

What drives me to write

A. M. Dassu

We've all been children and most of us have, at some point, learnt to read. However, not all of us have had the privilege of reading books or articles in which we can see ourselves positively or even accurately represented.

Growing up, I didn't really seek to find anyone like me in books or magazines; I'd never experienced it, so never expected it. Instead, I co-opted another culture that I could relate to, and felt seen if I saw anyone Black or brown on TV or in books. They were my people. I hung off every word that came out of Will Smith's mouth. I knew the words to all the soul and hip hop songs coming out of America. The soundtrack to my childhood was Bob Marley. I hadn't struggled as they had, but their struggle was mine. Alex Dimitriades, from the Australian TV Series *Heartbreak High*, fascinated me, he looked like my people and back then, when I didn't have the internet at hand to fact check, I just pretended he was South Asian. When a BBC TV sitcom, *Desmond's*, was aired each week, my mum and I would stop whatever we were doing and present ourselves in front of the screen.

Listening to the Black characters mention extended family back home – watching adults talking of another country, a better life – all of those conversations meant something to me, because I'd heard them before in my own home.

I'd been writing poems and stories for a long time but didn't dare to dream I could ever professionally publish them. It felt like something unreachable – not for people like me. There was a curtain around publishing, a mystique surrounding it. I thought it was only for the upper classes and people who were highly educated at Oxford or Cambridge. I wrote freely for myself, thinking I might somehow figure out one day how to publish my own book (this was before self-publishing became a phenomenon). Decades later, when I finally found the confidence to write for publications such as the Huffington Post and *Times Educational Supplement*, my intention was to write about universal topics, hoping that my brown face and foreign name would *show* others that people like me do indeed belong in the UK. I hoped I might make a difference by challenging the 'othering' narrative so often repeated in the news. I am a British Muslim, of mixed South Asian heritage. I bridge two cultures, not clearly fitting into one or the other. I am between them both, intertwined. And I feel privileged to be able to enjoy and understand both.

It's so important for young people to feel seen in books. School is a microcosm of society. It can be your first experience of stereotyping, of bias, of hate. Childhood is a time in your life that can really shape the choices you make. Young people want to understand the world they're in and their own place in it. And books can really help them to understand and tackle difficult themes that they will be aware

of through the news, their peers and perhaps their own experiences. Unfortunately, there are lots of kids who experience discrimination, stereotyping and microaggressions, who live with violent or controlling family members, who get called names, etc. A book can literally be life-changing if they can see themselves in it or if they realise they have something in common with those that seem different after all.

And so, I write to voice the perceptions of marginalised communities and to reflect the experiences of those who have faced or are facing discrimination, so that readers can understand the experience and impact of prejudice and bullying. People from ethnic minority communities aren't different; we have the same hopes and fears that others do. I write stories that have relatable characters, so that people who don't get the opportunity to meet us can make a connection. Most of all, I want the communities I write about to be authentically and accurately represented, and for their concerns to be voiced. Because, when you see yourself in a story it gives you a sense of belonging, a sense of place. You feel valued.

The world seems to be going backwards. In place of integration, division has been sown by extremists in politics and the media. Replaying historic racist tropes, media representation significantly influences the way certain groups are perceived by society. My writing is driven by the hope that somewhere, someone will read my work and learn that though our experiences are different we all spill the same red blood, no matter what shade our skin or our beliefs.

It is only through adequate representation and allowing people from diverse backgrounds to authentically voice their lived experiences that we can learn about and from different lives and cultures, and hopefully bring people together. This is what drives me to write, the hope that my stories will do just that, show children - alongside their families, carers and educators - that there are indeed other sides to the stories they are being told, ones in which they can see themselves portrayed, and through which they can aspire and dream, and that there is nothing to fear.

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

© A.M. Dassu