

How a job interview changed my life

A. M. Dassu

It was a clear bright day, I was 24 years old and heading to an interview at my local council. Stunned by the architecture, in awe of its grandiosity, I entered the building with a spring in my step, imagining myself working in their complaints department.

I swiftly completed both interview tasks and was proud of the sample letter I'd written. If I got the job, complainants would receive a version of my letter and feel reassured that the council was doing all it could to resolve matters. I was taken to an office and met by two women, one sterner than the other, and told that I had the highest score of all the applicants that day. I smiled warmly, feeling confident about the upcoming interview.

I had recently moved from Leicester, the most diverse city in the UK, where I completely belonged, where the colour of my skin and my faith were never an issue and my achievements thus far had been based on talent. I'd never questioned my Britishness – I was born and bred in England, I was patriotic, proud to be British, and I also wore a hijab, but that was just a personal thing for me... or so I naively thought.

The interview started off as any other would. I was asked about my experience and what I could bring to the role. As it unfolded, it was hard to gauge how I was doing. In response to the question 'what drives you?' I said, 'making a difference'. I watched the interviewer's face harden further; her response was short and harsh – I couldn't change the world through this job. Therefore, it wasn't the right one for me.

At the time, I didn't have the confidence to push back and remind the interviewers you *can* make a difference by writing supportive and positive letters to people who feel wronged. Instead, I left feeling 'othered' by the interviewer's microaggressions. I reflected on the way the woman had looked at me with disdain as I sat down smiling, thinking I was off to a good start. But it was now clear my performance in the tests was not of any value and was not the issue; the negative reaction seemed to be in response to my identity, my religion, the hijab on my head, perhaps even the colour of my skin. And I knew I hadn't got the job before I'd even shut the door on my way out.

That was the day I learned that being Muslim and brown in this new city was not going to be easy. I felt unsettled and unwelcome. I wondered if the panellists had ever met any brown Muslim women who wore hijab. I wondered how other companies might react to me. In my old city, if I didn't get a job, I knew it was because I didn't have the right skills, but here, I'd been treated with contempt after giving my all and achieving the highest test scores. It was a pivotal moment of realisation. I stepped out of that building with my head lowered, unable to make eye contact with passers-by just in case they too had a problem with my faith.

I told myself that interview was a one-off experience and I simply wouldn't apply for another council job. My next job interview, at another company,

went a little smoother. I was met by a man and a woman, both white-haired and in their sixties, and was told, as they stared at my hijab, that they'd never met anyone as articulate as me – implying it was so unexpected because I was a hijab-wearing Muslim woman. I wasn't sure whether they were aware of how their comment had come across. Did they think it was a compliment? I was confused and considered jokingly telling them everyone I know is articulate, but I left it. I needed the job, even though it was part time and not as well paid as the first. I was aware that this was just the beginning of the interview process, so it would be better to smile and move on.

Both experiences knocked my confidence, and I went from being application-happy to wary, thinking I probably wouldn't get any job I applied for anyway, because in this new place, my race and my religion were clearly an issue.

I realised that I had to be careful how I presented myself, and considered not using my full name in forthcoming applications. When I first started submitting my writing for publication, I decided to use my initials, worried that if I gave my first name, my work would be read with bias, and I would not be given the opportunity to prove myself. Growing up, I hadn't considered how my identity might impact how I progress in my career, or might even affect my decision about which career path I'd take. That first interview showed me I had to work harder to prove myself. I suspected even then that might not be enough, but the second also confirmed for me that I should do something about the way marginalised communities are viewed. I wanted to prove I could make a difference and that this wasn't a bad thing to want to do. Instead of writing letters to complainants, I decided I would write about topical issues to challenge demeaning stereotypes. I

would dedicate my life to ensuring marginalised people would have a platform and the confidence to share their voice.

I started off writing about generic topics for the *Huffington Post* and the *Times Educational Supplement*. I thought it would be enough for me to be *seen* in those spaces. It took me many years to build the confidence to write from my own lived experiences and openly challenge stereotypes, pushing back on opinions that I was seeing in the media and online. I was told I was being courageous when writing my first novel, *Boy, Everywhere* (2020), and back then I didn't understand why. But when I wrote *Fight Back* (2022), I was terrified to go out with a book that spoke boldly about the impact of racism and brazenly rejected far right ideology. Nevertheless, I'd found the job I love, my reason for being, and the hope that I could help push back on prejudice and hatred. Seeing my books open up discussion and change perceptions has been hugely satisfying, it has been the reward after the struggle of writing!

While trying to get published, I also set about working within the industry to bring change for others too. I was for many years deputy editor of a magazine for children's writers, ensuring writers and illustrators from diverse backgrounds were also given the opportunity to contribute. And I became an ambassador for a unique organisation of people who are passionate about inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in children's literature, Inclusive Minds. When the founders asked me to become a director, I jumped at the offer. This was my chance to realise my dream of creating opportunities and platforms for people with diverse lived experiences, while also improving representation in publishing. The first thing I did as director was introduce standardised fee packages to ensure ambassadors were paid for reading and consulting on books for publishers. Before this, publishers were offering acknowledgements in their books and

on rare occasions, a nominal fee for their feedback. I wanted to make sure our ambassadors (our 'experts by experience' who consult on authentic representation in children's publishing) were paid for their time and expertise, that they understood they had something meaningful to offer, and that publishers would value their contributions with payment as they should. I then set about looking for ways to platform their voices on panels and elsewhere, and to bring them different and more frequent opportunities for work.

Children's publishing has come a long way since I first started writing. While we see more books with characters of colour and diverse lived experiences on shelves, I would like to see more focus on the quality of the books published. I would like to ensure they are nuanced, representative and given proper time to be edited to the best standard possible.

While publishers have opened their arms to diverse creators, their work isn't always given an equal footing when it comes to marketing and product placement and books can easily fall into the 'niche' category because of this, or be deemed unsuccessful. For books and authors to succeed, they need support and marketing, to be given the same investment as commercial books that are propelled onto bestseller lists by the sheer scale of resources behind them. That is what I hope the industry will focus on and improve next.

My writing and my organisational work are driven by hope. Hope that somewhere, someone will read a book and feel seen or feel empathy and connection with someone who is different from them. And I hope one day I can meet my first interviewer again and tell her that she did me a favour. By not getting that job, she made me realise that there was work to be

done and that I was ready to write much more than a letter in response to a complaint.

A. M. Dassu

A. M. Dassu is the author of *Boy, Everywhere* (2020), which won The Little Rebels Children's Book Award 2021 and is an American Library Association Notable Book. Her acclaimed novel *Fight Back* (2022) was immediately a Book of the Month and Best New Novel in *The Guardian* as well as an Independent Bookshop's Book of the Month across all Indie bookshops in the UK, and also a finalist for the Jane Addams Children's Book Award.

She is a director at Inclusive Minds, an organisation passionate about inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in children's literature. As well as a Connecting Stories author with the National Literacy Trust, campaigning to inspire a love of reading and writing in children and young people, she is a patron of *The Other Side of Hope*, a magazine for refugee and immigrant contributors.

A. M. Dassu grew up in the Midlands and writes books that challenge stereotypes, that humanise and are full of empathy, hope and heart. Her latest book, *Boot It!* (2023) is a World Book Day novel.

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

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