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Hall of Shame

Technology tames defaulters in book trade

Book Link Correspondent

A WHATSAPP group has finally begun the arduous task of tracking and listing defaulters in the book trade. These are mainly distributors, retailers, book stores small and big who take books from publishers on credit that has often stretched for a decade. In the WhatsApp group's Hall of Shame today are more than 200 defaulters. This is one case of social media and technology actually being able to begin the process of a cleanup, very necessary in the publishing industry.

In 2012, that is four years ago, *Book Link* had published a defaulters' list that contained a dozen names. Some of those names continue to remain on our list still. There was no WhatsApp then. What has changed today is that a set of people within the very fractured industry have got together to tackle the bad business of 'default', an issue we as a newspaper have been campaigning against consistently for many years.

The book business can be a good business. It can make both publishers and booksellers earn profits and has the potential to make more than the author rich. In the 1960s it was a good



business and that was when the industry saw a dramatic expansion. However, for the past fifty years, the business has been flooded with malpractice, people just deciding one fine morning to sell books. All it needs is a friendship with a publisher or distributor, no deposits, no guarantees, nothing needed to enter the book business. Nothing needed to prove your credential.

The book business works on 'trust' and as such, it became murkier as the years rolled on. Publishers today find that each has more than a dozen defaulters. Publishers and sellers like Officers Books, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, Star Education, Astral Inter, Discovery Publishing House, Heritage Publishers, Ane Books, Manas and many small

“ From the WhatsApp group, the members have now created a Google Apps local group with e-mail facility for 10,000 people. So every time some information is posted on this group, the Defaulters of Book Trade forum, it goes to ten thousand members. <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!pendingmember/dobt/apply>.”

and medium publishers find recovering dues from sellers/distributors a major hassle.

Vivek Garg, legal advisor to Manas, owned by Sumanlata, had set up the WhatsApp group a few months ago, at first thinking it would provide publishers a platform to get together. 'We got together to discuss matters

such as downfall in sales, problems with governments, regulations, laws, taxes, news about government dictums that come forth from time to time and other activities of the book trade', Garg says.

'We wanted to get together to boycott tenders by the government/s, by aided institutions, libraries and other organisations.' Legally, there can be no tenders for books, as per the GOC rates (rates fixed by the Good Offices Committee of The Federation of Publishers' and Booksellers' Associations of India) and the tender process has resulted in corrupt practices and made it almost impossible today for honest publishers to get their books into institutions and public libraries, government departments. The Delhi State Booksellers and Publishers Association has already taken up the matter with the HRD and Culture Ministries. 'We want to draw the attention of the Finance Ministry to the fact that booksellers/publishers should be allowed to sell books according to GOC rates', Garg says. It was initially for concerted action like a boycott of tenders by the book trade that the WhatsApp group was formed.

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Turtle on the move

TOP GUNS in the publishing industry, some on notice period, have decided to come together and set up a publishing house that will provide 'educational services'. The new company will be called Turtle Books. Former HarperCollins CEO PM Sukumar, Publishing Director of Oxford University Press Rohit Dhar, EVP of S Chand & Co Santosh Verma and Sri Krishna Naroor, former MD of Collins India will be in senior management position of the new entity which hopes to begin publishing by August, end-September.

Asked why they are venturing into an already crowded 'education' market, PM Sukumar told *Book Link*, their intention is to make 'a good contribution' in the field of education. He said, this is an area for investment 'in a social cause'. 'It is a sector with great potential... every kid is entitled to eight years of schooling' and deserves content that is meaningful and qualitatively competent, Sukumar said, emphasising, 'enough justice has not been done' to school kids in providing quality content.

'Given the government's emphasis on schooling—the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education—and as educational content is the fastest growing sector in publishing', it makes for eminent sense to enter the educational publishing sector now despite the crowding, Sukumar said.

The company will produce both imprint and digital content for the Higher Education and K12 sector, Dhar told *Book Link*. — continued on page 7

There is no substitute for good marketing

The hangover the next morning... that's marketing: Ashwin Sanghi

Papri Sri Raman

FINALLY, ASHWIN Sanghi's *The Sialkot Saga* is on the stands. His three books, *Rozabal Lines*, *Chanakya's Chant* and *Krishna Keys* have been hugely successful. At JLF 2015, he told a discerning audience, '...We had detective fiction written by Satyajit Ray in the 1960s. By now, we could have created tons of content, we could have had our own Nancy Drew and Sherlock Holmes, we could have had our versions of great characters but we have always thought like "no, this is not the kind of stuff we should be dealing in."' We have been telling *Book Link* readers about *Sialkot Saga* for more than a year now. Ashwin refuses to let on, what his next one will be, in a frank chat with your newspaper.

Question: It is surprising to find fiction beginning with the Partition—that too... a last train scenario. Did you agonise over

where to begin... which to make the defining moment in India's current history?

Not really. I knew that the story had to begin with partition. Partition was the labour pain that accompanies childbirth. The rest of the novel was going to be about the two protagonists but it was partition that mapped their destinies.

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.

Q: You have used the memorable bads (mostly the bads rather than the goods) in post-independence history to weave your narrative around. Was doing this difficult as a storyteller?

It wasn't difficult. We tend to remember low points in our history much more than the high points. Low points are emotionally traumatising and emotionally draining hence

they tend to linger on in our memories. I simply wanted to take these 'bads' as you call them, and show that it was possible to overcome. The research was substantial though because for every year of the narrative, I first had to plot every major event and then plot what was happening in the lives of the characters.

Q: In the run-up to the release, the publicity forecast a mystery at the end...but you have ended it on a philosophical note... obviously this is deliberate... this is a deviation from your other Bharat series books...why?

There is no deviation. The *Krishna Key* also ended on a philosophical note. This

one not only ends with philosophy but also answers a key scientific mystery as it races towards the conclusion.

Q: You are making a timeframe/era/milennium connection from Ashoka to Ranjit Singh... and right into corporate India of the 21st century. Very early on you make Samudragupta say, 'He who has gold, makes the rule....that's the golden rule.' Are you saying that there is little difference between ancient India and today's India? India's driving philosophy is gold... money... riches... it was so three thousand years ago... its the same today.

Absolutely. In the days of yore, the most powerful of kings knew that a full treasury was critical to the kingdom's strength. Chanakya says as much in his *Arthashastra*. The difference between then and now is the fact that enlightened individuals of yore always knew that gold was simply a transit point and that the ultimate destination lay beyond mere wealth. In modern times that

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My writings attempt to address tantalizing zone that's overlap of history & mythology

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seems to have been forgotten. This was the central message that I wanted to convey through *The Sialkot Saga*.

Q: You have used a lot of modern-day financial scams and investment jargons.

I started working for a Marwari family business at age fifteen. I was never a banker but I used to deal with bankers and fund managers all the time. By the time that I wrote my first book, *The Rozabal Line*, I had been working for over twenty years in active business. In many instances, I was at the receiving end of investments that went wrong and squandered opportunities. They say that failure is the best teacher. It holds absolutely true for me.

Q: The book is extremely well-researched, makes your readers smirk... think of Grisham, Jeffery Archer styles.... not James Patterson style though.

You are right. This book is less like those of James Patterson or Dan Brown and more like those of Jeffrey Archer or Sidney Sheldon. Again, these are authors that I grew up reading and some part of their style comes through. 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.

Q: Tell us something about the pen name Shawn Haigins.... did you feel a foreign name would sell better than Ashwin Sanghi?

As you know, I am not a writer by profession. I was born and brought up in a business environment. By the time that I completed writing my debut novel in 2006, I had already been in business for over 20 years. The decision to use a pen name was nothing more than a desire to compartmentalise my life so that my entrepreneurial dimension would remain distinct and separate from my literary one. Hence my first novel was written under the name 'Shawn Haigins', an anagram of my real name 'Ashwin Sanghi'. When Tata-Westland decided to publish that book in India, they insisted that it had to be published under my real name. As it turns out, that wasn't such a bad idea. It made me more famous than Shawn!

Q: Corruption everywhere... you have fingered everything... from food imports, textiles, defence deals... dock-side crimes to white collar crimes.... the book reads like a non-fiction commentary on Bharat of today... and how it arrived at this point of super-terrorism-plagued India... is there a political voice you are trying to hide here in the name of fiction?

I steer away from two subjects in ordinary discourse: religion and politics. Both these subjects tend to polarize. I prefer narrating my stories. Often my personal beliefs may manifest themselves in the narrative but I don't end up losing friends that way!

Q: You have thanked Ashoo Naik. You have used a very interesting tool of going back and forth in history....did you begin the story differently and can you please share with our readers... how you decided this should be the structure of the narrative? For young writers the structure is often a big hurdle.

Young writers should read a book by Christopher Booker called *The Seven Basic Plots*. Booker says that all stories fall into one of seven basic plot formats. These are overcoming-the-monster, rags-to-riches, the quest, voyage-and-return, comedy, tragedy, and rebirth. No matter how many characters or variations one may introduce, your story will neatly fit into one of these slots. My advice: choose an existing theme but give it your own twist and character. Is every sandwich the same? All sandwiches have two slices of bread but each product is remarkably different owing to the variations in the filling. Make a sandwich that no one else has ever made. Remember, thrillers should hook the reader and force him or her to turn the page, producing a thrilling sensation at appropriate points in the story. This needs to be planned in advance.

Q: The Rozabal Line is very different kind of writing what got you to writing that?

I was in Srinagar and ended up visiting the tomb of a Muslim pir. The shrine is called Rauzabal or Tomb of the Prophet. Local land records acknowledge the existence of the tomb from AD 112 onwards. The sarcophagus at Rauzabal has been placed along the north-south axis according to Muslim custom but the true burial chamber beneath reveals that the grave of Yuz Asaf lies along the East-West axis as per Jewish custom. A carved imprint near the sarcophagus of Rauzabal shows a pair of normal human feet that bear crucifixion marks on them. I was fascinated with the notion that the man buried in the tomb could possibly be Jesus Christ. This led to my first book, *The Rozabal Line*.

Q: We have had two years of publicity on Sialkot Saga... you have said... first should come the story and then formulate the marketing plan. Now that you are an established and popular writer, do you still need a marketing plan? Don't you feel people in India are ready to buy a good book, marketing or no marketing?

Sure, it is easier to get people to read my books today than it was a decade ago. No question about that. But fame comes at a price. With every successful book, you set the bar higher for yourself. As regards marketing,



Ashwin Sanghi's new book, *The Sialkot Saga*, was formally announced at JLF 2016, where Ashwin was in conversation with Kajol Devgan and Sudha Sadanand.

An avid reader, Kajol was asked who did she get her love of books from? 'My mother (actress Tanuja) is a voracious reader. I have never seen her without a book. She even reads while eating.' Kajol revealed that she has three rooms in her house that have been turned into libraries. 'When my husband asked me to marry him, I told him that I'll marry him only if he provides me a library like the one in *Beauty And The Beast*. He agreed and that was my honeymoon gift.'

the truth is that there is no substitute for good marketing. Even the best written work needs marketing. Taking a cue from Hemingway who supposedly said, 'Write drunk, edit sober' I would say that you can write drunk and edit sober but the hangover the next morning... that's marketing.

Q: How do you see writing by Indian authors panning out in the next few years?

I think that commercial or genre fiction writing in India did not take off primarily because of our snobbish attitude towards commercial writing. Most Indian authors were busy churning out literary fiction and publishers continued actively searching for the next Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh or Jhumpa Lahiri. They could hardly be bothered with finding the Indian equivalent of Robert Ludlum, Frederick

I like to weave a tale around the areas that interest me and provide a detailed list of reference sources so that my reader can go back and check out those sources for himself.

Forsyth, Jack Higgins or Tom Clancy! Satyajit Ray would not have given us Feluda if an Indian market for mysteries, suspense, adventure and thrillers did not exist. It's sad that we allowed ourselves to cede space to foreign authors in these genres. I'm happy to see that this is changing rapidly now. We should have our own versions of Miss Marple, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot!

Q: For Indians, history is often the myths.... and often hearsay is fact... especially contemporary history.... analysis of the immediate past is not very important, nor are lessons... you pick on lesser-known nuggets of information to tell your tales. Do you think fiction can generate interest in

history among young readers?

Absolutely. Several Indian readers lump me into the 'mythological fiction' category. Mythology does not really interest me though. What possibly holds promise is the overlap between mythology and history. Ask me to retell the story of Hanuman or Ganesha and I'll give up within the first few pages. Ask me to write a story on whether the crossing to Lanka actually happened in history and I'll jump in with relish. My writing is an attempt to address the tantalizing zone that is the overlap of history and mythology. What makes that possible is the fact that we Indians never really distinguished between Itihasas and Puranas. Our history often reads like mythology and our mythology could often be referencing history. I like to weave a tale around the areas that interest me and provide a detailed list of reference sources so that my reader can go back and check out those sources for himself. I like to think of my books as a starting point of a deeper exploration.

*Q: Is there going to be another book in the Bharat series? Will it run into the future? You have brought *The Sialkot Saga* into the young generation of experimenters... as though you are getting ready for a futuristic story... was this kind of finish planning for the next book?*

Yes, there will be additional books in the Bharat series. The Bharat series simply consists of stories that are rooted in India's history, mythology, theology, culture, politics or economics. I have not yet decided the topic for the next book in the Bharat series. While it is possible that it may delve into the future, as of date the direction that it takes is left wide open. That should reassure you that there was no 'planning' involved in the ending of *The Sialkot Saga*.