

MYTHOLOGY TO MURDER MYSTERY TO McDONALD'S: ASHWIN SANGHI AT AN AUTHOR'S AFTERNOON, PRESENTED BY SHREE CEMENT, WITH t2

Bestselling writer Ashwin Sanghi's conversation with writer Jash Sen was a "bloody" entertaining experience for a select audience at an Author's Afternoon, presented by Shree Cement and Taj Bengal, held in association with t2, Pragna Khatun Foundation and literary agency Sisyph. Edited excerpts...

Jash: What I want to start with is, where did you find that first spark?

Ashwin: Honestly, writing ran in my blood. My mother's side loved reading, my father's family on the other hand, was really a family of business people. It would be difficult to find someone within the Sanghi family who would read a book. And I mean a book (smiles).

But the ray of light in my life was my grand-uncle, who lived in Kamrup. He had a beautiful library with some 15-20,000 books. He would send me a book every week, to read.... That was the best education I received in my life. If I think back to college, or school, or MBA programme, none of it was worth anything in comparison to that. And it wasn't just Shakespeare, Dickens and Tolstoy, it was also stuff that he felt that I must read. *Autobiography of a Yogi*, *Parashahansa Yogananda*, *Lord Chaitanya's Life* (H. R. Chowdhury), New 18th Edward Fitzgerald edition of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.... That's really where the spark came from.

Jash: As we go from your first book *The Rotted Line* to *Chenokov's Chant* to your third, *The Evil Eye*, I see a change in your writing style. How would you say your style has evolved?

Ashwin: When you are writing your *Rubaiyat* or *Udhavavilasa*, the *Rotted Line* is my best book. Because I wasn't constrained. As you start becoming more known, there is an expectation about what you should be writing, what you should be covering and how you should be conveying it. You set boundaries for yourself.

Having said that, when I look back, *Rubaiyat*, was all over the place. It ran from *WINE* all the way into the present day. I wouldn't blame people for thinking that Ashwin Sanghi was consuming some sort of mind-expanding substance, but he was not.

Writing well of course is about telling a story. No matter what words you use, ultimately the story is paramount. But it's also about getting balance. For example, the balance between research and story. Or balance between surprise and suspense....

There are people who say writing is an art. I think it's much more a craft. And my craft as the craftsman was to go ahead and tell them I am a work in progress. And of course, there are a bunch of critics who have tried to moan my whiff sort of a writer I am. I remember one of the earliest reviews.... a lady said, 'Well, Ashwin Sanghi's book is nice, it could've been a little shorter. It should have stopped on page 8' (laughs or loses).



Ashwin Sanghi (left) and Jash Sen at an Author's Afternoon at Taj Bengal. Pictures: Anshika Shankar Rao

Sundeep Bhutoria of Pragna Khatun Foundation asked Ashwin about his 'Bhutan book'.

"You are purposefully putting this on record! What happened is, we were in Bhutan for the Mountain Echoes literary festival and I made a commitment to the Queen Mother that I will back in Bhutan in one of my future books. As it turns out, Dhruv features in my next, *Sialkot Saga*," Ashwin told the audience.



H.M. Bangur, the MD of Shree Cement, selected Ashwin with an embossed utterance. "Is there anything that can predict who will be lucky? Because I was reading this book. Picked by *Pendemonium* (by Nassim Nicholas Taleb), and I want to ask you if we look at random things and say it's all luck.... 50,000 people start a job and one is successful, is it luck or is it somebody or the other fate to be successful?"

Bangur asked, "Brilliant question, I wish I had prepared some more," Ashwin quipped. "Part of it is randomness but even in randomness there are patterns. The sweet spot for success is when there is an overlap of D and EQ. In *13 Steps to Bloody Good Luck*, I have introduced the concept of LO - luck quotient," Ashwin added.

Ashwin's Off-Spin

● Alfred Hitchcock said the length of a movie should be determined by the endurance of a human bladder. But there are stories where you don't want to get up, even when you want to take a break! That's the kind of stories I want to tell.

● I have always maintained that I am a McDonald's more than a Michelin-starred restaurant.

● My writing is a little bit like a children's colouring book. I already have the outlines in black and white and by the time I actually get down to writing, all I am doing is using crayon and putting red in a particular place and green in a particular place.

Ashwin: There's one part of me which thinks that I could be a killer. I think there is a part in each of us that thinks there is a killer lurking inside us.... and come on, your best export from this city has been Indrani Mukerjee! When I looked at the Indrani story I had just finished the plot for another *Dhruv* book, and my wife asked me, "Why are you looking so angry?" I said, "I had written this as a plot, my editor and my publisher would have said, 'This defies all logic!'"

What happened really was that one of my very good friends who used to work with Random House got posted in London. And she was working in the same office as another lady who was representing James Patterson. So, when people ask me how did the *colours* of my writing come, I like to mention marriage. Those two ladies, like two old aunts, got together over lunch and said, "So you have a guy who writes thrillers in India and I have a guy who's like the biggest writer of thrillers in the US. Let's put them together and see what comes out."

I had a lot of fun writing a murder mystery. This is a genre that interests me and I want to alternate between pure and simple mythology and history, and crime. The other thing is, I don't want to be bored in. I think my latest book, *13 Steps to Bloody Good Luck*, was my effort to say, "Hey listen, I can do that also."



I have also realised that the relationship between a critic and an author is pretty much the dog and the lampost! I have stopped worrying about that. The best compliment I have had ever is from someone who said, "I was up till dawn because I couldn't stop turning the pages." That's the ONLY thing that counts....

Jash: For *The Krishna Key*, you have listed 43 books and 32 blogs and websites and 10 video and audio sources. Why do you do it? **Ashwin:** See, the stuff that I write about is grey area. If you look at the two words of believers and atheists something is always there, but there is nothing to believe and there is something in every believer that is itching to doubt - my effort is to bring those two worlds a little closer. For those who want to believe, may be my book will give them some doubt and those who want to disbelieve, may be it will give them some faith.

I don't look at my books as something that will cover you, some great fountain of knowledge. It's a starting point. It might just pique your interest to the point where you want to read more, or research more.

Jash: How did your book with *Jash Paterson (Private India)* come about?

Zed Feroz, the resident manager of Taj Bengal, has known Ashwin since before his bestselling days. "Ashwin is a son of the famous Sanghi family, the Taj used to deal with him.... over the years I remember him as a young executive, getting business from him.... And I know he still loves his single malt and his cigar," smiled Feroz.

Jash: I enjoyed *13 Steps*... Immensely! It looks at luck as a factor of opportunity and attitude.

Ashwin: The idea had come almost 10 years ago, at a time when the whole world was busy rejecting me. Forty-seven rejections later, there was no publisher left that would approach. My father had a very very close Punjabi friend, I told him, "Uncle! Nothing is happening, my single life has come to a standstill. This is the end of my writing career!"

He said, "Bete, just remember, in life 90 per cent is about good luck." I said, "What about that 1 per cent?" That must be hard work, talent, perseverance, time management....

Jash: Oh yeah! He lifted his glass and said, "That 1 per cent that 1 per cent is known as bloody good luck." It got me thinking. What is that 1 per cent that makes some of us so lucky? I have read lots of self-help, success and autobiographies and ended up with a huge scrapbook of real-world examples, because simply conveying a theory is not as interesting compared to when it is an example. Because we love hearing stories, I figured that this would be a great way to be able to present those stories of people who actually did it and then try and provide me may be a rationale as to what was behind them in making it happen.

Thomas Edison said, "I haven't failed, I have just found 10,000 ways that don't work." Once you start thinking of it that way, suddenly your life opens up. When I was getting rejected by publishers, I had on a bulletin board in front of my desk the number of rejections that had come in. Next to it was another list. It had the number of books that I wrote. It was 12. Twice was the number of rejections. In *13 Steps*, I have written 50, was 50, which was the number of rejections Stephen King faced before his first book, *Carrie*, was published. And 50 was *Game With The World*.

And I said, my god, I am outdoing these guys! I am probably the best worst author there is.

Jash: What's next on the horizon for you?

Ashwin: Currently my entire focus is on finishing a book called *Sialkot Saga*. It starts in 1947 and tracks a business family all the way up to 2015. I hope to have it out by January. I also hope to be able to give you another crime thriller may be next year. *And 13 Steps*... is being developed into a series. Because the truth is that now I also need to make sure that my mythological and historical books are substantial enough in order to be able to sustain me. So there is that what is called being *Ashwin* now kicking in. But I want to write only those books that I love. I think it was Nathaniel Hawthorne who said, "Easy reading is damn hard writing." And so if I have to make something very easy to read, I have to work on it 10 times harder.

t2 reader Pooja Sorli, a student of St Xavier's College, was happen-cast to meet Ashwin Sanghi.

Text: Samshita Chakraborty
What I like about Ashwin Sanghi...
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