

Vaseem Khan

in conversation with Sanjida O'Connell

Sanjida O'Connell: Vaseem Khan is the author of five crime novels set in Mumbai, India featuring Inspector Ashwin Chopra, and his sidekick, a baby elephant called Ganesha. The first in this series, *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, was a Waterstones Paperback of the year, a top bestseller in *The Times Saturday Review*, and an Amazon best debut. It has been optioned for film. He's won or been shortlisted for numerous other awards. *The Perplexing Theft of the Jewel in the Crown* won the 2017 Shamus Award for Best Original Private Investigator Paperback, and *The Strange Disappearance of a Bollywood Star*, was shortlisted for The Last Laugh Award at Crime Fest 2018 for The Best Humorous Crime Novel. Vaseem Khan, Welcome to Writers Mosaic.

Vasseem Khan: Thank you for having me on.

SO'C: So, your first novel was published in your late thirties.

VK: I think I was forty. I think I crossed the forty barrier.

SO'C: But you had already written quite a few novels before that. Is it seven?

VK: It's quite a sad story. I had written seven but also sent in seven, so that I could harvest another crop of rejection letters.

SO'C: So, tell me about your writing journey. How did you go to get your eighth novel published?

VK: So, it all started when I was seventeen, because I was reading a lot of Terry Pratchett at the time, I loved the Discworld Series, and as I was reading these books, I'd always wanted to write even from a younger age than that. And I thought to myself, this is so easy, and of course it wasn't. Terry Pratchett made it look easy. But I wrote my first novel, and it was a comic sci-fi fantasy, and I sent it in to maybe six or seven different agents. I sat back, waited for the contract to arrive, told my parents confidently, I didn't think I'd be needing to go to university, as they were encouraging me to do, being Asian parents. And unfortunately, I did not get that, I got my first set of rejection letters. So, it was quite a blow.

SO'C: You were quite young then, for your very first rejection slip?

VK: I was seventeen, so it's quite something to get a knock when you are completely full of yourself and the hubris of youth, thinking that this is a fantastic piece of work. I still have it, it's awful, but it's nice to go back and read it, and look at the way the writing has changed over the years.

SO'C: It's pretty incredible that you kept going, getting so many rejections. But you must have had faith that you were one day going to get published.

VK: I'm not so sure it was faith, it's much more to do with the fact that when you enjoy an activity as much as I enjoy writing, you keep at it because, it's an essential part of who you are. It's the same reason now at the age of forty-six, I waste my summers playing cricket. You know, grown men thrashing a ball around and getting over-excited when they're given 'out' by

the umpire and arguing. All that kind of thing and carry on. And it's the same for me for writing, I'd be down for a bit, and then read a new book and I'd be so enthused and I'd say, 'Wow, I can do that.' Then I'd write something else.

SO'C: Do you think that those seven unpublished novels helped you learn the craft of writing and enabled you to get published eventually?

VK: Without a shadow of a doubt. It's like anything else, if you want to be a tennis player, you hit 10,000, 20,000 balls before you become remotely good at it. And it's the same with writing. If you want to learn the craft of writing, you can't do that unless you are physically writing every day, editing or reading great books in the kind of space you want to write in.

SO'C: Getting in your 10,000 hours of practice?

VK: Absolutely, I estimate I must have written a million, a million and a half words before I actually got published.

SO'C: I'm interested in your journey. First of all you were convinced that you were going to be a novelist, but then you went on to do a degree in accounting. How do they go together?

VK: I mean, it won't surprise you: I come from an Asian household and my parents worked very hard. My dad was illiterate, my mother was raising kids. For them, it was a big deal that their kids had a better life than they had. And so, for them, university was the pinnacle of that dream. You go to university, you are bound to get a great job. But the trouble is, their definition of a great job was very narrow. You know, it was the traditional accountant, lawyer, doctor syndrome that many Asian parents suffer from.

In the end, I did accounting because I was quite good at maths. I did it at the LSE which gave me a solid degree with which I could then go on. I decided not to become a chartered accountant because I just couldn't face more exams and instead we agreed, my parents and I, that I could become a management consultant. They didn't know what it was. I really didn't know what it was either. I convinced them that you could earn money at it. And it was a good thing that I did, because it was that job that took me to India at the age of twenty-three.

SO'C: It was when you first went to India that led to the idea that became your first crime fiction series. Can you tell me a little bit about that first trip and what inspired you?

VK: This was in 1997, and India was at the beginning of that phase when it was about to change due to globalisation, westernisation, vast wealth sweeping into the country. And I remember that first day. I came into what was then Bombay International Airport. I walked out into this wall of heat, you know, I was just not used to 40 degrees. I hopped into a cab, stopped at a set of traffic lights, looking at the chaos of the Mumbai Road. Rickshaws and trucks and cows, and goats and dogs. In the middle of all of this, there came an enormous grey Indian elephant. That's not the kind of thing you can see in East London where I grew up. So, for me, that stuck with me. I spent ten wonderful years in India, fell in love with elephants and the whole environment of the country. So that when I got back to the UK, I wanted to write a chronicle on the environment I had seen. I also thought to myself, let's put an elephant in there, because I was very passionate about these amazing creatures.

SO'C: Just before we come to talking about the elephant – your novels are so steeped in what India is like. Your descriptions are really vivid. You can kind of almost smell the open sewers and then you've got the McDonald's on the corner, you know, it feels a really vibrant place. And you have written: 'My aim was always to take readers on a journey to the heart of modern India. The most vibrant, conflicted and supercharged place on earth.'

VK: Yes, because for me, you have to remember, I grew up in the UK. I had no experience of India before I stepped foot there, other than memories from my father, which turned out quickly not to be very accurate. And Bollywood movies which are even less accurate. People don't routinely dance choreographed numbers in the streets of India. It was an amazing experience, but also it was eye-opening. The first time I went, for instance, I'd never experienced poverty on that scale. I came from a poor household, but to see people living in a Mumbai slum, it meant that, by the time I finished my stint in India, I had this desire to showcase a real, gritty side to India that we perhaps in the West don't see, because we are so wrapped up with the whole mysticism of the 'Raj' and all of that snakecharmer mystique. I wanted to present a more realistic image of what India is like today.

SO'C: I think you have done really well in *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*. There's a description of a slum there and what was striking to me about it was not just the poverty, but these people were running these incredible businesses and, you know, using up-to-date technology. There was a beautiful leather store there in the heart of this slum. So, that was a really interesting contrast and felt very authentic.

VK: Well, absolutely. I've grown up reading literature about India, which goes on about the grinding poverty and everyone being utterly depressed, if you are not rich, I mean in India. Whereas the reality is more nuanced than that. Because you have places like the slums called the Dharavi slums in Mumbai where, undoubtedly, life is incredibly hard for these people. They have none of the kind of things that we take for granted. Poor transport infrastructure, poor sanitation, one doctor for every ten thousand, but life goes on. Their spirit shines through, they create these little businesses. They have a massive economy now just created by that slum, and their dreams are the same dreams that a middle-class Indian would have, which is to get their children ahead in life, so they can move beyond what they experienced.

SO'C: So, your central character, Inspector Ashwin Chopra, he seems quite different from the normal, run-of-the-mill detectives. Quite often in crime novels you have a detective who has a flaw and for a long time it's been something quite clichéd, like drinking too much alcohol or drinking too much coffee, having some demons in their past. But he's a really straight up, down the line man, isn't he, with a small baby elephant?

VK: That was very deliberate and the reason for that is that, you're right, the maverick, clichéd, thrice-divorced, chain-smoking, hard-drinking detective. Nothing wrong with that, I mean, I enjoyed those kind of detectives as well. But in India, the issue was that Chopra was a policeman operating in an environment where everybody else was corrupt. And so, it would have been silly for me to have given him too many flaws. The whole point was for him to be a contrast to the other police officers that are surrounding him; police

officers who are routinely either incompetent or who engage in corruption, or who are easy to bribe, or abusive. These things are true, unfortunately, the Indian police service does have a terrible reputation. Not everyone, but overall, its reputation is pretty dark and, for me, I wanted to make Chopra that shining beacon of integrity within this environment.

SO'C: I wonder what drew you to creating that character?

VK: What I wanted was a middle ground. I didn't want him to be too old, you know somebody who is sixty-five and just retired. I didn't want him to be too young because I wanted him to have some of that experience of his country and of the changes that were happening in his country, and allow him to draw some conclusions based on his experience of being a policeman for nearly three decades, since he qualified as a seventeen-year-old from a village outside Mumbai, moving to the big city. So that's the reason that I think Chopra is who he is. He's a man who has seen the light and the dark in Mumbai throughout these years. And now he's at a crossroads, he doesn't want to retire from the police force because it's the only work he's ever done. It's the only cause that he's ever had in life. For him, it's about justice in a society where, let's be frank, if you have power, if you have influence, if you have wealth, you can get away with the worst crimes up to and including murder. It never sat well with me when I discovered this in India, which is why I wrote Chopra that way, because he's a reflection, frankly, of my own thoughts and feelings about the India that I witnessed, and I suppose that he is the way he is.

SO'C: And on the day that he retires, he also inherits a baby elephant. I

thought that was really nice that he's got that little sidekick. You are at pains to say the elephant is not a gimmick. He's not kind of singing and dancing, and doesn't fly, anything like that. He is a proper animal, but he also plays a role in these stories.

VK: Yeah, so, the elephant, Ganesha, I think of him as a metaphor, a symbol for this modern India that I saw. But he is a real elephant, as you say, he's one year old and only comes up to Chopra's waist, or a bit below that, to be honest. And he's left on Chopra's doorstep by his long-lost uncle, and he's told to take care of this thing, this so-called animal that has come into his care. Now the background to this, Chopra and his wife Poppy have been together for twenty-plus years, but have not been able to have children. So, there is this space in their lives which Poppy has managed, in that she cares about social causes and things. She's the one, perhaps, who adopts this elephant first, even though it's come to her husband. He doesn't know what to do with it because they live on the sixteenth floor of a tower block, as most middle class people do in a place like Mumbai and his earliest thoughts are, okay, it's come to me. What can I do? Can I put it in a shelter somewhere? Can I get rid of it? That first book, I suppose, is a breakdown of how this very serious man who cares about justice and those kind of things, has to deal with this immediate personal issue of taking in and looking after a creature that, frankly, needs his help because it comes in quite depressed and not eating and Chopra has to adjust his whole view of the world to try and take this creature into his life.

SO'C: It's lovely that Chopra and his wife changed throughout the novel because of the baby elephant, and Ganesha is involved in the crime to a

certain extent, so he helps Chopra at a crucial point. He finds him when he's just about to be killed. I wondered if there is any danger of Ganesha becoming like a 'Deus ex Machina'?

VK: Certainly, I avoid trying to do that within the books. So, you are right, he pops his head around the door occasionally and gets involved and does little bits and pieces. One of the things I discovered, in doing the research, was that elephants have incredible sensory abilities. One of them being that elephants have the keenest sense of smell on the planet. They can literally smell over kilometres. So, not so far fetched for an elephant to be able to pick out a human scent of a particular person who they have gotten to know, because that's another part, well documented, that elephants really bond well with human beings. There are cases of elephants raised by a particular person, the person goes away for twenty years, comes back and the elephant still recognises them and immediately approaches them. So, I've included some of those sensory skills; to me, this is my nod to magical realism which is a genre that I absolutely adore and love. And I wanted to make these novels a mixture of the magical and gritty real India. But, also, just tipping my hat towards the mystical side of India via this magical realist elephant who is a real elephant but occasionally gets to do things that possibly in a straight crime novel we wouldn't see.

SO'C: I think we both love Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and that's a fine example of magical realism. I was wondering whether the elephant was a representation of that as well, that you had been influenced by Rushdie's writing and by that idea of trying to weave in a slightly magical realistic element into your fiction?

VK: Very much so. One of my greatest reading experiences was in Mumbai when I ducked into this book store in the middle of a monsoon deluge and as I was browsing I came across *Midnight's Children* for the first time. I bought it immediately and went home and read it that night. It was absolutely astounding to me. I had never come across magical realism. To read this story about how India came to be, how modern India came to be, which is essentially the story of *Midnight's Children*, but written in this incredible style that Rushdie was using. I just fell in love with magical realism as a genre and when I decided to write these Chopra books, I thought, why not, why not have a little bit of that?

SO'C: Your novels are sometimes called 'cosy crime', this particular genre which seems like a terrible oxymoron. You do have violent crime, child trafficking, in your first novel, but there is also a lot of warmth and humour there, and reviewers frequently describe your books as heart-warming. Was this a deliberate strategy to talk about some of the terrible issues going on in India, but to do it in a more light-hearted way?

VK: Yeah, I personally don't like the term 'cosy crime' to be applied to my books because cosy crime can vary all the way from literary books to books about chefs in kitchens where somebody may lose their wallet. Really, really, cosy stuff. I think of mine as the grittiest side of cosy crime. But for me there's a balance, because India herself is this contradiction, and if you go to India and wander around a little bit, you know instinctively what I mean because the people are so warm, so friendly everywhere you go. The whole country has about it this warmth, this cultural warmth that you feel. And yet at the same time there are so many of these dark realities that are evident

within the country. If you are not rich, if you are not middle class, you are susceptible to a lot of terrible things happening to you. So, for me, trying to get that balance right is one of the reasons why I thought I did not want it to be relentlessly dark, because that would not represent this country that I saw.

SO'C: There is a real contrast in India that you are portraying, you know it's very developed, it is Western in many respects. As you say, fabulous wealth but crushing poverty. A lot of the values are outdated in India in terms of how people think of women, class, race. I wondered how comfortable you felt about having some of your main characters reflecting those values within the books?

VK: There is absolutely no point trying to dissect a country and showcase it the way that it really is if you are not willing, within your writing, to actually depict those slightly uglier aspects of that society. And I made a conscious decision early on that I wouldn't shy away from showing those things where necessary.

SO'C: Juggling writing and real life, you have a job as the Business Development Director at UCL's Department of Security and Crime Science. What does that involve? And how does that tie in, or does it tie in, with your research for your novels?

VK: I've been very lucky in life. I had a job for a decade in India that I loved as a management consultant. I came back to the UK and for fourteen years, as you say, I have been working at UCL's Security and Crime Science depart-

ment. What we do, basically, is use science and engineering and maths to find ways of reducing crime, and better detecting of crime. What this means is that I'm constantly surrounded by very clever people working on, say, the latest in DNA forensics, or human trafficking or cyber-crime. It means that I have all this knowledge at my fingertips if I need it. So, recently I was writing a short story in the Chopra universe and I went to a colleague of mine and I said 'Sean, I need to work out how to burn a body alive.'

SO'C: You must be so popular in your department.

VK: The victim had been burned alive. So, for me it is amazing to have that resource. I don't always have to use it, because my novels are set in India where forensic science is still playing catch up as compared to the West. The Western TV shows may go over the top sometimes, like *CSI* for instance; half those things that they say or show simply aren't possible in real police investigative environments. I try and make a nice balance. But for me it's wonderful to be in that environment, immersed in it.

SO'C: And so, your new personal challenge. You have a book that you have written. It's about to come out in August 2020. Can you tell me about this new work?

VK: It's called *Midnight at Malabar House*. it's set in 1950 in India, which was an incredibly interesting period. It was just after partition and Gandhi's assassination. A lot of Westerners, foreigners were still in the country, most of them in Mumbai. It introduces India's first ever female police detective, a lady named Persis Wadia, and she is tasked to investigate the murder of

an English diplomat. The book follows her, not only in her journey to being this first female officer in a very patriarchal environment, but also having to solve the murder of a very powerful Englishman in this post-colonial era where India was trying to figure out what kind of country it was going to be, what kind of democracy. And there was a lot of social issues and economic issues about settling down after partition.

SO'C: It sounds really interesting and maybe less heart-warming.

VK: It is more of a historical crime novel. There is still some elements of humor, and hopefully wit, because I like that kind of note running through a novel, but it is more of a straight historical crime narrative. She has a cast around her that brings some of that warmth because her father is a man in a wheelchair who runs a bookshop. He used to be an anglophile but then he fell out of love with the English during the partition years and some of the abuses that occurred during that time. So, he's very cynical and acerbic.

SO'C: Where do you see yourself with your writing and what do you want to achieve?

VK: So, writers are on a pyramid aren't they? So, when we are unpublished, all we want is to be published and we are utterly grateful if anybody would just publish us. We don't care if we sell one copy or two copies or get a review, and then once you get published, you get a bit greedier, you want reviews in national newspapers, and the critics to like you a little bit. So, I've ticked most of those boxes. Then you want to sell a few copies. That's been done. Then after that, you get to a point and you start thinking to yourself:

okay, what do I really want to do now? And you get to the point of, I've got these amazing ideas, at least I think they are amazing. And I want to be able to write those ideas without the restrictions that are often placed on you if you end up in a particular genre. And I think that's where I am at the moment in my career. I'm a crime fiction writer but I have lots of ideas that I would like to write, and some of them are straight crime, not the kind of crime in the Chopra universe. Some of them are non-crime ideas, so, literary fiction which I absolutely love, screenplays. I love to write screenplays. I love to read screenplays. I love the movies, so, I've been doodling with those the last couple of years and I would like to sell a screenplay and actually see it turned into something on screen. So, that's where I am in my career, wanting to move in slightly different directions.

SO'C: And if you were to look back and meet yourself when you were seventeen with your very first novel that you had written, what advice would you give your younger self?

VK: It would be easy and trite for me to say, you know, write a better book or don't send this in. But I don't think that would make any sense because when I was seventeen, I wrote the book that I wanted to write and I wrote it to the best ability that I had at the time. I didn't know that that wasn't very good, but if I hadn't done that, I would not be where I am today. Because the easiest thing on earth is to start a novel, the hardest thing is to finish one. And that's often quoted, saying I finished a novel at the age of seventeen. Not many people do that, and then I had guts, guts isn't the right word, but I had enough hubris to send it in to agents believing that I would get published. And I think that that put me in very good stead over the next

six rejected novels, over a twenty-year period. So, wherever I was in India or wherever I was working, I used to finish one, get up and send it in. I could not have done that if I hadn't written and sent in that first novel at the age of seventeen. So, I would probably pat that young man on the back and say, 'you're an idiot, but carry on, carry on.'

SO'C: Vaseem Khan, thank you very much for being on WritersMosaic.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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