

THE OVERLAP GUY

In conversation with Ashwin Sanghi on his myriad of books and the desire to not be compartmentalised

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COULD IT BE THAT WHAT I EXPERIENCE in my dreams are shadows of my real life and right now, with you talking to me, this is my dream life?" Ashwin puts this question across as if he were passing pastry on a quarter plate. "Nah! I'm awake, this can't be my dream state, I dream only when I sleep," I think, for I'm the sort of woman who sees things for what they are. Yet, there's that germ of doubt all of a sudden. "But, wait. What if this is actually a dream?" We are barely a few minutes into our conversation and Ashwin Sanghi, author of best-selling novels like Keepers of the Kalachakra, The Rozabal Line, Chanakya's Chant, and Private India has already thrown open a door full of possibilities.

By now, I am convinced that Ashwin has a very unorthodox approach to life and his stories too must come from places that aren't ordinary. "People talk about the fact that we writers go looking for stories but actually

stories come looking for us. There was a story that came looking for me. Somewhere around 2002 or '03 I landed up in Kashmir for a wedding. It was the peak of militancy in Kashmir and the hotel I was staying in was devoid of tourists. I was going through severe depression and eventually told my driver to take me somewhere and he managed to take me to the heart of Srinagar where there is a tomb called Rozabal. The common folklore around Rozabal is that it is the place where Jesus Christ is buried. I was obsessed with this story so I spent the next year and a half trying to study everything I could about that tomb, alternative theories, I met as many people as I could to know about the tomb and read well over 50 books. At the end of that time I had become somewhat of an expert on that subject which was very strange, because my background was 180 degrees to what I was doing."

Ashwin spent most of his growing up years studying business and training for the same. From the age of 12 or

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13 onwards he spent a few hours learning the two most important words in the Marwari vocabulary, debit and credit (as he likes to joke about) and went on to pursue an MBA in Finance in the UK only to come back and join the family business. But where does writing fit in? "Everything was sort of predetermined that I would go into the business world. My maternal grand uncle, who lived in Kanpur, had this rather strange but very beautiful habit of sending me a book to read every week starting from age 12. During his lifetime he sent me a few 100 books and they were all varied. I was exposed to books that I would ordinarily not have read on my own at a very young age. Books like the Mahabharata Retold, The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, Tagore's Geetanjali and Autobiography of a Yogi. He had a habit of sending a book in the week and expecting that once I was done with it, I would send him a letter and tell him what I read and what I liked or didn't like and why. It was like the preliminary form of a book review really. That was going on in parallel with my business life so at that time I didn't understand that there was actually a literary spark within me that was growing, it was happening but it was subdued."

Throughout our conversation, Ashwin sits relaxed in his recliner and continues regaling me with the stories behind his books and the journey he has been through and about how he was rejected 47 (what!?) times by publishers for Rozabal Line. Following that, he started writing the 13 Steps series, a series of self-help books, starting with 13

Steps to Bloody Good Luck. Considering the genres of his three series, Bharat, 13 Steps and Private (a crime thriller) series and how distinct they all are from each other, I ask him if he considers himself to be a man of science or religion and that's when he sits up and says, "People always try to label me a certain way. I'm variously called a mythological philosopher, a historical fiction writer, I'm called the 'what if' writer," he says, pointedly looking at my editor who's all too busy munching on the excellent grilled cheese sandwich that has been rustled up for us to notice, before continuing, "I'm categorised into many fields but none of them excite me individually. Where I see an overlap between one or more areas, that's where the excitement lies for me. I'm the overlap guy, I suppose!"

I ask him how he switches between the two series to which he replies, with a smile, "I have to keep flipping between three series actually because there's also the crime-thriller series with (James) Patterson. But it's not about switching; my true love lies with the Bharat series. Besides that, I dabble into other things, which is the 13 Steps series, crime thrillers and all of that but those are flings. I mean, they happen. The other part is that I've always had this innate fear of being compartmentalised. It scares me because I don't think I can go through life just writing one kind of book. I have a lot of stories that I want to share with the world but sadly there's not enough time. But what I ensure is that I have very bad karma in this life so I get



many lives and all those stories get worked out.” That’s how easy switching between series ought to be for him I guess because by now he had gone back to his relaxed position.

Speaking of his crime-thriller series where he collaborated with James Patterson, I ask him about his experience working with him. “James is more of a wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am sort of a person. He writes in broad brush strokes. Whereas I’m one of those who loves research and historical elements, I’m meticulous in terms of detailing. I think we complement each other very well in that case. The reason why James and I came together was on an account of a common friend. James’ rep said that he is very keen to write a thriller set in India and my friend said that she had the ideal thriller writer in India and it was almost an arranged marriage really where the boy and the girl hadn’t met each other but the ‘aunties’ had decided that this will work.”

Ashwin is one of those people who can keep you glued to the stories you read in his books and make you lose track of time when you listen to him narrate them in person too. He would be in the middle of a conversation about a nightmare that he had and switch to the time he got drunk with Dan Brown and spoke about God. “2014 is when Dan Brown visited India and we made a dinner plan that went on till 2am. It’s difficult to explain how someone can push your buttons and you just want to talk! At about midnight

he asked me what I think about God. In The Krishna Key, there is a part where I talk about the fact that God is in the gaps of human knowledge. So I had a writing pad in front of me and I wrote $G = \text{infinity} - K$. He was also 4-5 drinks down so you can imagine to which extent this conversation had been lubricated. He asked me what is that and I said G is God, infinity is the whole wide universe and K is the extent of human knowledge. What we don’t know we attribute to God, Infinity - K. He said he had a similar concept that he calls God of the gaps and I was like wow! That was what I was talking about!”

People often compare Ashwin to Dan Brown and I ask him if he gets annoyed with the comparison but that is not the case. “I love Dan Brown! I’m probably the world’s biggest Dan Brown fan! It actually started with the Da Vinci Code. Frankly, this book came to me later because I had already read the book, Holy Blood Holy Grail which, to a very great extent, was the precursor to the Da Vinci Code. Dan takes elements which are almost ubiquitous. People who visit the Sistine Chapel will go and do the regular thing but he’ll write about something people haven’t noticed and that changes the outcome of the story. In that sense, I have no problem being compared to him because he’s one among tremendously unique people.”

As the conversation flows from one universe to the next parallel universe, I wonder how this bestselling author gets



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past writers’ blocks. He explains that writing a book for him is actually quite a mathematical process. It’s essentially months of research that is digested and then used to create a sharp plot line. An outline of the main story, as it were. Things thereafter are a cakewalk. At least he would have you believe so. “When I begin to write, it’s almost like filling colour in a drawing book that already has outlines. The only decision left to make is what colour I want to fill it with. So writing is the easiest part for me,” he says. And if all else fails then there’s the age old remedy he relies on. “And as the old saying goes, there’s no writer’s block that a peg of whiskey can’t cure,” he laughs heartily. His favourite single malt, of course but not Highlands or Lowlands or Islay Scotch. “Yamazaki.”

Ashwin’s drawing room and book-laden study, where he works, is a den or a lair that lends itself to easy conversation. Words flow between us like the amber liquid that he likes to sip, but we both have a common enemy. Time, and all too soon it’s time to wrap. I pack my notebook and almost at the door when I remember. “What next?” I ask. “I’m done writing the last chapter of the book, the 6th book in the series. That will hopefully get launched in January. It has a very interesting take because there is a modern day story and there is an ancient story. The ancient story is set in China and one half of the story is set in India,” he tells me. January can’t come soon enough I guess. **📖**

