

Why I write

Abir Mukherjee

I suppose it all started as a bit of a mid-life crisis. I'm an accountant by profession and had spent the previous twenty years in finance. I was 39, hurtling towards 40, and I thought, 'maybe there might be more to life than accounting'.

But, of course, that's not the only reason. I set my novels in 1920s colonial India because writing, for me, is partly a search for my own identity. My parents came from India and, as a British Asian, I felt that understanding the period of British rule in India was important to understanding more about who I was. What drove me was an itch to tell a story about a time and a place that I felt had been forgotten, and a period that contributed so much to the making of modern Britain, India, and the world. Both the US civil rights movement of the 1960s and Nelson Mandela's anti-apartheid campaign in South Africa learned much from the non-violent, non-cooperation movement of the Indian freedom struggle.

Unfortunately, when I was at school, the Raj period wasn't really taught. We learned more about the history of Germany in the 1920s and 30s than we did about the history of Britain in this period. My impetus to write came from a desire to tell the story of a time and place which I felt neither British nor Indian sources did justice to. I didn't want to write history books, but rather thrillers that would tell their own stories, set against the backdrop of

that historical period. Why? For the simple reason that thrillers are read by, and capture the imagination of, many more people.

I came up with the idea of sending a British detective to Calcutta in 1919; he goes to India in search of a fresh start after surviving the Great War. I wanted to look at the era through the eyes of an outsider, who, by virtue of his wartime experiences, is as detached from his British compatriots as he is from the Indians. He teams up with an Indian sergeant, one of the first Indians to be accepted as a detective in the Imperial Police, and together they figure out not only the mysteries placed in front of them, but also the complex relationship between an Englishman and an Indian, under a system that will always force one to be subservient to the other, no matter what their respective abilities might be.

Ultimately, I wanted to explore the effect of empire on both the rulers and the ruled. In particular, I wanted to explore what happens when a supposedly democratic nation subjugates another nation, in terms of the impact on the subjugated peoples and, just as importantly, its impact on the psyche of the people doing the oppressing. Because for me, as a British man of Indian parents, understanding both sides is key to understanding myself.

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Abir Mukherjee is the bestselling author of the award-winning Wyndham & Banerjee series of crime novels set in Raj-era India. He has won the CWA Historical Dagger and the Wilbur Smith Award for Adventure Writing, and has been shortlisted for the CWA Gold Dagger, and HWA Gold Crown.

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

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