

# Siddhartha Mukherjee

## ‘I don’t like writing as if I don’t exist’

*The Pulitzer-winning science author talks to Killian Fox about combining the history of cell biology with personal stories, the influence of Salman Rushdie and why he likes to write in bed*

Siddhartha Mukherjee is the author of four science books, including *The Emperor of All Maladies*, which won the 2011 Pulitzer prize for general nonfiction and the *Guardian* first book award. Born in Delhi in 1970 and educated at Stanford, Oxford (as a Rhodes scholar), and Harvard, Mukherjee is now assistant professor of medicine at Columbia University, as well as a cancer physician and researcher. He lives in New York City with his wife, Sarah Sze, an artist, and their two daughters. His latest book, *The Song of the Cell*, will be published on 3 November.

### Why a book about cells?

Cell biology had always been at the centre of my thinking – as an oncologist, I look at cells through cancer, which is their ultimate distortion. So much of our attention has been occupied by genetics over the past century, but a gene is lifeless without cells. There’s nothing you can read from a DNA molecule that tells you that your eyes are shaped like eyes or that your kidney is kidney-shaped. Only your cells in the right context and the right time can interpret that code. So it felt as if we were missing part of the equation.

### What is a cell? Do you have a handy definition?

A cell is the least autonomous living unit of life, and it is the unit that makes up all of life on this planet. So we need to know more about how it functions and how it acts.

### It’s such a vast topic. How did you pull the book together?

Finding a structure was the biggest challenge. You can’t write about the history of cell biology in the same way you could with genes, because the chronology becomes very muddled. In the case of DNA, or cancer, there’s a whole army of scientists trying to solve a riddle. In the case of cell biology, there isn’t an army trying to solve a riddle, there are a thousand riddles. How does each cell acquire its unique form and function? Why is the brain different from the heart, even though they’re both composed of cells? So the challenge was:



### The books interview

*Physician, biologist and author Siddhartha Mukherjee, New York City, October 2022. Ali Smith/the Observer*

how does one put a form on this information without falling down a rabbit hole?

**Some of the stories in the book are very personal – you open with one about a friend dying from cancer. What made you decide to include these stories, and were they difficult to write?**

Not difficult to write, but I think essential. I don’t like writing as if I don’t exist. The tone that comes most naturally to me floats somewhere between memoir and history and science. Occasionally a poem will creep in, or a fragment of an essay. It all goes into the mix. If you can convince a reader to come on the journey with you, then you can combine memoir with science writing.

**You’re an assistant professor, an oncologist, a researcher. How do you find time to write?**

*Bizarrely, I love being edited – it gives you a sense of perspective*

My time is pretty regimented: I have time to do one thing, then another, and then I take a break. It’s not like I’m running around the hospital one minute and then dashing off to write a sentence. It’s funny, because I don’t really pace myself, which is to say that it’s not always 10 pages a day. Some days I can write 50 pages, sometimes I’ll be stuck for days not being able to write at all. So I follow the thread of a thought, and let it rest. What helps is realising that this [thought] is not the comprehensive end of everything.

**Where do you write?**

Famously, I write in bed. I only say

“famously” because people make fun of it all the time. But I love writing in a small place. I don’t have a writing studio or anything like that. I like to snuggle up with my computer.

**What part of the writing process do you most enjoy?**

Bizarrely, I love editing, and I love being edited.

**That’s unusual.**

Well, no, I think it gives you a sense of perspective on the whole situation.

**Do you have a most trusted reader?**

Obviously, my publisher, but also my wife is a great reader. (I also see everything that Sarah is making and try to give her feedback on it.) I have two kinds of readers and I use them very differently. One kind I call a champion, and I give them the book first because they are likely to say: “It’s all good, keep going.” A second kind of reader is a critic who says: “Wait a second, we need to think about this book differently, here are the problems.” I think it’s really important to sequence them correctly, because in the early stages a book is very fragile and you don’t want it to be beaten down. Later on, it’s a tougher object and has the capacity to withstand challenges and critiques.

**What have you been reading lately?**

I just read Jennifer Egan’s novel *The Candy House*. Every time she comes out with a new book, it’s a new narrative trend or trail, and I love that about her writing. I finished, after a long delay, Katherine Boo’s book *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, about life in a Mumbai slum. I loved it. *The Lives of Artists* by Calvin Tomkins is a nice series of essays. Zadie Smith has a very slim essay collection that’s great, called *Intimations*.

**What kind of reader were you as a child?**

In India it was generally hard to buy books. My father made a deal with me that every birthday, I would get the number of books to match my age. So at 14, I got 14 books, and so forth. I read pretty widely. I read Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1984. *Midnight’s Children* was an immense book for me, as it was for tens of thousands of readers in India, and as I grew up, I read more of Rushdie’s work. Suketu Mehta’s book *Maximum City*, which I read as a young adult, was very influential, both in terms of style and the way he puts together memoir and history. I loved reading poetry too, and still do – and that’s how poems find their way into my books.

*The Song of the Cell* is published by Bodley Head (£25). To order a copy for £21.75 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837