Being a Writer Podcast—Going Beyond the First Book with Vaseem Khan

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**SPEAKERS**

Vaseem Khan, Nelima Begum

**Nelima Begum** 00:00

Welcome to the Being a Writer podcast from The Literary Consultancy. In each podcast, we go behind the scenes of the writing process with a special guest and get to the heart of what it means to be a writer today. Being a Writer is a unique programme of support for writers that prioritises literary creativity, wellbeing an emotional resilience. We kick off season four of the Being a Writer podcast with award-winning crime series writer Vaseem Khan to discuss the topic of going beyond the first book. Having authored two brilliant crime series, Vaseem shares with us his many insights on how to approach writing again after your first project. We explore his long and extensive career as a writer, from submitting his first manuscript at just 17 to finding success with the Baby Ganesh Detective Agency series much later. We also talk about prioritising finding the truth you're trying to tell in your story, and caring for your wellbeing as you approach later projects. Vaseem pulls back the curtain on his own experiences as a published author to provide some candid industry Insights, and offers a wealth of practical advice for writers to use for their second book and beyond.

Hi Vaseem, welcome to the Being a Writer podcast.

**Vaseem Khan** 01:18

Thank you for having me.

**Nelima Begum** 01:19

So we're kicking off season four with your episode, and we're talking about going beyond the first book, which is a really interesting one, because I feel like we have a good portion of writers who come through to TLC having written their first book, and then about to embark on the journey of their second. And sometimes there are nerves and a bit of anxiety and just a general feeling of not really knowing how to approach it. And I thought you would be best to speak [about] this subject in particular. So, thank you for joining us today.

**Vaseem Khan** 01:49

Delighted to be here.

**Nelima Begum** 01:51

So, let's start with a bit of background on you. Tell us about your first experience of writing. When did you feel like a writer?

**Vaseem Khan** 01:59

I guess it's a—I think everybody should get their hankies out because it's quite a sad story—but I wrote my first novel aged 17. I was reading Terry Pratchett's wonderful Discworld series, and I made the mistake of thinking this looks very easy. And I decided… I wrote a sci-fi fantasy. And I finished it, which is a good thing. And I sent it out to a bunch of agents. And then I went to my parents, and I told them that I was not going to go to university, I was going to become rich and famous and above the law. And you can imagine exactly how my parents—traditional Asian parents, immigrant parents—thought about that suggestion. Anyway, we didn't have to go much further with that discussion, I collected my first set of rejection letters. But I had finished a novel. And over the course of the next 23 years, I wrote six or seven more novels across different genres. And every time that I would finish, I would send them in. And this was back in the days when you had to print 30-40 odd pages of your first three chapters and send it in with a synopsis and a covering letter. So, you know, I’d pretty much been rejected by every agent in in the UK at one point or another over those 23 years. However, the good news is that I did finally get a publishing contract with one of the world's biggest publishers, Hachette. And that was at the age of 40. And I've had a fairly good career since then. So I guess the first lesson in this discussion is that persistence pays, and the thing about persistence is it's… like anything else in life. So for instance, they say that tennis players have to hit 10,000 balls before they get any good. And I guess the same principle applies to writing: you actually have to physically write a lot. And by write a lot, I mean start and complete novels, to understand exactly how the process works, and to then get better at it. And when you when you say to me, when did I actually begin to feel like a writer, I would suggest that it was around about the fourth book, so maybe a decade into that writing journey. And that was when I stopped getting letters. The odd reply that you get from agents—you don't always get replies—but I stopped getting replies that were basically you’re rubbish. I did, I kid you not back in the old days agents were not so worried about people's mental health and being rude if they really felt that someone was rubbish. And I have to be honest, at the age of 17 I was pretty rubbish. Not many people can write well at the age of 17. And I know I couldn't because I occasionally look back at some of those old manuscripts I submitted. And, you know, I cringe and you should cringe. Yeah, the good news is that you can compare it to later writing if you've really gone on that journey of trying to improve your craft, and you can see how you've improved. I think it was about the fourth book where I started to get agents writing back to say, we don't want this because it doesn't fit our list, but we like the way you write so we'd like to see the next thing that you write. And I think that was the point.

**Nelima Begum** 05:21

That's really interesting that you've been able to track your writing over so many years, and I think your advice about, you know, persistence, and [that] sometimes it takes a while to see the fruits of your labour, but you really do just have to, sometimes you do have to go through 10,000 no’s before you get one yes.

**Vaseem Khan** 05:37

And there's a great quote by… so I tried to write literary fiction for many, many years because I love literary fiction. And there's a great writer called John Irving [who wrote] *The World According to Garp*, *The Cider House Rules*, some really famous globally best-selling novels. And Irving, I read something that Irving had written a long time ago which will probably be of relevance to a lot of people listening. It certainly helped me to get my mindset right. And he said that when he was a younger writer and he wasn't getting very far and he felt a bit downhearted and depressed by the whole thing, he met one of his literary heroes at a talk. And he spoke to him about, you know, the fact that he was stuck in his career, not going anywhere, and [that] he was trying to be a writer. And then his hero said to him John, the first thing you have to do is stop saying to yourself that you're trying to be a writer. If you're getting up and you're writing every day, then you are a writer. And the rest, well… there are other factors beyond your control. You know, you can learn your craft, but once you've done that, then you need a great idea. And then you need some luck. But you know, wake up every day and tell yourself that you're a writer.

**Nelima Begum** 06:54

That's really profound. And I think it's something that a lot of our audience needs to hear as well, because I know first-hand that there are quite a few out there who are, you know, they're reluctant to refer to themselves as a writer, so it's nice to, kind of, hear it from you directly. I actually wanted to ask—it’s slightly off topic but not really—did your parents read any of your early drafts that you were doing as a 17-year-old, and after?

**Vaseem Khan** 07:20

Not at all, no. No my dad was not a literate man. He spent his whole life working in an industrial bakery. He was perfectly, he had the immigrant ambition for us to all become educated and therefore find a higher station in life then he had, but he couldn't understand the idea of words that people had just made up. That didn't quite compute. Perfectly happy to buy us textbooks, but the idea of me asking for some of the very little money that we had in our house for books, for fiction, that just didn't sit well with him. My mother was more understanding. She was slightly more educated than my dad, actually. But no, they didn't. They didn't quite get this because the idea for them, of course, as you might know, is the Asian dream of a doctor, lawyer and accountant in the house. Especially for a firstborn son!

**Nelima Begum** 08:17

Oh, man, you guys have it hard! No, I do understand all too well.

**Vaseem Khan** 08:23

To be fair to them, after the book that I sent in at age 17 failed dramatically, I did go to university and I did study accounts. I didn't become an accountant, I became a management consultant. And it was that job that took me to India, which eventually led to my first book.

**Nelima Begum** 08:43

Oh, that's brilliant, though, because I, you know, I guess towards the end all the dots kind of connected for you. And it all added up to this experience that you're having now?

**Vaseem Khan** 08:53

Yes, yes, indeed.

**Nelima Begum** 08:55

Great. So, on the topic of that, can you walk us through your experience of writing your debut novel, *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, because, obviously, the topic is going beyond the first book but I think it's important to start with the debut as a scaffolding.

**Vaseem Khan** 09:10

So this book is about a policeman in his late 40s who retires from the service. He's forced into retirement, and on his last day in office—his name is Chopra—he discovers the body of, the murder of, a poor boy in the local area. And he realises that seniors don't want to investigate, so he decides like any self-respecting crimefighter to go off and investigate on his own. What also happens on that last day is that he inherits a baby elephant. So, I should be clear, I mean, the book is, the book is really about my experiences, my 10 years of living in India and trying to present this country, and the fact that I used crime fiction was simply a, you know, it's a canvas that I use to try and tell the story about this changing India, because when I went to India, India was a largely a post-industrial economy. But I saw the effects of globalisation and Westernisation first-hand, as they completely changed the country. And you ended up with this new India, with, you know, glitzy skyscrapers and shopping malls and call centres which I'm sure everybody has been the beneficiary [of] at some time or another, stacked up against the legacy problems of old India—caste prejudiced and massive slums and religious intolerance. And so I wanted to try and depict that in a novel. And I started off writing a literary novel, but then I thought, You know what? After 23 years of rejection, it's not going to get published. Why don't I just write something purely for myself? So I decided to—I love crime fiction as well—so I thought, you know, I'll make this a crime story, I'll throw in this elephant. I mean, I should be clear, the baby elephant doesn't fly or sing or talk. It's a metaphor. It's a symbol of India, it's a metaphor. And what I'm really trying to do with this book, and this might help to try and get the thinking working for some of the people who are working on novels that try and explore something that they're intimately familiar with, I was trying, because one of the things that I always urge writers to do is to step back and look at the theme, the theme of the book that they're working on. What is it that you're trying to say about the world? And why is that incredibly important? The reason that's so important is because publishers and agents know that they can sell a theme better than they can just sell a book without one. What I mean by is that a theme, a really good thematic hook, gives them something more to talk about than purely the contents of that book. It gives them an angle to talk to radio shows and literary critics and try and push that book and promote it. So for me the theme was presenting this modern India but stacking it up against India's past. Because we are guilty sometimes in the West of mythologising India and turning it into a land of Swamis and snake charmers. Exoticizing it. And you know, there's plenty of that, but the truth is that, you know, Indians don't get up and dance in choreographed numbers every five minutes, and if you grew up in a slum, you don't win the lottery as in Slumdog Millionaire, you know.

**Nelima Begum** 12:31

It’s a very different reality.

**Vaseem Khan** 12:32

It is a different way of looking at things. So that book, *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, it went really well for me. I got a four-book deal from Hachette, one of the world's largest publishers. I was put on to BBC Breakfast, which was quite nerve-wracking. I'm not a very nervous person, but it was quite nerve-wracking to have to present the book to six million people on the on the Breakfast sofa. But what it did do was it gave the foundation for that series, and it allowed me to then have the career that I'm having.

**Nelima Begum** 13:05

That’s brilliant. What was your writing process like, and did it change when it came to your second book?

**Vaseem Khan** 13:14

With the first book, after 23 years of rejection, clearly I wasn't pushed to finish it. So I took a lot of time over it. I took several years, because what had happened was, I'd lived in India for a decade, then I'd come back to the UK. And I’d settled into a new job in the UK. And I was writing in the margins. And, you know, I'd occasionally give up for a while, and then come back to it and give up for a while and then come back to it. Now, ultimately, I wasn't even sure whether to submitted, but it was my wife actually, who said, ‘Look, you've written the damn thing. Now, you might as well send it in, because I know you like it, because I hear you chuckling away as you're writing it.’ So, you know, I'm one of those. I am one of those sad people who laughs at his own jokes. And although, although these are crime novels, there is a… subtle note of humour that I think has helped them to be successful. So I did send it in. Now with the second book, it's a different thing, because you're under contract.

**Nelima Begum** 14:16

Yes. And under time constraints as well, I imagine.

**Vaseem Khan** 14:19

Absolutely. You've got a deadline to meet. So again, this is just for the edification of those listening: the publishing industry works on certain cycles. And they have to publish certain types of author at a certain time of year, which is why you will rarely see debuts published around Christmas time, because nobody wants to compete with the big name authors or the big biographies or the big cookbooks that come out at that time. So there are set dates around the year where they have to publish and that means that you have to deliver a book in time to meet that publishing schedule. And that means usually with a big publisher like Hachette, it means you have to deliver a book one year before it's going to be published, because it has to go through several different edits, which we can talk about later if you want. And then it has to go through a cover being designed. And then it has to go through blurbs and the marketing setup. So, for me, that was the big change in process that I had to knuckle down each and every day, give myself a word count, make sure that I was hitting those word counts, make sure that I had enough time built in so that I could then look over the book once I had finished the first draft, and not just send in, because with the first draft book that I sent in, when my agent took it he immediately picked out some inconsistencies. So again, here's another quick lesson for you. If you get an agent, an agent will usually be the first person who professionally helps you, unless you've already paid for a professional editor to help you to edit your book. So you really want to be in the best place possible, because an agent will really not want to take on a book where they feel they're going to have to do a lot of editing. They're just too busy to do that. So it behoves you to do as much of that work beforehand. And my agent, in *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, he picked up the a few things. So for instance, he said, ‘Vas I don't know if you've realised, but you haven't actually physically described your protagonist.’ And this was amazing to me, because that's like the first thing you learn in writing, right? But I went back and he was right. Other than a few lines, I had barely touched on describing these individuals. And so that was a bit of a shock, that you can have these blind spots that you yourself cannot… because in 23 years, I'd never shown anyone else my writing.

**Nelima Begum** 16:44

Right. So there’s a process to also getting feedback as well. So getting feedback in itself is a long, you know, it's on that journey, too.

**Vaseem Khan** 16:54

Yeah, that was the first feedback I'd ever received, because my wife doesn't read my books at all. I had no friends in the writing business then. And this was pre, I grew up in [the] era… where the internet was just coming in, so there were no writing groups that I could join locally. And I'm in a frankly, I'm in a community, an Asian community, where, you know, there are 600 members of my community, 600 who came to my sister's wedding, and I can count on one hand the number who read fiction. So there was no one really for me to show these books to.

**Nelima Begum** 17:26

Yes, it was very much like a solitary venture for you at the time.

**Vaseem Khan** 17:30

I'm not sure if it was an adventure, or did you say venture?

**Nelima Begum** 17:33

Venture.

**Vaseem Khan** 17:34

Venture? Yeah, fair enough.

**Nelima Begum** 17:38

Okay, so Wow. So that was a different experience for you receiving feedback for first time.

**Vaseem Khan** 17:45

Yeah, and you know what, the thing about feedback is that there are two ways you can go with it. Whether you're a younger writer, or a newer writer, I should say, not younger, you find yourself swayed by people who clearly are more experienced than you. And that's agents and that's editors. Then, as you get more into your career and more confident about your writing, maybe you've had some success, or at least you've had some great feedback, then I think you can push back a bit more. I don't think you can afford to push back too much, unless you're one of these incredibly, incredibly self-confident people who would rather die than change a single word of their precious manuscript. I would strongly advise not doing that.

**Nelima Begum** 18:31

Don’t be that person.

**Vaseem Khan** 18:32

Don’t be that person, listen to your agent, listen to your editor, especially if they're senior and, you know, well respected within the industry.

**Nelima Begum** 18:40

And have been doing this dance for a while as well, because, you know, they are very experienced. So, I can imagine that when it comes to the second novel, for any writer there's quite a lot of pressure, because it's a matter of either upholding or exceeding any existing success that you had with your first. How did you, kind of, keep yourself very focused on the task at hand, but balanced?

**Vaseem Khan** 19:04

Well, I think—so this is the other thing that I really feel that people need to take on board. You have, you know, I've heard the saying that there's a book in everybody. We've all heard the saying, right? Well, it's not true. I mean, there might be a bad book in everybody, but there isn't a good book in everybody. And to make sure that you produce a good book, or as good a book as you can possibly write, you have to approach it as a business, as a writing business. Now, I know that sounds as if I'm sort of killing the whole romance of writing, but you know, I'm not. Honestly I’m not, because writing still should be fun and all the rest of it. But if you begin to think of the industry as a business, then you will realise that agents, they really couldn't give a toss about your idealistic romantic notions of your work. What they're looking for, you know, I might be being slightly harsh, but I'm just trying to make a point [because] there's a solid truth underneath that, which is that they're looking for someone whose books they can sell. Because they don't have any basic set salaries, they only make money… as a percentage of whatever they can sell your books for. And the same goes with editing houses. Yes, editors might be slightly more into the whole we really believe in this book, and we really want to do it, but if a commissioning editor, and that's what they’re called at these editing houses, takes on a book, the next thing they have to do is sit in front of a team of people who crunch the numbers and try to figure out how many copies of your book can be sold and how it can be marketed, and how will it stack up against other books that are similar in that space.

**Nelima Begum** 20:56

Like projections, basically. Not set in stone by any means.

**Vaseem Khan** 21:00

Not set in stone by any means. You know, sometimes they take a chance on a book that they simply fall in love with and they believe the audience will be created for that book. They don't need to rely on past numbers for similar books. Sometimes the book is just so novel and wonderful that they just feel you know what, let's take a punt. But the reason I say all this is to just get you, to get the audience to, think, How can I approach, how can I fit into, that model? And the way to fit into that model is to just be very professional, yourself. And that means that to a certain extent, being very, very focused, carving out time every day, to do the writing, the editing or reading, or just thinking about the book. It's also having that self-belief. I know that imposter syndrome is very common in this industry, for obvious reasons. But let me give you this example. Think about our politicians, right? These are people who are manifestly unqualified most of the time for the job that they've been given. Do you see people like—well, I won't take any names because you know.

**Nelima Begum** 22:15

Let's not name names, but yes.

**Vaseem Khan** 22:16

Do you ever see any senior politicians suffering from impostor syndrome? Somebody who's never had anything to do with the climate is suddenly put in charge of the climate portfolio, for instance.

**Nelima Begum** 22:28

Someone with no medical history—no experience with medicine or that industry at all will become a health secretary.

**Vaseem Khan** 22:36

And yet the converse is also true. Brain surgery, right? I've always wanted to do brain surgery, right. However, I doubt that anybody would let me practice brain surgery, for obvious reasons, because I haven't learned my craft, and I haven't earned the right to do brain surgery. It's the same with writing, if you approach it professionally, and you work on your craft over many years, and you're focused, and, you know, you're really trying to improve your skill levels, then… you've earned the right. You've earned the right to be to be listened to and for your work to be given a fair hearing.

**Nelima Begum** 23:18

And I would agree with you, you know, that, you know, you have to make it a priority sometimes as best as you can, like, treat it like any other important thing in your life, and really try and carve out the time and make the effort to make it happen for yourself.

**Vaseem Khan** 23:31

Yeah, and the truth is, you know, you can't, I would love to mollycoddle everybody and say you know what? You can just chill out and be mellow, and all the rest of it. And I'm sure there are other authors who would do that. But I want to be honest with you and say that it's very, very hard work being a professional writer. And the best way to prepare yourself for it, is to start doing it from the earliest possible moment. To treat it like a second job.

**Nelima Begum** 24:04

Okay, great. So, writers, have the confidence of a British politician.

**Vaseem Khan** 24:12

Or a brain surgeon.

**Nelima Begum** 24:14

Or brain surgeon. I really hope you get to perform brain surgery one day. This is really interesting industry insight as well, and a really unique way of pulling back the curtain, as it were, on your own processes and things that you've learned as you've kind of come up in the writing process. So, the Being a Writer platform is focused on wellbeing as much as it is creativity, and you kind of touched on impostor syndrome before. How did you maintain your mental wellbeing while having to write that second novel, knowing that there's a lot of, I guess, pressure and expectation from peers, publishers and readers alike?

**Vaseem Khan** 24:52

You know, one of the things that I really love in this modern era of Twitter and WhatsApp are those wonderful memes that you get about living your best life. You know, my friends will send me these things, and, you know, it's wonderful. “What you seek is seeking you”, or “Belief is that little place inside you where magic grows”. You know, I wonder who comes up with these. Actually, more likely I wonder what they're smoking. But the point of these things is that mental wellbeing is a discussion that wasn't there when I was younger, but it's very much necessary now. And it's very much important that we have that discussion. Expectation, again, particularly for a second novel, is sky high. And everyone's heard of the really difficult second novel or second film or second whatever it happens to be in life, particularly if you've had some success with the first one. How do you follow that up? And the truth is with great difficulty. However, what you can do is to step back. Just step back for a bit. And make sure that you've got enough space to think clearly about what it is you're trying to achieve with your second novel. And I have to say that with my second novel, following *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, I wish that I'd had slightly more time. But I was on a strict schedule, and I had to deliver it. I'm not sure I would have changed a lot about it, but I would have liked to have had more of that time to just sit back and enjoy the success of the first book and then say to myself, ‘Okay, what is it that I really, really want to write about with the second in that series?’ And of course, things differ depending on what your second book is going to be about. And I think we're going to talk a little bit later about the different scenarios… or embarkation points for your second novel, so I'll leave that discussion till then. But it does, of course… clearly how you approach your second novel and your mental wellbeing and your mental state at the point of approaching that second novel depends a lot on how your first novel fared. So, yeah.

**Nelima Begum** 27:10

There are some instances where let's just say the first novel has done okay, perhaps not met the writer’s expectations, but it's been fair, it's been alright. Some may see the second novel as an opportunity, to kind of, experiment or try something new, or really just try and surpass anything that the first novel was.

**Vaseem Khan** 27:33

Yeah, and you know what, a lot of this industry is about experimentation, because the one truth that I can absolutely guarantee everybody is that no one really knows what they're doing. And that's slightly facetious—of course, there are very experienced people who know when they have a good book in their hands, but whether or not that book will sell, that's a different story. And you hear stories of massive advances paid to books that end up, you know, completely, just, you know, just sinking without trace. And then through no fault of their own, everybody hates the author, they hate everything to do with that author, you know, they’re like a bad stink in the building, and nobody wants them there. And this has happened to some friends of mine. So it's, you know, I'm being slightly, slightly comical with the whole thing. But the truth is that this does happen. This does happen to people through no fault of their own, I should say, because a writer has almost zero control over the amount of an advanced paid and how a book then subsequently fairs. So when that happens, yes, the effect on mental wellbeing can be tremendous, and not in a good way. So but the opposite can also be true that, you know, the industry rejects a particular book. You know, Harry Potter went through what 28 rejections or whatever, and then somebody chose to publish it. And next thing, you know, the series is doing, well, fabulously, as we know, and all of a sudden, everybody's scratching their heads wondering, well, you know, why did they all reject it? It was so obvious it was going to be a hit. Well, it wasn't obvious.

**Nelima Begum** 29:12

Early stages, when it's just loose paper, it's not very obvious to anyone at all.

**Vaseem Khan** 29:17

Not at all.

**Nelima Begum** 29:19

So we've kind of touched on this already. But you've mentioned that, with regards to a second novel, there are several outcomes for writer. Could you walk us through those and how you've perhaps dealt with some of those scenarios, if any?

**Vaseem Khan** 29:31

Yeah, okay. So, the way I see it, and I guess this is comprehensive, but the way I see it, there are three scenarios after your first book before you embark on your second book. So the first is the best outcome. And that is that your first book did reasonably well. By reasonably well what I mean is that it met the, it roughly met… the sales figures that your team had put in place as their expectation for that book. So everybody's happy with you. You know, you're loved up when you come into the building, everybody's slapping you on the back and saying, ‘Hey Vas, you're wonderful. You're the best thing since Hemingway’, et cetera, et cetera. So then, you know, they normally want more of the same, right? So if it's series fiction you're writing, it'll be a second in a series. If you're writing non-series fiction, it'll be, yeah, do another book, but make sure it's sort of in the similar kind of style, similar space. You know, if you're writing angst-ridden immigration tales, they probably want another angst-ridden immigration tale from you, even if it's not a series. So that's the best outcome.

Then the second scenario is where your first book didn't do that well. However, it got some good reviews, maybe it got some good marketing play. Your editor in your agent, were happy with the writing and they believe in you. Right? So, you still have the same editor and agent for your second book, you haven't lost them. And therefore, then it's that experimental phase that you were just mentioning. You know, is it time to change genre? Hopefully not. Is it time to maybe think about a completely new setting, a new theme, that you want to explore not related to your first book? Maybe you want to change the way that you're working, change your blueprint, you know, if you've written an 800-word fantasy, and now… you want to go from that to a 300-page light literary novel. So that's the second scenario. And again, that's hard work, but at least you're still in the game and you're getting a chance.

The worst-case scenario, of course, is that your first book absolutely crashed. Maybe, again, through no fault of your own. It just didn't work on any level whatsoever, and therefore, your editor, and your agent, possibly, they think, Okay, look, we're not going to get any [further] with this relationship, and you lose your contract. Now, that's quite rare. Normally, these days, the good news is normally these days, most debut writers are signed up for two-book contracts. And the reason for that is that if your first book succeeds really well, they don't want you wandering off to some other publisher or some other agent. So they sign you up for a two-book deal. The reverse, of course, is that if your book doesn't do very well, they do have the option of cancelling that contract. Most of the time, they don't, they just say okay. They sit back, lick their wounds and say, ‘Alright, fine, that completely bombed. But let's try something different. You're under contract anyway. So let's see what we can do.’ But sometimes, of course, you will lose your editor and you will lose your agent. And I think that's the point where the whole being resilient, needing to, sort of, have a very tough skin, you know, being strong on your mental, mental wellbeing and saying to yourself, look, it's not the end of the world, you know, I can go away, I can lick my wounds, I can come up with a, yeah, pick yourself up, reinvent myself. You know, life does this to us. Sometimes, you know, we're thrown off the horse. And sometimes we get thrown face-first into a pile of manure. It happens. It happens in writing a lot. But that's when you need to really say to yourself, [and] look at yourself in the mirror, and go back to what I said at the top of this recording, which was persevere. And also tell yourself you're a professional writer, even if you're not published. And therefore that means that you have to take failure and rejection as par for the course, and keep going and keep going and think of something else.

**Nelima Begum** 34:02

Of course, and I think another thing to bear in mind is, sometimes it's getting thrown off the horse, or things not working out, and those moments of discomfort and a bit of cluelessness, where actually the most growth can happen for a person.

**Vaseem Khan** 34:17

Well, you know, they say, failure these days is a cottage industry, right? I mean, everyone's got a podcast about failing, and people write books about failing. And you know what? It's fine. You know, everyone tells you that story about—was it Edison who went through 3,000 light bulbs or 10,000 light bulbs until he found the one that actually worked? You know, we don't—you don't—need anything as trite as that. All you need to do is learn that the industry does these things. Sometimes it's not your fault, but sometimes it does require you to go back and reflect on your work and the direction of your work and say to yourself, is there something else I can do. And authors reinvent themselves all the time. You know, there're plenty of authors I know who have gone from writing literary fiction to crime fiction, some who've gone in the opposite direction, some who have branched out into YA. So—

**Nelima Begum** 35:14

I mean that’s the best thing about writing, isn't it? That, you know, it's creative, it's fluid, you're able to play, able to experiment, and really just find what works for you really.

**Vaseem Khan** 35:23

well, this takes me back to what I said earlier, which is if you have put in the hard yards, the years of learning your craft, then you already have that toolbox to be able to go off and write different genres, to change, to pivot, when you get dumped into the manure. If you haven't put in that hard work in the beginning, and you've basically woken up one day, zipped off a quick novel, because you thought, you know, it'd be fun, and you just had a great idea, and then you've sent it in and maybe you've got lucky and your first novel got published in that way, but you haven't really put in the effort to have all of those skills at your disposal, it becomes much harder for you to then pick yourself up and reorient yourself.

**Nelima Begum** 36:11

With regards to that first novel in particular, I'm quite intrigued. Let's just say you decide to write a different genre, or indeed your first novel worked out, and when you're now writing the second in a series, or something. I mean, I imagine it could be quite tempting to, kind of, use certain things from that first novel that have worked really well. How do you, kind of, get yourself in the mindset of experimenting, to avoid, perhaps, recreating things or, you know, remaking clichés or other things that have happened in your first work?

**Vaseem Khan** 36:45

Well, I think what you've got to do is first have a very honest discussion with your agent, right? And agents are usually quite good, because they're like the bridge between you and your editor. So if you've got a good agent, their job really is to do what the Secret Service does for the President, which is to dive in front of those bullets, so that, you know, the editor spares the worst criticism, and just basically has a chat with your agent offline. And says, ‘Look, this is woeful, this is what's wrong, this is what we need differently. Now you go and coddle your writer, lift them up a bit, and then gradually get them to see sense and maybe make some of these changes to whatever they're writing next.’ So that's the first port of call. And the other thing is, you know what, you've got to be very grown up about these things. It's so easy, and I've done it. Right, I've spent so for instance, I've spent 20 years working on a massive literary novel set in Egypt, and using magical realism as the style base. And it's, like, 200,000 words, and I keep coming back to it, and I keep asking my agent, ‘Will you please read it?’ because I want to get it published. And he refuses He says, ‘Vas, one, it's too long.’ And I said, ‘How do you know it's too long, you haven't read it. It might be exactly the right length for that type of novel.’ And then, and then he says, of course, ‘Vas, it’s far away from what your publisher is trying to do with your career. You're well-known in crime fiction now. For us to try and push this book, it would just be confusing to your readers, to your publishers, to your marketing people, to everybody.’ But, you know, I won't let go of it. I won't listen.

**Nelima Begum** 38:40

Right, because that's your passion project.

**Vaseem Khan** 38:42

That's my passion project. And that's why I completely understand that there will be people in the audience who are listening, on the group, who are wedded to that first book, or the style or the genre, who don't want to change. Well, if that's the case, you know what? Go with your gut instinct, do what you feel is right for you, and maybe you don't have to abandon everything. You know, maybe if you're wedded to writing big literary novels, fine. Write another big literary novel. If you're wedded to a particular sort of style, find, keep that style.

**Nelima Begum** 39:16

Or even just stick with a character or outline if it's one that you particularly don't want to let go of, maybe stick to your gut and go with it.

**Vaseem Khan** 39:24

Well, I don't know about that. Because, well, if we're talking about a book that was published and completely tanked, that's different. You don't want to be repeating those characters and that plot, because it just didn't work.

**Nelima Begum** 39:35

Oh, no. I mean, like, in the early drafting process.

**Vaseem Khan** 39:39

If it's an early drafting process, then yes, maybe you can do that. But you might just want to tweak certain things by having these discussions with your agent, with other members of your writing groups, because that's the big innovation that I didn't have access to when I was young, which is to have, hopefully, other writers who you can take this to or budding writers that you can take this to.

You know, there is no perfect answer that anyone can give you here, it's so subjective, writing, and which ideas will absolutely work, you can't be sure. But the one thing you can be sure of, and again, I'll come back to this, is that there is a baseline of quality. And that baseline, you know, it doesn't vary over the ages, you know, an agent or an editor who has any experience, and even we as readers, you pick up a book that is beautifully written, you know it within five pages. Now, you may not like the book ultimately, you know, it might get boring, or the plot may not quite hook you. But in terms of a baseline of quality writing, you recognise it. And that's, that's the first and most important thing, and I know those baselines will vary depending on your genre. It's a different baseline in crime fiction, it's a different baseline in romance, a different baseline in, you know, top-end literary fiction. But ultimately, within each of these, there is a baseline. And if you're not meeting that baseline, you will get very short shrift from agents and editors.

**Nelima Begum** 41:12

You touched on writers’ groups and things. So, aside from the writing itself, what else do you think could help a writer on their journey beyond the first book regarding things like research and networking, and basically just inspiration?

**Vaseem Khan** 41:27

Well, I think, you know, it's very difficult to get most writers to understand the importance of, say, networking. Okay, we'll touch on rich research in a second. And the reason for that is because one, a lot of writers are very shy, as we discussed earlier on, and they hate telling people that they're a writer. You know, they have that imposter syndrome. It's like walking into a party and telling people you're a serial killer. Nobody wants to admit to that. And nobody wants to admit to being a writer. But also a lot of writers are quite insular, they find it very difficult to, sort of, mix in these circles, and to talk about themselves, because, you know, they're not politicians, they're not used to bragging about achievements that they haven't actually achieved yet. And that, essentially, is what you're doing. If you're an unpublished writer you're going out to these places (and by places I mean writing festivals, writing groups, writing chapters that you often have nowadays, where you can meet in your local library, or wherever). So these are quite important events to attend, in my opinion, and I wish I'd had access to these when I was still in my phase, because I think it might have shortcut the journey a little bit for me to getting published. Because at these places you meet, not just fellow writers, but you also meet bloggers, you meet reviewers, you meet people who might be writing something similar, you will meet people who are editors and agents, obviously, though it's very rare for anyone to get an agent. You know, in spite of stories you may have heard, you don't normally get agents at festivals. What you do get is an understanding by just chatting to people or listening to panels, where there are agents and things. You get an understanding of what the industry is looking for. What's hot right now? How are they making those judgments? So these are things that I do really encourage people [to do]. Self-promotion. This is a big theme, a big, big theme in the industry. So, if you get if you're lucky enough to get an agent and an editor, one of the things that they absolutely want to know is, can they trust you to work very, very hard to do some of your own marketing and promotion. And the smaller the publisher that you go with, the more they might be leaning on you to do some of that, and the basics they might expect these days or social media, for you to have, you know, some accounts and maybe making an effort to say some things about your books and your writing, to have some kind of personality. I know, heaven forbid writers having a personality, but it’s sort of expected within the industry more and more now, because it's more outward facing. And then they're looking to know can you articulately and engagingly talk about your work? Are you going to bore the pants off of people? Are you going to be one of those authors who goes to a… they booked you at a festival and you go there and then you don't meet eyes with anybody and you end up doing a 20-minute reading which puts everyone to sleep. Nobody wants a 20-minute reading anymore. We don't live in that age. What they want is an author maybe to do a short reading but then to engage them with some interaction, answer their questions, tell them about the journey, maybe have some anecdotes that they could tell about the story around the plot. So, all of those things, I think, are things that you can work on, you can prepare. To give you a simple example, when I knew I had my first book deal, and I was told that I had to come in and talk about it to a big audience of people at my publisher, it was one of their annual dinner nights, what I did was I prepared a four-minute talk, not specifically about the book, *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, but about changing India from the days of the Raj. And I added some humour and some jokes, and then I practised it, and then I filmed myself on my phone doing it, and then I had a look, and I could see, you know, certain mannerisms that were, you know, I've always been a reasonably okay, confident speaker, but, you know, this was a different thing. Because that had been for work; this was something completely different. So, I worked on it for a good couple of months to get it really, really slick, so that when I actually went to deliver it, it went down really, really well. So these are easy things that people can do. You can easily attend these festivals, you can attend writing chapters and groups, you can create some social media you can work on self-promotion, [and] on how you might do a talk for presenting your book.

**Nelima Begum** 46:42

Knowing what you know now, and you know a lot because you've come up and you've, you know, done incredible things, what would you tell the Vaseem Khan who was about to write his second novel?

**Vaseem Khan** 46:54

Well, I think that all you can really do is go back to the things that make novels work, no matter what genre you're writing in. And, you know, as I said earlier, if I'd had a bit more time and a bit more experience within the industry, I might have taken a bit more time over that second novel. What I did do, so I guess this is slightly more relevant to me personally, is I wrote five books in that first series. And that's when I took the break. That's when I stepped back. And I said to my publishers, ‘Look, I want to do something different. I want to write a historical crime series set in 1950 in India. And the reason I want to do that is because I want to tell the story of how this modern India that I've described in my first five books, the Chopra novels, how did it come to be.’ And although India is an ancient culture, the truth is that in 1947, after 300 years of the British presence, and it became independent, many of the things that happened then have set the tone for the India that we know today. And I knew that that was an area of… [or is a] time in India that has not been explored very much in fiction, there's only been one really big book called *A Suitable Boy*, which, of course, is a huge literary, brilliant book. But it's never been explored in crime fiction. And I wanted to introduce India's first female police detective into that story, so that book became *Midnight at Malabar House*, which went on to win the Crime Writers Association historical dagger, which is the biggest prize for historical crime fiction in the world. But it allowed me to then do what I'm doing now, which is writing that particular series.

When you're going from your first novel to a second, or from a first series to a second series, and you have the time, you have to remember the things that make novels work, no matter what the genre is. And those are, in my personal opinion, each book is about the search for a particular truth. Something that you want to say about the world. And that applies even if it's a thriller. The very best thrillers have messages within them. So, think about *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* thrillers, right? They've become big films, they've sold 100 million copies around the world, and everyone thinks, Well, you know, they're just about some cyber-hacking woman who, you know, helped solve some murders. Well, the author who wrote them, Stieg Larsson, he actually was a crusading journalist, and his main area of journalism was about violence against women in his native country, and these books, when you read them, they're actually much more than thrillers because they're really talking about male violence against women, as the backdrop to the actual thriller and the crime story. So again, that's the main thing: what is your book about? What's the truth? What is the search for truth in that book? And then the other thing is, of course, human frailty, human weakness, the things that really keep us turning the pages are characters who we want to see… fail, succeed, fail again, go through all sorts of problems and trouble [and] challenges—really put them through the wringer. So here's something that you won't hear very often, but it's a useful insight. Now, everybody in the industry often gets asked, certainly when I do workshops, what's more important plot or character? And usually you have authors and editors sitting on the fence and saying oh, no, they're all equally important, important, blah, blah, blah. That's not true. Right? You heard it here first.

**Nelima Begum** 51:04

You're here to give us a definite answer to this.

**Vaseem Khan** 51:07

I’m giving you a definite answer, no sitting. I find the fence very uncomfortable to sit on, so I never sit on the fence. Character is more important than plot. And the reason for that? Well, the reason for that is this: the industry knows that they can sell a character easier than they can sell a great plot, especially, and particularly, if you're doing series fiction. So, if readers fall in love with the character, they will come back time and time again to that character, if you're doing a series, or to that author, because they feel that author will be able to create similarly brilliant characters. They will forgive you the occasional plot hole, they will forgive you the occasional bad book in a series. And you only have to look at some of the big crime series that have gone on for 15, 20—you know, not every Agatha Christie novel was fantastic. And I've read most of them, so I know. You know, but readers, they fall in love with Poirot, and we're willing to go on the journey with Poirot just because we want to spend time with him. So these are the great, these are the things that I think, when you're doing your second novel, if you have the time to go back and ask yourself these questions, what's the truth I'm exploring, what are the human frailties I'm exploring? You know, and ultimately, what you want is a book that has great charisma. Now, that's a very hard quality to define. And nobody has a real definition for it. But as I might have said a bit earlier, I think you know, if you read enough over your life, when you've got a book that really appeals to you. So, I can give you another example: *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*. Yeah. So this is a book that's, I guess it would be classified as contemporary, maybe contemporary women's fiction, although I don't like that term myself, but it's a contemporary book about, yeah contemporary fiction, I think that's good enough, about a woman who is very, sort of, prickly, works in an office, has a bit of a dark backstory.

**Nelima Begum** 53:19

Reserved, having been through incredible trauma.

**Vaseem Khan** 53:21

Yes. Exactly. Exactly. Now, nobody thought this book was going to be, it came out of the blue. You know, it wasn't given a huge advance or anything. But it's so brilliantly written the character, the plot doesn't really do much. There's not a lot that happens in the plot. You know, there're some really dark revelations at the end of it, but most of it's just, it's just pottering around, but it's the brilliance of the character.

**Nelima Begum** 53:43

A character that pulls you along, and keeps you there, helps you go the distance all the way.

**Vaseem Khan** 53:48

Absolutely. It's charisma. And, you know, it's word-of-mouth that helped that book to sell millions.

**Nelima Begum** 53:54

So these are really brilliant insights that you're sharing as well, and great advice. And on the topic of advice, I mean, you've taught your fair share of creative writing workshops. What would you tell everyone who's about to, or is in the process of, writing their second book? For a lot of people, this will be their new year's resolution, perhaps, for 2023—I'm going to write my second book this year.

**Vaseem Khan** 54:19

Well, again, I'm going back to, I don't want to repeat myself too much, but having this space to really think about it, because I'm going to heap a load of pressure on you now, the second book is absolutely critical to your career. Okay, it's critical. It's critical, no matter what happened with the first one, because if your first one succeeded, well, you need to build on that you cannot disappoint. You cannot disappoint your readers, your editor, the publishing industry. They expect big things from you. And we just mentioned *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*. Well, it's been five years and Gail Honeyman has not written a follow-up yet. And a lot of people think it's because the book was so unbelievably successful that she's wrestling, she's wrestling with how to make the second one as good. So, you know, it can happen to the best of us. But it's important. And an on the other hand, if your first book was a complete failure, then this is your chance to recover your career. So again, it's critical. So I'm so sorry that I can't mollycoddle and coddle everyone and say don't worry about it, it's no big deal.

**Nelima Begum** 55:33

Hard truths with the Vaseem Khan.

**Vaseem Khan** 55:37

It is a big deal. But the good news is that you've already written a book. Well, you've written a first book, so you know the process of writing. You just need to be able to take a deep breath, get rid of some of that panic. And think very clearly about your mission. What is it that this book is going to do for you, as a writer? What is it that you need to get off your chest? And the other thing I will say is a general comment about editing. Now, I'm one of those people who hates, I despise, receiving edits from my editor. So I tend to do a lot of editing upfront, you know, to the point where I will go over it three, four or five times, I'll put it away for a few weeks then go over it again. And again. And it's helped me over my career, because I do get very few edits now, because I've… taken care of nearly all of the questions I might possibly be asked. So I would, again, suggest that with your second book, I would advocate a detailed plan. Once you've thought about the kind of book you want to write, make a detailed plan, because I often find in the planning, and I take about three months to plan a novel, and I plan every single scene in that book, I do the research as part of the planning. And that, again, helps me to change those scenes and those plot lines. I find that the process of planning throws up lots of great ideas to make the book a better book. So I strongly advocate doing that for your second book, and then really editing hard at the other end. And I think if you do that, you know, I liken it to, I don't know, a master craftsman working on something, and taking their time and doing the due diligence and the due process, as opposed to those writers—and I'm sure there are many in this group as well (and there's nothing wrong with that)—who call themselves pantsers. So I was just talking about plotters, but I'm sure people have heard of the notion of pantsers. And these are people who say that I just wake up one day with an idea in my head, and I just begin writing. Yeah, no, well fine. If that works for you, fine. I haven't heard of many people that it actually works for. And the reason I haven't heard of many people that it actually works for is because what often happens is the idea is rattling around in your head and you feel you have to write it and therefore you charge straight into it, and then you get stuck in about 20,000 words. Or you begin to panic, and you start going off in all sorts of directions. And then when you finally finish that draft and look back, you realise it's absolute garbage, and then you have to basically start again anyway. So I would strongly not advise doing that until maybe you've published a few books and you're really confident with your technique and the way your brain works when writing.

**Nelima Begum** 58:42

Okay, fantastic. So, find that plot and really put in the work with the edits. We have some quickfire questions to, kind of, round off the episode with. So these require far [fewer] thoughts, just first thing that comes to your head. So, the first one is what's your comfort read.

**Vaseem Khan** 59:01

That would be *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie. I found it in a bookshop one monsoon day in Bombay, and I didn't know what to expect. I didn't really know much about Salman Rushdie at the time. But it is magical. It is one of the best books about India, and India going through independence, that has ever been written, and it won, rightfully, the Booker Prize, but it also won the Booker of Bookers, so it was voted as the best Booker winner for 40 years.

**Nelima Begum** 59:32

Nice. What are you reading at the moment?

**Vaseem Khan** 59:36

Oh, I read a lot. And again, I guess this is normal advice for every author: read a lot and read across genre. So I tend to have four books on the go. I have a bathroom book, a tube book on the train, a bedside book just before lights out, and then I have a book that I just read for the for the heck of it. So, what am I reading at the moment? I'm reading this year's Booker winner, actually, *The Seven moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka.

**Nelima Begum** 1:00:05

Fantastic! I also like that you've got a book for every single thing. If you can share, what are you writing at the moment?

**Vaseem Khan** 1:00:16

Well, I think one of the things you learn—

**Nelima Begum** 1:00:16

Are you writing something at the moment, actually?

**Vaseem Khan** 1:00:18

Yeah. Well, there's no choice. One of the things you learn as a professional writer is that you're actually working on three books at the same time. And what do I mean by that? What I mean is that you're promoting one book, the one that was published recently. So for me, that's the third book in the *Malabar House* series, which is called *The Lost Man of Bombay*, and that's about a white man who's found murdered in the foothills of the Himalayas, gets sent to Bombay, there’s a notebook in his pocket with some cryptic clues, and my protagonist has to go off and find out who killed him and why. So you're busy doing that. So lots of festivals and events and blogs and all the rest of it. Then, you're editing the book that's coming out next year, which has already been written, but you've had the edits back. So I'm just finishing the edits for the fourth book in the *Malabar House* series. And then you're busy, of course, writing the one that you have to deliver in a few months’ time. So yeah, very, very busy.

**Nelima Begum** 1:01:15

Yeah, you are writing. What has writing taught you about yourself?

**Vaseem Khan** 1:01:22

Well, I am one of those people who wanted to be a writer from a very young age, as I mentioned. So, for me, writing is an extension of who I am, you know, I've been doing it for 30 years now. You know, I started writing, as I mentioned I wrote my first novel as a teenager. So, 30-plus years later, I'm still writing novels. And I think what I said earlier was very relevant to everybody here: if you don't wake up and think of yourself as a writer, regardless of whether or not you've been published, then this probably isn't what you should be doing. You know, if it doesn't excite you, and motivate you, in spite of all of the disappointments and failures, and I've had lots of disappointments, as I mentioned earlier, all of those rejected years, if it doesn't still… if you can't bear to think about picking yourself up and doing it all over again, then this isn't really for you.

**Nelima Begum** 1:02:25

Okay. And finally, what does being a writer mean to you?

**Vaseem Khan** 1:02:30

Well, I only had two dreams when I was younger and one was to play cricket for England, and the other was to write novels. Now, I am a failed cricketer, I have to say, although I do still play cricket every weekend.

**Nelima Begum** 1:02:44

And brain surgeon.

**Vaseem Khan** 1:02:46

Oh yes, well that was a later ambition in life, brain surgery. Now look, I'm living out my childhood dream. And I don't think… [there are] a lot of people who can say that the dream they had as a 14-year-old, you know, now they're getting the opportunity to live that. And my sincerest hope is, for the people who are listening to this, is that, you know, if that's your dream, too, then, you know, it will happen for you. And I've seen so many people over the years now, over the 10 years that I have been published, who have come into the industry, who have had those and have shared the fact that they've had that dream. And they spent years trying to write a book. I mean, I just interviewed—I do a podcast of my own, which is a crime fiction podcast and I interview some of the world's biggest writers on that podcast—and I recently interviewed Kate Moss, who is the historical writer who became world-famous with the *Labyrinth* novels, you know, sold millions upon millions of copies around the world. And she said that she was working on that first book for a decade.

**Nelima Begum** 1:03:59

Wow.

**Vaseem Khan** 1:04:00

And everybody would keep asking her, her friends and her family, they'd come in and jokingly say, ‘Okay, are you still working on that on that book of yours?’ And you know, she'd be slightly squeamish and a bit embarrassed about the fact that, you know, after 10 years it… hadn't been finished and got nowhere and nobody had any expectation, and she didn't have much expectation, frankly, for it. But then, lo and behold, it was published, and it just changed her life.

**Nelima Begum** 1:04:26

Oh, that's lovely. And that's such a brilliant note to finish with as well and so wholesome. It really sets the note for the upcoming year because I know there are lots of people who will want to make 2023 their year of writing. So, thank you so much for joining us for this episode, Vaseem, this was brilliant. What a wonderful way to kick off season four, and you've shared so much advice and wisdom and insight, so I'm sure our audience will really benefit from it too.

**Vaseem Khan** 1:04:51

Thank you so much for inviting me on.