
Karan Mahajan

Family Planning

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Q: How would you describe the experience of writing this novel, your first? How long did it take you to write, and what inspired this story?

A: The book began with the question: What in the world would prompt a middle-class couple in *contemporary*, urban India to have a large family? Large families were a fixture in the middle class as recently as the 1950s; it's only the post-independence generations that have taken the message of "*Family Planning*" to heart and stopped at two kids. Even a three-child family is a rarity. The point being that I needed a particularly absurd reason to justify a brood of thirteen brats. Enter Mr. Ahuja and his obsessive urge to procreate.

This absurdity only begat more absurdity, and soon I had a book on my hands. It took a year and a half to write and required much more humility than I had suspected: I had to constantly scale back my own desires as a writer in favor of what the characters demanded.

Q: The bulk of *Family Planning* takes place in less than a week. What were some of the narrative challenges involved in condensing so much living into so little time?

A: The subject of the book is chaos—each scene is purposely overpopulated, with many characters talking past each other—and to anatomize the crowds I needed to slow down time significantly; otherwise I would have lost both myself and the reader. But it was a real challenge. I had the hardest time figuring out how to put my characters to sleep.

Q: You grew up in India but now live in New York City. How closely does the New Delhi of *Family Planning* resemble the city you experienced as a child?

A: *Family Planning* captures a city growing into a self-image that is all wrong. When I lived in Delhi, it was burdened with so many futures—fast roads, malls, flyovers—that one felt almost obliged to be hopeful. Now that hope has diminished you can feel the city going into a frenzy to reinvent itself. I miss living there.

Q: To what extent do you see this novel as a tale of two protagonists—father and son?

A: I wanted both characters to complete each other. Arjun and Rakesh are distinct, discrete individuals, but I hope the arc of Arjun's disappointments offers a clue to the origins of Rakesh's vindictiveness and self-pity.

Q: What authors have influenced your sensibilities as a writer?

A: The list is endless: V.S. Naipaul, Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick, R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, and so on.