

Belonging and a Sense of Place

Zanib Mian

Belonging is a fundamental human need. We all seek out places, or people among whom we belong, but figuring out *how* to belong can be tricky. The way I look at belonging, and how to find it, has been completely transformed by the journey of writing *Planet Omar*, a series for readers between the ages of 8 and 12, featuring a (goofy) Muslim family, just like mine.

Think of how difficult a sense of belonging can be to achieve. Now imagine attempting to achieve it while the media is continually perpetuating negative stereotypes about people that look like you. When the world is being told that it's extreme to want to wear a burqini on the beach, or that you are oppressed if you cover your hair and wear a full-length skirt, you find yourself filtering out major parts of your personal identity to fit in. This response is a phenomenon known in psychology as 'masking' or 'covering'; even if you feel included in the world, you can never feel you belong as long as you are having to mask, or downplay major parts of yourself.

I fell into the trap of masking. Being out and about, I felt at risk of rejection or embarrassment when carrying out spiritual or religious practices which were part of my everyday routine – for example, asking for a place to pray

if I was at a day-long seminar. I fell into it because I thought I was making people more comfortable around me, by not being completely myself.

The impetus for writing *Planet Omar: Accidental Trouble Magnet* was the evident tension in society caused by Brexit and Trump's campaign to run for president. Closet racists were emboldened by the us-and-them narrative. Islamophobia was rising, and even school children were not safe from it. The NSPCC reported a surge in faith-based bullying in the playground. I had always created diverse picture books, but I realised it was time for a more in-depth, friendly window into the lives of a regular Muslim family.

I pondered a lot over how many religious references I should make. What was too much Islam? At the same time, I felt there shouldn't be too little either, as prejudice stems from misunderstanding, and I wanted the book to correct misrepresentations of Muslims. So I wrote openly. Unapologetically. If the world was to really get to know a Muslim family, then all that we hold dear had to make an appearance on the pages. We pray five times a day. We wear hijab. We fast. We wear modest clothes. We have actual, friendly conversations with Allah. I wove it all into the text, with often comical explanations. And I realised that it felt good. It was OK. Our differences are OK as long as they are understood. What appears many more times is what we have in common. All the silliness, squabbles and quirks of every family. The same causes of sorrow and of joy. The same likes, dislikes and ambitions. This was the book that won the Little Rebels Award in the UK, secured a three-book deal with Hachette and then with Penguin in the US. And in those moments, **I felt I truly belonged.**

I learnt that belonging comes from being unapologetically ourselves and still feeling seen and valued for who we really are.

Zanib Mian

Zanib Mian fell in love with writing at primary school. After studying molecular cell biology at University College London, she taught science in secondary school before deciding to move into children's publishing. Zanib felt that characters from all minorities were missing from books for young children and launched Sweet Apple Publishers with a clear commitment to publishing inclusive books.

Her books include *Oddsockosaurus* and *The Robot That Said Moo*. They have featured on the BBC's CBeebies Bedtime Stories show and in the *Guardian* for their contribution to diverse children's literature. *The Muslims* won the 2018 Little Rebels Award and was longlisted for the 2018 UKLA Book Awards. She has also been nominated for the 2019 Carnegie Medal. Zanib lives in Wembley, London.

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

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