

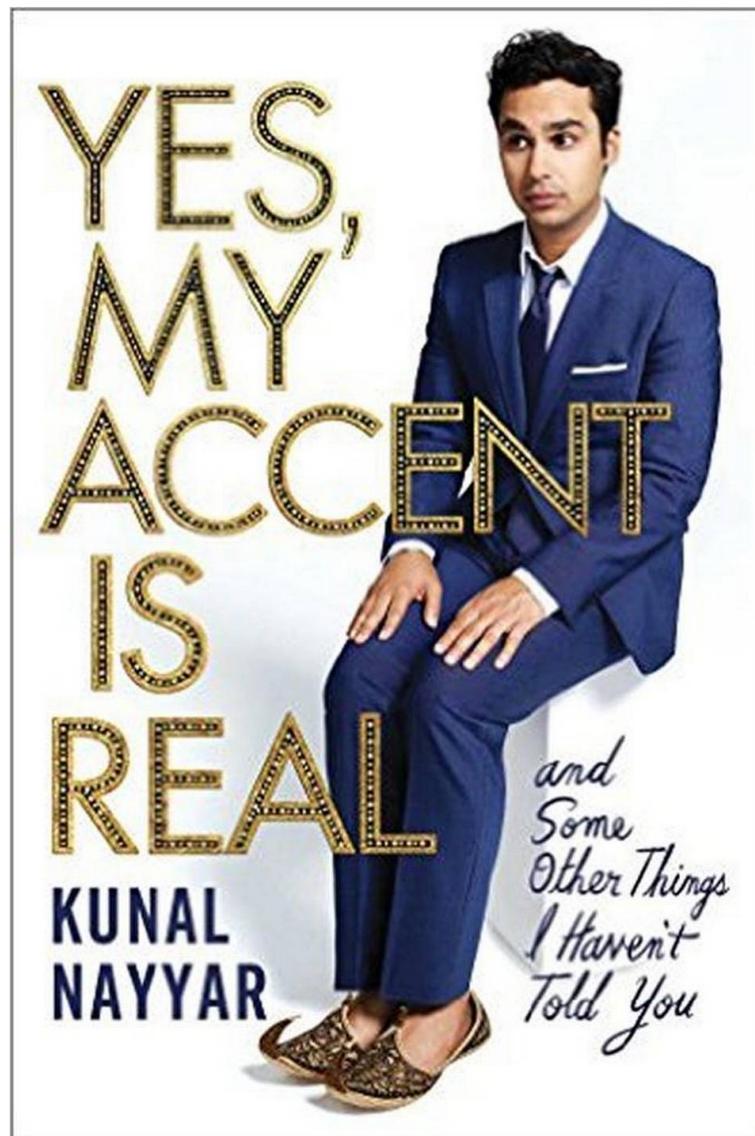
'Big Bang Theory' star Kunal Nayyar: Yes, my accent is real

HIGHLIGHTS

'Big Bang Theory' star says writing book was 'torture'

His memoir is a collection of essays

Appears with friend/onetime costar Jesse Eisenberg at Miami Book Fair on Sunday





BY MADELEINE MARR
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Kunal Nayyar is on one of TV's top sitcoms, but the 34-year-old actor still doesn't mind putting himself through hell on occasion.

At Forbes' last check, *The Big Bang Theory* star was pulling in a sweet \$800,000 an episode as painfully shy astrophysicist Raj Koothrappali.

So, yeah, news flash: He didn't write *Yes, My Accent is Real* (Atria, \$26) for the money.

"It was torture doing a book about my life," says Nayyar by phone ahead of his Sunday appearance at the Miami Book Fair. "It wasn't cathartic at all. I almost quit three times!"

Fortunately, a lot of the groundwork for the collection of essays had been laid out beforehand — the India-raised London native had kept a diary of sorts of years, scribbling various thoughts and musings on airplane napkins; for instance, "There is a lot in this world to be worried about. ... but there is also a lot to celebrate. Be a smiler. Be a boss." Reproductions of these napkins appear throughout the 245-page book, complete with cocktail-ring stains.

So why go through the trouble of doing a book? Obviously, seeing the hardcover on shelves feels like a "major accomplishment." But there's another, more universal reason: his fans.

"Forget sales, forget bestseller lists — though don't tell my publisher that," Nayyar says, laughing. "When I get messages from people saying, 'I loved your book, you inspired me to quit what I was doing or something that my parents wanted for me and live out my dreams,' that's a nice feeling."

Nayyar is indeed the stuff American dreams are made of. Initially, he had no intention of going into showbiz, arriving from New Delhi to the United States in 1999 to study business at the University of Portland in Oregon. One day on campus, feeling "lonely," the sophomore saw a sign for play tryouts and figured it might be a good way to meet people, especially the female kind.

Safe to say, the audition went well, and parts in several plays followed. Not only was Nayyar pretty good on stage (if a bit histrionic, critics complained), but also being in front of an audience made the U.S. newcomer happy.

“I think I gravitated toward theater so much originally because that’s where you can be yourself and not feel so out of place,” Nayyar explains. “You’re allowed to express yourself without being judged.”

Armed with a business degree, Nayyar continued with his studies, forgoing Hollywood temporarily to nab a master’s in acting in 2006 at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Unlike most overnight success stories that take a decade, fame really did come rapidly for the girl-crazy charmer whose first role was on an *NCIS* episode as a terrorist.

Quicker than you can say “lucky break,” Nayyar landed a plum role in a new show from Chuck Lorre (*Two and a Half Men*) about a bunch of supernerds working at Caltech, which premiered in September 2007.

Nayyar realizes his fast track to fame isn’t like what most stars experience; hence, another reason for the book.

“I think people are interested in my journey,” he says. “Many would assume when you’re on a TV show that your life is so glamorous. And I was like, ‘Eh, let me tell you how it goes.’ I want you to know, ‘Hey, I’m just a kid from India, and I’m like you.’ Whether it’s about meeting women, losing my virginity, failing at something, I’m humanizing my journey.”

OK, sorry. But Nayyar isn’t exactly a PLU (people like us). Aside from being one of TV’s highest-paid stars, he’s also married to a former Miss India-turned-fashion designer, Neha Kapur. They met in 2008 while he was back home in New Delhi visiting family.

No need for envy. Nayyar is disarming, humble and, like Raj, self-deprecating. And he does share a few traits with his small-screen alter ego, the unluckiest in love of the nerdy pals who owns more cargo pants and track jackets than you can count.

“Like Raj, I can get into trouble sometimes because I look at the world through very innocent eyes,” he says. “Not that I’m naive. I do really feel that those I meet or interact with, they don’t want to manipulate me, yet I often get into a situation where I say ‘yes’ to anything and can’t get out of it. I spread myself so thin, always trying to please people and always want to be liked.”

Look out for a few changes on the way for his character, as well as a continued love interest, Emily (Laura Spencer).

“He’s finally developing kind of a spine,” Nayyar says of the gullible young man who leans on alcohol to speak to women. “He’s becoming a bit of a smartass. It’s fun to see him becoming a man before our eyes.”

Dare we say the entire *Star Trek*-worshipping clique is growing up?

“What’s different now is that five years ago we used to have comic book night. Now it’s, ‘I want to go to the comic book store, but I have to ask my girlfriend first.’ ”

All good. *Big Bang* diehards will likely stay for the ride following major road-to-maturity plot points, like if supergeeks in love Amy (Mayim Bialik) and Sheldon (Jim Sheridan) will ever make it to the altar or if Penny (Kaley Cuoco) and Leonard (Johnny Galecki) will have a kid.

Nayyar has a hypothesis about the massive success of *Big Bang*, now in the middle of its ninth season. Millions upon millions keep tuning in Thursday nights, despite the fact that few viewers are likely scientific-term-spewing brainiacs.

“What is so precious with these colorful characters is that we are brilliant, but we are also going through whatever anyone goes through — love, heartbreak, achievement or failure — we’re human,” he says. “Sometimes these multi-camera comedies can get a bad rap for being too presentational. You know, like, ‘Look at me!’ ‘Laugh at my joke!’ So much of what we do on *Big Bang* is sit around and have a conversation.”

Any spoilers/tipoffs/plot points?

“I think we are due to re-up for season 10. After that, who knows? I hope to continue, but it’s not entirely up to me. Even if we do season 11 or 12, it’s a very odd sensation this year. We are all feeling quite nostalgic. We’re so close. We have each other’s back. We keep it private on set and really love each other. It’s going to be very hard to adjust to going back to what is normal, since this is my normal, if that makes sense.”

Nayyar is excited for his first trip to Miami and to meet locals in the flesh at a Sunday afternoon signing event with pal Jesse Eisenberg (the two appeared over the summer together in Off-Broadway play *The Spoils*).

What are the typical reactions Nayyar gets during public appearances such as this one?

“They say, ‘My goodness,’ ” Nayyar answers cheekily, “I didn’t realize how handsome you were.”

Joking aside: “They expect me to be Raj. Then they’re like, ‘You’re actually cool!’ ”

IF YOU GO

What: Kunal Nayyar and Jesse Eisenberg at Miami Book Fair.

Where: MAGIC Screening Room in Bldg. 8, Miami Dade College’s Wolfson Campus, 300 NE Second Ave., Miami.

When: 12:30 p.m. Sunday.

Cost: Free with Street Fair admission of \$8 (\$5 for teens 13-18 and seniors over 62, free for children).

Information: www.miamibookfair.com.



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