

WRITERSMOSAIC

Zanib Mian

in conversation with Roopa Farooki

Roopa Farooki: Hi, I'm Roopa Farooki.

Zanib Mian: Hi, I'm Zanib Mian.

RF: And we're here in Wembley, in Zanib's beautiful office overlooking gorgeous rolling green fields of Harrow, and surrounded by gorgeous colours and cookies. It's a wonderful, bright environment and it's very much like the bright and funny and lovely books that we're going to talk about today. Zanib, welcome to *WritersMosaic*.

ZM: Thank you for having me.

RF: It's such a delight to have you. You're such an amazing publisher *and* writer for children. You're originally a teacher, though, so, I want to take you right back to the start of your journey. How did you begin writing?

ZM: I actually began writing when I had children, and I was taking them to the library from when they were six months old, reading them lots and lots of picture books. But I noticed that BAME characters were completely missing from picture books, which was just non-issue fun picture books. You know, it might be a book about dinosaurs or robots and, you know, BAME characters were missing from these books. And that's the exact

reason why I started writing. I started telling my child stories with bits of our cultural lives entwined within the stories, and I eventually published.

RF: And when you started... so, you started telling those stories yourself and then you started writing them down, and then you got them published. What was that journey like from actually telling a story? Because everyone says, 'Oh, I've told my son this or my daughter this beautiful story', and they feel that it could be published. You actually did it. How did you kind of get onto that path?

ZM: I took a very unconventional route into publishing with one of the 'Big Five' publishers. I actually started up my own teeny-tiny, independent publishing house because, at the time, when my child was young and I started telling him these stories, I had a look online. I did my research and I found that publishers were not concerned about publishing representative books. They weren't exactly doing it and I didn't know how to approach an agent, or what to do exactly. So, I thought, 'Well, why don't I just do something about this myself?' And then I published my own book, so then published books by other writers that will represent everyone. I was quite ambitious with it. I didn't want to just represent Muslims or Asians; I wanted to represent all kinds of minorities... but it wasn't until I published the book called *The Muslims*, and it got picked up by a big publisher, that I took that route into publishing.

RF: So, how many... so you started off... so basically you had this idea that you wanted to create something: what you were doing for your children, you want to be able to do for everyone. You want to be able to tell these representative stories. How many picture books, and how many books did you publish, before you started writing the middle grade books?

ZM: I had published about eight picture books...

RF: Wow!

ZM: ... before I wrote *Planet Omar*, which was a middle grade book, a lot of that had to do with my son just growing up because, when he was younger, he inspired picture books. So, I guess I was writing for him first and foremost. But when he grew up - and now he's a nine-year-old boy - and I thought he was a really, really funny and intriguing character that needs to go into a book.

RF: So, did the trajectory kind of follow your son's life? So, you're writing books for younger children, when he was young, and then did you find it quite easy to write in middle grade, because obviously longer stories, much more to tell, much more into their worlds as well? How did you find that?

ZM: Yeah, I actually found it easier to write for middle grade because with picture books you have to limit your words, and you have to say so much in fewer words. And that's actually way more difficult than it...

RF: So hard.

ZM: Yes... so hard. So, writing in a middle grade 'voice' was really, really natural to me and I very, very much enjoy it.

RF: You can really feel how much you've enjoyed it, because there's so much humour and so much joy in those books – and it's actually been a real runaway success, I think. Do you feel that you've had a lot of support from other writers and artists in the writing community to get you there? Did you feel that contributed at all when you were writing?

ZM: To be honest... to get me there, no. But when I got there, yes. I just feel like a part of this really, really loving and close-knit community that is of children's authors on Twitter, online. But in the beginning, it was a very lonely experience when I was just publishing my own books and then, rather than authors, it was other people in the industry, for example, the Little Rebels Award, judges, and everybody behind the Little Rebels Award, which is the whole reason why my book got picked up and was thrown into the spotlight. So, it was other people in the industry that I suppose got me there, rather than other fellow authors, which I hadn't really had the joy of meeting yet.

RF: So, you had this incredible experience publishing *The Muslims* yourself, which was what *Planet Omar* was called originally.

ZM: That's right.

RF: And then you won this amazing award... and then you got... and then the big publishers noticed you. And then, what was your decision-making when they came forward and they said, 'What do you think about making this a series?' Did you feel any trepidation? Did you feel you had to change anything? What did you feel about all of that?

ZM: It was intriguing to see. When I went in for the meetings, I wanted to know how much they would want me to change. Would they want me to take out the Islamic bits, for example? But I think that was just me being... sort of thinking, 'Oh, they don't want me to be myself', which links back to the piece I wrote [for *WritersMosaic*] on 'belonging' and when I saw that they actually *want* all of that, it really helped me as well with my personal identity and it was amazing to see that. No, they wanted the book just as it

was. Yeah... I wanted them to have it because they could do so much more with it than I could with my little publishing house.

RF: And had you originally envisaged it as a trilogy when you started writing, or do you think it was going to be a series that was going to carry on?

ZM: Yes, I did, because (a) I enjoyed writing in Omar's 'voice' so much, and (b) there's so much... there's so many places to go with a character like that and a family like that, so many different experiences that they could live through and adventure through. So, I definitely... I wanted to see how it was received and then if it was received well, to write lots more.

RF: I feel that Omar's stories, they gave a voice to British Muslim children that we don't often hear – because you manage to thread in stories about faith and about hijab, prayer, fasting, the mosque - and it's just part of the everyday experience, and you don't do it with any apology, and also you don't do it with any preaching. It's just done as part of their lives and with so much humour. And I kind of wondered, did you feel when you were approaching this, did you have a kind of question in your mind about balancing this? Did you feel it might be a hard sell when you have an agent and an editor... to do it *your* way?

ZM: Yes, definitely. It was definitely playing on my mind a lot while I was writing it. How much is 'too much' Islam to go in there? Too many explanations? But, at the end of the day, I was trying to write a regular Muslim family and there's no way that you can do that and withhold major parts of their daily lives. So, yeah... I just kind of wrote unapologetically but I made sure that when I did make religious references about what they were doing, it's really light-hearted and easy to understand. And, yes, it's important to not make it feel preachy, but it's just, you know, that's the nice

thing about Omar – he can give a very light touch to something that could otherwise be perceived as heavy.

RF: And it's completely normalised because it's in his very sort of young and vibrant and real voice. So, for example, things [like] his little brother playing up by blowing his whistle at the back of the mosque. I say this because my nephew blows his whistle on trains all the time. Or breaking the fast, by accidentally popping a liqueur chocolate. I mean, all these things are part of... I guess it helps normalise our everyday experience for people where you think, 'Actually, it's not that you are going to get struck down by lightning if something different happens'. That this is just part of our normal lives, in the same way that someone kind of, you know, from a Christian background walking out of Mass because they had to take a phone call. It's not ideal, but if there's a baby screaming, and they've got something to do, it's... I guess, it just makes you feel that, yes, this is just one part of our lives and actually what we share is so much more important.

ZM: Exactly. I think that is a huge part of the *Planet Omar* books. Readers who are not from the same background as Omar can just relate to so much in the book. They can relate to Omar himself. They can relate to other things like the silliness and the quirks, sibling rivalries, and friends, screen time, all of that kind of thing. And even, you know, the scene that you mentioned at the mosque. I've had people on Twitter saying, 'Oh, that's hilarious because a similar thing happened to me at church'. So, it's nice then to be able to make those connections as well. And really, I feel that readers don't... they relate to much more than they feel is different.

RF: Exactly. I think we all have experiences of being 'othered' in some ways. I guess a lot of people of faith feel othered, for example, and so, knowing that we all share sometimes this feeling of that we're different,

but that's still okay. I think that's a really, kind of loving message to share. Now, in the books you write about fun friendships. You write about family relationships, but there are some kind of cross-cultural, some societal issues that are affecting Omar and his planet, his world, as well. For example, in the first book, there's quite a bit of normalised bigotry from adults like Mrs Rogers, the kind of grumpy neighbour next door and from children; and in one of the books, the children are actually running away from a homeless man because they think he might be a zombie. So, there is a suspicion of people who are not like us in some ways. Did you feel that you were making... that it was really important that you make these points - almost like a political point, or was it just a natural expression of what's happening in the world today?

ZM: I was making a political point on purpose. I did it in a natural way, or I hoped it would be a natural way. It was the whole reason that I wrote the *Planet Omar* book because of the rise in Islamophobia and faith-based bullying in schools and this kind of thing. And I felt that I needed to correct some of the misrepresentations of Muslims and the negative stereotypes. So, yes, I was making a statement and trying to correct the... as I said... rather than making a statement but trying to correct the misrepresentations.

RF: And I think doing it for children is so important because, I mean, just to speak from personal experience in the kind of post-Brexit kind of pathos, and what was going on with Trump and everything... one of my own children when he was only ten years old got kind of beaten up by a bully outside his school, who was calling him a 'Paki' and saying all these sorts of things. And I just thought, 'This didn't happen when I was a child. Why is it happening now?' And it's because people feel that... that child was... that bully was politicised in some way. His parents, or his grandparents,

someone told him it's okay to beat up on children, who are brown or of Pakistani origin; and he acted out on that. And so, I think if it's really important that we speak to the children who would form this next generation, actually teach them tolerance, because some of them aren't getting it from their adults, so... or from the people around them, who should really be teaching them better.

ZM: Yeah, absolutely. It's really, really, really, important. Children are definitely more politically aware now. And the trouble is that they... rather than being politically aware in an educated manner, they just hear snippets of information from here or there or see the terrible headlines and then just make up their own minds about what's going on, and that can be quite dangerous.

RF: And what I love about the books, though, is that you have the... I guess, the grumpy neighbour next door who keeps making comments about 'The Muslims' (the original title) ... She starts off using it as a pejorative term and towards the end it's actually quite an affectionate term, because they're her neighbours; they're the ones who look out for her. So, it shows... the book shows, that once you actually reach out... and there's a lovely scene where the mom actually just holds out her hand for the lady when she's feeling poorly, and she takes it... If you just reach out your hand to someone, even if they haven't been very good to you, there is a way back for them. So, that you show in that book, there is a way back from any kind of pre-internalised bigotry, or prejudice, from something that she might have picked up. I guess in the book, you describe that. The dad explains it away, saying, 'It's not her fault. She's seen it in tabloid papers. She's seen it from other people. But when she knows what we're really like, she comes round'. And she really does. And ditto with the school bully ... with, is it ...Daniel?

ZM: Daniel, yeah.

RF: When he starts off saying kind of some mean things and making comments about the mum being in hijab... And at the end of the day, Omar is the one who actually helps him out, and then they actually learn to be friends. And he actually... we actually learn about what makes this child so difficult, that he actually has a tough background as well. So, sometimes you know... people aren't... I guess the message is there's always a way back from prejudice, or bigotry, and that maybe there is a reason for why some people are less kind, and so, you can give them a reason to be kind.

ZM: Absolutely. That's so well picked up. It's about empathy, forgiveness. I mean, that is empathy... it's having empathy for Daniel, trying to understand why he's like this. Omar is able to put himself in Daniel's shoes, you know. They forgive Mrs Rogers and just open up with love and kindness which, cheesy as it might sound, is always the way forward and will always win over any kind of hatred and bigotry.

RF: And tell me a little bit about the trajectory from *The Muslims* to *Planet Omar*. Was it a lot of your decision-making to think, 'It's not going to be *The Muslims* anymore, it's going to be this boy's planet?' How did that happen?

ZM: Yeah, um... I loved the title *The Muslims*, but I guess you would only understand it after you've read the book, I suppose. I thought it was quite playful, but *Planet Omar* is a title that's ... can be more widely received, I suppose. So, it was the publisher's decision, but with me in agreement to change it to *Planet Omar*, which I love now, and I think it makes a great series title. There were a couple of people who told me when they saw the

book when it was called *The Muslims*, they thought it was a non-fiction book.

RF: Oh, okay. I suppose that's possible, yeah.

ZM: So, *Planet Omar* is a really fun middle grade title and I love it.

RF: And [the subtitle of the first volume] '*Accidental Trouble Magnet*' – he actually says that in the book. Had he already said that when you decided on a title, or did you leave it in?

ZM: I think... [Laughs] I'm not sure I remember now. But, you know, definitely the whole gist of it is that he's quite a trouble magnet, so... yeah.

RF: So, share with us a little bit the journey of the trilogy. So, we start off with Omar and, you know, he's in a new place, he makes new friends, and they have to win over difficult neighbours and, you know, they try out the different mosques. And then in the next book, they're a bit more settled, and then it becomes very much him and his team of friends sorting out... it's the *Unexpected Super Spy*, where they have to work – basically, they're working out the best way to save the mosque, and the whole community, in a really lovely way, comes together and the people they're suspicious of turn out to be the ones who can save the day – which is lovely. Where do we go next? I know you've got another book coming out. How are you carrying on his story?

ZM: That's right. The next book's coming out - book three, in the summer, and Mrs Hutchinson goes missing, off the face of the Earth – quite literally – because Omar and his friends are convinced that it's an alien abduction. And there's a...

RF: He's very keen on alien abductions.

ZM: [Laughs]

RF: In the first book, he's very much saying, 'What if my teacher is an alien?'

ZM: [Laughs] Yes, but they take a trip to Pakistan and that's where Omar...

RF: Oh, amazing.

ZM: ... all the questions are solved, really.

RF: Because in this first book, they... there are questions about, 'Oh, you might have to all go back to Pakistan. He's like, 'Well, I don't... I've never been there...'

ZM: [Laughs]

RF: '...may do us a bit of good though.' So, he actually manages to go there?

ZM: Yeah, and it's his first trip there and it's very interesting to see how he reacts to everything.

RF: I guess you must have dozens of *Planet Omar* stories, kind of, spinning around you, like the planets.

ZM: [Laughs]

RF: How do you decide which one is the one you're going to pick for a book? And, you know, which journey you're going to go on next?

ZM: I suppose I decide the one that excites me more, the one that I think, 'Yeah, it's all already completely almost there and I'm ready to just put it down on paper.'

RF: Are you writing the next one, now you've just put the third one to bed?

ZM: Not yet... not quite yet. But really, really hoping there will be more...

RF: Now, I wanted to ask you a question about the parents because they're both kind of smart people. They're sort of super scientists. The mum is pretty much curing cancer, as far as I can work it out... and they have their 'Science Sundays' with all these amazing experiments. And I know that you were previously a science teacher. I hope I'm not giving away some big terrible secret you're trying to hide there.

ZM: No, no.

F: So, is it really important for you to have that STEM reference... to actually have that kind of science and, you know, things going on in the book for the children to, kind of, at first be a little bit playful with, sometimes get a bit bored with? But they actually have their parents' passion and they're really good at science and chemistry, aren't they?

ZM: Yeah, yep, they are. I think it was just a nice touch. It was a natural thing for me to write the mum as a scientist, because I'm a scientist, and other than that, I want to encourage children because, you know, being from a science-loving background, I wanted to encourage children to love

science and to realise that it's fun. And I think the book portrays it as a fun thing, especially girls. That's why I thought it was important that the mother is a scientist, not just the father. But my brother is a scientist, and a lot of the inspiration for the characters in the books have come from my own family and friends. So, yeah... it was quite natural to include two scientists in the book.

RF: Do your family and friends recognize themselves? Is there a Mariam, for example, in your wider family?

ZM: [Laughs] No, I never base...

RF: Is there an Isa? [Laughs]

ZM: [Laughs] Probably, yeah. No, I never base a character *solely* on one person. It's little bits and bobs of people that I meet and people that I know; but, having said that, from the character description of Omar's dad in the beginning of the book, my neighbour, Michael saw it and he said, 'That's your brother!' So, I thought, 'Okay. Is it *that* obvious?' Beard, losing a bit of hair – yep, motorbike, and scientists.

RF: There we go. Was your brother working Saturdays at the time, as well?

ZM: [Laughs] No, I did make some bits up.

RF: [Laughs] Diplomatically done. Now, basically, you're a powerhouse of a writer and a publisher. I'm sitting here in this... I don't know if I described this in the beginning, but I'm sitting in this amazing kind of workhouse, workhouse of a place with books stacked up to the shelves, with books all over the place; most of which have been written by Zanib, and it's amazing.

You're doing all this work and you did recordings this morning... you're recording with me now. How on earth do you keep up with writing? And I mean, how do you choose? How do you decide what's important at this point in time? How do you do it?

ZM: Yeah, well... as a writer, you might relate to only being able to write when you're in the exact mood for it. So, I'll have times, or days, where I think today is definitely a writing day and other things can wait. Because then, I will have other days where I just don't feel like writing, and if I'm forced to write, it's just not going to come out as well. So, a lot of it, I just play it by ear; and being my own boss here, I can do that. [Laughs] I can leave when I want to, and go and do my writing, or I can... and other than that, I have kids. I do the school runs myself, and I do try to balance that out as well. I do everything that I can while they're at school. Then, go home, be mum, maybe do some more emails. Sometimes, it can be challenging... I won't lie. I'm not a super-person. It can be challenging but it's just as long as I'm having fun, which I absolutely am... I just love doing it.

RF: Do you ever feel that you're not doing enough? Does your publisher or your editor ever say, 'Look, you know, you haven't kind of done this visit, or done this tour'. Do you ever feel that there's more that you could be doing to kind of promote the books and get the word out there?

ZM: Yeah. I always say 'Yes' to everything that they come at me with. So, I always say 'Yes' but, you know, I think I should be doing more school visits. You know, it's just a matter of finding the time because school visits would really just take a day, even if you're just doing a couple of hours; but it's the coming and the going. So, I do personally feel that I should be out there a bit more with the school visits; and I love it when I do, actually.

When I go into a school, I just come back smiling and laughing at how wonderful the kids were.

RF: I'm sure they smile and laugh a lot with your books.

ZM: [Laughs] Yes.

RF: I've only done a few school visits, but I think it's amazing, you know, that, you know, for that moment in time, three hundred children are focusing on you as a writer. So, how do you feel about that? Do you feel that it's a moment to really, you know, get your book across in person, to really share that message?

ZM: Yeah, it's amazing. It's amazing seeing all those eyes on you just really attentive and wanting to know more; and actually, just having a laugh, giggling, and putting their hands up, really, really interacting. And, you know, that's my audience. And so, it's lovely to see that first-hand and get some inspiration from them as well. I learn lots and lots, too.

RF: Do you feel that you gain more from school visits than you would say doing a festival, or going to the bookshops? How do you feel about that... about the different ways of telling the stories?

ZM: Yeah, that's an interesting question because at festivals as well it can be the same sort of thing; but instead of being a school, it's still a room full of children and then a book signing later on. But I do feel that school visits can be a very, very powerful tool for authors because they're... it's just you. At a festival, they might be seeing loads of other things going on, but a school visit, you know, they might not have had anybody else come in for

a couple of months and then they get to have that time with you. And I think they really enjoy that and take more from it.

RF: So, you completely encourage other writers to go and do that... who are writing middle grade?

ZM: Yes... absolutely.

RF: Your stories, I guess for me, they really show Muslim writers... and I'm thinking about *new* Muslim writers here – because part of what we're doing with *WritersMosaic* is trying to kind of encourage, you know, new writing – that their stories are important; that all their stories deserve to be heard, even if they're 'different', even if it's not a story that someone's heard before, that's no reason not to tell it! How would you encourage the new writers who might be listening to this piece? What would you tell them? What advice would you give?

ZM: Yeah, I would say write from your own experiences, even if you think that those are experiences that people don't want to read about. They *do* want to read about it. You know, I once thought that and then I wrote this book and look what happened. It was so surprising, but I've learnt from it. That yes, people *do* want to read *our* stories and that we should write from our very own experiences because it's a more authentic voice and that comes through on the pages.

RF: And can I ask you a little bit about the diverse picture books? So, we spent a lot of time talking about your middle grade but, you know, there are lots of wonderful diverse books that you've written: things like *My Dad's Beard*, that I was looking up, you know, lots of really good stories. Tell me

about, you know, what messages you feel that you were sharing in those stories? Would you mind talking a little bit about those books?

ZM: Sure. Thank you. In a picture book, the message is always more subtle because, you know, there's fewer words and it can be very powerful, but mostly what I was trying to do with the picture books was just representation on the page. In the pictures... the pictures speak a thousand words. I just wanted every child to see themselves in a fun book. So, that's why we have *Oddsockosaurus*, where the character is a mixed-race character with natural hair. And it's not about him being from that background, it's just about him being a dinosaur.

RF: And all the other dinosaurs they could be.

ZM: Yeah, and all the other dinosaurs that he could be. Or there's *The Robot That Said Moo*, with, you know, the robot's lost, and he goes round and there's various different people helping him and they're all from diverse backgrounds because that is real life. So, it was just more about everybody seeing themselves in fun books.

RF: Which of those would you kind of press on a friend? Which do you think is the most important for you? Is it hard? Is it like picking out a favourite child?

ZM: Yes. It definitely is... It definitely is. Different books speak to different people. So, I suppose it depends on what's going on in their lives at the moment. What are their interests? If they love dinosaurs, then it's *Oddsockosaurus*. If their dad has a beard, then it's *My Dad's Beard*.

RF: So, I guess another question is, what are you... I know that you're still working on *Planet Omar*... do you have any other middle grade stories? Do you know what you're going to be doing next?

ZM: I don't have any other middle grade stories just yet, but I do know that I love writing in this voice, in this middle grade voice, so I definitely can envisage that I will be writing more... other than *Planet Omar*.

RF: Had you ever thought, as your children grow up, if you'll move into young adult?

ZM: I knew you were going to ask me that. No, I think it has to stop there. I don't think... I can't imagine myself writing YA. It gets way too complicated. And I think I'm way too much in touch with my inner child. I can be quite a silly person. So, I think I'll have to stop at that sort of middle grade. I'm just right for middle grade.

RF: And I guess, what message do you want to give your readers? What would you... what do you really want people to take from your stories?

ZM: I guess I want them to take the message of being able to be yourself, even if you are different. Just be unapologetically yourself and that's when you will be valued for who you are.

RF: Oh, thank you so much. That's a lovely note to end on. Thank you so much for talking to us, for *WritersMosaic*.

ZM: Thank you so much. Lovely being here.

A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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