

Creativity's magic lamp: why the genie of ideas really exists

Vaseem Khan

Terry Pratchett once wrote that ideas are forever sleeting through the cosmos, just waiting for the right mind to drop into. Certainly, his Discworld series of fantasy novels remains a testament not only to Pratchett's boundless imagination but to the notion that creativity arises automatically in the face of challenge. The Discworld books were Pratchett's way of critiquing the world he saw around him; xenophobia, religious strife, technological upheaval, all present and dissected with absurdist glee in the great city of Ankh-Morpork.

I believe that every act of creativity comes from an innate desire within us to solve problems. The process of solving those problems is rewarding but exacts a toll on our emotional and intellectual resources. I liken this wellspring of ideas to the genie from Arabian myth – a 'magic lamp' of ideas that keeps our creativity flowing. But there's always a price to be paid, for with a great idea comes great responsibility.

In the original tale, Aladdin is recruited by a sorcerer to retrieve a lamp from a magic cave. That lamp yields a genie, one bound to do the bearer's bidding. Aladdin becomes rich and powerful, but the sorcerer returns and trouble ensues before the inevitably happy ending. In another lamp story from the Arabian Nights, a fisherman is confronted by a djinn named Asmodeus, trapped for 400 years, and, unsurprisingly, in a foul mood. Instead of granting the fisherman his heart's desire he allows him instead to choose how he will be killed.

I believe a writer's mind is akin to this lamp. There's a genie trapped in

there, and it only requires the right challenge to bring it forth. But once our summoned genie has gifted us a 'great idea', there is still the small matter of turning it into something useful. Great novels are often born of a single idea, a simple hook. But how many books have we read where the idea loses its way in the face of poor plot development, clichéd writing or an awful denouement?

I write crime novels set in modern Mumbai. Beginning with *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, the Baby Ganesh Agency novels feature a Mumbai police officer forced into retirement in his late forties, who inherits a baby elephant. The idea for that elephant fell into my brain on the first day I set foot in India, in 1997, as I was sitting in a cab, staring out at a Mumbai street: honking rickshaws, hooting trucks, bikes, cows, goats, dogs... and an enormous elephant, lumbering through the chaos.

Later, returning to the UK after a decade on the subcontinent, I decided to fuse that initial inspiration with my desire to chronicle the India I had witnessed. Like Pratchett, my books seek to describe, explain and understand the world I saw around me – a textured environment, where vast slums co-exist with gaudy malls, where globalisation is transforming both physical and mental landscapes, where politics and religion make uneasy bedfellows. In this turbulent, fast-changing place, problems abound.

In each of my books, I bring to bear a lens on these problems. For instance, in the fifth Baby Ganesh Agency novel, *Bad Day at the Vulture Club*, I examine the murder of a wealthy Parsee whose body is discovered in Mumbai's notorious Towers of Silence, a place where the Parsee dead are left open to the air to be devoured by vultures in a process known as excarnation. The subsequent investigation touches on the plight of those caught in India's slum redevelopment programmes, schemes that promise much and often deliver little. On the Indian subcontinent, corruption and politics invariably work to the detriment of those on the lowest rung of society.

My genie has been bountiful, but the responsibility to portray a land and her people with flair, accuracy and compassion is a heavy one. I often struggle to ensure that each of my books is balanced between the story I am seeking to tell and my desire to capture within it some of the darker realities of this modern India.

It's a price I am willing to pay.

Vaseem Khan

Vaseem Khan is the author of the bestselling Baby Ganesh Detective Agency series featuring Indian detective Ashwin Chopra and his baby elephant sidekick. The first book in the series, *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra* was a *Times* bestseller and a Waterstones Paperback of the Year, now translated into 13 languages. The second in the series won a Shamus Award in America. In 2018 he was awarded the Eastern Eye ACTA (Arts, Culture and Theatre Award) for Literature. His books aim to take readers on a journey to the heart of modern India, exploring social issues and the realities of life in a country being transformed by unprecedented global change. Vaseem was born in London, but spent a decade working in India in his twenties. Since 2006 he has worked at University College London's Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science. His latest book is *Bad Day at the Vulture Club* about the murder of a wealthy Parsee in Mumbai's notorious Towers of Silence where the Parsee dead are left to be eaten by vultures.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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