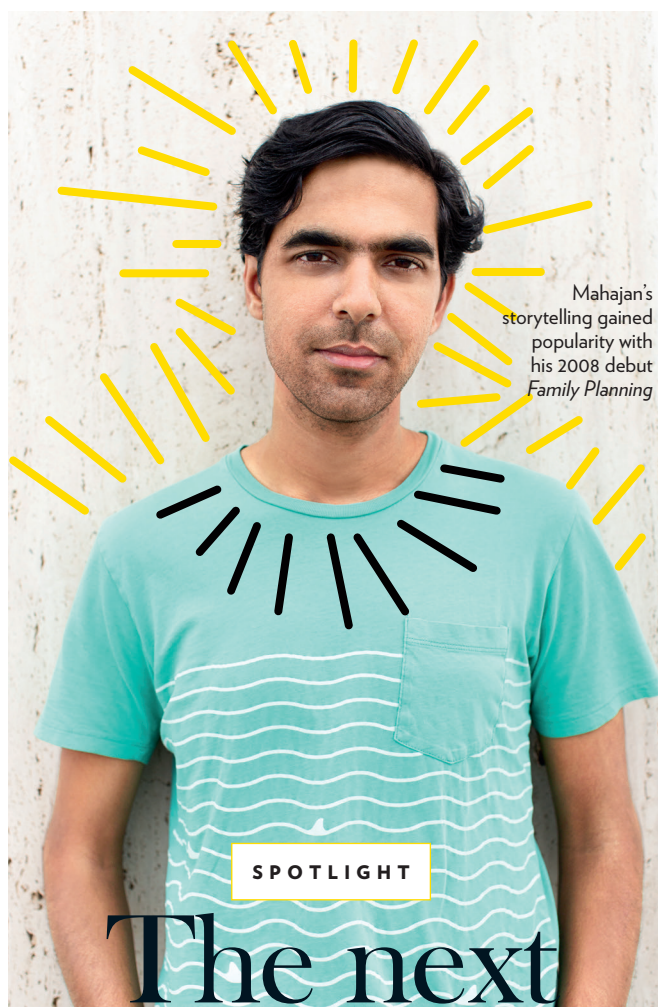


Capturing contemporary New Delhi—smog-encased, sprawling and cacophonous—is no easy feat. But novelist Karan Mahajan, who left that jumbled megapolopolis for California in 2001, confesses to a borderline obsession with his home town.

“I left Delhi when I was 17 and it’s only now that I see it was kind of a trauma I went through,” says Mahajan, now 32. “Because I threw myself into a new environment and settled into the US, through my novels I’ve had to slowly rectify my relationship with home,” he adds. “As a result of that, Delhi will remain a troubled place for me, a place that I’m drawn to.”

Perhaps that’s why the Indian capital plays a starring role in Mahajan’s debut novel, *Family Planning*, a 2010 Dylan Thomas Prize finalist that offers a satirical glimpse into middle-class India and its political gauntlets. New Delhi also serves as the relentless heart to a tangle of divergent yet captivating narratives in his second book, which released this March. *The Association Of Small Bombs*, Mahajan’s latest, is based on the true story of a 1996 terrorist explosion that rips through a market in Lajpat Nagar, killing two young brothers, imprinting a series of visible and hidden scars on their shaken surroundings.

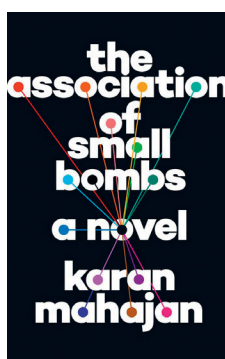
“In a weird way, real life is messier than novels,” admits Mahajan, recounting an exhaustive investigation process that involved sifting through 20-year-old newspaper articles (“The Lajpat Nagar blast got coverage for a couple of days, then vanished from the headlines,” he explains), intimate conversations with market vendors, and keeping a watchful eye on the capital’s courts, which took nearly 15 years to sentence some of the terrorists behind the gruesome attack. “One of the great challenges of writing a novel is inhabiting an event the way it happened as opposed to the way it would be recollected,” he emphasises. “It took me a long time to develop a certain innocence about the whole thing.”



SPOTLIGHT

The next Great Indian Novelist?

Generating glowing reviews in the American press and sharp curiosity in India, novelist **KARAN MAHAJAN** is the literary flavour of the moment, says **AARTI VIRANI**



tours, including one as an economic and urban planning consultant for the New York City government, before settling into the role of a full-time writer. “The life of an author vexed me for a long time,” he claims. “Partly for financial reasons, but mostly psychologically,” he continues. “I didn’t think I could declare myself a novelist but eventually it got to a point where I realised I was denying an essential part of myself. Publicly committing to being an author has improved my writing vastly.”

These days, Mahajan, who is tinkering with ideas for his third book—“I can tell you; it’s a huge mess right now,” he says, laughing—writes mainly from Austin, Texas, a city so laid-back and mellow that it might be the ultimate antithesis to frenetic New Delhi. “The back and forth can be extremely disorienting,” he reveals, hinting at a nomadic travel schedule. “But every time I’m in transit, I have a huge number of observations about each place,” he adds. “I find ways of looking that weren’t available to me before.” ■

Mahajan’s second novel is set against the backdrop of the 1996 Delhi blasts