

Weaving • *magic*

A master storyteller and author of three bestselling novels, Ashwin Sanghi is one of India's leading English fiction authors. Be it business or mythology, fiction or non-fiction, he has captured the attention of readers. In a candid chat with *Trujetter*, the spinner of yarns tells us about his recent book, *The Sialkot Saga*, his method and discipline on writing, on collaborating with James Patterson on the *Private India* series, and more.

Words: MIA GANDHI

What led to the concept behind *The Sialkot Saga*?

During the early days of my writing career, I stayed away from business-oriented topics. After all, my writing was an endeavour to escape the humdrum of my business life. But after I wrote *Chanakya's Chant* that dealt with the games people play in politics, I became convinced that I could quite easily write a book about the games people play in business. That was the spark that led to *The Sialkot Saga* which is essentially a story of business conflict.

Your books span centuries & themes. How do you research on them?

I usually spend a year on research for books in my Bharat series. Take the example of *The Sialkot Saga*. The research for this book was difficult. A substantial amount of reading happened before I started plotting the story. The ancient track was the easier bit. The more difficult part was in trying to get the contemporary history

of India right. Books were able to provide recorded accounts but I needed more. Things like movies, music, restaurants, celebrities and culture are usually never part of the historical narrative while it is these very things that provide the flavour of that time. I was only able to fill those gaps with extensive interviews with people who had lived those years in those cities. With each reading or interview, I would jot down even more ideas. It finally resulted in a plot outline that ran to over 10,000 words.

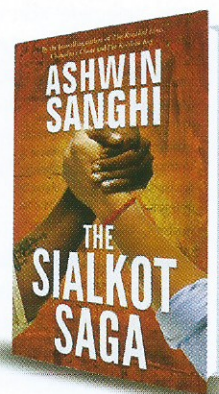
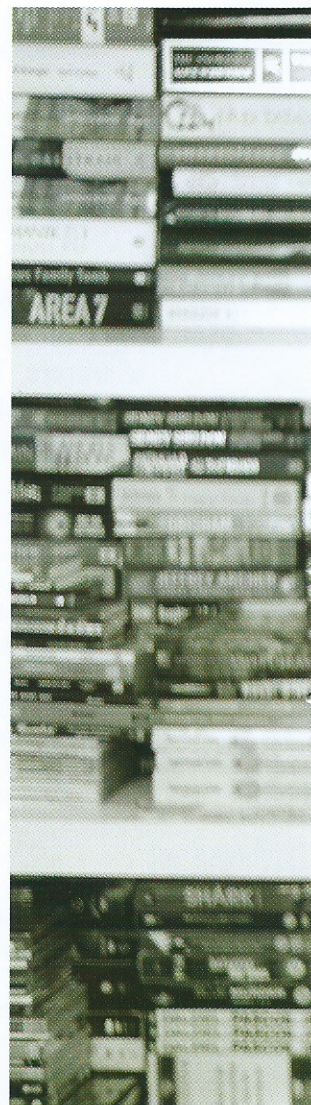
Do you have any fixed routine for writing that you follow?

I usually write in the mornings from 5 am to 9 am, which explains why I have to start my day at the office late. My evenings are usually spent reading and researching from 6 pm to 10 pm. I am an introvert by nature and have a close circle of friends whom I meet every few weeks. Other than that, I have virtually no social life. My life revolves around work, writing and

my family. And honestly speaking, I like it that way.

How have Indian readers, in general, evolved in the past decade?

The changes are at several levels. Firstly, they are reading more books by Indian authors than foreign ones. This is the exact opposite of what used to happen a decade ago when foreign authors used to dominate the bestseller lists. Secondly, the demographic has changed. A larger chunk of readers are young these days. It means that writers have to be able to reach out to them. Finally, Indian readers seem to be looking for great stories rather than great writing. Ten years ago, our publishers encouraged literary fiction and non-fiction over commercial fiction. The explosion in fiction within sub-genres such as mythology, romance, chick lit and crime is due to the fact that new authors are being encouraged. I think it augurs well for commercial fiction in India.





According to you, what are the ingredients of a good book?


When I complete a book and hand it over to my publisher, I ask him: did you turn the pages or did the pages turn themselves? Commercial fiction is about telling compelling stories, it's not about weaving exquisite sentences. The first paragraph of your story must hook your readers. The end of every chapter must compel readers to turn the page. The last paragraph of your book must ensure that they look out for your next book. Rather simple really.

What is it like to collaborate with James Patterson?

I was slightly concerned that I would be attempting something a little different from the usual. After all, my previous books were thrillers but with an abundance of history and mythology. *Private India* on the other hand was meant to be a purely contemporary crime thriller. But James took care of that. He suggested that I should frame the plot outline. This meant that I was free to introduce elements that excited me. This clinched the deal. James provided a guideline as well

as an existing set of characters that need to be woven into the story. Using his guideline, I developed the plot outline. We discussed the plot outline in detail and froze it after amendments. I then wrote the first draft. The final draft was written by James. All of this happened with periodic interactions over email.

Is writing non-fiction as satisfying as spinning fictional yarns?

No. That's why I try to tell stories even when I'm writing non-fiction. My creativity is at full throttle when I'm tackling a novel. 

QUICK TAKE

A must-read book:

Autobiography of a Yogi by Paramahansa Yogananda

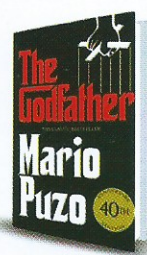


Favourite author/genre:

Arthur Hailey for research-based thrillers

Book on your nightstand:

The Tao of Physics by Fritjof Capra



Favourite book turned movie/tv series:

Godfather by Mario Puzo

Top 3 fictional characters:

Hercule Poirot (from Agatha Christie's books), Hannibal Lecter (from the novels of Thomas Harris) and Jeeves (from the PG Wodehouse novels).