

## The Secret of my Success

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SECRET OF MY SUCCESS

# It took me 12 years and a major bout of impostor syndrome to finish my book

Akhil Sharma | April 06, 2014



Don't be a writer; be a famous writer. (The Great Beauty/Janus Film)

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I had been scared for so long that I had gotten into the habit of being afraid. Now, when I should have been triumphant, all that was happening was that my anxiety had taken on a new color.

I had written a book. For various reasons, the publishing industry had decided that my book was going to be “important.” The novel had taken me 12-and-a-half years to write and after being with the book for so long, I had no real perspective on the merits or demerits of what I had written. I hoped it was good, but feared that it wasn’t.

My wife is the most wonderful woman in the world and my parents are the most extraordinary father and mother. I am shamelessly biased about the people in my life and it makes sense to me that other people are the same. I also understand that in other things most of us are not mentally healthy. We are incredibly sensitive to status. When someone gets a success and we too have done good work and sometimes even better work than the person who has just triumphed, we wonder: Why did success pass me by?

I had written one book before *Family Life*, the one that people were excited about. That first book, *An Obedient Father*, had taken me nine years to write and had been about an elderly child molester whose widowed daughter moves in with him with her daughter and the pederast becomes sexually interested in his granddaughter. To me, one measured the quality of fiction based at least partially on how far it could take you into worlds you wanted to know nothing about. My first book I knew was an excellent work.

When the book came out, it got some good reviews and then a truly snarky one in the Sunday New York Times. The book had begun to gain some slight momentum because it [had been excerpted in the New Yorker](#). My publishing house had spoken about taking out a full-page color ad in the Sunday book review (there used to be a discount for ads for first books). After the review, they decided that this made no sense. I remember sitting at the breakfast table reading the review and thinking that it was over, that those nine years of work had been dismissed so quickly.

The book sold 5,800 copies in hardcover and then almost twice that in paperback because the essayist David Sedaris liked it and spoke about it often. It also won a prize for a first novel.

I am mentally healthy enough to draw satisfaction from having written a good book. It was disappointing though to apply for grants and jobs and then for these things to go to people whom I did not respect largely because their books had sold enough copies that they had made their presence felt.

When the editor of my new book told me that she had great hopes for my novel, all I could feel was the dread that this book too would not succeed.

## Business Class

I was once at a party where I met a famous writer. I told him I had learned that novelists can rent apartments at the American Academy of Arts in Rome for a low price. I offered this bit of information almost as a gift, thinking that the famous writer might want to take advantage of it. This writer liked me. He laughed affectionately and said, “Oh Akhil, there are so many things you get when you are famous.”

With my first book, I had noticed that my book had gotten one page in my publisher’s book catalog and that a friend of mine who was publishing at the same time in the same house had gotten two pages. I had known that the publishing house had had a lunch for him to meet the press and not for me.

It makes sense that a publishing house be careful with its money and place its bets where it expects the highest return. I had understood the logic of what was happening, but I had also felt that my book was stronger than the one receiving this attention. Now, with my second book, I was the one who had two pages in the catalog, who had a lunch for press at a Michelin-starred restaurant. But among

the greatest surprise of having my book treated as a “big” book was what happened with the British rights.

With my first novel, only one publishing house in England had offered to buy it and they had paid \$600. They had offered to arrange interviews for me if I would pay for my own ticket to get over to England.

With my new book, they asked if my schedule allowed me to come over months in advance of the book even being printed because they had been able to drum up so much interest. I flew on the British Airways redeye flight from New York to London. I was flown business class.

It was strange to be a writer in jeans and to be surrounded by businessmen in suits. Even before the plane took off, waitresses were walking up and down the business class cabin holding up bottles of champagne. It was like a Toulouse-Lautrec poster. Seeing such luxury, I wanted to gobble it all in, but I understood that I needed to be sharp when I landed and that I could not afford to drink. Unable to sleep from the worry of what was going to happen, I walked up and down the aisles past these businessmen lying on their sides on the enormous lie-flat seats.

And then, when I landed in London, I was whisked to an incredibly beautiful hotel called 51 Buckingham Gate and placed in a wonderful suite. The hotel, across from Buckingham Palace, incarnated my image of England at its apex during the Victorian era.

For me, all this was like the Eddie Murphy skit where a black man paints himself to resemble a white person and suddenly discovers that whites don't have to pay for anything.

The best part of all that was happening was not the luxury, but the fact that my book was actually being read. Getting a book read by critics is the great problem of publishing. So many books are published that even the most devoted critics can only read a few books. A publisher basically has to shout from the rooftops that a book needs to be read before it actually is. And therefore a publisher can only push one or two books truly hard each publishing season.

My British publisher had a party to introduce the books that would be released in the upcoming season. The party was in a large window-lined attic near the British Museum. I had been to such meet-the-critics parties before. I had tried in the past to chat up critics at such events and be appealing enough that they might try reading my book.

At this party, critics came up to me. Some said that they had started the book. A few had even finished it. I think if it had not been for the experience I had had with my first book, I would have felt that this is the way books enter the public consciousness. A publisher sends out galleys; critics read them; and then they discuss it. Now, I realized that this was not the case, that there are hundreds of things that a publisher has to do to get a critic to open a book.

The more people I spoke to at the party, the more afraid I got. I was aware of how much luck I was experiencing and so I had the sense that it could all vanish.

## Aloft

My agent phoned me a few days before the official publication date of my novel. I was in my apartment, sitting at my desk and trying to write a short story. He said that he had some news and asked if I wanted to hear it?

I had told my agent and editor that I wanted to know nothing about how the book was being received. I did not want to read reviews. I did not even want to know

that a review had appeared. This was because of remembering how I had been battered by my first book and how little I had learned from reading the reviews.

My agent asked me the question and I, because I have the foolish belief that part of being an adult means seeking out pain, said, “Yes.”

“You are getting the [cover of the Sunday New York Times Book Review.](#)”

At least in the world of literary fiction, this is like winning the lottery. My first response to change is fear, however, and my heart began racing like I had done something bad. I called my wife. I started speaking in such a hushed way that she asked if there was anything wrong. I told her the news. She became quiet. “I feel like crying,” she said. So many sacrifices had been made in the writing of the book that I could understand her relief at this bit of evidence that it had not all been a waste.

I got the news on a Thursday afternoon. Within a few hours, I was getting so many calls that whenever I put my phone down it began ringing again.

During the many years of writing my book, I had often prayed, “Please, God, let this book just end.” Now, partially because I had not read any of the reviews and so not begun to think that I had written something good, everything that I was experiencing felt unearned, like some great gift. I kept telling myself be happy. By the end of the day I was.

*We welcome your comments at [ideas@qz.com](mailto:ideas@qz.com).*