



Nilima Pathak

The way it works Ashwin Sanghi says writers set themselves up for future disappointment with every success they deliver

Thrill of recognition

Ashwin Sanghi talks about being initially rejected by publishers, managing his business and writing, and bagging a prestigious franchise

By NILIMA PATHAK
Special to Weekend Review

Ashwin Sanghi began tentatively. He struggled to find a foothold in the literary world and published his first book using a pseudonym. But the author of *The Rozabal Line* (2008), *Chanakya's Chant* (2010) and *The Krishna Key* (2012) is now collaborating with American thriller novelist James Patterson for his next book scheduled to be published in 2014.

Sanghi, whose books have been thrillers, but with a historical, theological or mythological backdrop, belongs to a family of reputed industrialists. His parents relocated from Jodhpur in Rajasthan, and settled in Mumbai, where he was born on January 25, 1969.

He completed his schooling from Cathedral & John Connon School, Mumbai, and graduated in economics from St Xavier's College. Sanghi joined the family business at a young age and went to the Yale School of Management for his MBA.

His became interested in books during his childhood, when his maternal grandfather, who lived in Kanpur, in Uttar Pradesh, would send him a book from his library every week. From Charles Dickens to Leo Tolstoy, Sanghi would read all. He dutifully obeyed his grandfather's condition that he send a letter every week telling him how he liked the book.

Though Sanghi had never intended to be a writer, on his return from the United States he was approached by *Cosmopolitan* to write a column for them. It was then that he realised his comfort level with writing for the first time.

A few years later, on a chance visit to the Rozabal shrine in Srinagar, Sanghi became obsessed with writing about the tomb after researching the subject in depth. In no time, the industrialist had also become a writer.

Sanghi spoke with *Weekend Review* in an exclusive interview. Excerpts:

■ **Apart from writing, do you continue to contribute to the family business?**

Once upon a time I was a workaholic clocking more than 80 hours per week. That changed after I began to write. I now work only around 35 hours per week. I do not work on weekends because these

are the days that I use for research as well as for my writing. I wake up early but start my day late so that I am able to write in the mornings. The family business consists of independent divisions in areas such as build-to-lease real estate, industrial gas manufacturing and engineering of turn-key projects, wind-power generation and automobile distribution. Since my father and elder brother look after these, the decentralisation allows me the time to indulge in my parallel career.

■ **Did you write the column in *Cosmopolitan* using a pseudonym (Shawn Haigins) as you did for your first book?**

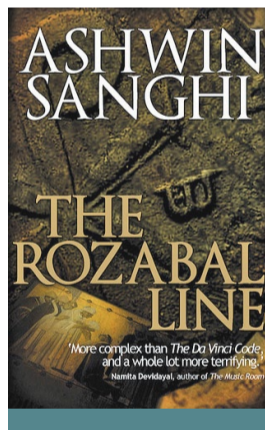
While it is true that the first time I used a pseudonym was for an article I wrote for *Cosmopolitan*, the pseudonym was different. Shawn Haigins was born with the writing of *The Rozabal Line* and was an anagram of [my real name], Ashwin Sanghi.

■ **Did you choose the name for its foreign feel and with the intent of easy acceptance by the readers?**

Not at all. It was simply my deep-rooted fear that *The Rozabal Line* would not be liked and would result in more brickbats than bouquets. The fear eventually turned out to be unfounded. I also had a business avatar to protect and was not sure how developments in my writing career would alter my business image. Using a pseudonym seemed to make a great deal of sense at the time.

■ **Is it because you did not find any takers that you self-published *The Rozabal Line*? Do you feel vindicated now that the same publishers are queuing up to publish your future works?**

I like to joke that I probably hold the world record for rejection letters. Yes, the truth is that I was fed up of being rejected repeatedly and self-publication was an act of defiance at traditional publishing. But life works in strange ways. I had never imagined that a copy of my



The Rozabal Line

By Ashwin Sanghi,
Lulu Enterprises, Inc,
332 pages, \$16.95

self-published book would end up in the hands of my publisher today as an Amazon purchase and that it would be appreciated to the extent that they would actually want to publish it. Sure, I do feel vindicated. But I'm also enough of a realist to know that an author is only as good as his last book.

■ **After the desperation to succeed with your first work, do you feel you are now in a safe zone?**

The publishing scene in India is evolving rapidly and the key challenge is to keep reinventing oneself so that one does not become formulaic. Sometimes it is safer to deal with the consequences

of failure than the fruits of success.

Remaining on one's toes is critical and often one finds that success makes one complacent. I have tried to push my own limits with all my books. I pray that I never allow myself to become too comfortable with my success.

■ **How do you work on this book with James Patterson — you live in different parts of the world? What is it about?**

Given that all three of my previous titles have been thrillers with short chapters, compelling pace, and unexpected hooks every few pages — traits that are amply evident in Patterson's writing — the fit seemed a natural one. While Patterson has written about 97 novels, some of these are part of what is called the *Private* series. This series is about a global detective agency that is called in to solve criminal cases that baffle the police. The head of this fictional agency is a charismatic chap called Jack Morgan. All books in the series involve deadly criminals being hunted down by Jack Morgan's team in different parts of the world.

Private India will simply be an extension of that franchise to India. The collaboration is an extension of what I have already been doing — writing thrillers — but with an entirely modern and contemporary backdrop. Patterson provides a guideline as well as an existing set of characters that need to be developed in

the story. Using his guideline, I develop a plot outline. We discuss that in detail and freeze it after amendments. I then proceed to write the first draft. Patterson writes the second and third drafts. All of this happens with periodic interactions over e-mail and videoconferencing. Once both he and I are done with the story, the editors at Random House take over.

■ **Are you also writing another book?**

Yes, set in 1937, modern Indian history forms the backdrop to my next independent title but it does not constitute the core. The book is about a subject that I have grown up with — business. I started working in a family enterprise when I was barely 15 years old and I have thousands of incidents, anecdotes and stories tucked away in the recesses of my mind. This book will be an attempt to bring them out on paper.

■ **One sometimes feels let down by books that are international bestsellers? Have you ever had similar experience with a book that has won awards and rave reviews?**

My reading habits are equally divided between the literary and commercial. I remember being disappointed by *The Lost Symbol* by Dan Brown. The disappointment was primarily because of the very high standards that he had set with *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels & Demons*. Similarly, I had loved *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie but was unable to read even a fraction of *The Satanic Verses*. I enjoyed two books of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy — *River of Smoke* and *Sea of Poppies* — but was unable to plod through *The Hungry Tide*. I was passionate about the initial books from John Grisham — *A Time to Kill*, *The Firm*, *The Pelican Brief* and *The Client* — but found the page-turner element missing from many of his subsequent books including *The Chamber*, *The Testament* and *The Partner*. I guess the point I am making is that one cannot expect a sixer from every ball that is bowled. The reality of the writer's world is that you set yourself up for future disappointment with every success that you deliver because you end up raising your audience's expectations.

■ Nilima Pathak is a journalist based in New Delhi.