

**"THIS AUTHOR IS FIERCE, FUNNY, AND FEARLESS."
-Washington Post**



PRESS KIT for

THE PULITZER PRIZE-LUMINARY COMMENDED MEMOIR

THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED: A TRUE STORY



***PRAISE
for
'THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED'
THE PULITZER PRIZE-LUMINARY COMMENDED MEMOIR***



"Fierce, Witty, Brilliant."

-Washington Post



"First-time author Rajamani offers a fascinating look at his life and recovery as a brain injury patient that is both heartbreaking and uplifting."

-Publishers Weekly



A fierce, funny and fascinating memoir of a man's battle over a brain injury that damaged his body but resurrected his spirit and the meaning of his life."

-Wade Rouse, bestselling author of "At Least in the City Someone Would Hear Me Scream"



"A pretty wild book."

-BBC



"The Day My Brain Exploded is a memoir of epistemology. Ashok Rajamani shares how a man rebuilds a life of the mind. His prose is witty and inquisitive, persistent and clear. If the brain could write an autobiography, this would be it."

-- Steven Kuusisto, bestselling author of "Planet of the Blind"



"With penetrating prose, Rajamani beautifully captures an experience unknown to most. It reminds us that the body is remarkably adaptable and that new values arise after physical changes occur. The Day My Brain Exploded will take you to new places within you, it will leave a lasting imprint on your consciousness."

-Belo Miguel Cipriani, bestselling author of "Blind: A Memoir"



"... good humor and self-criticism... treats his drama with elegance."

- Harper's Magazine



In this frank and witty account of his own brain "explosion," Rajamani describes in vivid detail the circumstances that led to the injury and its devastating consequences for both his family and himself, including chronic epilepsy and a strange form of blindness that affects the left side of each eye. With disarming drollery, the author also recounts his racism-tainted upbringing as an American Indian in Chicago's white-dominated suburbs. Shedding much-needed light on a little-known medical trauma, Rajamani's sharp prose is informative and inspiring, especially for the many outcasts who suffer brain injuries and those close to them."

BOOKLIST Magazine



"... a frightening, raw, droll, and hopeful book about what life is really like for a twenty-something who falls down a rabbit hole but doesn't end up in Wonderland. Instead, he finds a nightmare that won't end without the strength of character he never knew he had."

-PBS



"Extraordinary... very personal."

-CBS Radio



"Bright and attractive. Perfect sarcastic humor... a hilarious, irreverent and fascinating Holden Caulfield-style story of a 25-year-old 'brain-damaged, Indian-American redneck'."

-American Library Association



"Rajamani painstakingly records his advancement back into the world through actions, therapy, and a very strong will to succeed. Regardless, he maintains a sense of humor, albeit extremely avant-garde at times, which I think is so integral to healing and moving forward.

This is a great book. "

- Rocío in Kudzu magazine



"Rajamani's story is personal, inspiring, scary and funny, finding humor in his situation..."

- Times of India



"The story unfolds like a flower blooming. The powerful honesty, hardcore and humor make this a book that I would recommend to anyone... thanks to Ashok for opening up and sharing so honestly. Shocking, amazing, powerful, it's an excellent book."

--Melinda Gustafson Gervasi, author of "Illness, Death, and Taxes for the Middle Class"



"Rajamani is clearly a new creative talent to watch: he skillfully mixes dark comedy and Sedaris with surreal drama, so he's capable of being perversely hilarious and seriously brave (especially when it involves cultural taboos), while still being emotionally authentic."

-- Jason Michel, Paris, editor-in-chief of pulp metal magazine and author of "Confessions of a Black Dog"



"A memory full of unique humor."

--Open City Magazine



"Rajamani's Tale is a memoir that describes the course of his life before and his recovery after a rather catastrophic hemorrhagic stroke. It's full of irreverent wit and wittily written prose, and it speaks to many topics that are rarely recognized, including life as a second-generation American struggling to assimilate into a society that will never truly accept him, and the stigmas and perceptions surrounding the afflictions of the brain and mind. Rajamani goes out of his way to underscore the importance of all of that with a healthy dose of gallows humor."

--"Time Out of Life," Tumblr



"An articulated biography written from the heart".

--garamchai.com



"Pure emotion: raw and real. It's a very accurate portrait of what happened before, during, and after his brain hemorrhage."

- Leigh Pafford, Hometowne Television



"Rajamani mainly tells his story with humor and irreverence, but his account of his painful recovery period is poignant and sincere. He is an inspired survivor who weaves a revealing story of overcoming enormous odds."

--PositScience.com



"Rajamani takes you through your own range of emotions as you share her story of the event and the therapy and recovery that is ongoing. Cry. You laugh. You feel pity, sympathy and empathy. What a daily to be able to read."

-Rebecca Holland, author of "From the Nightstand"



"These memories are so important... for anyone suffering from a disability, especially a brain-related disability."

-David McMillan, Radio "Strategies for Living"



"While it's a wonder he survived, most people don't make it after such traumatic injuries, what's a miracle is that he recovered enough to write such an eloquent book about his ordeal."

- Khabar Magazine



Discover Great New Writers Selection

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Biography Pick

Booksellers Pick

-Barnes & Noble

HARPER'S

M A G A Z I N E

NEW BOOKS

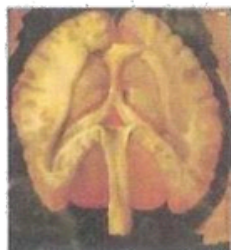
By Jane Smiley

Ashok Rajamani would like to show you what happens when 100 billion neurons are suddenly overwhelmed by bursting blood vessels. In June 2000, at the age of twenty-five, Rajamani is passing the time in preparation for his brother's wedding masturbating in his Manhattan hotel room while the rest of his family is out sightseeing. Unbeknownst to anyone, Rajamani suffers a congenital defect in the way arteries and veins in his brain are connected—an arteriovenous malformation—which leads to what he calls a "Hiroshima" hemorrhage the moment he climaxes. ("Those rumors about jerking off were right," he remembers thinking before he passed out.) The AVM hemorrhage was, according to his doctor, bound to happen sometime, but in his good-humored and self-deprecating memoir, *THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED* (Algonquin, \$13.95, algonquin.com), Rajamani persists in feeling culpable—for being blinded by God, for ruining his brother's wedding, and for switching jobs without signing the COBRA form that would have extended his health insurance. The months, then years, following the hemorrhage are

Jane Smiley is the author of many works of fiction and non-fiction. Her most recent novels are, for adults, *Private Life*, and, for young adults, *Pie in the Sky*. She won a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1992 and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1997.

a chaos of change, misunderstanding, adaptation, and revelation. Bacterial meningitis, hallucinations, a ventriculostomy, a craniotomy, and a plummeting white-blood-cell count, as well as a savior complex, follow. ("I'm the body of love, I'm the body of love," Rajamani babbles to his family for weeks on end.)

His recovery takes him to religion—Christ, Krishna, Kali—and to the offices of speech, physical, occupational, and cognitive therapists. *The Day My Brain Exploded* chronicles his return, not to his normal life (a life in which he had been bullied for being "brainy" before becoming a public-relations whiz and inveterate alcoholic), but to what he calls "a brand new life." His brain is deceitful, fooling him time after time into thinking that everything has stabilized—even as he suffers seizures and migraines, short-term and emotional memory loss. When, after several years, he starts seeing the people around him, as well as his own reflection, as figures so distorted he can't bear to look at them, no epileptologist or psychiatrist can cure him; hiding out at home, he comes up with his own diagnosis by means of the Internet—Alice in Wonderland syndrome, also known as lilli-



putian hallucinations. The doctors pooh-pooh it, but Alice's adventures help him to decipher his warped visions. Rajamani's book deals with his drama elegantly, by maintaining a calm tone, and though he initially thinks of himself as a "science class earthworm"—regenerated, but with only a portion of his old self intact—he eventually derives pride from his altered state. "I loved that old guy profoundly," he sighs. "But I think I love this new fucker just as much. Perhaps even more."

"It only takes a solitary, single, massive explosion to create a completely new universe," Rajamani tells us; *PHYSICS IN MIND: A QUANTUM VIEW OF THE BRAIN* (Basic Books, \$28.99, basicbooks.com) by Werner R. Loewenstein, an emeritus professor of biophysics at Columbia, explores our universe's alpha explosion, the Big Bang. Loewenstein begins by relabeling the mysterious quantum unit sometimes called energy and sometimes called matter as "information," explaining that the moment before the Big Bang was the "moment when the information of the universe was concentrated in a minuscule

A lithograph of Alice watching the White Rabbit disappear down a hallway, 1865, by John Tenniel
© Mary Evans Picture Library. The human brain, from *Totulae Pictae*, by Girolamo Fabrici
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INDIA CURRENTS

HOME OF THE GLOBAL INDIAN

Ashok Rajamani: Of Brains, Beards & Burqas

by Tom Dobbins Jr. | Mar 15, 2020



Ashok Rajamani is the author of ‘The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story,’ the Pulitzer Prize-Luminary Commended memoir.

He grew up near a cornfield in Illinois, one of the handful of brown or black kids in the neighborhood, took off to New York City at seventeen and never looked back. At the age of twenty-five, Ashok suffered a catastrophic, near-fatal brain hemorrhage which left him with epilepsy, distorted hearing, lifelong bisected blindness and many other complications.

Ashok’s stroke and his miraculous recovery are recorded in his critically-acclaimed memoir, which has received praise from Pulitzer Prize luminary Jane Smiley, as well as global raves from Publisher’s Weekly, Harper’s Magazine and The Washington Post among others.

As a survivor, Ashok has become a proud brain injury rights advocate, serving on the board of the International Brain Injury Survivors Network and is a Subject Matter Expert (SME) for the Brain Injury Association of America. He is also a renowned public speaker, poet, and visual artist, and has had his work exhibited in galleries like Greenpoint Gallery and Exit Art New York.

Ashok sat down with Tom Dobbins Jr , the Justice and Peace Program Director at Catholic Charities, Archdiocese New York, to talk about his unique journey:

TD: Ashok – over your lifetime you have done many things besides surviving the explosion of your brain: you’ve written and published a memoir, you are an artist, a poet, an author, and an activist for inclusion across the board; of all of these identities, which of these resonates the most with you, and why?

AR: They are all equally important to me. I love the idea of creating my thoughts into existence.

TD: Your works often dive into two elements of your identity: race and disability, both of which are explored in your memoir. Why do you think this is?

AR: I suppose it is because these are two facets of my identity which are most visible to the world: my skin color and the permanent scar engraved on my skull. As a little brown boy raised in the Heartland – a Hindu Hick I like to say — I understood that my skin color was a conspicuous visibility, but it was more than just something to be seen – it was a crime. I would be at these all-white functions like county fairs and tractor-pulls, and it just seemed at the time that by going into their spaces, I was always invading ‘white’ territory, so as an invader, I was automatically committing a crime. And now, suffering the bisected blindness, brain injury, and other handicaps in a world of abled folks, I fit in even less, so the crime continues.

TD: How do these parts of your identity affect your life these days?

AR: Both stigmas – racism and disability discrimination – obviously still exist in society. Out of the two – my race is obviously the most discernible. On the other hand, my disabilities – fortunately or unfortunately – have the option of being invisible. After all, let's face it – I can grow my hair to cover my scar. The only way I can cover the color of my skin is to put on a lot of clothing – and I have yet to don a Burqa.

TD: As a white male living in the United States, I know that my situation is quite different than a person of color. But as an Indian American, does your experience differ from that of other people of color?

AR: As many comments I received after the publication of my memoir point out, the story of the racism that is encountered in this country by Indian Americans is not one told as often as the racism encountered by other minorities like African Americans and those of the Latinx communities. Like my fellow men of color though, I too have had the experience of being stopped in high-end stores, accused of being a shoplifter, and living in New York City it hasn't escaped my notice that it is still far more difficult for me to hail a cab than my white friends. And let's be honest – when I grow a beard I'm not considered a hipster or lumberjack – I'm considered the guy who will bomb the airplane!

TD: Considering these obstacles – can you share with us some of the things you've done in your life to challenge these stereotypes?

AR: The best answer would be quite simply that I wrote my memoir, which tells the story of a young Hindu guy growing up in the Heartland only to have to face disability from a massive, life-changing brain bleed just in his twenties. I think discussing how the color of one's skin crashes into the destruction of one's brain is a story which has rarely been out there, and challenges what we know about the Indian American experience.

TD: What other immediate projects does Ashok have up his sleeve?

AR: Proud to say I've been invited to appear at the renowned Curtea De Arges Poetry Festival in Romania, and I am so excited to be representing the communities both of Indian Americans and handicapped brain-injury survivors.

TD: As someone who is so active in the literary arts, how would you describe the difference in writing poetry and prose?

AR: If we are talking about poetry, we are talking about something that involves the interplay of rhythm with balance of sounds – whereas there is no rhythm required in prose. It is in the writing of poetry where I can best see my “Indianness” come into play. Poetry is musical – just like language from the subcontinent, where everything is set to melody – be it the sound of anklets, songs of Bollywood, or even the way our necks dance when we talk.

TD: On a final note: I just read a commentary about you from one of your fans in a Reddit forum on South Asian Writers. He said, “Ashok’s a fave of mine since he’s a writer from NYC who won’t stop effing with culture, race, and brain injury.” Thoughts?

AR: Love it!

Tom Dobbins Jr. is the Producer of the weekly national social justice current events program ‘JustLove’ on Sirius-XM. He works in the field of International Justice and Peace Education, Interreligious Dialogue and Advocacy and “meets many amazing individuals who are working – in various ways – to bring an appreciation of cultural diversity and enlightenment to a world that desperately needs it.”

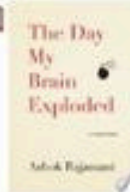
***originally published in India Currents, 2020*

Booklist



The Day My Brain Exploded

Ashok Rajamani



Jan. 2013. 256p. Algonquin, paperback, \$13.95 (9781565129979). 617.48.

[REVIEW](#). First published [December 1, 2012 \(Booklist\)](#).

More commonly known as strokes, cerebrovascular accidents—or CVAs—are an all-too-frequent occurrence among our nation’s elderly population. About 87 percent of these are ischemic strokes resulting from sudden blood clots in the brain, whereas the other 13 percent are classified as hemorrhagic. This latter type of CVA, where either a blood vessel or arteriovenous malformation (AVM) unexpectedly ruptures, can occur at any age, as former New York public-relations executive Rajamani horrifyingly discovered when he was only 25. In this frank and witty account of his own brain “explosion,” Rajamani describes in vivid detail the circumstances leading to the injury, and its devastating aftermath on both his family and himself, including chronic epilepsy and a freak form of blindness affecting the left side of each eye. With disarming drollery, the author also recounts his racism-tainted upbringing as an Indian American in white-dominated suburban Chicago. Shedding much-needed light on a little-known medical trauma, Rajamani’s sharp-edged prose is both informative and inspiring, especially for the many marginalized sufferers of brain injury and those close to them.— *Carl Hays*

UPLIFTING VOICES

**#1 global online community for empowering people with disabilities –
Together we will be heard, together we will uplift**



Standing in front of newest self-portrait

Ashok Rajamani Interview

"I try to face obstacles in my life by calling upon the humor, courage, and resilience deep within me." – A talented artistic life of a brain injury survivor and activist

Ashok Rajamani is a Pulitzer Prize-Luminary Commended Author, an accomplished artist and a brain injury rights advocate who believes in giving life a second chance. At the age of twenty-five, Ashok suffered a catastrophic, near-fatal brain hemorrhage which left him with epilepsy, distorted hearing, lifelong bisected blindness and many other complications. His strong survival instincts have enabled him to face the challenges to relearn everything from eating, thinking, walking to even seeing. Ashok's stroke and his miraculous recovery are recorded in his critically-acclaimed memoir, *The Day My Brain Exploded*.

Thank you Ashok for your time. Your interview will motivate all our community.

Q: What challenges did you face during your post-brain-surgery recovery? Were you given any unique therapies to help heal your brain?

A: My brain hemorrhage was the death of Ashok 1.0. So, in order for Ashok 2.0 to be formatted, I had to relearn every single thing, from walking, to talking, to eating, to using the bathroom, to simply thinking. Since the brain hemorrhage left me permanently blind in half of both my eyes, I've also had to relearn how to see the world. Not just so I can write and read and paint again, but just so I can shave my face without butchering it and cross the street without getting run over!

My family and I were told that I should always try to keep my brain alert by watching news programs and game shows. I became hooked on *Wheel of Fortune*! And let me tell you, that show helped me retrain my vision (still does) and helped me strengthen my cognitive abilities. In fact, my adventures with watching *Wheel of Fortune* are lavishly noted in my memoir, and Vanna White is even mentioned in the book's acknowledgements!

Q: Which is more creatively satisfying, being an artist or a writer and why?

A: Both are fabulous in that you are creating brand new worlds for your audience to enter each time.

Q: Who can benefit from your memoir “The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story”?

A: So many people can benefit – not only my brothers and sisters in the disability community, but also our loved ones, friends, caregivers, and medical community. On a larger scale, the book also benefits anybody who has ever felt alienated, bullied, victimized, or felt like an outcast.... and needs to be reminded that they can SURVIVE.

Q: Which is your most memorable work so far and why?

A: Unquestionably, out of all the books I have authored or published, out of all my artworks or gallery shows I’ve had, out of all the keynote addresses I’ve given, my most memorable work – my greatest achievement -- is THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED. Everyday I get emails from families around the world, affected by brain injury, saying how the book has helped them. Makes everything worth it. If, tomorrow, I were to close my eyes forever, I will be content in knowing that the story of my birth and rebirth has been told to the world.

Q: How do you face obstacles in life? What keeps you moving forward?

A: I try to face obstacles in my life by calling upon the humor, courage, and resilience deep within me. Believing in God does the rest. Besides being brain-damaged and blinded, the hemorrhage also left me epileptic. My first grand mal seizure happened as I was walking in a New York City snowstorm. I thought I would never psychologically be able to walk on snow again. But many months later, I finally did. It’s amazing what we humans can accomplish the minute we think we don’t always have to run from the fire but instead make the gamble to walk through it. I keep moving forward by trying to hold on to my sense of humor -- remembering that my laughter will always, always, be far more powerful than my tears.

Q: What are your other hobbies?

A: I’ve been watching way too much cable news these days.

Q: What is your favorite place to visit? What do you love about that place?

A: My spiritual and ancestral motherland: India! As I always say, India is, indeed, God’s backyard. Crowded. Messy. Noisy. Loud. Beautiful. Mystical. Gorgeous. Sublime.

Q: What is your suggestion for families of children with disabilities to empower their children?

A: Never stop reminding them they are perfect as they are! Teach them to always love and respect themselves, no matter which bullies come their way. My memoir details my childhood as a brown boy in an all-white town, in which I was consistently bullied, not because of my disabilities, but because of my skin color. Whether it’s your disability, sexuality, race, gender, or anything at all, there will always be people putting you down, especially when you’re a kid. Your job is to know there is nothing wrong with who you are, not one darn thing.

Q: What tips/advice do you have for those in our community who want to publish their work?

A: Many will tell you nothing can happen unless you have a literary agent. Let me tell you this is FALSE. In fact, literary agents, poor things, are going the way of the dinosaurs! Good riddance! This is a grand thing, as it seems many literary agents just like rejecting authors for the sake of rejecting them. I didn’t use an agent. Just cold-called a few publishers until I found the right one. Also, self-publishing is booming, and no matter what the ‘traditional’ publishing world states: being self-published is no longer a negative thing. But if you do want to go traditional, here’s my advice: Do what I did; contact editors and publishers directly via phone. Don’t wait for someone to do what you can do yourself.

Q: Any special message for our community?

A: Keep speaking your truth no matter who tells you to be quiet. Whether it be in art, music, writing, dancing, singing, show what you're all about. You know that old saying "out of sight, out of mind"? It's the same thing with disabilities. People will want to close their eyes or ignore any handicaps of others due to their own 'discomfort.' Don't let their need for comfort deprive you of YOUR right to be visible and be heard. BE BOLD, BE BRAVE, BE FEARLESS!

UPLIFTING VOICES, SEPTEMBER 2019

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OPEN CITY

Q&A With Ashok Rajamani: The Man Whose Brain Exploded

Kyla Cheung talks to Ashok Rajamani about his uniquely humor-filled memoir recovering from an aneurysm at the age of 25.

By Kyla Cheung



Ashok Rajamani at a recent book signing | Timothy Bellavia

OC: Your memoir opens with a quote from the poet Rabindranath Tagore, a quote from Lewis Carroll, as well as a quote from Charo, the Spanish 1970s comedienne. What did you mean by including all three? What artists inspire you?

AR: Tagore, Carroll, and Charo all inspire me. If we were to ask if I existed in the high-brow world or the low-brow world, then I would say, without question—both. I dig Dolly Parton and Frida Kahlo. I like to call my book the anti-Oprah book. Yes, it is the story of surviving a tragedy, lending itself to mawkishness and over-the-top sentimentality. But, this is not that type of book. My book revels in comedy, tragedy, bawdiness, and flat-out vulgarity, and redemption all at once. But it does not implode into sentimentality, that's for sure. As for which artists and people who inspire me... there are too many to name. But here are just a few off the top of my head: Frida Kahlo, Gautama Buddha, Malcolm X, Madonna, Swami Vivekananda, and of course Jem (the cartoon character).

OC: Your book is funny considering the sobering material. Was that something that surprised you?

AR: My book is written with comedy because that reflects who I am. Before my hemorrhage, I'd always found humor in even the darkest of circumstances. Luckily, I have retained that baseline personality trait even after the brain explosion. I'm convinced that humor saved my sanity.

OC: What are your thoughts on how your many identities—as a traumatic brain injury survivor, an Indian-American and a person of color, interact with one another? How did these affect your approach to writing?

AR: Being brown is visible, but being brain-damaged isn't. Sadly, both issues are not discussed enough in pop culture. The circumstances of racism toward Indian-Americans are never fully dealt with in literature, and brain damage is not historically a major-league subject in books. I'm glad to bring out these issues. In my acknowledgements, I give props to little brown kids in America's Heartland and to brain-damaged warriors as well. I hope I can represent them well, and by publicizing my life, I hope I can publicize theirs.

OC: One of the funniest parts of the book is when you, as a 5th grader, get into a shouting match with your classmates after you show-and-tell a bronze statue of Krishna with them yelling "Jesus" and you yelling "Krishna." It's a comedic and also insightful moment of how early on Americans recognize and participate in identity conflict.

AR: I don't think kids are inherently racist. They fought with me not because they hate brown skin, but because they are curious. Once teen-hood begins, the racism kicks in.

OC: Your relationship with your family members plays a very present role in the memoir. The letters your mother wrote are some of the most touching moments in the book. She writes to you as you lay in the hospital bed and pleads with God, "Why did it all have to happen?" Did your perspective change as you wrote the memoir and included your family's voices? How has your family reacted to the book?

AR: When I wrote the book, I realized my family never gave up, even when they could have. My mother's letters were the most challenging to include. They not only voiced her love and support for her child, but also her fears, and of course, her pain. I gave my folks advanced copies of the book for Christmas. To my surprise, they loved it right away! I was shocked, because South Indian Brahmin families are usually the first to disavow sharing private matters.

OC: You mention in your memoir how you witnessed a marked change how you were treated after 9/11, recounting how your father's close friend, a Sikh man, was killed in a hate crime. You still live in the city and have often, in the case of your seizures, have been on the receiving end of the kindness of New Yorkers. What is your relationship to the city now? Has it changed?

AR: New York City reminds me of a friend I knew that had a miscarriage. She was freaking out, depressed, sad, and angry for the months before-and-after her pregnancy. After many, many months she returned to normal and life went on. With 9/11, New York City suffered its own miscarriage, or more fittingly, a brain hemorrhage, and survived it. It took a while to move on, and even though it has some scars, it has moved on. Yes, it was a tough time to be a brown male from 2001 to 2002, but I firmly believe New York is coming back to the city I remembered.

Ashok Rajamani tours the East Coast:

March 28—MAPLEWOOD, NJ—[Words], 7:30pm

*April 2—NEW YORK CITY—Barnes & Noble, 7:00pm **Joint signing with Domenica Ruta, With or Without You: A Memoir.*

A Conversation with Ashok Rajamani

Author of The Day My Brain Exploded

By Norm Goldman Published September 5, 2013



Today, Bookpleasures.com is pleased to have as our guest the internationally published writer, poet, essayist, and artist from New York City, Ashok Rajamani.

Ashok's work has appeared in dozens of publications, including Scholars & Rogues, Danse Macabre, Salon.com, South Asian Review, and the Atlantic Monthly.

He is a member of the Authors Guild, New York Writers Coalition, Asian American Writers Workshop, South Asian Journalists Association, and is a nationally recognized poet in Poets & Writers Literary Organization's Directory of American Poets.

At the age of 25, in 2000, Ashok suffered a massive full-throttle hemorrhage at his brother's wedding. Though surviving, he was left with permanent bisected blindness, erratic short-term amnesia, spatial motor-skill loss, epilepsy, distorted hearing, and metal staples in his brain.

His writings about his journey of survival led to a memoir entitled *The Day My Brain Exploded*, published by Algonquin Books in 2013. This recently-released, critically-acclaimed memoir is currently available in bookstores worldwide.

Good day Ashok and thanks for participating in our interview.

Norm:

How did you get started in writing? What keeps you going?

Ashok:

I've been writing since I was a little boy, back when my glasses weighed more than me. I suppose I always loved the written word. The first things I ever wrote were actually tiny books. One was called "Penquinolli's Journey." It was about an Italian penguin that waddled his way across the earth to find a good bowl of spaghetti. I also penned lovely narrative poems. One was called "My Poltergeist." It was about a ghost in my house who looked like Ronald Reagan. I continued writing as the years went on. (I'm also an artist who has painted and drawn since he was three, so I continued my art as years went on, too.)

The possibility that I can affect readers by creating entirely new worlds for them, or even better, reflecting their own worlds back to them... this is what keeps me writing. The phrase from the novel "The Gunslinger" is a phrase that always rings true to me: "Go then, there are other worlds than these."

Norm:

In view of your neurological condition, do you have difficulty in focusing when you write? If so, how do you overcome this challenge?

Ashok:

Focusing is not actually the problem. My cognitive abilities, oddly enough, still allow me to stay focused on any job at hand. My main challenge in writing is due to the sort of blindness I now face. It's a rather unique and difficult condition called hemianopsia, also called

hemianopia.

This is a form of blindness in which I am half-blind in both eyes. My brain hemorrhage exploded multiple lobes, one of them being the occipital lobe. As the name suggests, this is the lobe responsible for sight. So, as the hemorrhage happened on my right occipital lobe—which controls a person's left-field vision, I am now blind on my left-half in both eyes.

Because of this problem, it is hard to see the computer monitor fully. To write this book, then, I had to use different methods: I swiveled the monitor or moved my positions (to help delineate margins and type words at the beginning of sentences), used rulers sometimes (to see when the next lines began), held three way mirrors up to the monitor on occasion, to see if my writing has moved to the correct page, or page break. Took much longer to write the manuscript, but it was worth it.

Norm:

Could you tell our readers a little about your book *The Day My Brain Exploded*?

Ashok:

The Day My Brain Exploded is the true story of how, at the age of 25, I suffered a massive, full-throttle brain hemorrhage provoked by, well, a routine yet risqué activity— at my brother's wedding! And how I survived it all. The story is, at times, as blunt as the title, and is non-chronological, veering from era to era, from my life before the hemorrhage, to my life after, and everything in between.

Brain injury survivors are not hyper-pious martyrs. We are as silly, as funny, and yes, as raunchy, as everyone else. This book is vibrant and raw. I like to call it an "anti-oprah memoir," because it is anything but sentimental and mawkish. It is irreverent, tragic, comical, frightening, vulgar, and humorous. Just like life.

Norm:

What purpose do you believe your book serves and what matters to you about the story? What was the most difficult part of writing your book?

Ashok:

My memoir survives multiple purposes. It is the personal story of brain injury told from the patient and survivor himself. Many books like this are written by physicians or surgeons, none of whom truly understand what it is to have their skulls be drilled open! But this is more than just a mere medical memoir. In addition to presenting the world of brain damage from a patient's voice, the book also addresses issues of race, bullying, politics, and hallucinations from a young Indian American redneck. This is why the book matters. It not only allows an unheard voice to be heard, it allows it to be roared.

Revisiting painful events in my life was the most difficult part of writing this memoir. Detailing the racism I was forced to experience as a youngster was probably harder than recounting the physical demolition of my brain.

Norm:

What would you say is the best reason to recommend someone to read your book?

Ashok:

The Day My Brain Exploded deals with an exploding brain, addiction, orgasms, blindness, epilepsy, racism, and Wheel of Fortune. What's not to love? It is the true story of someone who survives the explosion of his brain...with laughter, humor, strength, and

perseverance. My grueling, vivid adventure through brain damage might be personal, but the odyssey to stay alive is not.

The best reason to read the book, then, is to discover a journey that has been rarely told – a brain-damaged Hindu hick trying to live again -- only to realize that the journey to survive is entirely universal.

Norm:

How has your environment/upbringing colored your writing?

Ashok:

Growing up as a Hindu brown boy in all-white, small-town Midwestern America full of corn-fed pink-faced bible-beating folks, I learned early on what it was to be an outsider. My childhood as the "other," in which I met no human that resembled me, has affected my writing in that my stories will always have an outsider bent, a demimonde perspective that enriches the narrative. By always being on the outside looking in, I can create characters with viewpoints that arise not only from distress, but from discovery.

Norm:

What does a typical writing day look like for you, from waking to turning in at night, and how does it compare to a conventional 9 to 5 job?

Ashok:

I somewhat miss the structure of a 9-5. I miss being forced to wear pants. I wish I could say I am disciplined, like those other writers who dress up as if going to work, then type, then walk, then eat, then back to work, and so on. There is no "typical" writing day for me. My writing is completely fed by the energies, spirits, and muses around me. If there are none, I don't write.

Norm:

What do you think of the new Internet market for writers?

Ashok:

It's wonderful! No more monopoly by the big traditional/print publishing houses, which are now a dying breed thanks to e-books, e-zines, social media, digital self-publishing and more. At last, authors can work, create, and release their visions without fear of

traditional publishers and most of all, fear of that outdated, soon-to-be unnecessary clique in publishing: the literary agents. They will go the route of the dinosaurs. Good riddens, I say. Agents will finally be in desperate need of writers, and not the other way around.

Norm:

Do you hear from your readers much? What kinds of things do they say?

Ashok:

Thanks for asking this question! The response I am getting from my readers is probably – no, undoubtedly -- my favorite thing that came out of my book being published. I'm getting emails from readers all over the world, from places like Switzerland, South Africa, Australia, and even Uzbekistan!

Most are excited to have found a book that tells of their own personal experiences, which they rarely can find. These are folks who have survived brain hemorrhages, folks with bisected blindness, folks with metal staples in their skulls, folks who are Indian Americans dealing with hardcore American racism. One of the most moving emails I received lately was from an Indian American teen in Iowa; she was

happy to finally read a book about racism that affected South Asian Americans, one that wasn't about the Latino or African American experience. She was also tired of many Indian American youngsters being forced into the medical or technology professions, and said my book gave her the courage to fulfill her dreams to become a writer.

Norm:

Do you feel that writers, regardless of genre owe something to readers, if not, why not, if so, why and what would that be?

Ashok:

Absolutely, authors owe the readers very much. They are our audiences, our listeners -- the people who spend their time, energy, and resources for our creations. I can't stand when writers don't give enough respect to their readers. I was just at a recent book reading and signing in New York City. I did the event with another author who not only dismissed her audience; she downright disrespected them. She presented the image of being "smarter" than her readers, and smugly responded to any questions. She also neglected to wear anything that would dignify the effort readers had taken to see her. I suppose in her mind, an author has to dress down to show that she is a "true artist." She wore curlers in her hair, ratty leg warmers, and looked like she had just gotten up from a 48-hour bender. We need to respect our readers more than that.

Norm:

Are you working on any books/projects that you would like to share with us? (We would love to hear all about them!)

Ashok:

My next book is called *If these saris could talk*, which will hopefully be out next year. It is a fun, frothy, gossipy ode to subversive femininity, featuring all the secrets of the zany, transgressive women in my family, set in India and America. Think *"Desperate Housewives in Mumbai."*

As for the project after that, I'm thinking it will be focused entirely on freaks, inspired by the epic novel *"Geek Love"* and the classic movie *"Freaks."* Given the ludicrousness of my life so far -- in which everything's shocking and nothing's shocking -- I don't know yet if this will be a work of fiction or nonfiction.

Norm:

What would you like to say to writers who are reading this interview and wondering if they can keep creating, if they are good enough, if their voices and visions matter enough to share?

Ashok:

I want to say: whether you think so or not, your stories matter to at least someone, somewhere. Isn't that what twitter and facebook are all about? Someone could write "my cat pooped this morning." The rest of the world might hate, dismiss, and ignore it (I probably would, since I hate cats) -- but there will always be one person out there who needed to hear that a cat pooped. So, whether your story is *Of Mice and Men*, or *Of Cats and Poop*, your story matters to someone out there. Now put on your armor and helmets and be prepared for the battle to get your delicious words out into the world. My official WEBSITE is definitely the go-to destination. It has extensive information about me, the book, my poetry, other works of prose, and my artwork. There is also an important section called "Brain 411" for those who want to learn more about brain injury and

find neurological resources.

Norm:

As this interview draws to a close what one question would you have liked me to ask you? Please share your answer.

Ashok:

I would have liked you to ask me: "Ashok, can you still cook even after your brain hemorrhage?" My answer would have been: "No, I still can't cook. I never could."

India Abroad

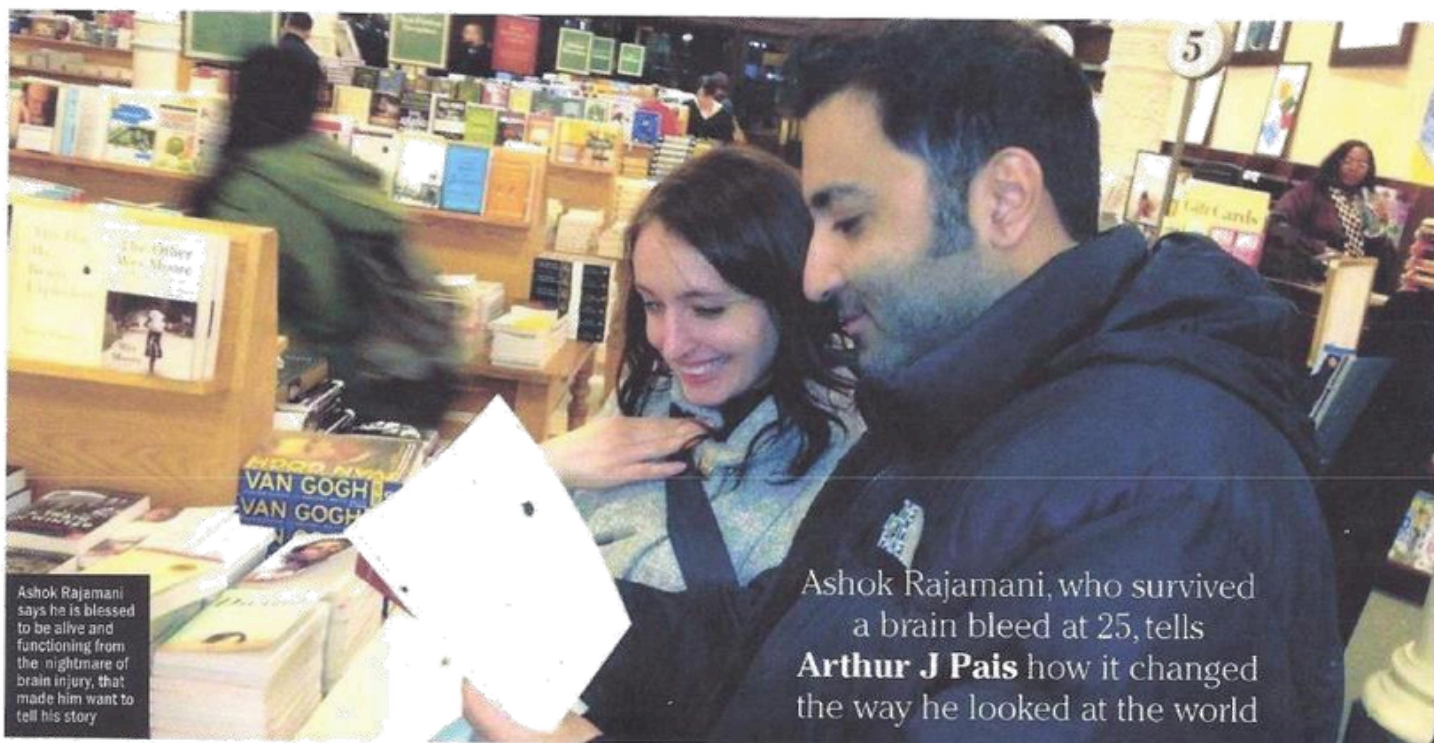
THE MAGAZINE

India Abroad February 22, 2013

EXTREME SURVIVOR



M5



Ashok Rajamani says he is blessed to be alive and functioning from the nightmare of brain injury, that made him want to tell his story

Ashok Rajamani, who survived a brain bleed at 25, tells **Arthur J Pais** how it changed the way he looked at the world

'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

The handsome man, around 38 years old, walked into the ladies room and came out in no time before the shrieks started. "Oh, I did it," he muttered as he apologized for his mistake.

Can you really blame him? Ashok Rajamani, survivor of a full-throttle brain bleed at the age of twenty-five, could only see the words MEN outside the WOMENS toilet because the hemorrhage had left him with lifelong bisected blindness, epilepsy, in addition to distorted hearing, erratic transient amnesia, metal staples in his brain, and ultimately, a carved skull because of open brain surgery.

The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story — a confessional book — full of raw stories and dark humor, is the consequence of his body's very own 9/11, says Ashok.

It is also the story of an immigrant family and its two America born sons, and the racism they had to face in an all white school near Chicago. The book has received praise and media attention for the first-time author who has lived in New York City for over 17 years.

He graduated from New York University in journalism and attended Columbia University for advanced cultural

studies.

Now a brain injury rights advocate, Rajamani has been a regular host for Brain Injury Radio and is a board member of the International Brain Injury Survivors Network, as well as a subject matter expert for the Brain Injury Association of America.

Your book is titled *The Day My Brain Exploded*. Tell us about that day.

The actual bleed, that provoked the explosion that day, was, shall we say, something not suitable for children to hear; you'll have to read the book to find out!

The hemorrhage was caused by the explosion of a hidden birth defect called an arteriovenous malformation — a congenital birth defect — that is hard for doctors to detect until it explodes, as was my case.

An AVM can exist anywhere in the body, but is most frequently detected in the brain. Mine had nestled in my brain from birth, awaiting its explosion.

In other words, my AVM was a ticking time bomb. Perhaps most shocking: the event took place in the most surprising of situations — my brother's wedding.

Was this the original title of the book?

The original title was actually *Brain Karma*, but after some thought, my editor and I realized we wanted something more in your face. *Brain Karma*, we felt, sounded more like a book of brain puzzles, or even a book of yoga

instructions.

The title *The Day My Brain Exploded* is colorful, blunt, and vivid, and perfectly mirrors my no-holds-barred writing style.

Your mother felt you were too young to write such a memoir; what was your answer?

I told her, quite simply: "I've died already. I think that's more than old enough."

Why did you choose to tell your story?

There are not enough memoirs by brain-surgery and brain-injury survivors. In many cases, these survivors have become too mentally challenged or face other severe handicaps.

Plus, they are often killed by their injuries. I once asked my brother, "How come there aren't many 'brain injury pride parades in contrast to parades with survivors from other health conditions?" He told me, deadpan, "That's because the marchers are either too damaged to walk, or, they're dead."

I've been blessed to be alive and functioning from the horrendous nightmare of brain injury. I have to tell my story.

I also haven't found enough memoirs by Indian Americans dealing with the issue of race. Americans of Indian and South Asian descent must contend with as

'You mean your God is metal? That's dumb'

Although I was, of course, aware of my somewhat different appearance, I was raised to be proud of who I was as well as of my cultural heritage, something that occasionally created a bit of tension in the environment.

I had to go to Avon Center School, Not too painful. The main problem was my name. Realistically, "Ashok" is only two syllables; it shouldn't be a problem. But on the first day of every school year, the teacher found a new more inventive way to fuck up my name.

Some variations included Uh-Sheek, Ah-Shook, Ass-hock. Even my classmates were sick of it. With a collective yell at the teacher on the first day of the school year, they would clarify: "It's UH-SHOCK!"

The new teacher, flushed with embarrassment, would then say it correctly. By the next day, though, it would be forgotten and we would start all over.

In first grade, our teacher was a Latina named Mrs. Marquez. The kids tried to depict her in their Christmas cards. As they did, one after the other called out, "She's not our color!" They held up the peach-colored crayons, which the box had conveniently labeled as "Flesh."

"We can't use the flesh color to draw her," they exclaimed. So they used the black crayon from their boxes.

The statue I was bringing to school was of Lord Krishna as the Vishwaroopa, his multi-headed, twenty-armed avatar, representing God as the ultimate power that controlled the creation, preservation and the destruction of existence itself.

Of course, I did not know how to articulate all that at the age of ten, so Mom explained to me in understandable terms.

"Why does he look like that, Mom?" I asked the day earlier, confused by Krishna's multi-limbed appearance.

"All of his arms and heads equal all the people in the world," she said. "It means God is everywhere."

"So is that the statue of God?"

"Not exactly," she said with a chuckle. "It just shows what God means. But it's still holy."

Mrs. Swenton, a fifty-year-old white

woman who excelled in frumpiness, introduced me.

"Ashok is next," she said, her needle-thin, unpainted lips in action, "to show what he brought. Everyone pay attention."

Just before me, a boy showed us his pet puppy, a golden retriever named Demon. The class, of course, loved the presentation, their "oohs" and "aahs" flooding the small yellow-tiled room. It was a tough act to follow.

I went to the front, gussied up in my au courant gray turtleneck and plaid pants chosen by Mom.

"Everyone," I said, "this is Lord Krishna."

The kids, still panting over Demon, shut up and listened. They all seemed intrigued.

I had my speech prepared.

"He's God and this."

Before I could continue, Leslie interrupted, her blonde pigtails bouncing. "Ewww! You mean your God is metal? That's dumb!"

"Jesus is a man," said Mike, who looked like a sweet, cute version of Curly from *The Three Stooges*.

"You should love Jesus!" some other classmates boomed.

"How stupid," Leslie snickered. "How can God be for show-and-tell?"

"Here is what's stupid," I said. "You think your Jesus is great. I've seen his pictures. He has only two arms. My God has so many arms he can kick your stupid God's butt!"

I had unlocked the door to an invisible sports stadium. Three of the kids, as though rooting for one of the teams in a football game, started cheering. "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!"

"Krishna! Krishna! Krishna," I countered, trying to yell above the impromptu pop rally. "You know my God can beat up yours!" ■

Excerpted from *The Day My Brain Exploded*, published by Algonquin Books. Copyright, Ashok Rajamani.



I try to find **humor** in the **pain** of my journey

4 M5

PARESH DAVIDS

much bullying, bigotry, and racism as any other non-white community in our nation. We need such stories that address this fact.

Your resurrection from such extreme brain trauma is quite rare. How would you say you've contended with your survival?

I tell other brain-injury survivors that we shouldn't feel so morose, because I feel we've been given two lives for the price of one. That's how I look at it.

I know I am lucky to have survived well enough to speak, to think, to read, and to write, and to do everything offered in the land of the living.

I try to find humor in the pain of my journey. As I often say, my laughter is far stronger than my tears. When one undergoes a hellish experience, they can either cry or laugh. I chose to laugh.

Tell us about your trauma of dealing with doctors.

Unfortunately, I learned that some in the medical profession have a sordid 'god-complex.' They feel just because they heal your physical ailments, they can belittle your self-worth.

In the book, I mention how a surgeon cruelly dismissed questions about my operation. It was then that I realized a patient's health is only as good as his doctor's humanity. That said, I have also had some wonderful doctors, who have treated me warmly, lovingly, and humanely. I owe much of my recovery to them.

Your memoir details your spirituality. How would you describe your belief system?

I am a proud Hindu. Specifically, I am enraptured by both the aggression and surrender I must ingest to survive. This aggression is symbolized by Shakti, the Goddess Durga.

Surrender is a mindscape created by the loving, passive embrace of Lord Krishna. I survived because of the conflation of the two. This made me rely on a belief in something bigger than myself, a force so great and perfect which would protect me and ensure that I could never be destroyed entirely.

Hinduism is a banyan tree — we can worship God all the way from meditating on God through the path of representative idols and the path of *bhakti*, to the way of *karma yoga*, in which our daily work brings us to the divine, all to the way to *jnana yoga*, a developed view of Vedanta, in which we do not personalize God, but understand in energy and the concept of Brahman, which exists everywhere — an idea that some actually call a form of atheism.

My death and rebirth made me even more a believer of forces beyond control. Whether one calls it 'universe,' 'god,' 'energy,' I know there is something bigger than all of us, as individuals. And each one of us has different paths to discover it. Hinduism maintains, all rivers, all yogas, lead to the same ocean.

The narrative of the book is not chronological. Instead, it slides back and forth between different years and spaces of time. Why did you recount your story this way?

Our thought processes are far from linear. The ways our brain retrieves memories and envelops fresh thoughts are never predictable. I wanted my memoir to conflate both order and disorder, reflecting such mechanics of the brain.

The back and forth motion also forces the reader to be energetic, whereas a chronological narrative does not. Rather, it enforces eventuality. The reader can guess where the timeline of the story is headed, and this can be disinteresting. Many memoirs, unfortunately, take a route as bland as that.

In most memoirs, the writer discusses his or her families. How is yours dealing

► M9

'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

4 M8

with their compromised privacy due to the book?

Actually, my parents have been totally supportive. South Indian Brahmins so supportive over such raw self-revelation! I was rather surprised.

My mom's late mother was obsessed with the words 'privacy' and 'dignity' like the Queen of England. She was a devout Brahmin woman who insisted on privacy. I'm sure if she were still with us, she would be wringing my neck, or probably choking me with her sari.

Describe your parents, especially your mother whom you describe as the strongest woman you have ever known.

My mother would come to the hospital, sit on a blue plastic chair, and would be with me all during my days of torture.

I never understood why until I saw the movie *Passion of the Christ* and watched Mary watching her son being crucified, in agony.

I realized that most mothers, no matter what pain their children are going through, will not leave them.

My mother is an incredible woman. She had an arranged marriage and had to learn to be a part of a very quirky family. She then was forced to live in an all-white Midwest town without any Indians, and she was quite the outsider.

But she looked after us very well and gave us a lot of moral support. My father has a very big heart and a great sense of humor, all of which helped me survive the nightmare of my journey.

You write at length about the support you received from your parents. Could you tell us about your brother Prakash and the role he played in the community of supporters?

Like I say in my book, Prakash was my first responder and savior. I couldn't have made this journey without him. He is a lawyer, so practically speaking, his guidance and input were invaluable in any legal matters we had to deal with it, like my medical health insurance.

Emotionally, it was his strength, along with his humor,

which carried me through my journey. Most importantly, throughout my entire life as Ashok 1.0, brain explosion or no brain explosion, he has been my protector, guide, companion, and rival, all rolled into one.

My deep relationship with Prakash is evidenced heavily in the book. The reason is simple: He is my big brother, and whether he knows it or not, we are tied for life, sharing a bond that only two brothers, in our cosmos, could ever share.

Writing this book must have taken a long time. Do you have a 9-5 job? How has your daily living changed since the hemorrhage?

Being a writer is a full time job, but it's not stable, and unfortunately, I don't have a 9-5 job currently to provide such stability.

I volunteer for the brain-injured community as well as write articles, teach English as Second or Other Language to those in need, and hold other odd jobs.

I realized a few years after my brain explosion that it was tremendously difficult to explain my long absence from the work place. Most references I can provide to future employers are over a decade old.

It's so hard to explain the large gap in my resume now. Sadly, many years ago I had a seizure right in the middle of an interview, which has scarred me entirely. Ever since it has been difficult to effectively seek jobs without certain anxieties.

I now live my life day-to-day. The fateful day I had my brain explosion I had no idea that I would face death when all I did was leave for a wedding.

Also, now that I've been left with epilepsy, I can have fears of having seizures in inopportune moments. This, as well as knowing death can happen at any time... these are issues I never had before the hemorrhage, and now often make me feel that every time I leave my house, it might be for the last time. So the good news is, now I don't leave my apartment messy.

It's like your mother always warns, never leave home with

unclean underwear. You know what? She's absolutely right. You never know if you'll be caught dead in it!

When I had the brain hemorrhage and long hospitalization, to my shock I had discovered my father had cleared out my apartment in Manhattan, and to do that he had to check out everything in it, and take all of my belongings, everything which constituted my life at the time, to his house in New Jersey where I would be staying for a long time.

Naturally, I felt violated. After all, my private life had been torn open. I had arguments with him over that, but later I realized that he had done what he thought was the right thing.

It took me a while to get over my anger, but I forgave him. After all, he is the only Dad I have and I love him dearly. He has been a great support in my journey through recovery.

You write about Ashok 1.0 and Ashok 2.0. Who are these Ashoks?

Ashok 1.0 was a 25 year old more affected by the material world, who basically went for the more visible things — clothes, money and career. He was a heavy drinker, making a lot of money in the public relations world, but not quite living a life rewarding to him.

Ashok 2.0 has been resurrected. He has risen past death, overcome painful surgery, had to fight tremendous amounts of guilt and anger, but he has ultimately been transformed.

He is more spiritual than ever, and he is sharing the concerns of many in the brain-injured community, all the while realizing his main contribution to himself lies not in external successes but within his internal breakthroughs.

What kind of guilt, envy, and anger did you go through soon after your surgery?

Looking at my brother, I would be angry, thinking, why didn't he have a birth defect like me? We were born from the same womb!

At the same time, I was irrationally consumed by guilt of ruining his wedding ceremony by having my brain explode right at that moment.

My mother went through a guilt phase too. She blamed herself for my misfortune, which was the result of a congenital condition.

I told her she should not blame herself but a few months later, it was I who was accusing her for causing the hemorrhage. And yet I knew she was not responsible. She did not drink, she did not do drugs.

I asked her for her forgiveness soon.

Much of my anger and frustration would happen when I would look at myself in the mirror. I looked perfectly normal while knowing that inside me everything had been destroyed.

Coming to terms of my condition helped resolve my anger, and became a big part of my transformation.

As you were recovering from surgery, you gave up two friendships. Why was that?

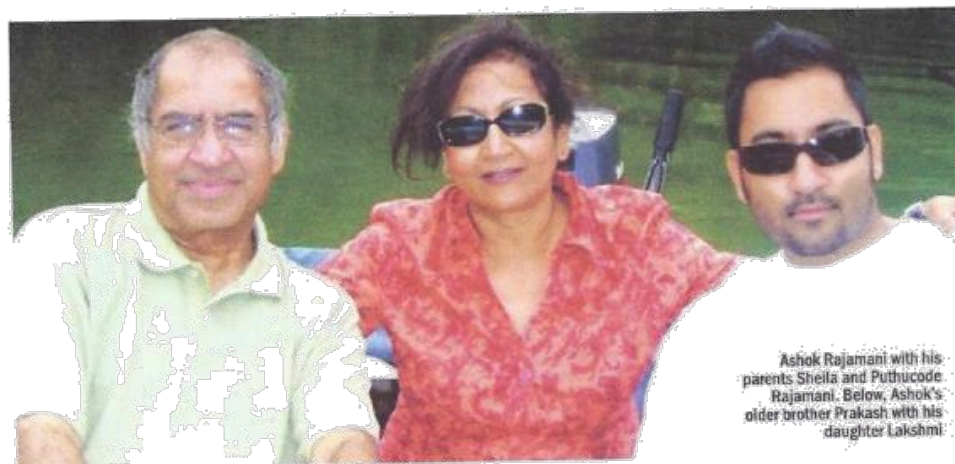
One friend of many years was a great help to my family and was behind me solidly when I had to go through very complex surgery three months after my bleed. But I came to feel that she had become a Tragedy Queen.

She saw herself as a martyr and I heard her telling a friend that she had to take care of me. I began to feel she was getting off on the fact that I was seriously sick. Her helping me in fact was less about helping me than about her needs, and the need to make her feel important. The friendship has since ended.

Ashok 1.0's closest friend was a brother-figure in every way possible. He was my drinking buddy and we had enjoyed each other's company enormously. We parted ways after my hospitalization though, after it became obvious that our lifestyles were no longer the same.

I've now found kinship and friendship with the Brain Injury Community. We are all wacky and loud. 'Loud' being the operative word! Sure, from time to time I've felt angry and envious of others, but I know now how to handle it.

My friends in the brain-injured community know a lot about these feelings. What surprised me in the hospital was that some of the doctors did not understand how, after losing parts of my brain, I could be uncouth or temperamen-



Ashok Rajamani with his parents Sheila and Puthucode Rajamani. Below, Ashok's older brother Prakash with his daughter Lakshmi.

'The tears came gushing like a waterfall'

Arthur J Pais finds out how Ashok's family dealt with the aftermath of his illness

Sheila Rajamani would sit on a plastic chair in a DC hospital and write letters to God in her journal as she watched her 25-year-old son Ashok Rajamani battle for his life.

"Dear God, It has been less than a week since Ashok's in the hospital, nothing makes sense to me," Sheila, who had worked as a kindergarten teacher in a small town in Illinois when her two sons were very young, wrote in March 2000.

Referring to her first born, she added, "We had all come to share in the joy and happiness of Prakash and (his fiancée) Karmen on their wedding day, and Ashok is in ICU fighting for his life. Why did all have to happen at this time? Ashok has just started his new job, and off to a great start. I hope I'm providing him with some solace and comfort, and I hope he knows I'm there in the room."

A few days later she would write to God again. "Please spare his eyes. He's an artist. Spare his eyes. I know God, I am asking a lot from you."

God surely must have listened. Ashok retained half his vision, and a lot of his former life.

She says the most important thing she told her sons while

they were growing up was to be proud of who they were.

"Their experiences growing up were many times quite difficult. But it built in them the resilience to survive, gave them strength of character, made them fearless, emboldened their resolve and enlightened them early on. These qualities have made them the wonderful men they are today, and I am proud of them," she adds.

As Ashok was fighting for confidence and strength after a very difficult surgery, she told him, "There is a reason why you survived. To enjoy the sun, blue skies and a beautiful rainbow, remember not to take things for granted? You've got a second chance for life. Love everything about it."

What kept her going in the hospital and following months? "Keeping a journal, penning my innermost thoughts and

feelings, frustrations and hopes for Ashok, my daily letters to God," she says. "It was a very difficult learning process. No one prepares you in the recovery of a brain-injured person. It is a journey, coping, nursing and dealing with the physical, emotional, mental well-being of a loved one round the clock."

Sheila says when she read the book she couldn't believe how far Ashok had come since "those months restrained in bed in the hospital. I feel pure joy that he is with us, and has triumphed beyond my wildest dreams. The tears that I held back these dozen years came gushing like a waterfall."

Her husband, Puthucode Rajamani, who after working for major pharmaceutical companies for over 35 years, has his own pharmaceutical-related business, says Sheila is a woman of extraordinary strength and was a very important player in his son's recovery.

"We were tested all of a sudden and I wonder if there are many families who had to undergo ordeals like us," he says.

He recalls the day Ashok had the brain bleed. His oldest son Prakash rushed in his tuxedo to the hotel suite where he found his brother in great physical agony. "He carried his brother to the nearby hospital, as he did not want to wait for the ambulance as he feared it might take its own sweet time to arrive," Rajamani Senior says. Of course, Prakash or the immediate family did not have an idea what had happened to Ashok.

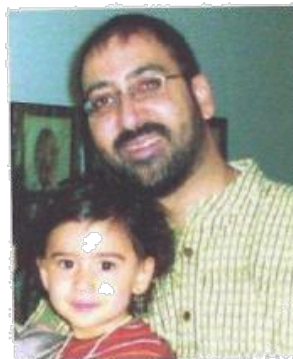
The hospital people called the insurance and were told that Ashok, who had just started a new job, was not covered. That was a bureaucratic nightmare, as the family had started suspecting the treatment might run into couple of millions of dollars.

The three Rajamanis had to educate themselves about Ashok's condition, and often they found the doctors not ready to discuss things at length. "Today, I think we have become experts on his health problems," his father says, with a wry laugh.

Though his brother felt several times that he had ruined the wedding ceremony, Prakash says, he himself never felt that way. "We had to do everything we could to help Ashok. He is the only brother I have."

The family was always convinced, he adds, that Ashok had been saved so that he could answer a higher calling and be an inspiration for those afflicted with what might initially seem a hopeless case.

"Many people in his position would have gone into deep depression, a few might have committed suicide," Prakash says. "It is not that Ashok did not have huge problems adjusting to his new reality, and deal with anger and frustrations, but he was able to overcome much of all that because he has a generous heart and an inner life. He knows he has been saved for a reason and God has plans for him."



CM9

tal at times. In fact, there was one doctor who loved to look at me and point 'Inappropriate! Inappropriate!' Looking back, I realized he was in the wrong profession. He should have been a librarian.

Bullying continues across schools in America, and Indian-American students continue to be affected. What are your thoughts today about dealing with school bullying?

Indian-American students are affected, yes. But so are all students perceived as 'different' by their peers — be they be brown, or yellow, or gay, or small, or puny, or overweight, or poor, or too-intelligent, or not-intelligent-enough, or black, or Hindu, or

'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

Jewish, or Muslim, or anything at all perceived as the 'other'.

Bullying is an acceptable hate-crime in schools, in which the victims are rarely able to fight back.

I was bullied often, be it because of my race, ethnicity, religion, name, intellect, 'wimpiness,' and other issues.

I would like to say I can foresee a cure, but as long as children bully those who are different, there might be no end.

I am hoping we will have more nationwide legislation to help control bullying like the Dignity for All Students Act in New York state. I'm hoping that parents will raise their children by teaching the

virtues of tolerance, and not the fears of difference.

What will your next book be about?

It's going to be fun and frothy: a funny, comical collection of semi-autobiographical stories about the zany, crazy, and eccentric women in my family in India: a sort of *Desperate Housewives* in Mumbai! There is even a daughter-in-law who falls in love with her mother in law!

The working title of the book is *Adventures in Curd Rice*. For those unaware, Curd Rice is a yummy South Indian dish, containing rice, yogurt, ginger and other spices. I'm very excited about this project. It is more humorous than *The Day My Brain Exploded*. No bleeding brains involved. ■



THE TIMES OF INDIA

When his brain exploded

One day the ticking time bomb in Ashok Rajamani's head went off. In an 'anti-Oprah' memoir, he talks about how he put his life together again

VRUSHALI HALDIPUR

At age 25, Ashok Rajamani (below) had what he calls a 'bad day' when he experienced an extreme, near-fatal traumatic brain injury. Now, after more than a decade of overcoming brain damage, he recounts his experience in his memoir, *The Day My Brain Exploded*.

His injury was caused by the sudden explosion of an undetected Atrial Fibrillation (AF) in his brain, a result of a rare congenital birth defect, seen in less than 1 per cent of the population. After this injury, he went through a roller coaster of traumatic consequences — partial blindness, hallucinations, visual distortion and Grand Mal epileptic seizures. While his condition can be fatal, he has fought through it and is back leading a normal life.

Rajamani's account is personal, inspiring, terrifying and funny, finding humour in his situation, and also in his family members, who, while being firmly supportive, were also pragmatic, as only middle-class families can be. His injury occurred on the day his brother Prakash married. Rajamani's mother resolutely decided that the show must go on, even as the bride and bridegroom wanted to call it off.

"Trust me," she told him. "It's going to be difficult, true, but your brother will be okay. This wedding will go on as planned. After all, Rajamani is wearing Vera Wang" — she paused for emphasis — "and it's not a rental. Thank of the eighty percent".

At times, he felt like Alice in Wonderland, where everything appeared too big or too small. Also, the blindness was such that his mind was unaware of missing vision. The former public relations executive had to re-learn his life to his new reality: learning to walk, read and paint again. Many survivor tales can be heart-rending but in his writing, he

says he prefers to go for tears of laughter rather than those of pain. "I wanted to show that you can go through suffering and pain without making it sentimental," he says. "By making it humorous, I wanted it to be an anti-Oprah book and not maudlin."

At a cafe in New York's Chelsea district, the 38-year-old writer spoke candidly about adjusting to his new life and the challenges of writing a memoir.

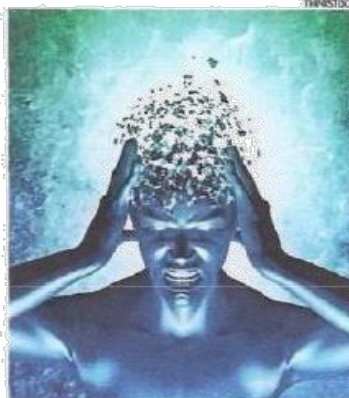
What are some of the challenges of memory that you still face today?

I have erratic short-term memory, retrograde amnesia — it means that I can see you now but it would be very difficult for me to recall you after this meeting is over. I won't remember what you looked like. I'll remember what we spoke about, but visually I may not remember. It's weird. I can remember things that happened when I was ten, but I can't always remember what happened ten minutes ago. So to counter this, I create in my head a kind of safety-deposit box. Every word you say — I can store it in that safe and recall it. Otherwise, it would be swept away into an ocean of what they call 'senior moments' — and yes I have plenty of those!

Can you tell us about the kind of blindness that was a result of the AF?

It's called hemianopia or hemianopsia — blindness in half of both of the eyes. The problem with this is, I think I see everything, when actually all I can see is half your face and half of everything. For instance there are times when I go to a public restroom, I end up going to the women's room as all I could

If I was an amputee, I could recognise that I have lost a limb, but with a brain injury there are no outward signs. Then I would see people my age, my friends leading their normal lives and I would get very angry



see is the 'men' part of the word. I can see a bunch of stalls, suddenly women will scream and it's only then that I realise I have made another mistake and walk out. Things like this are very hard, because you can intellectualise some things but when you live through it, it's hard to remember that all the time. It's something that one has to live with every single day.

I went to a support group recently and some people with my condition walk with a cane, dark glasses and seeing-eye dogs and I don't want to do that.

You also have written about the racism you experienced growing up in small-town America and at the workplace — a fact that is often swept under the carpet in the Indian-American diaspora.

Most books talking about race are attached to the Black or the Latino experience and we don't read enough about the Asian,

South Asian or East Asian side of it. Many Indian-Americans like to think it does not happen because they are financially prosperous and in a way they can forget the societal problems of race — but I wanted to bring it up. Indian-Americans experience bigotry just like any another non-white group here and I wanted to address that.

Do you feel like you have integrated into 'normal' life again?

I think the challenging aspect is to realise that life has changed — to keep looking into the mirror and say, 'You look normal, nothing is wrong with you. Why don't you have a proper nine to five job? What happened to your life?' In that respect, it's difficult to move on in life because physically I look the same. If I was an amputee, I could recognise that I have lost a limb, but with a brain injury there are no outward signs. Then I would see people my age, my friends leading their normal lives and I would get very angry.

It's frightening for anyone going through an ailment that seems to have no answers. When things began appearing visually distorted, I was mortally terrified, doctors couldn't tell me what it was. It took me a long time to get over it. I first had the haemorrhage, then blindness, then epilepsy and then vision distortion. It never ends — I was thinking of it as a title for the book actually!

It is a strange point in my life — I was used to having a 9 to 5 life and now it's different. One never knows what is going to happen next, so I take each day as it comes.

I am also working on my second book — I like to call it 'If These Sins Could Talk' — it's based on the women in my family and the way they have underneath the prim and proper facade. It's so tricky that my grandmother would kill me if she saw it!

The book reveals many extremely private moments in your life. How did your family react to seeing this in print?

We are South Indian Brahmins, so we are very private. My relatives in India are equally private, so I was so worried when I wrote this — worried about how my parents would feel, but I think they knew that I have always been a big mouth! I gave an advance copy to them on Christmas Day. They surprised me — they're extremely proud of me and have liked what I have written.

The tsunami took everything — her husband, her two sons, her parents. Sonali Deraniyagala contemplated suicide, turned briefly to alcohol, and then began to write. 'Wave' was her raft to survival

SAMRITI DANIEL

By the time I heard Sonali Deraniyagala's voice on *Stowe*, I had been waiting for months to talk to her. In that interval, I had read and re-read her unbearably poignant memoir *Wave* while watching the news proliferate online.

Praise abounded (Michael Ondaatje dubbed it "the most powerful and haunting book" he had read in years). It had been launched in March without fanfare, its author having previously reached an agreement with her American publishers that she would do only a few interviews and no TV talk shows. Still, *Wave* didn't seem to need much promotion — almost effortlessly, the slender tome had become one of the most extraordinary accounts of the 2004 tsunami.

That December, Deraniyagala, then a lecturer in economics at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and her husband Steve were vacationing with her parents and her children in Yala on the south-eastern coast of Sri Lanka.

Eight-year-old Yisara who "knew he was about to die", loved the white-bellied sea eagles that soared in the skies



Though it started as an exercise suggested by her therapist, Deraniyagala did not consider her writing cathartic. She wasn't working her family out of her system — she was drawing them in. She brought her two boys to life, and then she began on her husband and parents. They are there on the page, thrumming with life

turned the jeep in which they were attempting to escape and separated her from her

being terrifying and mostly being extremely painful physically. These first pages and

So she proceeded chronologically, through the chaos that followed the tsunami where hundreds upon hundreds were missing or unaccounted for in Sri Lanka alone. Yisara's body and those of his grandparents were identified in January but Steve and Nikhil were yet to be found — that news would take four months and the hope of a job in Austria to identify them from bodies exhumed from a mass grave.

While Deraniyagala waited for confirmation of what she already knew to be true, she planned her suicide, shed away from all recollections of her family and for a brief

APPOCALYPSE NOW: The tsunami tore through their hotel, overturned the jeep in which they were attempting to escape, and separated Deraniyagala (far left) from her family

colleagues, casual acquaintances and even her neighbours in New York didn't have a clue. That's all changed with *Wave*. People approach her in supermarket queues and out on the street. "They mostly just want to talk," says Deraniyagala, sharing her "relief that people know and I don't have this false identity". On the other hand I'm not at ease with the details that people do know. I don't know; I have to work that one out.

Readers are finding that *Wave* is as much about love as it is about loss; it is not one but two stories. One is the deliberate and unflinching examination of her own grief and her passage through it and the other the story of the life she once had. Though it started out as an exercise suggested by her therapist, Deraniyagala did not consider her writing cathartic. She wasn't working her family out of her system — she was drawing them in. She brought her two beautiful boys to life, painstakingly recording all she could of them and then she began on her husband and her parents. They are all there on the page, alive with detail, thrumming with life.

In *Wave*, Deraniyagala has an extraordinary memorial to the people she loved, allowing us first to know and then to care for these strangers through her words. The book feels like an invitation into their home in Priem Hamlet, which Deraniyagala keeps much as it was. She imagines that her boys would cringe to know their playroom was the scene, their robes and unwashed Christmas presents still intact. She fears that people stopping in can imagine that Nila and Malli are in the other room; her husband perhaps out at the store.

Explaining her instinct to stockpile her memories, she writes: "I can only remember



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Everything Offered in the Land of the Living: A Conversation with Ashok Rajamani

Posted by Miwa Messer x February 15, 2013



Dear Reader,

Ashok Ramajani's memoir, **The Day My Brain Exploded** (A Spring '13 pick) is the astonishingly true (and shockingly funny) story of what happened after the author suffered a massive, near-fatal cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 25. He discusses the continuing, daily consequences of his traumatic brain injury, why he chose to structure the book

as he did, and how his sense of humor helps him survive, among other things with Discover Great New Writers.

The Day My Brain Explodes begins on the day of your brother's wedding, the day your brain "explodes." Can you tell us about that day?

Unfortunately, I can't; people have to buy the book to find out! What I will say, though, is that the hemorrhage was caused by the explosion of a hidden birth defect called an AVM, an arteriovenous malformation, a congenital birth defect that is hard for doctors to detect until it explodes, as was my case. An AVM can exist anywhere in the body, but is most frequently detected in the brain. Mine had been nestled in my brain from birth, awaiting its explosion. In other words, my AVM was a ticking time bomb. The event took place in the most surprising of situations, and the actual bleed that provoked the explosion, was, shall we say, something not suitable for children to hear.

Not for children? Sounds provocative!

Provocative is a good word to describe it.

Your resurrection from such extreme brain trauma is quite rare. How would you say you've contended with your survival?

I tell other brain-injury survivors that we shouldn't feel so morose, because I feel we've been given two lives for the price of one. That's how I look at it. I know I am lucky to have survived well enough to speak, to think, to read, and to write, and to do everything offered in the land of the living. Well, that's not the total truth. I can't ride roller coasters.

You've made an amazing recovery. Are there issues that you still have to face and overcome each day as a result of this injury?

There have been quite a few consequences from my hemorrhage. I now have erratic short-term amnesia as well as seizure disorder, otherwise known as epilepsy. Although I have not had a seizure in years, sometimes I still worry about getting another one. This is a fear faced by most people with epilepsy; no matter how long we go without seizures, we fear another incident is just around the bend. I also suffer from tinnitus, which is a consistent ringing in the ears, a sound that happens nonstop. In the book, I call the problem "chasing ambulances in my head."

Worst of all, I now have permanent blindness in half of both my eyes. This is a condition called hemionopsia, and it is a dreadful ailment. I can only see half the world now. The trouble is, there is no demarcation in my sight, such as some sort of black line, which tells me my field vision has ended. So I truly think I see the whole world, when in fact, I don't. You wouldn't believe the number of times I've accidentally walked into a women's public restroom since I don't see the "women" sign on the door, but only see the word "men." Then, when I enter and see a roomful of stalls with no row of urinals, I realize I have made a mistake yet again! My visual therapist once ordered me to consistently turn my head around like an oscillating fan. Since it's hard for me to always be conscious about the blindness, I often forget to do this. And when I keep my head in place and scan an area by moving my eyeballs left to right, I end up looking like a shifty-eyed villain from an old black-and-white movie.

Your memoir details your spirituality. How would you describe your belief system?

I was always spiritual, but my survival has made me even more a believer of forces beyond control. Whether one calls it 'universe', 'god', 'energy', I know there is something bigger than all of us, as individuals. And each one of us has different paths to discover this. Rivers lead to the same ocean, don't they? After all, Love is love around the world, even though it has different names in different languages.

The narrative of the book is not chronological. Instead, it slides back and forth between different years and spaces of time. Why did you recount your story this way?

Our thought processes are far from linear. I wanted my memoir to conflate both order and disorder, reflecting such mechanics of the brain. The back and forth motion also forces the reader to be energetic, whereas a chronological narrative does not. Rather, it enforces eventuality: the reader can guess where the timeline of the story is headed, and this can be disinteresting. Many memoirs, unfortunately, take a route like this.

In most memoirs, the writer discusses his or her families. How is yours dealing with their compromised privacy due to the book?

Actually, my parents have been totally supportive. I myself was rather surprised! I do know, however, that my mom's late mother was obsessed with the words 'privacy' and 'dignity', like the Queen of England. I'm sure if she were still with us, she would be wringing my neck, or probably choking me with her sari.

Why did you choose to tell your story?

There are not enough memoirs by brain-surgery and brain-injury survivors; for many, these

survivors have become too mentally challenged or face other severe handicaps. Plus, they are often killed by their injuries. I once asked my brother, "how come there aren't many 'brain injury pride parades' in contrast to parades with survivors from other health conditions?" He told me, utterly deadpan, "that's because the marchers are either too damaged to walk, or they're dead."

I've been blessed to still be alive and functioning. I have to tell my story, and the story of those who can't tell it themselves. I also haven't found enough memoirs by Indian Americans dealing with racism, or folks with half-blindness, or folks with psychotic hallucinogenic vision syndromes, or of folks with many other issues that I detail in the memoir. We need such stories.

Survival memoirs are often emotionally painful to write. Yet *The Day My Brain Exploded* is comical and humorous. How were you able to recount your difficult journey with such humor?

I don't take myself too seriously. And, as I often say, my laughter is far stronger than my tears. When one undergoes a hellish experience, they can either cry or laugh. I chose to laugh.

Who have you discovered lately?

Just finished Juliann Garey's *Too Bright to Hear Too Loud to See*. It is, simply, one of the best books I have read recently. The writing is bold, vivid, and moving. Details the issue of madness perfectly. Terrific work.

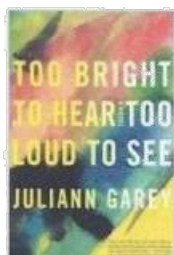


Miwa Messer is the Director of the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers program, which was established in 1990 to highlight works of exceptional literary quality that might otherwise be overlooked in a crowded book marketplace. Titles chosen for the program are handpicked by a select group of our booksellers four times a year.

FEATURED TITLES



The Day My Brain Exploded: A...
Ashok Rajamani
Paperback: \$9.83
NOOK Book: \$10.49



Too Bright to Hear Too Loud...
Juliann Garey
Hardcover: \$19.53
NOOK Book: \$10.49

Life After Your Brain Explodes

By Ashok Rajamani

0

Tweet 4

Share Dec 17 2012, 10:29 AM ET

When I was 25, I had a ruptured cerebral aneurysm. I later joined a brain injury support group -- reluctantly.



LadyDragonflyCC/Flickr

"Don't compare apples to oranges. All of you are in different areas in life. Remember that. Different categories completely."

Kari, the moderator and social worker of the brain injury support group, was trying to give us a pep talk.

"You need to understand that your lives changed after your brain injuries. Understand that point, and you won't get jealous or hurt," she continued.

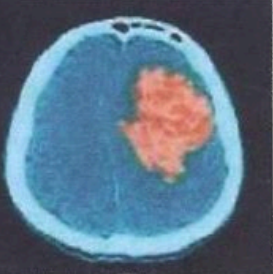
It didn't work. Out of the twenty attendees in the room, four, including me, were still morose, sad, and bitter. I was there because, following several months of treatment for a brain aneurysm that wiped out much of my memory and left me partially blind, everyone -- neurologists, therapists, counselors -- told me to join a group as soon as I was released from the hospital. But it took almost four years for me to actually attend a meeting. I had never planned to go, but finally I was so lonely and depressed that I felt I had no choice. Most of all, I had become painfully envious of everyone around me. To live in the outside world again, I needed to cope with non-brain-injured folks, whom I called "norms" a la old-school carnival-freak patois. These norms, with their goddamn unscarred heads, were pissing me off. They would never understand what had happened to me.



Ashok Rajamani - Ashok Rajamani is a writer based in New York City. His work has also appeared in *Scholars & Rogues*, *South Asian Review*, *Danse Macabre*, and *3:AM Magazine*. *The Day My Brain Exploded* is his first book.

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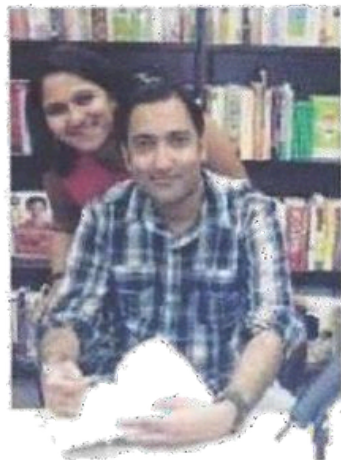


A destra,
la copertina del libro
autobiografico *The
Day My Brain
Exploded* di Ashok
Rajamani (sotto). A
sinistra, cervello con
emorragia cerebrale.



L'uomo a cui esplose il cervello

UN'EMORRAGIA GLI HA TOLTO METÀ VISTA E IL RICORDO DELLE EMOZIONI. IN COMPENSO GLI HA LASCIATO UN SIBILO NELLE ORECCHIE, EMIGRANIE, ALLUCINAZIONI, CRISI EPILETTICHE... HA DOVUTO **reinparare** A CAMMINARE E A PARLARE. MA, DICE, OGGI LA SUA VITA È PIÙ PIENA DI PRIMA. LEGGERE PER CREDERE.



dal nostro inviato **Riccardo Stagliano**

NEW YORK. Alla vigilia del grosso grasso matrimonio del fratello, un ventiseienne indo-americano in carriera smaltisce l'eccitazione del momento nel bagno di una camera d'albergo di Washington. È solitariamente intento, per dirla con Woody Allen, a fare «sesso con qualcuno che amo». Sul più bello sente come uno schianto dentro la testa. Tutto diventa buio, si affloscia sulla moquette come un burattino a cui hanno tagliato i fili. «O mio Dio, pensi, sono fottutamente cieco. Ecco che cos'era quel botto. Le cose che ci dicevano sui rischi della masturbazione erano vere», scrive Ashok Rajamani in *The day my brain exploded*, il giorno in cui il suo cervello è esploso, tragico memoir sulla sua morte e risurrezione.

Ashok LO, il talento delle pubbliche relazioni che ha appena ottenuto un nuovo posto lusingosamente retribuito, finisce il 17 marzo 2000. Sul workaholic da quattordici ore e

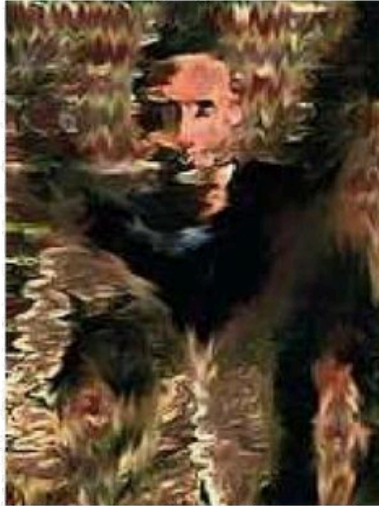
manuale che i medici definiranno malformazione artero-venosa (Avm), si è rotto, inondando di sangue i tessuti circostanti. Miracolosamente riesce a chiedere aiuto ai genitori nella stanza accanto. Il quadro che il neurologo si trova davanti è critico. Un fiume di fluido cerebrospinale esondato è andato a finire negli organi interni. Il cervello, la zona più protetta del corpo, diventata di colpo contaminatissima. Dopo l'emorragia gli viene una meningite, che da sola potrebbe ucciderlo. Il tour della sfiga non è ancora finito. Rilevano anche un *Campylobacter*, un batterio ormai quasi inesistente nel mondo sviluppato, che generalmente viene trasmesso dal pollame andato a male («Raccontai di aver mangiato del pollo all'aglio non tanto buono in un ristorante cinese. E i medici mi dissero che poteva averci a che fare»). L'unica misura radicale per aggiustare quel disastro è operare. Vari rischi sanitari: cecità, sordità, paralisi delle gambe o quadriplegia. E un rischio economico: Rajamani non aveva ancora firmato l'assicurazione medica del nuo-



La ricostruzione di Ashok 2.0 non è un lavoro da niente. Tra le cose che mancano all'appello del sopravvissuto Rajamani c'è metà vista. Si chiama emianopsia, ed è appunto la perdita di metà del campo visivo. Non è facile neppure da immaginare, tant'è che, pur avendolo letto, quando incontro Ashok nel suo studentesco bilocale di Chelsea mi siedo davanti a lui, e mi chiede di spostarmi di lato, all'estrema sinistra, perché solo da questa prospettiva obliqua potrà vedermi quasi per intero. Nella vita quotidiana significa sbattere contro i muri, i pali, gli oggetti. È solo l'inizio. Le terminazioni danneggiate dei nervi degli occhi gli provocano un acufene permanente. Non pensate al sibilo occasionale che sperimentiamo dopo un concerto fracassone. «È come sentire le sirene dell'ambulanza tra un orecchio e l'altro» dice. Da impazzire. «Col tempo e una gran disciplina impari a non pensarci. Non sparisce, ma si attenua».

I primi tempi dall'apertura della calotta cranica, richiusa con quattro placche di titanio, portava i capelli corti che mostravano uno squarcio orrendo. Ora li ha lunghi e non si vede più. Ma anche per il resto, se non sapeste cosa ha avuto, non vi accorgeteste di nulla. Quello davanti a me è un trentanovenne con una sofisticata proprietà linguistica e un gran senso dell'umorismo che si rammarica solo perché la sua memoria non è più quella di una volta e per questo si è dimenticato di prendere la sua dose giornaliera di pillole. Sono farmaci antiepilettici, l'altra pesante eredità di questa vicenda. Constata: «La cicatrice lasciata dalla rimozione dell'Avm è un fattore irritante per il cervello. Che ogni tanto reagisce con una crisi». Gli è successo al lavoro, per strada e, l'ultima volta, due anni fa, durante un colloquio per un nuovo posto, che non ha mai ottenuto. Dice: «La cosa più inquietante è l'aura, una serie di sensazioni olfattive, un puzzo come di avanzati andati a male, che precedono gli attacchi. E che ho imparato a riconoscere». Nella sua lunga convalescenza ha avuto anche una fase non breve di emicranie: «Mi dicevano di annotarle, attribuendo loro una scala di intensità da 1 a 10. Neanche a dirlo, erano tutti 10». E un periodo intenso di allucinazioni: «Non vedevo il mio naso allo specchio.

Ricordo quello che è successo ma non le sensazioni: se sono stato felice o triste e perché



Due opere di Rajamani: **Self-portrait: tentacles** (Autoritratto: tentacoli, sopra) e **Self-portrait: in utero** (Autoritratto: in utero, sotto)



I miei denti diventavano così grandi da coprire il resto del viso. Oppure il mio corpo sembrava più piccolo del mio pollice».

Questi sono alcuni dei danni collaterali quando la tua materia grigia è diventata un campo di battaglia. Non gli unici. La conseguenza più strana, più difficile da spiegare anche per lui che con le parole e l'introspezione ha familiarità, è la perdita della memoria emotiva: «Ricordo i dati, ma non le sensazioni. Quando sono tornato nel mio liceo sapevo di esserci stato ma è come se stessi sfogliando un catalogo perché non riuscivo a rievocare se in quelle stanze ero stato felice, triste e per quale motivo». Perché ciò accada, perché ai fatti venga strappata la pelle delle sensazioni, non si comprende bene e ha forse a che vedere con la definizione stessa di anima, di quella coscienza del pensiero che Kant chiamava appercezione. Ciò che invece non è difficile capire è che perdita immane sia questa amputazione del sé. Rajamani lo dice benissimo: «Ci vuole una combinazione paradossale di resistenza e accettazione. Serve brandire una spada, non arrendersi davanti alle gigantesche frustrazioni di quando devi reim-

parare a camminare, parlare, pensare. È innaturale ridiventare bambino con un corpo di venticinquenne. Ma serve anche il flauto della resa, per capire che certe cose non torneranno più e non è il caso di farne una tragedia, soprattutto quando scopri che gli altri superstiti a incidenti come il mio sono rimasti quasi tutti in condizioni molto, molto peggiori».

Forse la spiritualità indiana aiuta. Scherza: «Alla fine ho avuto due vite al prezzo di una». Il trauma ha scremato gli amici («Ne ho 2-3 che vedo spesso») e l'ha reso più sensibile ai problemi altrui («Il pr è un lavoro superficiale e cinico, che non rimpiango di aver perso. Dare speranza, con la mia storia, a vittime di danni cerebrali importanti dà tutta un'altra soddisfazione»). Resta il sempre fastidioso problemino di come campare. «Avevo dei risparmi dalla mia vita precedente. Ho fatto vari lavoretti, alla Croce Rossa e come insegnante di inglese. I miei mi hanno aiutato. Il libro è uscito all'inizio dell'anno scorso e sono stato molto impegnato con il book tour. Ora sto lavorando al secondo, ancora autobiografico ma assai più allegro, su crescere da indiano negli Stati Uniti». Per lui è stato quell'apprendistato di discriminazioni, da secchione dal nome impronunciabile per gli standard fonetici dell'Illinois della sua infanzia, per di più dalla sessualità ondivaga («queer è il termine giusto»), ad averlo reso capace di affrontare ora questa prova. L'evoluzione gli sembra evidente: «All'inizio era la rabbia a prevalere. Ero capace di prendermela per niente, litigare soprattutto con quelli che mi stavano vicino, tipo mio fratello. Poi mi dimenticavo tutto, non perché sia saggio ma solo perché la mia memoria a breve termine faceva cilecca. Come se non fosse mai accaduto. Ora mi sembra che questa perdita, come tutte quelle che si vivono con consapevolezza, mi abbia costretto a guardarmi meglio dentro e a tirar fuori risorse che avevo trascurato. Nonostante la minaccia dell'epilessia e di altre funzioni dimezzate mi sembra di vivere ora una vita più vera, più in pace con me stesso».

Ci sono maniere meno devastanti per conoscersi. Lui dice che era il suo karma: perdere un pezzo per trovare il tutto. Da mandare a memoria quando ci si imbestialisce per un treno ritardatario, un raffreddore persistente o altre pinzillacchere.

Riccardo Staglianò

The Washington Post

Health & Science

Rapper 50 Cent's fitness tips; rebuilding the mind after a brain 'explosion'

By Maggie Fazeli Fard February 4, 2013

HIP-HOP FITNESS

Get fit or die tryin'

Most Read

1 "We failed," New York police commissioner says of sergeant fatally shooting 'emotionally disturbed' woman



Forget getting rich. Rapper 50 Cent — who became a household name in 2003 with the album “Get Rich or Die Tryin’ ” — is now interested in helping you get fit. The hip-hop star known as much for his abs as his rhymes has released a new book, sharing workout tips and advice for getting ripped. “Formula 50: A 6-Week Workout and Nutrition Plan That Will Transform Your Life” details workouts and nutrition tips modeled on 50’s own regimen. It promises that body fat will decrease by 10 percent, energy will increase by 20 percent and strength endurance will improve by 20 percent — a total gain of 50 percent, according to 50.

How one man rebuilt his mind

“The Day My Brain Exploded,” by Ashok Rajamani

Ashok Rajamani was 25 years old when his brain “exploded.” The result of a rare congenital birth defect that had lain in wait for more than two decades, a tangle of veins and arteries ruptured at a most inopportune of moments: while having sex, and on the day of his brother’s wedding. “A bad day, to put it mildly,” writes Rajamani in “The Day My Brain Exploded.” With a self-deprecating tone that vacillates between humor and anger, Rajamani details the cerebral hemorrhage and the damage it caused. The book jumps back and forth in time, from the “brain explosion” that left him epileptic and partially blind, to his childhood growing up as a first-generation Indian American in suburban Illinois, and to his post-college years working in New York. Rajamani describes what it is like to relearn the most basic of skills — how to walk, to eat, to speak — as an adult. “True, what I went through was terrible and, true, I wasn’t always patient with those around me,” he writes. “But I realize now, looking back, I am one of the luckiest people alive, and in telling my story I am hoping to give a voice to others who were not so fortunate.”

— Maggie Fazeli Fard

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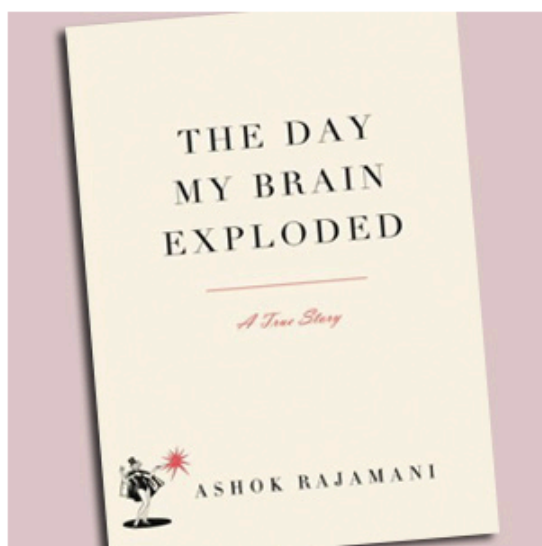
COMMUNITY NEWS

EVENTS

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BOOK MATTERS

Compiled/Written by Murali Kamma
January 2013



Ashok Rajamani calls *The Day My Brain Exploded* (Algonquin Books) a true story. A ticking time bomb lay inside him because of a genetic flaw, resulting in an aneurysm when he was in his 20s and working at a top PR firm in New York. Triggered on the day his older brother got married, Rajamani suffered a severe brain bleed that turned his life upside down. Even basic tasks like eating, speaking, and walking became difficult. While it's a marvel that he survived—most people don't make it after such traumatic injuries—what's a miracle is that he recovered sufficiently to write an eloquent book about his ordeal. Rajamani went through a gamut of dark emotions, but he was also hopeful and resolute. And he was grateful to his doctors, relatives, and friends. He sees himself reborn as Ashok 2.0, Ashok 1.0 having died on that fateful day in 2000. "I am now calmer and ready for a wide-open future," he writes, though he still faces problems like epilepsy and

functional deficits in memory, sight, and hearing.

neelthemuse

EVERYBODY'S POET



27 Jun 2013

What motivates you to write? This is a question that I would like to ask all the writers of the world. Ashok Rajamani's life story is closer to fiction than non-fiction; yet he has lived the story and now written about it.

Ashok Rajamani is an internationally published writer and poet in New York City. His recently-released, critically-acclaimed memoir, *THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED* (Algonquin Books) is currently available in bookstores worldwide. The book, an irreverent and electric account of his amazing survival from a full-throttle brain aneurysm, is the first of its kind by any Indian American author in history.

Put aside everything you know and just focus on this interview.

Did your brain injury lead you to writing more seriously? Tell us about your amazing journey to the *THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED: A TRUE STORY*.

It was not a question about being more “serious” with my writing. I have always been serious about this craft. The difference in my writing, since my brain injury, rotates around one word: ‘authenticity.’ It took this horrible near-fatal incident to make me realize the extreme limitations of our lives — in other words, it made me realize, fully, the simple cliché: life is short. As such, an artist must do what s/he can to create inspiring work which rings true for the reader. It took years to write this memoir, and I hope I’ve been able to bare my soul in the process. I am extremely proud of the end result.

You write poetry, essay and books. How do you shift so seamlessly from one form of writing to the other?

I actually change my identity as the written word dictates. For instance, at one point I am Ashok the Poet, one point I am Ashok the Memoirist, and so on. I unconsciously alter myself to fit whatever media or expression I pursue at the time. I am also an artist, so Ashok the Artist is another identity too.

What do you think new writers should do to be successful in 2013 and beyond? What shouldn’t they do?

Plain and simple: new writers should never give up. Publishing is an incredibly horrifying profession; the rejections are countless. To be successful you have to be strong enough to face the criticism. More importantly, you have to be strong enough to break the rules. Many writers hear about how important it is to have an agent, or how to do queries and other such things. But, believe me, don’t listen to them! All those rules are a bunch of crap. I got a deal without an agent. I simply cold-called the editor. I wrote queries in my own strange way. I never followed – nor follow – rules. To be successful from here and beyond, don’t listen to the rules. Write what fulfills you – and stop at nothing at getting your words out. Self-publishing, digital publishing and other possibilities, are all new ways books are read. No more do we have to fear the old “establishment” of publishing houses. Be bold, be brave. But no matter the hurdles, keep on writing.

Keep on Keeping on. We should always realize that, in order to get where we want to go, persistence is a must.

No book, or poem, can exist without a full narrative.

As a writer who has dealt with brain injury, what kind of advice do you have to give to writers who want to deal with difficult health issues? Is there anything like too much honesty when you write about the darkest moments of your life?

First off, I want to say that the book was difficult to write because of my motor skills (my hands would often quiver on the keyboard), cognitive disability (I had to keep writing and reading notes due to my amnesia), and my visual handicaps (the hemorrhage left me blind in half of both my eyes, and I have faced multiple sight distortions). But I kept moving forward.

I swiveled the mirror so I could see; I made comprehensive outlines; I used a ruler to help me delineate the margins; I did whatever it took to keep writing. So, to all the disabled writers who don’t think they can do it – you’re only as good as the limitations you set for yourselves.

Now, to answer your question: writing about one's health issues is a personal matter. What happened to me is not unique – brain injury is faced by many. I think what made the difference is that I had a compulsion to document it. It takes a certain motivation (some would say derangement) to write about your health nightmares. So I can't advise other survivors or patients on how to move forward with writing their experiences. All I can say is that it is not easy to revisit the terrors you've experienced. Be prepared to have meltdowns in the fight to write about your life.

As for being honest, I don't think there is such a thing as "too much" honesty about disclosing a health crisis. Even a lie always reveals the truth. The main problem is trying to convince your family not to hate you for revealing family secrets!

Is there any writer who has inspired you more than your life?

There is not just one writer who inspires me. There are many, all of whom have been able to conflate sorrow with humor. My memoir never gets too mawkish; laughter is stronger than sorrow. Tears of joy carry more power than tears of pain, so I adore poets, novelists, and memoirists who understand the importance of mixing comedy with drama. Faves include the following writers: Katherine Dunn, David Sedaris, Augusten Burroughs, T.S. Eliot, and Herodotus. On a grander scale, you can't beat the fictional or non-fictional Vyasa, the mythical wordsmith credited for writing the greatest poem ever made: The Mahabharata.

Thank you Ashok for your time. Your advice is invaluable to writers who procrastinate and those who try, and to people world over who have encountered rebellions of the body. Hope your book gets all the success it deserves!

neelthemuse@ 2013

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RISE

The Flight of the Birdman: Flappy Bird Creator Dong Nguyen Speaks Out: How did a chain-smoking geek design the viral hit Flappy Bird - and why did he walk away? *Rolling Stone's* David Kushner travels to Hanoi to profile the story of the creator of Flappy Bird.

Got Bulgogi? The (Maybe True) Story Behind A 'New York Times' Ad: Luis Clemens of NPR's CodeSwitch was baffled by an ad he saw in the *New York Times* promoting bulgogi -- not from any restaurant or brand, just bulgogi in general. Clemens did some digging and tracked down the source: a visiting professor from Sungshin Women's University.

MSNBC is Doing Asian Americans No Favors: According to a ChangeLab study, MSNBC wins for its racial diversity among the Sunday political talk shows. But where do Asian Americans factor in this count?

An orgasm almost killed me! "It was my brother's wedding day, and I was practicing some bored self-love. It ended with an explosion in my brain." An excerpt from Ashok Rajamani's *The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story*, a frank first-hand account of his life-changing brain injury.



Marvel, Please Cast an Asian American Iron Fist: Keith Chow and other comic fans plead with Marvel Studios to cast an Asian American actor as Iron Fist in an upcoming Netflix show.

The South Asian Times

excellence in journalism

Acclaimed author Ashok Rajamani named keynote speaker for Brain Injury Association of NYS conference 2024



Aug 7, 2023

By D P Thomas

One of the most important brain injury organizations in the nation, The Brain Injury Association of New York State, has named author Ashok Rajamani as the keynote speaker for its 2024 annual conference.

Ashok Rajamani is the renowned author of the globally acclaimed memoir *The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story*, his darkly comedic account of his astonishing survival from a massive brain hemorrhage at 25. Blending complex issues of disability, race, and culture, it is one of the first brain injury memoirs of its kind. Ashok's many other works include his book of cultural criticism, *Imagine Carnavalesque*, and his writings have appeared in dozens of publications, such as *Danse Macabre*, *3:AM Magazine*, and *South Asian Review*. A nationally recognized poet as well, he was invited to represent America at the prestigious "Curtea De Arges" International Poetry festival in Romania.

He was a keynote speaker for the International Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy held at the United Nations.

The Brain Injury Association of New York State (BIANYS) is a statewide non-profit membership organization

that advocates on behalf of individuals with brain injuries and their families. Established in 1982, BIANYS provides education, advocacy, and community support services that lead to improved outcomes for children

and adults with brain injuries and their families. The organization plays a central role in the development of public policy on the federal, state and local level.

"Ashok serves as an example to the brain injured of New York State of not only surviving a potentially deadly brain hemorrhage but also overcoming numerous medical issues from this event to thrive. His story is compelling and inspiring," said Michelle Kellen, BIANYS Professional Development Manager.

The BIANYS Annual Conference is a unique opportunity to bring together brain injury survivors, family members, caregivers, healthcare providers and other brain injury professionals to celebrate, learn and share as a community. Comprised of educational sessions, networking

opportunities and celebrations, the 2024 event will be held June 12-June 14 in Sarasota Springs, New York. "As a survivor with a scarred skull, I know that those who endure and survive brain injury are absolute warriors. I am deeply honored to be the keynote speaker at the BIANYS conference, an important event for all New Yorkers," said Ashok.



**"INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR: ASHOK RAJAMANI" WINS HIGHEST HONOR
IN THE 35th ANNUAL TELLY AWARDS**

New York, NY – July 2014 – The Telly Awards has awarded the program "Interview with the Author: Ashok Rajamani" (hosted by television personality Leigh Pafford for HomeTowne Television Network), its top prize, the "Silver Telly." Nearly 12,000 entries from all 50 states and numerous countries compete for the award. Less than 10% of entries are chosen as Silver Telly winners, the highest honor. Approximately 25% of entries are chosen as Winners of the Bronze Telly.

"Interview with the Author: Ashok Rajamani" is a sit-down interview with Ashok Rajamani, New York City author, poet, and artist. He discusses *The Day My Brain Exploded*, his critically-acclaimed memoir of surviving a severe, near-fatal brain hemorrhage. He recounts the details of his tough path to recovery and the challenging life he now faces. The half-hour special is hosted and edited by Leigh Pafford, who anchors news and provides monthly book reviews for HomeTowne TV.

The Telly Awards was founded in 1979 and is the premier award honoring outstanding local, regional, and cable TV commercials and programs, the finest video and film productions, and online commercials, video and films. Winners represent the best work of the most respected advertising agencies, production companies, television stations, cable media outlets, and corporate video departments in the world.

For its 35th season, The Telly Awards once again joined forces with YouTube to give the public the power to view and rate videos submitted as part of the People's Telly Awards. In addition to recognition from the Silver Telly Council, the judging panel that selects the Telly Awards winners, the Internet community helps decide the People's Telly Awards winners.

An illustrious judging panel of over 500 accomplished industry professionals, each a past winner of a Silver Telly and a member of The Silver Telly Council, judged the competition, upholding the historical standard of excellence that Telly represents. The Silver Council evaluated entries to recognize distinction in creative work – entries do not compete against each other – rather entries are judged against a high standard of merit.

"The Telly Awards has a mission to honor the very best in film and video," said Linda Day, Executive Director of the Telly Awards. "This winning program, 'Interview with the Author: Ashok Rajamani,' presents Mr. Rajamani, author of a memoir about amazing survival, in a televised interview that is as not only a testament to his humor and courage, but also to great television and video production."

"As an author, I'm honored and thrilled to be involved in a program which has been so well-received. The journey of my memoir *The Day My Brain Exploded* –from writing the first page, to having it in bookshelves worldwide, and now possibly, to witnessing it adapted to the stage and silver screen – has been an amazing one. Being the subject of this Telly Award-winning program is a wonderful, unexpected add-on to this odyssey," said Ashok.

HomeTowne TV is a cable television station in Summit, NJ that broadcasts television programming to Union, Morris, and Essex counties.

Ashok Rajamani named keynote speaker at BIANYS conference

He is the first person of Indian origin to be bestowed with this honor.

Mehak Luthra, 07 Aug 2023



Indian American author Ashok Rajamani, who survived a near-fatal brain hemorrhage at the age of 25, has been selected as the keynote speaker for the 2024 annual conference of The Brain Injury Association of New York State, a prominent organization in the field of brain injury.

"As a survivor with a scarred skull, I know that those who endure and survive brain injury are absolute warriors. I am deeply honoured to be the keynote speaker at the BIANYS conference, an

important event for all New Yorkers," said Rajamani, who is also an artist, poet, radio host, and speaker.

Rajamani's memoir "The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story," released in 2013, is a remarkable account of his survival. The darkly comedic memoir received global acclaim including from Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley. In addition to his memoir, Rajamani has authored the book of cultural criticism "Imagine Carnavalesque." His writings have been featured in numerous esteemed publications, including Danse Macabre, 3:AM Magazine, and South Asian Review.

"Ashok serves as an example to the brain injured in New York State of not only surviving a potentially deadly brain hemorrhage but also overcoming numerous medical issues from this event to thrive. His story is compelling and inspiring," remarked Michelle Kellen, BIANYS professional development manager.

The Brain Injury Association of New York State (BIANYS) is a non-profit membership organization that operates across the state, advocating for individuals with brain injuries and their families. Since its establishment in 1982, the organization has been dedicated to offering education, advocacy, and community support services, ultimately leading to enhanced outcomes for both children and adults with brain injuries, as well as their families. Moreover, the organization holds a significant role in shaping public policy at the federal, state, and local levels, contributing to the betterment of brain injury-related matters.

Top 10 Bizarre and Disturbing Masturbation Sessions

by Robert Grimminck

✓ fact checked by Jamie Frater

7 You'll Go Blind!



Unlike a lot of people on this list, Ashok Rajamani was just pleasuring himself in a normal way on March 17, 2000. He wasn't doing anything freaky with weird objects or sticking things in places where they probably shouldn't go. He was just a 25-year-old man who had masturbated countless times before. What was different about that day was that it was his brother's wedding and he was staying in a hotel. And that session was different because when Ashok popped, something in his brain popped as well. Ramamani's orgasm caused him to suffer a Subarachnoid Intracranial Cerebral Hemorrhage, which was caused by Arteriovenous Malformation (AVM) which is a congenital birth defect, so he was born with it. People inflicted with AVM usually suffer a hemorrhage between the ages of 20 and 40. As the doctor[6] on the case said "Many brain hemorrhages and aneurysms are urogenitally based, meaning that they usually happen when a person's having sex, giving birth, going to the bathroom." Luckily, Rajamani was able to call an operator for help and he was rushed to the hospital. The hemorrhage wiped out most of Rajamani's memory, left him half blind in one eye, and he now suffers from epilepsy. He wrote a book about his experiences called *The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story*. [7]



Brain Karma: Understanding 'The Day My Brain Exploded'

by Ashok Rajamani December 23, 2023



Hemorrhaged brain, a hallucinogenic journey into God's cosmic uterus, and now the author's story ready to be turned into a movie. But here he shares how his spirituality affected his resurrection, and lessons learnt.

My name is Ashok Rajamani. I'm the author of "The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story", the Pulitzer Prize-Luminary Commended Memoir.

It tells the tale of my experience as a 25-year-old Indian American suffering a massive, full-throttle brain hemorrhage that occurred at my brother's wedding.

Though I survived, I was left with permanent bisected blindness, epilepsy, distorted hearing, erratic transient amnesia, metal staples in my brain, and ultimately, a carved cranium courtesy of extensive brain surgery. Published a decade ago by Algonquin Books, 'The Day My

Brain Exploded' is finally on its

path to becoming a motion picture. While a production studio has yet to be decided upon, the visionary and legendary director Tarsem Singh will be directing it.

In honor of my memoir now making its way to the big screen, I was invited by 'A Lotus in the Mud' web magazine to write an article on how my spirituality affected my resurrection and what I've learned through it all.

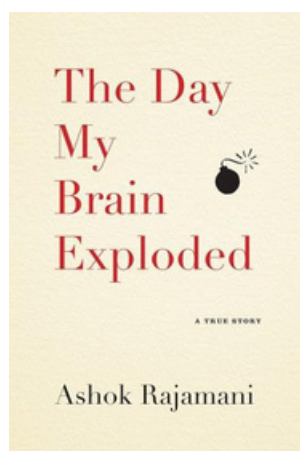
I couldn't say no, as my connection to the unseen is what led me past death into the land of the living.

I was 25 when my brain exploded at my brother's wedding. I was hospitalized immediately. For

the next few months, I existed not only in the soundless

neurocritical care world but also in the deep, dark world of my mind.

Days bled into nights, nights into weeks. I had lost track of time while my entire world lay in my skull. The staff nurses would continuously ask what day and hour it was. Sometimes I knew, sometimes I didn't. It was often impossible to figure it out. Even surrounded by people, mine was a world of maddening solitude and darkness.



Ashok Rajamani's memoir received worldwide acclaim, including raves from Pulitzer Prize Luminary Jane Smiley. He also performed the unabridged audio production of the book, which was called by Dr. Gregory O'Shanick, Medical

Director Emeritus of the Brain Injury Association of America, a “groundbreaking masterpiece.”

The Liquid Afterlife

My brain began functioning in the only way it knew how at that point: hallucinations. And it started with my journey to the afterlife.

Indeed, I saw the great beyond. Yet rather than seeing the proverbial white light, I entered splendid, deep blue water, and emerged fish-like, making my way through a liquid passage, a magnificent cosmic uterus.

I was pushed through a thick wetness to emerge as a newly born. Dying, it seemed, was as difficult as being born.

The work a newborn endures to leave the womb seemed akin to my struggle. I forced my way through the watery birth canal, to die and be reborn anew.

I discovered the world after death. But just as I was pushing hardest through the heavy fluid, I was stopped – my nurse was slapping my face.

It seemed my blood pressure had dropped dangerously low; there was fear for my life. As my death illusion revealed, my hallucinations revealed a new form of consciousness I had never known.

The liquidity taught me that in death we return to being the fish we were in our mother’s womb.

And we enter another, far more substantial womb. Whether this was, indeed, God – as mother, as woman – setting us free once more, or whether the world beyond was a liquid afterlife, I knew that our visions of the hereafter – simple constructs like heaven and hell – meant nothing.

A joy, an exuberance, waits for us after our last breath. But it is neither light nor white. It is dark and blue.

To Fight, To Surrender

While my mind was swimming in divine adventures, my body had entered hell. I felt the sharp intrusive needles stabbing me.

I felt the metal tubes drilling into my skull. I felt the restraints strangling my hands and arms. I felt the injections on my feet to prevent clotting.

And I fought it every step of the way, kicking and screaming at the doctors and nurses. Like an animal, I was restrained to the bed for the rest of my stay.

Yet, in the blackness of my hemorrhaging brain, I found a way to tolerate it all: I worshiped it.

Since my pain was so intense, I decided it must be virtuous. I began deifying the pain, making it holy. Surrendering to it.

And when the nightmare became too intense, this Hindu boy named Ashok became a crucified Christ.

When I watched my family members – all sitting in chairs, their faces wearing looks of deep agony and despair – I realized I had to save them.

So began my romantic affair with my corporeal self. I would rant daily, “I’m the Body of Love, I’m the Body of Love,” as my family looked on in mute, helpless horror. In those moments, I inhaled the world’s suffering. All of humanity’s dreams, hopes, fantasies and nightmares lay inside of me, and I never let the doctors and nurses forget it. Whenever they performed their routine tasks, I said solemnly, “Go ahead. My body is ready for you.”

After three months of pain and solitude, my skull was finally drilled open and three lobes of my brain – which were mutilated from the hemorrhage – were restructured.

Horseshoe Souvenir

The brain surgery also gave me something permanently visible to all around me. Since much of my cranium had been opened, it now had to be put back, bolted with titanium staples.

This resulted in a life-long scar.

A scar in the shape of a horseshoe. And like the hooves of many horses, my skull was now altered for life, modified by metal.

But the difference remains. Instead of running through a racetrack or a farmer’s road, the horse I had become fought to move past death’s ocean – through a liquid afterlife – swimming, pushing, forging ahead, and ultimately surviving.

The Dagger and the Flute

I believe in God. There has to be a reason why I’m still here. Sure, the surgeons did a bang-up job in bringing me back to life. They inserted clips and resected veins and arteries in my skull. Nobody is dismissing their exceptional job.

I’m not that dumb. But, in the end, they were simply gas station attendants, while God was the fuel I needed to keep me alive. To me, the Divine is beyond gender.

Yet I now realize that God – male or female – holds an infinitely feminine power, though not in the way the West thinks of femininity, as a purely inactive, nurturing essence.

Yes, that aspect is definitely present, but “female” power, described by us Hindus as Shakti, is ferocious, powerful, ruthless, and at times vengeful.

After my own hallucinogenic journey into God’s cosmic uterus, I believe in the womanhood of God, represented by the sheer force of the hypnotic Kali, correlated with Shakti.

However, I couldn’t have survived without the passivity of Lord Krishna, whose loving and warm sensuality embraces the nurturing side of both genders.

Both worlds – the passive and the vengeful – assisted me in my path to resurrection. Kali, her tongue ferociously extended, holds a dagger. Krishna, the tender, affectionate deity, plays a melodious flute.

The flute and the dagger symbolize the two deities – the two aspects of Godhead. In my transformational journey, I veered back and forth from wielding the dagger to playing the flute.

Moments of forcible rage swiftly changed to passive surrender. In the end, neither sword nor flute consumed me wholly. But the holy union of both – resistance and surrender – saved me.



I now realize that God holds an infinitely feminine power, though not in the way the West thinks of femininity, as a purely inactive, nurturing essence. Yes, that aspect is definitely present, but “female” power, described by us Hindus as Shakti, is ferocious, powerful, ruthless, and at times vengeful.

Higher Education

Life is bondage. Everything we see around us is illusory, or maya.

Reincarnation exists because we must return to this tiresome earth until we fully evolve, and we fully grasp the unreal nature of the material world.

In other words, the body is a prison from which our souls must be freed. After what happened to me, I’ve begun to understand. Only when you witness your once-healthy mind and body deteriorate do you realize that real life is unseen, beyond physical comprehension.

The whole thing is like high school. Achieving ultimate consciousness and awareness is the equivalent of finally entering senior year.

Spiritually, that’s a level that usually takes numerous lifetimes to reach.

Then, and only then, we can graduate and find salvation, or, as some might say, heaven.

We can, at last, travel past even the Liquid Afterlife.

I don’t know why my karma, my fate, took me on this astounding journey of my brain’s destruction, and I don’t know why I survived it.

I don’t know why I’ve been given a second chance on this Earth: to walk, talk, see, hear, and breathe. Having had the divine experience of swimming in God’s womb, the experience of living after dying, I’ve worked hard to exist again.

In the educational institute we call life, God might be a strict, butt-kicking high school principal, but She’s a fair grader.

Yet although I doubt that I’ll make valedictorian, I definitely won’t flunk this time around, whether it ends tomorrow, two months or 50 years from now. I was granted access to enter

the Liquid Afterlife, for at least a moment.

So, I think that I'll be moving up a rung in the next life, graduating to the next grade. After all, I'm sure making it through my brain's long, devastating, yet triumphant journey through death and rebirth has earned me, at the very least, a bucket-load of B's in this lifetime.

And maybe even an A or two.

Lessons

This was, this is, my karma. To experience the detonation of my brain and live once more. And it's beautiful.

Author John Pavlovitz once summed up one of his open letters to readers by labeling his note as "a plea and a promise, a dare and an invitation."

My own goal with this essay was not to force my concept of a Higher Power on anyone – whether you name this higher essence God, or the Universe, or simply Energy. Rather, what I've written is a plea and a promise, a dare and an invitation.

See the unseen.

Wield the dagger yet play the flute.

Fight the war yet surrender to the journey.

Moonwalk through the flames, wearing sunglasses as you do.

Never give up.

You'll make it through. Just trust that no matter what obstacles you face, no matter what suffering you experience – nothing can defeat your battle cry and your divine melody, the gorgeous karma of your life. ###

Lead image: "Self-portrait"; Photo by Ashok Rajamani

"Kali Triptych" (ink, charcoal, acrylic, ink, ricepaper, canvas), Artwork by Ashok Rajamani



'Self-Portrait: Trimurti' (acrylic/ink/canvas) Artwork by Ashok Rajamani.

ABOUT ASHOK RAJAMANI

Ashok Rajamani is the author of 'The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story' (Algonquin Books). His work has appeared in dozens of publications, including The Atlantic, Danse Macabre, Scholars & Rogues, and South Asian Review. He is an accomplished artist as well, whose works have been shown in galleries worldwide. Official site: www.ashokrajamani.com/

salon

An orgasm almost killed me!

It was my brother's wedding day, and I was practicing some bored self-love. It ended with an explosion in my brain

By **ASHOK RAJAMANI**

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Excerpted from "The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story"

Perverted. Masturbating on your older brother's wedding day is perverted, isn't it? Well then, call me a perv. Because that's what I was doing in my hotel room a few hours before the ceremony.

March 17, 2000. Twenty-five years old.

The day before, I had flown from New York City to Washington, D.C., where my older brother, Prakash, and his fiancée, Karmen, lived and were to marry. At the time of my spontaneous onanism, the rest of my family was out playing tourists. My brother Prakash was in the room next to mine, preparing for his big day.

Now, people practice the art of self-love at various times and for just as many reasons. They might be feeling randy or simply utterly bored. In my case, it was the latter. Weddings don't make me feel amorous. And so, I prepared myself for a little diversion. I hadn't yet changed into my formal wedding suit; I was wearing an outfit appropriate for a jerk-off: a ratty '80s Def Leppard tour T-shirt. Nothing else. I set myself to the task, watching my progress in the big mirror over the dresser.

As my solo act came to its usual splashy end, I felt a sudden, massive pop inside my head. I had jerked off innumerable times before, but this orgasm was different; this orgasm was unnatural. Something was wrong, horribly wrong.

I felt a fierce explosion in my head.

In a mere instant, the equivalent of an atomic bomb had been detonated within my skull. Between my ears. Behind my eyeballs. My brain had become Hiroshima.

Suddenly I could see nothing as the bomb blasted. It was as if a blindfold -- making the world darker than a moonless, starless night -- had been tightly bound around my head. "Oh my God," I thought. "I'm fucking blind! That's what the explosion was. Those rumors about jerking off were right." Had my palms also become hairy?

Within a second, however, my sight had returned, albeit faintly. Everything was hazy, as if enveloped by fog. Caught between fear and confusion, I fell to the faded hardwood floor, straining to look at the pseudo-crystal chandelier above my head.

I felt as weak as a baby, but not a baby entering this world but rather one leaving it. My head was filled with unimaginable pain; my universe was slowly leaving me. Strange how the body knows what it knows. I knew I was going to die. So my survival instinct took over, and with the little strength and vision I had, I was able to locate the hotel phone. I clawed at the receiver, thrust it to my ear and painfully pushed "0." I croaked out a plea for an ambulance.

"We're right next door to the hospital," the hotel operator chirped, as if she were merely telling me where to find the nearest vending machine. "Is there anyone who could take you there? It would be quicker."

I gave her my last name, and she paged Prakash. When he answered the phone, I bet he was still fumbling with his cummerbund.

Prakash rushed next door to my hotel room and discovered me on my bed. Surprisingly, despite the brain explosion, my sense of modesty had prevailed. Through the deadly haze and the pain and the panic, I had

somehow been able to slip on my Hanes briefs. My brother found me horizontal on the bed, barely lucid, my arms crossed over my chest.

It was an oddly regal pose. Prakash had now discovered his baby brother cast as a dying pharaoh atop a hotel sarcophagus, a seemingly doomed king headed somewhere other than the River Styx wearing nothing but an '80s metal T-shirt and a pair of tighty-whites.

Time seemed to blaze through a blackened stretch of undiscovered galaxies following my hotel room collapse. When my eyes opened and clear sight had finally returned, I had no idea where I was.

Fuck Fuck Fuck. I was in a bed. But where? I looked up. High above me, a metallic-gray steel ceiling spread out overhead. Then I saw Prakash's face staring down at me, a terrible mingling of fright, anxiety and terror. This didn't look good at all.

"You're in a hospital," he said. "They say you've had a brain hemorrhage. Your brain bled."

No way. There was no blood. Just some cum.

"You're in a hospital," he repeated when he saw my look of horror. "You don't remember? I picked you up a while ago from the hotel room and walked you here. You've been pretty much unconscious, sleeping since I got you here. The doctors just took a CT scan of your head."

I then noticed Mom standing next to Prakash.

Both were silent. Next to them stood a pink-faced man in a white coat. Extremely skinny, balding and sporting a scraggly white beard, he looked like an anorexic Santa Claus.

"Ashok, I'm Dr. Brown. You gave us quite a scare. Let me tell you what happened."

"Prakash told me I had a brain hemorrhage," I said.

"Yes, you did. It's called a Subarachnoid Intracranial Cerebral Hemorrhage, and after taking the CT scan, we discovered the cause of it," he continued, holding out an X-ray in front of my face.

He pointed to a major dark spot on the bottom left corner of the brain scan. I inspected it. Prakash and Mom moved in closer for a better look.

"See that?" he said.

We all nodded.

"That," he said, "is an AVM. AVM means Arteriovenous Malformation. I assume you've never heard that term."

Even in my blurry state, I almost replied sarcastically, out of habit, "Duh."

"An AVM is a tangle of veins and arteries hidden in the brain," he explained.

Prakash suddenly lashed out at me. "See what you get for all your whacking off?" Clearly I must have told him about my private activity before the wedding, although I couldn't remember doing it. Mom's face contorted into a grim, stony-faced mask, looking as though her tightened, immobile lips would prevent her from bursting into a flood of tears.

“An AVM is not caused by anything,” Dr. Santanorexic said quietly. “It is a congenital birth defect — a defect that develops in the fetus during the third month of pregnancy. Behavior didn’t cause it. Ashok was born with it.

“The AVM hemorrhage was going to happen someday — turns out today was the day. It usually bursts in a person between the ages of 20 and 40. Many brain hemorrhages and aneurysms are urogenitally based, meaning that they usually happen when a person’s having sex, giving birth, going to the bathroom. In your case, your brother told me you were masturbating.”

He turned to me. “The second you orgasmed, your blood rushed to the brain with severe pressure. The AVM ruptured because of it, causing your brain to bleed, flooding your head with septic fluid. Ashok, AVM bleeds can be fatal.”

He then looked at my family and said gravely, “It’s a wonder he’s still here.”

The fog in my head scattered with this new information. So this disgusting tangle had been hiding in my brain since I was in Mom’s womb. It was my inheritance: a murderous genetic inheritance.

* * *

Immediately after dealing with an insurance debacle, the real nightmare started. Thoughts churned wildly in my damaged mind as the effects of the explosion made their way through my body. All I really understood was that I was losing my freedom to move. I later learned that, right at this moment, my exploded brain had exposed my body to a tidal wave of murderous bacteria. I was moved immediately from the ER to the Intensive Care Unit.

Though unaware of my actions, I had become hysterical from the hemorrhage, and like an animal caught in an unforgiving trap, I tried to pull my arms free of the IV pole and tried to kick myself off the bed. The doctors were forced to strap me in.

I began burning with a high fever and started vomiting. And as the raw torture caused my consciousness to slowly descend into delirium, my earlier shocks of confusion were lessening, transforming into horror and fear.

My insides felt scalded with the shockwaves brought on by the hemorrhage unleashing too much radiated heat for my body to handle. The pain caused my damaged brain to shut down; I felt my mind rapidly slipping away. The doctors then decided to administer a spinal tap to check the amount of noxious blood and fluid swirling inside me.

I sensed my head being split apart, the middle a bloody yolk. My torn brain was continuing to spill itself into me, flooding my internal organs with an excess of unhealthy cerebrospinal fluid, or CSF.

Another CT scan was performed. While it showed no new complications, this was little consolation; CSF continued its deadly flow throughout my brain.

I sensed I was now bypassing purgatory and going straight into the lake of fire.

* * *

Spanking my monkey into a brain-bleed, of course, was not how the wedding day had begun.

When I first arrived in D.C. on Thursday, I had not felt well. My throat hurt, my nose dripped, my ears ached. Everyone else was excited about the nuptials — but I only felt miserable. I went to a nearby pharmacy, bought some over-the-counter cold syrup and hoped for the best.

The wedding was set for the next day at 5 p.m. But when I awoke that morning, there was little change in my condition.

As the others headed downstairs to the hotel restaurant for breakfast, I begged off and stayed in my room. I told them I still felt ill.

Most of our family — aunts, grandparents, cousins, et cetera — lived in India. Here in America, we only had a couple of uncles.

Our blood representatives for the marriage, then, were few. Only my mother's brother, Sunil Uncle, and his two-year-old daughter, Supriya, had come for the wedding. For most people, having so little family in attendance might be depressing, but we were grateful just to have these two. Like abandoned children in an unvisited neighborhood, my small family — Dad, Mom, Prakash and I — had been alone in America throughout our lives.

After breakfast, the five came upstairs to my room with plans to tour D.C. They would take a trolley to the White House, the Lincoln Monument, the Smithsonian and the Arlington National Cemetery. My father had it all planned. I just shrugged. I still felt like shit and was going to sleep in.

Prakash and Karmen, his bride-to-be, were delighted that the family was leaving. After all, they had their own plans: Prakash wanted to hang with his boyz around the hotel; Karmen wanted to have a “beauty” day: spa treatment, massage, skin pampering. She would meet up later with her dad and brother, who had flown in from Florida.

Months after my hospitalization, Mom dutifully described to me the events of that unimaginable day. It was an especially chilly day, unusual even for March. The group left the hotel at 10 a.m. with Dad determined to see as much as he could. I learned later that he kept everyone on the tour despite the cold — even though Supriya, unaccustomed to the frigid weather, was clearly uncomfortable. When Mom asked that they return to the hotel, Dad brushed her off.

“The next stop is Arlington Cemetery,” he said with fervor. “We can’t miss it, I’ve heard so much about it.”

“Why are you so obsessed with that place? Supriya’s not feeling well. Let’s go back.”

Only after they had walked through the miles of monuments and acres of white stone crosses did Dad finally give in. At 3 p.m., they returned to the hotel.

Upon reaching the hotel room all four were sharing, the first thing they noticed was the telephone. Its red light was blinking furiously, insistently, as though it were caught in a seizure. The answering machine display read 25 messages. Dad quickly punched the play button.

“Come quick,” Prakash shrieked. “Ashok is in the hospital!”

That was followed by: “Ashok is in the ER, he had an aneurysm, Oh my God!”

The next 23 messages were variations of the first two, each transmitted in Prakash’s most frantic voice.

After discovering that Dad's cell phone had been off during the entire tour, Mom turned on him, her eyes blazing.

"How could you waste time in the goddamn cemetery?!" she screamed. "How could you be so oblivious and not turn on your cell phone?!"

Dad didn't respond but simply opened the door and raced out into the hall. The others followed him down the stairs, through the hotel lobby and next door to the hospital. They found me in the emergency room, lying in a bed, Prakash watching over me.

* * *

This was not to be Prakash and Karmen's only wedding ceremony; after all, Karmen was a devout Christian and Prakash a Hindu.

The authentic Hindu ceremony was held the day before in a temple in Maryland. Nevertheless, for most invitees, this Christian, all-American hotel version was still considered the "official" ceremony.

The Hindu ceremony had come off perfectly. Karmen was the daughter of a Filipino mother who had passed away years before and a white father. Genetically, it was a lovely combination. In traditional Indian bride fashion, her dark-chocolate hair was parted down the middle and tightly knotted in a heavy, stupa-formed bun. She was quite tall, nearly matching my brother's six-foot frame.

Karmen had adorned herself in an extravagant red sari with a gold border. On her forehead was a circle of brilliant crimson powder to signify her entry into wifehood. Rich red henna had been elaborately painted on her bare feet.

After Prakash placed the holy wedding necklace, the mangal sutra, around her neck, Karmen clasped hands with him. A priest stood before them. They took seven steps around the sacred fire, symbolizing their commitment, respect and honor for each other. Prakash and Karmen chanted holy mantras, and the ritual was completed. No wank-induced brain-bleed disrupted the happily-ever-after scene. Not that day.

Excerpted from "The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story" by Ashok Rajamani. Copyright 2013. Algonquin Books. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

BIOGRAPHY



Ashok Rajamani is an internationally published author, poet, artist, essayist, radio host, voice actor, and activist in New York City.

Heralded by Barnes & Noble as one of the "Great New Writers of 2013", he is a nationwide speaker, having conducted multiple reading engagements in events and venues such as the United Nations International Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy; "Masala in Words: A Night of South Asian American Writers," New York City (headliner); Barnes & Noble, New York City; Barnes & Noble, Princeton NJ; Barnes & Noble, Holmdel NJ; Words Bookstore, Maplewood NJ; Decatur Book Festival, Atlanta GA; "Explosion of the Explosion" Brain Injury Book Launch, New York City; "Ashok Rajamani: Brain Injury as Confession," New York City; "Brain Injury Warriors," New York City (headliner); and Brain Injury Association of New York State.

In 2000, at the age of 25, he suffered a sudden, near-fatal, massive cerebral hemorrhagic stroke due to an undetected birth defect. Though surviving, he was left with lifelong bisected blindness, epilepsy, distorted hearing, erratic transient amnesia, metal staples in his brain, and ultimately, a carved skull courtesy of open brain surgery.

The final consequence of his body's very own 9-11: an irreverent and decidedly unconventional memoir about a day that exploded not only his brain, but the world around him, entitled THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED: A TRUE STORY.

The memoir received worldwide acclaim, hailed by multiple global media outlets, including Publisher's Weekly, Harper's Magazine, The Times of India, Washington Post, Booklist, The Atlantic Monthly, BBC, and more.

He also performed the unabridged audio production of the book, which was called by Dr. Gregory O'Shanick, Medical Director of the Brain Injury Association of America, a "groundbreaking masterpiece."

After the hemorrhage, he emerged as a proud brain injury rights advocate, and became a board member of the International Brain Injury Survivors Network, as well as Subject Matter Expert (SME) for the Brain Injury Association of America.

In addition to his memoir, Ashok has been a featured writer in other books/journals/magazines including: South Asian Review, Three Line Poetry, Mantram, Catamaran, 50 Haikus, Monsters of the Rue Macabre, Armageddon Buffet, Pulp Metal Literary Magazine, and dozens more. He has been host for Brain Injury Radio worldwide, and belongs to the Authors Guild, New York Writers Coalition, Asian American Writers Workshop, and South Asian Journalists Association.

A self-acknowledged Hindu hick, Ashok grew up in a town near a cornfield in Illinois, before fleeing to The Big Apple at the age of 17, where he's lived ever since.

He is a Magna Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa graduate of New York University, where he received his Journalism degree with Kappa Tau Alpha honors. He attended Columbia University for advanced cultural studies.

His turn-ons include: Kathy Bates in Misery. His turn-offs include: tomato chunks.

India Abroad

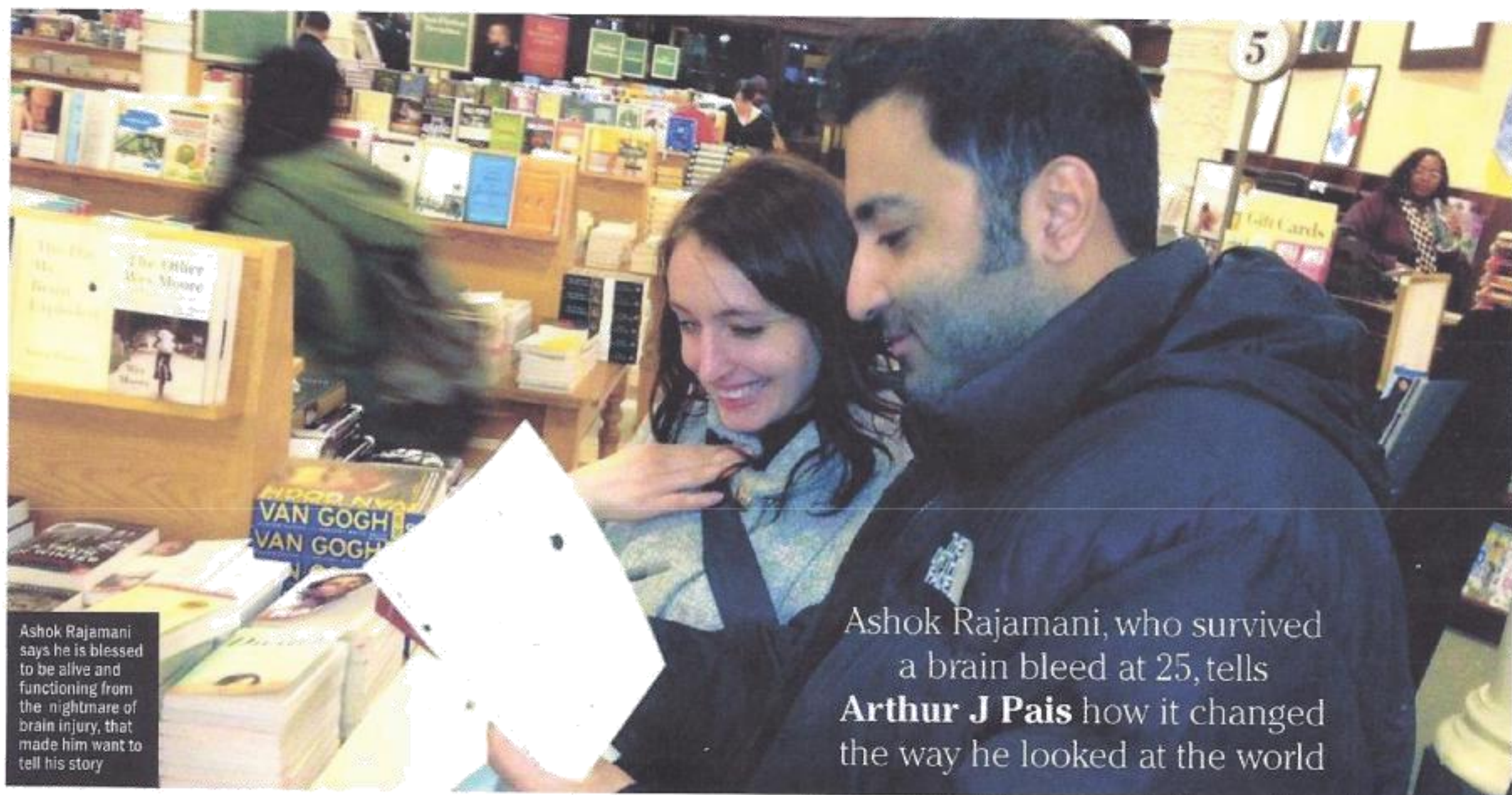
THE MAGAZINE

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EXTREME SURVIVOR



M5



Ashok Rajamani, who survived a brain bleed at 25, tells **Arthur J Pais** how it changed the way he looked at the world

'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

The handsome man, around 38 years old, walked into the ladies room and came out in no time before the shrieks started. "Oh, I did it," he muttered as he apologized for his mistake.

Can you really blame him? Ashok Rajamani, survivor of a full-throttle brain bleed at the age of twenty-five, could only see the words MEN outside the WOMENS toilet because the hemorrhage had left him with lifelong bisected blindness, epilepsy, in addition to distorted hearing, erratic transient amnesia, metal staples in his brain, and ultimately, a carved skull because of open brain surgery.

The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story — a confessional book — full of raw stories and dark humor, is the consequence of his body's very own 9/11, says Ashok.

It is also the story of an immigrant family and its two America born sons, and the racism they had to face in an all white school near Chicago. The book has received praise and media attention for the first-time author who has lived in New York City for over 17 years.

He graduated from New York University in journalism and attended Columbia University for advanced cultural

studies.

Now a brain injury rights advocate, Rajamani has been a regular host for Brain Injury Radio and is a board member of the International Brain Injury Survivors Network, as well as a subject matter expert for the Brain Injury Association of America.

Your book is titled *The Day My Brain Exploded*. Tell us about that day.

The actual bleed that provoked the explosion that day, was, shall we say, something not suitable for children to hear; you'll have to read the book to find out!

The hemorrhage was caused by the explosion of a hidden birth defect called an arteriovenous malformation — a congenital birth defect — that is hard for doctors to detect until it explodes, as was my case.

An AVM can exist anywhere in the body, but is most frequently detected in the brain. Mine had nestled in my brain from birth, awaiting its explosion.

In other words, my AVM was a ticking time bomb. Perhaps most shocking: the event took place in the most surprising of situations — my brother's wedding.

Was this the original title of the book?

The original title was actually *Brain Karma*, but after some thought, my editor and I realized we wanted something more in your face. *Brain Karma*, we felt, sounded more like a book of brain puzzles, or even a book of yoga

instructions.

The title *The Day My Brain Exploded* is colorful, blunt, and vivid, and perfectly mirrors my no-holds-barred writing style.

Your mother felt you were too young to write such a memoir; what was your answer?

I told her, quite simply: "I've died already. I think that's more than old enough."

Why did you choose to tell your story?

There are not enough memoirs by brain-surgery and brain-injury survivors. In many cases, these survivors have become too mentally challenged or face other severe handicaps.

Plus, they are often killed by their injuries. I once asked my brother, "How come there aren't many 'brain injury pride parades in contrast to parades with survivors from other health conditions?" He told me, deadpan, "That's because the marchers are either too damaged to walk, or, they're dead."

I've been blessed to be alive and functioning from the horrendous nightmare of brain injury. I have to tell my story.

I also haven't found enough memoirs by Indian Americans dealing with the issue of race. Americans of Indian and South Asian descent must contend with as

'You mean your God is metal? That's dumb'

Although I was, of course, aware of my somewhat different appearance, I was raised to be proud of who I was as well as of my cultural heritage, something that occasionally created a bit of tension in the environment.

I had to go to Avon Center School, Not too painful. The main problem was my name. Realistically, "Ashok" is only two syllables; it shouldn't be a problem. But on the first day of every school year, the teacher found a new, more inventive way to fuck up my name.

Some variations included Uh-Sheek, Ah-Shook, Ass-hock. Even my classmates were sick of it. With a collective yell at the teacher on the first day of the school year, they would clarify: "It's UH-SHOK!"

The new teacher, flushed with embarrassment, would then say it correctly. By the next day, though, it would be forgotten and we would start all over.

In first grade, our teacher was a Latina named Mrs Marquez. The kids tried to depict her in their Christmas cards. As they did, one after the other called out. "She's not our color!" They held up the peach-colored crayons, which the box had conveniently labeled as "Flesh."

"We can't use the flesh color to draw her," they exclaimed. So they used the black crayon from their boxes.

The statue I was bringing to school was of Lord Krishna as the Vishwaroopa, his multi-headed, twenty-armed avatar, representing God as the ultimate power that controlled the creation, preservation and the destruction of existence itself.

Of course, I did not know how to articulate all that at the age of ten, so Mom explained to me in understandable terms.

"Why does he look like that, Mom?" I asked the day earlier, confused by Krishna's multi-limbed appearance.

"All of his arms and heads equal all the people in the world," she said. "It means God is everywhere."

"So is that the statue of God?"

"Not exactly," she said with a chuckle. "It just shows what God means. But it's still holy."

Mrs Swenton, a fifty-year-old white

The Day My Brain Exploded

Ashok Rajamani

woman who excelled in frumpiness, introduced me.

"Ashok is next," she said, her needle-thin, unpainted lips in action, "to show what he brought. Everyone pay attention."

Just before me, a boy showed us his pet puppy, a golden retriever named Demon. The class, of course, loved the presentation, their "oohs" and "aahs," flooding the small yellow-tiled room. It was a tough act to follow.

I went to the front, gussied up in my au courant gray turtleneck and plaid pants chosen by Mom.

"Everyone," I said, "this is Lord Krishna."

The kids, still panting over Demon, shut up and listened. They all seemed intrigued.

I had my speech prepared.

"He's God and this..."

Before I could continue, Leslie interrupted, her blonde pigtails bouncing. "Ewww! You mean your God is metal? That's dumb!"

"Jesus is a man," said Mike, who looked like a sweet, cute version of Curly from *The Three Stooges*.

"You should love Jesus!" some other classmates boomed.

"How stupid," Leslie snickered. "How can God be for show-and-tell?"

"Here is what's stupid," I said. "You think your Jesus is great. I've seen his pictures. He has only two arms. My God has so many arms he can kick your stupid God's butt!"

I had unlocked the door to an invisible sports stadium. Three of the kids, as though rooting for one of the teams in a football game, started cheering. "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!"

"Krishna! Krishna! Krishna," I countered, trying to yell above the impromptu pop rally. "You know my God can beat up yours!" ■

Excerpted from *The Day My Brain Exploded*, published by Algonquin Books. Copyright, Ashok Rajamani.



'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

◀ M5

PANESH GANDHI

much bullying, bigotry, and racism as any other non-white community in our nation. We need such stories that address this fact.

Your resurrection from such extreme brain trauma is quite rare. How would you say you've contended with your survival?

I tell other brain-injury survivors that we shouldn't feel so morose, because I feel we've been given two lives for the price of one. That's how I look at it.

I know I am lucky to have survived well enough to speak, to think, to read, and to write, and to do everything offered in the land of the living.

I try to find humor in the pain of my journey. As I often say, my laughter is far stronger than my tears. When one undergoes a hellish experience, they can either cry or laugh. I chose to laugh.

Tell us about your trauma of dealing with doctors.

Unfortunately, I learned that some in the medical profession have a sordid 'god-complex.' They feel just because they heal your physical ailments, they can belittle your self-worth.

In the book, I mention how a surgeon cruelly dismissed questions about my operation. It was then that I realized a patient's health is only as good as his doctor's humanity. That said, I have also had some wonderful doctors, who have treated me warmly, lovingly, and humanely. I owe much of my recovery to them.

Your memoir details your spirituality. How would you describe your belief system?

I am a proud Hindu. Specifically, I am enraptured by both the aggression and surrender I must ingest to survive. This aggression is symbolized by Shakti, the Goddess Durga.

Surrender is a mindscape created by the loving, passive embrace of Lord Krishna. I survived because of the conflation of the two. This made me rely on a belief in something bigger than myself, a force so great and perfect which would protect me and ensure that I could never be destroyed entirely.

Hinduism is a banyan tree — we can worship God all the way from meditating on God through the path of representative idols and the path of *bhakti*, to the way of *karma yoga*, in which our daily work brings us to the divine, all to the way to *jnana yoga*, a developed view of Vedanta, in which we do not personalize God, but understand in energy and the concept of Brahman, which exists everywhere — an idea that some actually call a form of atheism.

My death and rebirth made me even more a believer of forces beyond control. Whether one calls it 'universe,' 'god,' 'energy,' I know there is something bigger than all of us, as individuals. And each one of us has different paths to discover it. Hinduism maintains, all rivers, all yogas, lead to the same ocean.

The narrative of the book is not chronological. Instead, it slides back and forth between different years and spaces of time. Why did you recount your story this way?

Our thought processes are far from linear. The ways our brain retrieves memories and envelops fresh thoughts are never predictable. I wanted my memoir to conflate both order and disorder, reflecting such mechanics of the brain.

The back and forth motion also forces the reader to be energetic, whereas a chronological narrative does not. Rather, it enforces eventuality: The reader can guess where the timeline of the story is headed, and this can be disinteresting. Many memoirs, unfortunately, take a route as bland as that.

In most memoirs, the writer discusses his or her families. How is yours dealing

▶ M9

'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

4 M8

with their compromised privacy due to the book?

Actually, my parents have been totally supportive. South Indian Brahmins so supportive over such raw self-revelation! I was rather surprised.

My mom's late mother was obsessed with the words 'privacy' and 'dignity,' like the Queen of England. She was a devout Brahman woman who insisted on privacy. I'm sure if she were still with us, she would be wringing my neck, or probably choking me with her sari.

Describe your parents, especially your mother whom you describe as the strongest woman you have ever known.

My mother would come to the hospital, sit on a blue plastic chair, and would be with me all during my days of torture.

I never understood why until I saw the movie *Passion of the Christ* and watched Mary watching her son being crucified, in agony.

I realized that most mothers, no matter what pain their children are going through, will not leave them.

My mother is an incredible woman. She had an arranged marriage and had to learn to be a part of a very quirky family. She then was forced to live in an all-white Midwest town without any Indians, and she was quite the outsider.

But she looked after us very well and gave us a lot of moral support. My father has a very big heart and a great sense of humor, all of which helped me survive the nightmare of my journey.

You write at length about the support you received from your parents. Could you tell us about your brother Prakash and the role he played in the community of supporters?

Like I say in my book, Prakash was my first responder and savior. I couldn't have made this journey without him. He is a lawyer, so practically speaking; his guidance and input were invaluable in any legal matters we had to deal with it, like my medical health insurance.

Emotionally, it was his strength, along with his humor,

which carried me through my journey. Most importantly, throughout my entire life as Ashok 1.0, brain explosion or no brain explosion, he has been my protector, guide, companion, and rival, all rolled into one.

My deep relationship with Prakash is evidenced heavily in the book. The reason is simple: He is my big brother, and whether he knows it or not, we are tied for life, sharing a bond that only two brothers, in our cosmos, could ever share.

Writing this book must have taken a long time. Do you have a 9-5 job? How has your daily living changed since the hemorrhage?

Being a writer is a full time job, but it's not stable, and unfortunately, I don't have a 9-5 job currently to provide such stability.

I volunteer for the brain-injured community as well as write articles, teach English as Second or Other Language to those in need, and hold other odd jobs.

I realized a few years after my brain explosion that it was tremendously difficult to explain my long absence from the work place. Most references I can provide to future employers are over a decade old.

It's so hard to explain the large gap in my resumé now. Sadly, many years ago I had a seizure right in the middle of an interview, which has scarred me entirely. Ever since it has been difficult to effectively seek jobs without certain anxieties.

I now live my life day-to-day. The fateful day I had my brain explosion I had no idea that I would face death when all I did was leave for a wedding.

Also, now that I've been left with epilepsy, I can have fears of having seizures in inopportune moments. This, as well as knowing death can happen at any time... these are issues I never had before the hemorrhage, and now often make me feel that every time I leave my house, it might be for the last time. So the good news is, now I don't leave my apartment messy.

It's like your mother always warns, never leave home with

unclean underwear. You know what? She's absolutely right. You never know if you'll be caught dead in it!

When I had the brain hemorrhage and long hospitalization, to my shock I had discovered my father had cleared out my apartment in Manhattan, and to do that he had to check out everything in it, and take all of my belongings, everything which constituted my life at the time, to his house in New Jersey where I would be staying for a long time.

Naturally, I felt violated. After all, my private life had been torn open. I had arguments with him over that, but later I realized that he had done what he thought was the right thing.

It took me a while to get over my anger, but I forgave him. After all, he is the only Dad I have and I love him dearly. He has been a great support in my journey through recovery.

You write about Ashok 1.0 and Ashok 2.0. Who are these Ashoks?

Ashok 1.0 was a 25 year old more affected by the material world, who basically went for the more visible things — clothes, money and career. He was a heavy drinker, making a lot of money in the public relations world, but not quite living a life rewarding to him.

Ashok 2.0 has been resurrected. He has risen past death, overcome painful surgery, had to fight tremendous amounts of guilt and anger, but he has ultimately been transformed.

He is more spiritual than ever, and he is sharing the concerns of many in the brain-injured community, all the while realizing his main contribution to himself lies not in external successes but within his internal breakthroughs.

What kind of guilt, envy, and anger did you go through soon after your surgery?

Looking at my brother, I would be angry, thinking, why didn't he have a birth defect like me? We were born from the same womb!

At the same time, I was irrationally consumed by guilt of ruining his wedding ceremony by having my brain explode right at that moment.

My mother went through a guilt phase too. She blamed herself for my misfortune, which was the result of a congenital condition.

I told her she should not blame herself but a few months later, it was I who was accusing her for causing the hemorrhage. And yet I knew she was not responsible. She did not drink, she did not do drugs.

I asked her for her forgiveness soon.

Much of my anger and frustration would happen when I would look at myself in the mirror. I looked perfectly normal while knowing that inside me everything had been destroyed.

Coming to terms of my condition helped resolve my anger, and became a big part of my transformation.

As you were recovering from surgery, you gave up two friendships. Why was that?

One friend of many years was a great help to my family and was behind me solidly when I had to go through very complex surgery three months after my bleed. But I came to feel that she had become a Tragedy Queen.

She saw herself as a martyr and I heard her telling a friend that she had to take care of me. I began to feel she was getting off on the fact that I was seriously sick. Her helping me in fact was less about helping me than about her needs, and the need to make her feel important. The friendship has since ended.

Ashok 1.0's closest friend was a brother-figure in every way possible. He was my drinking buddy and we had enjoyed each other's company enormously. We parted ways after my hospitalization though, after it became obvious that our lifestyles were no longer the same.

I've now found kinship and friendship with the Brain Injury Community. We are all wacky and loud. 'Loud' being the operative word! Sure, from time to time I've felt angry and envious of others, but I know now how to handle it.

My friends in the brain-injured community know a lot about these feelings. What surprised me in the hospital was that some of the doctors did not understand how, after losing parts of my brain, I could be uncouth or temperamen-



Ashok Rajamani with his parents Sheila and Puthucode Rajamani. Below, Ashok's older brother Prakash with his daughter Lakshmi

'The tears came gushing like a waterfall'

Arthur J Pais finds out how Ashok's family dealt with the aftermath of his illness

Sheila Rajamani would sit on a plastic chair in a DC hospital and write letters to God in her journal as she watched her 25-year-old son Ashok Rajamani battle for his life.

"Dear God, It has been less than a week since Ashok's in the hospital, nothing makes sense to me," Sheila, who had worked as a kindergarten teacher in a small town in Illinois when her two sons were very young, wrote in March 2000.

Referring to her first born, she added, "We had all come to share in the joy and happiness of Prakash and (his fiancée) Karmen on their wedding day, and Ashok is in ICU fighting for his life. Why did all have to happen at this time? Ashok has just started his new job, and off to a great start. I hope I'm providing him with some solace and comfort, and I hope he knows I'm there in the room."

A few days later she would write to God again. "Please spare his eyes. He's an artist. Spare his eyes. I know God, I am asking a lot from you."

God surely must have listened. Ashok retained half his vision, and a lot of his former life.

She says the most important thing she told her sons while

they were growing up was to be proud of who they were.

"Their experiences growing up were many times quite difficult. But it built in them the resilience to survive, gave them strength of character, made them fearless, emboldened their resolve and enlightened them early on. These qualities have made them the wonderful men they are today, and I am proud of them," she adds.

As Ashok was fighting for confidence and strength after a very difficult surgery, she told him, "There is a reason why you survived. To enjoy the sun, blue skies and a beautiful rainbow, remember not to take things for granted? You've got a second chance for life. Love everything about it."

What kept her going in the hospital and following months? "Keeping a journal, penning my innermost thoughts and

feelings, frustrations and hopes for Ashok, my daily letters to God," she says. "It was a very difficult learning process. No one prepares you in the recovery of a brain-injured person. It is a journey, coping, nursing and dealing with the physical, emotional, mental well-being of a loved one round the clock."

Sheila says when she read the book she couldn't believe how far Ashok had come since "those months restrained in bed in the hospital. I feel pure joy that he is with us, and has triumphed beyond my wildest dreams. The tears that I held back these dozen years came gushing like a waterfall."

Her husband Puthucode Rajamani, who after working for major pharmaceutical companies for over 35 years, has his own pharmaceutical-related business, says Sheila is a woman of extraordinary strength and was a very important player in his son's recovery.

"We were tested all of a sudden and I wonder if there are many families who had to undergo ordeals like us," he says.

He recalls the day Ashok had the brain bleed. His oldest son Prakash rushed in his tuxedo to the hotel suite where he found his brother in great physical agony. "He carried his brother to the nearby hospital, as he did not want to wait for the ambulance as he feared it might take its own sweet time to arrive," Rajamani Senior says. Of course, Prakash or the immediate family did not have an idea what had happened to Ashok.

The hospital people called the insurance and were told that Ashok, who had just started a new job, was not covered. That was a bureaucratic nightmare, as the family had started suspecting the treatment might run into couple of millions of dollars.

The three Rajamanis had to educate themselves about Ashok's condition, and often they found the doctors not ready to discuss things at length. "Today, I think we have become experts on his health problems," his father says, with a wry laugh.

Though his brother felt several times that he had ruined the wedding ceremony, Prakash says, he himself never felt that way. "We had to do everything we could to help Ashok. He is the only brother I have."

The family was always convinced, he adds, that Ashok had been saved so that he could answer a higher calling and be an inspiration for those afflicted with what might initially seem a hopeless case.

"Many people in his position would have gone into deep depression, a few might have committed suicide," Prakash says. "It is not that Ashok did not have huge problems adjusting to his new reality, and deal with anger and frustrations, but he was able to overcome much of all that because he has a generous heart and an inner life. He knows he has been saved for a reason and God has plans for him."



knows he has been saved for a reason and God has plans for him." ■

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tal at times. In fact, there was one doctor who loved to look at me and point 'Inappropriate! Inappropriate!' Looking back, I realized he was in the wrong profession. He should have been a librarian.

Bullying continues across schools in America, and Indian-American students continue to be affected. What are your thoughts today about dealing with school bullying?

Indian-American students are affected, yes. But so are all students perceived as 'different' by their peers — be they be brown, or yellow, or gay, or small, or puny, or overweight, or poor, or too-intelligent, or not-intelligent-enough, or black, or Hindu, or

'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

Jewish, or Muslim, or anything at all perceived as the 'other.'

Bullying is an acceptable hate-crime in schools, in which the victims are rarely able to fight back.

I was bullied often, be it because of my race, ethnicity, religion, name, intellect, 'wimpiness,' and other issues.

I would like to say I can foresee a cure, but as long as children bully those who are different, there might be no end.

I am hoping we will have more nationwide legislation to help control bullying like the Dignity for All Students Act in New York state. I'm hoping that parents will raise their children by teaching the

virtues of tolerance, and not the fears of difference.

What will your next book be about?

It's going to be fun and frothy: a funny, comical collection of semi-autobiographical stories about the zany, crazy, and eccentric women in my family in India: a sort of Desperate Housewives in Mumbai! There is even a daughter-in-law who falls in love with her mother in law!

The working title of the book is *Adventures in Curd Rice*. For those unaware, Curd Rice is a yummy South Indian dish, containing rice, yogurt, ginger and other spices. I'm very excited about this project. It is more humorous than *The Day My Brain Exploded*. No bleeding brains involved ■

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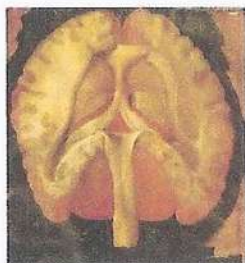
NEW BOOKS

By Jane Smiley

Ashok Rajamani would like to show you what happens when 100 billion neurons are suddenly overwhelmed by bursting blood vessels. In June 2000, at the age of twenty-five, Rajamani is passing the time in preparation for his brother's wedding masturbating in his Manhattan hotel room while the rest of his family is out sightseeing. Unbeknownst to anyone, Rajamani suffers a congenital defect in the way arteries and veins in his brain are connected—an arteriovenous malformation—which leads to what he calls a "Hiroshima" hemorrhage the moment he climaxes. ("Those rumors about jerking off were right," he remembers thinking before he passed out.) The AVM hemorrhage was, according to his doctor, bound to happen sometime, but in his good-humored and self-deprecating memoir, *THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED* (Algonquin, \$13.95, algonquin.com), Rajamani persists in feeling culpable—for being blinded by God, for ruining his brother's wedding, and for switching jobs without signing the COBRA form that would have extended his health insurance. The months, then years, following the hemorrhage are

Jane Smiley is the author of many works of fiction and non-fiction. Her most recent novels are, for adults, *Private Life*, and, for young adults, *Pie in the Sky*. She won a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1992 and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1997.

a chaos of change, misunderstanding, adaptation, and revelation. Bacterial meningitis, hallucinations, a ventriculostomy, a craniotomy, and a plummeting white-blood-cell count, as well as a savior complex, follow. ("I'm the body of love, I'm the body of love," Rajamani babbles to his family for weeks on end.)



His recovery takes him to religion—Christ, Krishna, Kali—and to the offices of speech, physical, occupational, and cognitive therapists. *The Day My Brain Exploded* chronicles his return, not to his normal life (a life in which he had been bullied for being "brainy" before becoming a public-relations whiz and inveterate alcoholic), but to what he calls "a brand new life." His brain is deceitful, fooling him time after time into thinking that everything has stabilized—even as he suffers seizures and migraines, short-term and emotional memory loss. When, after several years, he starts seeing the people around him, as well as his own reflection, as figures so distorted he can't bear to look at them, no epileptologist or psychiatrist can cure him; hiding out at home, he comes up with his own diagnosis by means of the Internet—Alice in Wonderland syndrome, also known as lilli-



putian hallucinations. The doctors pooh-pooh it, but Alice's adventures help him to decipher his warped visions. Rajamani's book deals with his drama elegantly, by maintaining a calm tone, and though he initially thinks of himself as a "science class earthworm"—regenerated, but with only a portion of his old self intact—he eventually derives pride from his altered state. "I loved that old guy profoundly," he sighs. "But I think I love this new fucker just as much. Perhaps even more."

It only takes a solitary, single, massive explosion to create a completely new universe," Rajamani tells us; *PHYSICS IN MIND: A QUANTUM VIEW OF THE BRAIN* (Basic Books, \$28.99, basicbooks.com) by Werner R. Loewenstein, an emeritus professor of biophysics at Columbia, explores our universe's alpha explosion, the Big Bang. Loewenstein begins by relabeling the mysterious quantum unit sometimes called energy and sometimes called matter as "information," explaining that the moment before the Big Bang was the "moment when the information of the universe was concentrated in a minuscule

A lithograph of Alice watching the White Rabbit disappear down a hallway, 1865, by John Tenniel
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