plot is like the outlines in a colouring book," he explained.

The second point is to have a strong opening and conclusion, and provide hooks at the end of each chapter to draw the reader to the next. "You need to have a corpse in the first page or the first para or the first sentence of your book. The last page should make readers look forward to your next book," he says.

Sanghi creates an Excel sheet with chapters in one column, their description in the next and the hook to retain readers in the third column.

The third element is the balance of surprise and suspense. While an assassination would count as surprise, a lurking assassin is the suspense. "An unfired bullet is far more dangerous than one shot," says Sanghi.

His fourth trick is to use every opportunity to bring out conflict. "The hero must struggle against all odds. The reader must sympathise with him. The hero cannot have an easy time," he says. This dovetails into his fifth point of creating larger-than-life characters — both good and bad. The contrast between the hero and the villain should be stark. Creating a cult character is something a thriller-author should indulge in without reservation.

The sixth strategy supplements the first two. Sanghi advises writers to drop questions gradually into the novel. By the end, all the questions need to be answered. The research and leg work should be completed before beginning the novel. Once the loose ends are tied, the clues can be dropped whenever the writer wishes.

For a thriller writer, less is more. That's the seventh rule. Descriptions of crime scenes should only include observations that lead to answers that resolve the crime. "Read your lines out aloud, especially conversations between characters. That eliminates non-conversational language," says Sanghi.

The eighth rule: Tell a story, don't write it.

The ninth rule is an extension. Everything should be said from the point of view of the main character. If another character's point of view must be used, restrict it to the scene involving that character.

Get it right is the 10th rule. "A lie is believable when it is as close to the truth as possible. Research makes it believable. There's always going to be a reader who knows the particular aspect you are writing about, better than you. For that reader and your own reputation, you can't compromise on research."

Read, Re-Read and rewrite: that's the 11th rule. "Every scene must create intense emotions in the readers."

Finally, Practise Practise — the more you write, the better you get.

"Bestseller writers aren't the best writers. They're the most thick-skinned ones. I faced 47 rejections for my first book. Those publishers didn't know better."

