

A Storytelling Duel Amid Delhi's Ruins

By ANJUM NAIM

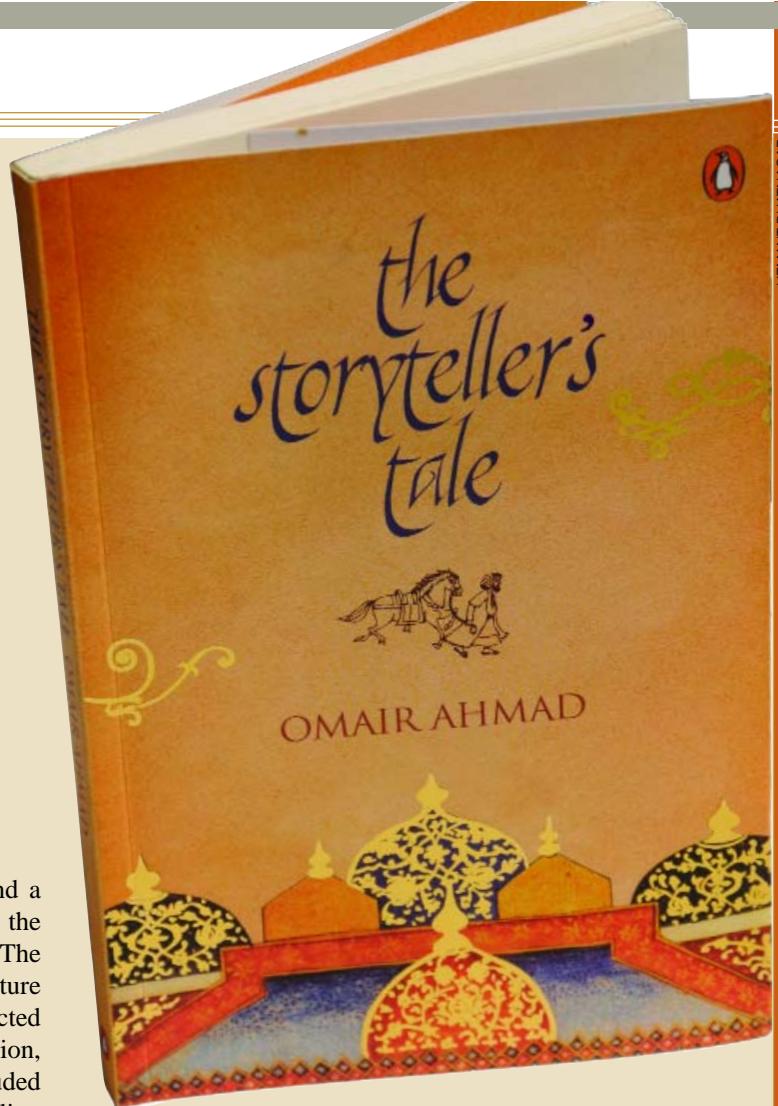
Omais Ahmad's tale of love and violence weaves together diverse influences.

A storyteller returns to his beloved Delhi two and a half centuries ago, only to find it devastated by the violence of Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali. The plunder, the loss of lives, the destruction of a culture and a civilization, breaks his heart. The dejected storyteller finds a roof over his head in a beautiful mansion, thanks to the invitation of Begum, who is living a secluded life with her servants. Little does he know, the storytelling competition of a lifetime awaits him.

This is the setting of Omais Ahmad's *The Storyteller's Tale*, his third book, released earlier this year at the American Center in New Delhi. Ahmad, 34, is a journalist and a storytelling connoisseur who told stories on campus while earning his master's degree in international relations at Syracuse University, New York from 2001 to 2003. There he learned about the American form of storytelling, known as Tall Tales, exaggerated and imaginary stories about bravery and adventure from the wild west of the 1800s, often told around campfires.

Ahmad grew up listening to Urdu and Persian stories, which were read in his family, and the epic, *Mahabharata*. "That is why I felt no difficulty in expressing my thoughts in this form," he says. Fictional elements of all the four stories presented in his novel are based on the *Panchatantra*, parables from the Bible and quotes from the Quran.

In *The Storyteller's Tale*, Begum challenges the storyteller to a competition. While the two narrate four stories to each other, a new story takes place, a love story between Begum and the storyteller. Begum's sentiments are intense while the storyteller resists as he knows the suffer-



HEMANT BHATNAGAR

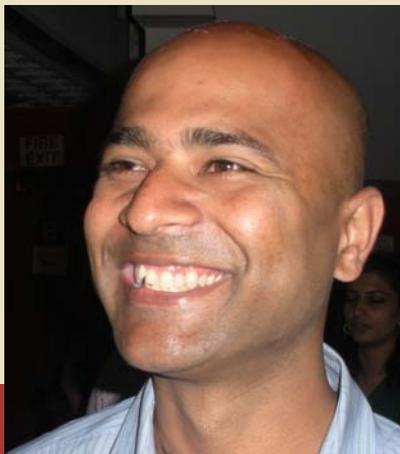
ing of love. And in this way, their stories become the expression of their failed love affair.

Violence permeates every scenario, crossing the limits of time and space. Different forms of violence collide in the mind of the storyteller. Ahmad says, "We are unable to ignore this fact because violence and violent tendencies are affecting all of us in one form or the other. It has become the central reference of lives of people like us."

Ahmad chooses storytelling as his means of communication, comparing it to the efficacy of Biblical parables and Quranic stories at conveying a message. "Moreover, stories heard in childhood also become a part of our psyche," he says.

Ahmad writes for *Outlook* magazine and *Voice of America* and is also an active political analyst. His collection of stories on the lives of common people living in the towns and villages of India was published under the title *Sense Terra* by Pages Editor in 2008. His novel, *Encounters*, published by Tara Press in 2007, depicts the growing rigidity in a section of Muslims. *The Storyteller's Tale* and all of Ahmad's writings make the issue of extremism in words and deeds, their subject matter.

And the winner of the storytelling duel? You decide.



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