



EXCLUSIVE

## Man of the moment

Rumours of a Pulitzer and nods from literary greats have made **AKHIL SHARMA** the toast of New York's literary circuit. By AARTI VIRANI

There's nothing charming about Akhil Sharma's desk. Wedged inside a closet in his hand-some Manhattan flat, the modest space is an unlikely sanctuary for an award-winning author. But it's within these claustrophobic confines that Sharma—who works with the sliding doors closed—scribed much of his second novel, *Family Life*. "Writing, for me, feels deeply self-ish," reveals Sharma, 42. "Hiding in my cubby and sealing myself in makes it easier."

*Family Life*, releasing this month in India, comes 15 years after Sharma's debut, *An Obedient Father*, shook the American literary landscape in 2000. While it earned a PEN/Hemingway prize, a Whiting Writers' Award and votes of confidence from luminaries like Joyce Carol Oates and Jonathan Franzen, its bleak premise (a single mother forced to live with the father who molested her as a child) made it indigesti-

ble for the masses. "It was grim," Sharma admits. "I sold the British rights to the book for just \$600."

### CLOSER HOME

Sharma's second act draws from his own coming-of-age story as an Indian-American, set against the backdrop of a family tragedy. The heart-wrenching tale, peppered with earnest humour (the eight-year-old protagonist, Ajay, believes in a god that looks like Clark Kent), has already unleashed rumours of a Pulitzer. But Sharma is astonishingly understated. "I spent over 12 years writing this book," he confesses. "By the end of it, I was like, 'God, let this be over.'"

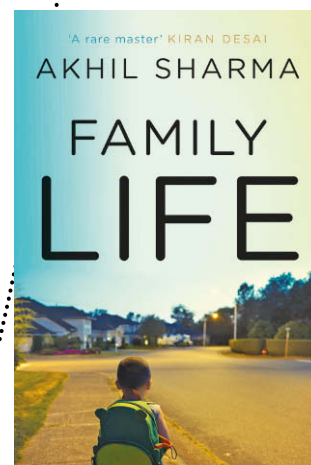
Penning *Family Life* was debilitating at times, Sharma says, forcing him to relive his brother's swimming accident (leaving him brain-damaged for nearly 30 years, until he passed away two years ago), which occurred soon after his family left New Delhi for New York in the late 1970s. "We had thousands of dollars in medical bills," he describes, recalling a frugal childhood in suburban New Jersey. His father, a civil servant, battled inner demons of his own while his mother was buoyed by a sense of false hope, thanks, in part, to outlandish miracle workers who appeared at his brother's bedside. "My parents don't read my work," he states plainly. "And I'm glad. I adore them but I wouldn't want to embarrass them by depicting them in such difficult situations. When I told my mom about the book, she said, 'Just make me look good.'"

### EARLY PROMISE

Sharma attended Stanford University to fuel his creative ambitions, though his success rate left something to be desired. "I sent what I thought was my best story to a range of magazines. I got prompt rejections from all of them except the *Atlantic*, who I didn't hear from for several months. But they bought my story." A discouraging stab at screenwriting led Sharma to three years at Harvard Law School (it's where he met his wife, Lisa), followed by a job on Wall Street. But even 80-hour work weeks couldn't stop him from churning out stories. "I quit the banking job the week I turned 30," he says. "Once you're a writer, you're just always a writer," he emphasises. ■

### TIMELINE

- **1971**  
Born in New Delhi, India
- **1979**  
Arrives in the United States
- **1995**  
Publishes 'If You Sing Like That For Me', his first short story, in the *Atlantic*
- **1996**  
Awarded the O. Henry Award; anthologised in *The Best American Short Stories* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)
- **1998**  
Awarded second O. Henry Award; anthologised again in *The Best American Short Stories*
- **2000**  
Debuts in the *New Yorker* and releases his first novel, *An Obedient Father*
- **2001**  
Wins the PEN/Hemingway and Whiting Writers' Awards for *An Obedient Father*
- **2007**  
Named one of America's best young novelists by *Granta*
- **2014**  
Releases his second novel, *Family Life*



*Family Life*  
(Penguin India)  
is out this month

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