

## Why Do I Write?

Zanib Mian

I don't remember a lot from when I was a five-year-old girl, but I have one very vivid memory that has stayed with me. It's of a happy classroom, with a teacher I loved – I still remember her name – Mrs Plant. We were asked to make an illustration of ourselves to go in a book. Drawing wasn't one of my greatest skills, and I felt that my pictures were always ruined when I coloured them in. But on this occasion, I was proud of my work. I thought it was one of my best pieces yet. I had drawn myself in a garden, with colourful flowers, grass and, of course, bright and wonderful clothes. I eagerly bounced up to my teacher's desk, hopeful of high praise. *She'll be really impressed by this*, I told myself.

But Mrs Plant looked at my picture and said, 'You haven't coloured yourself in'.

*Coloured myself in? What does she mean? I thought. But the paper is white, that's why I didn't need to colour my face in. It's already white..?*

Pondering over this conundrum for a while, I finally picked up a 'skin colour' crayon, filled my face in and went cautiously back to my teacher's desk to present my work for a second time.

This time, Mrs Plant didn't have much patience left. She waved me away saying, 'No, no. It's all wrong.'

I remember the feeling of utter confusion and heartbreak. I liked my picture, but my teacher wasn't pleased with it. I hadn't the foggiest idea why. My young mind couldn't make sense of something so obvious... I needed to colour myself in brown. My skin was brown.

Even though I couldn't make sense of it at the time, the memory stayed with me. Perhaps because of how upset it made me, perhaps because it was something that was so terribly confusing. But now, not only does it make sense, **it is the whole reason why I write.**

The five-year-old me didn't think to colour herself in brown, because she had only ever seen white characters in books, and even on television, in cartoons, magazines. Everywhere. Except of course, in real life!

I didn't actually revisit this memory until I had my own child and began reading to him. I was shocked to see that thirty years on real life still was not reflected in children's books, and children must still think that people that look like them don't belong in books. That's when my writing journey began. I started by making up everyday stories for my son, that had elements of adventure and silliness, but also included people like him.

Today, eight books on, I write so that children can feel represented in the world they live in, and so that readers can pick up a book that is a window into the lives of fellow humans from different cultures.

## **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](https://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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