

A.M. Dassu

In conversation with Sita Brahmachari

Sita Brahmachari (SB): This is Sita Brahmachari talking to Az Dassu on a very sunny afternoon in Leicester and we are outside; you can hear the birdsong. You've been talking about migratory journeys and refugee journeys and you can hear the road and your books are very much about the busyness of life and the real world and how people interact. I think we first met through your work at *Inclusive Minds* and I am—have been fascinated to know about your publishing journey and how your activism and your writing come together, both in your storytelling with *Boy, Everywhere* and now *Fight Back* and your recent World Book Day story. And I really want us to talk about that: what is it to live that life where you have something desperately that you want to convey to children through your books, and how have you managed to do it?

A.M. Dassu (AMD): [Laughs] It's not been easy, as you know! Yeah. I think the one thing that, you know, gets our stories out there is sheer determination and I think with *Boy, Everywhere* it was that. I had this determination to see that story published, I couldn't let it rest, I couldn't

give up on it because I truly believed that it was going to change perceptions and I wanted to show a different viewpoint that I hadn't yet seen, that had been explored. But it was really challenging to navigate publishing.

SB: So many people have read that incredibly beautiful and moving book. I have to admit that I cried a lot when I read that story and also smiled and laughed too about the camaraderie of people on their journeys and the young people's courage. Could you just give people that haven't read it just a little idea of the spirit of that story?

AMD: It's a story that looks at the refugee crisis from a middle-class perspective. And what it seeks to do is connect readers in the west to war and displacement in the other part of the world and especially in the Middle East and South Asia, etc. where people are pre—you know, deemed to be unworthy, uneducated, desperate to leave their lives behind, when in reality they are sta—you know, settled, they are happy and they only leave when they're forced to leave. So it takes a middle-class child who's got everything, an iPad, a great school; he loves PlayStation, he loves football and he is suddenly just—his life is upended, he has to leave that very—within a few days of a bombing and seek safety in Europe and eventually in England and it charts their journey and the challenges that refugees face and it shows us how very difficult it is for them to make that decision, to leave home, to leave their families, to leave their entire being

behind and to start again. And ultimately it shows us that it could happen to us very easily.

SB: It's a very emotional read and you don't pull any punches. You see the characters on their journey and the dangers that the children face and he faces, really every day, on that journey here and what has been the response from child readers to—

AMD: Oh—

SB: —We have the road behind us, we're just going to continue because the road is the busyness of life, so yeah [they laugh].

AMD: It's been incredible, actually. I didn't—you see, the thing is I wrote it for everybody and I really was nervous about children reading it because it's a challenging book and as you said I went into detail and I treated the subject as I would for adults. I didn't, you know, cosy or put anything through rose-tinted glasses and they have really taken to it. They adore Sammy. They want to do something after they've read the book. It's a favourite book for so many children, which I find amazing because it's actually a book that—my first book—which doesn't have that many light moments, as I tried to put in my subsequent books, I've tried to make them lighter in places, whereas that one it was difficult for me to have really, really light moments. I tried to interject them.

SB: But Sammy was in a traumatic situation.

AMD: Exactly, yeah and for that reason I thought that children might not take to it, maybe a book that they just read in class because they have to but actually that's not the case. It's chosen by them voluntarily and they've, you know, dressed up as Sammy. They've sent pictures of the cover of him. When I do school visits the reaction is actually just incredible, it's something—they just connect to him and connect to that story in a way that I just had hoped for. [Birdsong is distinctly heard in the recording for much of the interview from here on.]

SB: Do you find that children are really searching for a way to navigate and have an understanding because they do hear, don't they, the narratives? You've talked about toxic narratives and how much the words that are used around refugee people are important but children and young adults do hear those words.

AMD: Yeah.

SB: And do you feel that they're looking for something?

AMD: I think, so far, what I've seen in publishing is that publishers and gatekeepers want books which are—provide escapism, which are light, etc., because they believe that children need that and should have an innocent childhood which is free from any worry or pressure. But in reality,

children are exposed to everything and in today's world they're exposed to it, not just via the news but you've got YouTube, you've got Snapchat, you've got WhatsApp chats, you've got your grandparents, you know: it is everywhere. You've got news around at school that they watch so they are exposed to things that are happening around the world. They've got questions. There are children also learning alongside them who've experienced these things and so I feel that we need to equip children; not, you know, mollycoddle them and protect them because they are going to go out into the world and I want them to—I want children to go out into the world fully equipped to be empathetic and understanding of other people's struggles (if they aren't struggling themselves) and if they are struggling themselves, to see themselves in that book or in a book and to get empowered and to see that character and think: *you know what? That character went through awful things but—and I am going through an awful thing, but they got through it and so will I.* So I guess it's a means of hope and empowerment and that's what I want my books to be for them.

SB: So, so far it seems that your books have been sort of a journey through struggle—

AMD: Yeah.

SB: —to sort of resilience—

AMD: Yes.

SB: —and a sense of empowerment for the young characters.

AMD: Yeah.

SB: Is that something that you feel is part of the DNA of your storytelling?

AMD: Yeah, I think so. I think when I wrote *Boy, Everywhere* I wasn't seeking to—I didn't know—I was told I had to have a brand. I didn't know how to have a brand. I didn't understand at all. But it was only through writing more stories that I realised the kind of stories that I wanted to tell and they all have this common theme. So I kind of understand now, yes, these are my stories. And I ultimately I do: I want children to leave my books feeling a sense of hope, feeling a sense of empowerment and also —It's really funny because when I wrote *Fight Back* obviously I created Aaliyah and I've experienced some of the things that Aaliyah's experienced.

SB: —Tell us a little bit about Aaliyah, for those who haven't.

AMD: So in *Fight Back* Aaliyah's, you know, a typical girl, a teenager. She —like any other—enjoys time with her friends. She loves music. She loves going to school and she sees herself—she sees nothing wrong in her life. She sees—you wouldn't ever question her belonging in this country until there's a terrorist event that happens in her city and she's at that concert

bombing and it absolutely turns her world upside down and she is then— has to face bullying. She feels isolated and she withdraws until she finds— she realises that, *actually why am I hiding from my identity? Why am I scared to say 'I'm a Muslim', to show I'm a Muslim? I'm gonna—I'm actually going to change things around. I'm gonna fight back.* And she puts on a hijab to basically represent her community and herself and to show people nothing to be afraid of. But obviously she then, you know, struggles with even more bullying and isolation. And then she finds her people and she finds people from all sorts of backgrounds.

SB: And Az, there is a kind of echo isn't there in that, in your own journey as well, talking about that moment in history with 9/11?

AMD: Yeah. 9/11 changed all of our lives globally; like, it touched everyone's lives: the way that we travel, the way that security is thought about, the way that brown people are perceived, whether you're Muslim or not. If you cover—everyone, sort of—you know—was burned by that episode in history and it changed my life. It made me want to be seen physically as a Muslim, visibly, so that I could then walk into a room and change perceptions. And, like Aaliyah, I did it for the same reason; I put on a hijab and it's not been easy. I think that's—after putting it on I've realised just how much prejudice there is out there; how stereotypes take hold; how people make assumptions and, you know, during my working life as a magistrate I—every day that I went into court I was restarting. It didn't matter if I had worked on that bench with those people. Every day I was

going in as a new person where I had to prove myself over and over again.

SB: Because you're wearing hijab?

AMD: Because of the way I look, because of, yeah, my name, my background, my colour, yeah. So I had to—and my age, because obviously I was younger than the majority of magistrates, but yeah. All of those things meant that I had to prove my worth on that bench. And I'd always leave happy because I had to—I'd do it, you know. I'd show that I had something to give but going in was always daunting.

SB: What drew you to become a magistrate?

AMD: I wanted to represent. I was Aaliyah. So basically I, yeah. Well, I was looking for something to do. I was looking for a job at the time in Manchester and I wanted to give back and somebody—I used to do school appeal panels, and somebody there said, 'you'd be great as a magistrate.' So I thought, *I'd never considered that*. I was only 26 at the time. Oh no, not 26, I was 23 or 24, very young. And I went home and I remember my husband saying to me—he laughed. He's older than me and he said, 'no one's gonna make you a magistrate!' and he laughed. 'What, what life experience have you got?' And that was it. I said, 'right I'm gonna show you!' So I showed him!

SB: They're quite feisty, your characters!

AMD: Yeah, like me! [Laughs]

SB: It's great. and it must be very empowering for the young readers to feel that force.

AMD: Yeah! I hope so—

SB: —and slightly cheeky too. They're quite, sort of, in their own way; they're going to do things in their own way; challenge, say, the educational institution sometimes in *Fight Back*?

AMD: Yeah yeah! So, yeah, Aaliyah goes against the establishment, you know, she's told she can't wear a hijab and she wears it sneakily. She does a protest and she really stands up for herself and alongside her all of her friends from different backgrounds do too. So it's really—it was a book that I wanted, I wanted it to be different because I wanted to pan out and I wanted everyone to feel they can get involved. It's not just one person's journey, one person's struggle, we all struggle together and if we do it together we're just so much more stronger and that was the overall message for that book. It's just really funny, as I was saying, that she as a character gives me strength so when I get, I get really disheartened when I go on social media and look at the comments on news, news articles, etc.

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SB: —Around, around Islamophobia and refugee crisis?

AMD: Yes, yeah, really upsetting because you—every day you're just made to feel like—I mean, we're British, born and bred. Don't know anything else. Wouldn't have another country to go to, yet you feel like you don't belong. Never felt like that in my entire existence until now.

SB: What was that? Because you grew up in Leicester feeling very much you—all—really until your late teenage years, a sense of belonging—

AMD: Yeah.

SB: —And *'this is my city'*, these are—this is, this diverse—level of diversity, in terms of religion, cultures, backgrounds, histories, friendships, loves, all of these things were together—

AMD: Yeah.

SB: —food, shopping, everything—

AMD: Yeah—

SB: And then some—you say, you feel something's changed?

AMD: Yeah. So we, you know, we grew up as one; when I went to school with everyone; all sorts of background, you know, black people, white people, Hindus, Sikhs, Jain—Jain, you know, Jainism—people who follow Jainism, Jews. Everybody was in that school. And we were just one and my mum, you know, her best friends were Sikh, Hindu. We grew up together celebrating each others' festivals, going to the same community centres, going to the same trips through the women's centre together. And then 9/11 happened and there was this shift. I went—I came back from uni, started looking for work and all of a sudden everyone's got their own community centres; you know, there's a Sikh centre, there's the Hindu centre, there's the Muslim centre. Nobody's mixing anymore; no *mithai* or sweets are being shared on Eid or Diwali, you know. It was just different. And I didn't understand why. Obviously, I then moved on to Manchester which was a different experience altogether and having come back, to obviously raise my children here, and especially in recent years there's been, politically there's a big divide in Leicester now. You know, there's discord between communities. There's a lot of hate, judgement, misunderstanding and it's quite shocking because never in my life—I don't think anybody who lived in Leicester would have ever seen this come: seen the far right or extremism take hold in Leicester which is literally—it was *the* beacon for diversity and multiculturalism in the UK. It was the place to look at. And to see that happen here is shocking. So now, you know, for the first time in my life in Leicester, in the city—so I live outside of Leicester at the moment—but when I go there, I do: I'm still wary, whereas before I'd never be wary. I'd go into Leicester: you're safe,

whereas now you can walk the streets and you'll see somebody; they may even be brown and the way they look at you, you may be—you're not sure whether—what they're thinking, which is—it's just not something that I've experienced before. That's very sad.

SB: That's very sad and but you do, there seems to be a very, very strong instinct in your stories to tell stories to young people that counter that division.

AMD: Yeah.

SB: And not only in your stories but in your work with *Inclusive Minds* and with your editorial of *The Other Side of Hope*.

AMD: Oh yes.

SB: Which is a beautiful anthology, an online anthology which highlights the voices of refugee people from around the world. So it feels like there's a sense of writing for the young people but also giving platform to new voices—

AMD: Yeah—

SB: —to come forward.

AMD: Yeah.

SB: Could you talk a bit a little bit about intergenerational—you mentioned your grandparents as well and—

AMD: Oh yeah.

SB: —and you know I'm thinking about Lord Alf Dubs—

AMD: Yes.

SB: —And how he is also part of that editorial—or that process of *The Other Side of Hope* that—putting forward this, this sort of—generations of people who have supported refugees, not just in this generation, it's not just kind of like a social-media kind of divide of those who support and those who are hostile, but it seems to me that you're trying to kind of pave a story which is making those links across generations.

AMD: Yeah. Like you, in so many ways it's—you know, I think what you have to do is seek, seek the good people and there are so many. And I think it's very easy to get disheartened by the division that you do see being pushed by the media and politicians, and not do anything and despair, but actually when you go out there and you want to help, you want to contribute, you will meet like-minded people and it gives you so much hope. You know, *The Other Side of Hope*—that magazine and that

anthology is just—it has given me so much hope. It's so inclusive globally and it connects communities across all the continents. It's incredible what's been achieved in such a short space of time. And the fact that you're giving voice, as you said, to people that would ordinarily be rejected because of who they are, where they live, you know, whether they have the means. Because there are barriers to publishing, as we know, and this absolutely supersedes all those barriers and just gives that chance. To the point where, you know in terms of payment, where you can't pay a refugee, the founder, Alex, gave vouchers, food vouchers to refugees so they could spend that money on something, because they weren't allowed payment. So it's a way of lifting, building, you know, helping people even earn, or contribute to their own lives through their words. It's a really great thing to be a part of. I'm really proud to be part of and I'm so glad you're part of it [laughs].

SB: It's a fantastic, fantastic, ethical, well-thought-out collaboration and anthology and it feels like the ethics of what you do are really at the heart of your work. I think we first met through *Inclusive Minds* when a young person that I had been working with became an ambassador.

AMD: Ah!

SB: And she was a young South Asian girl with cerebral palsy and she had advised me on one of the characters in one of my books, *Tender Earth*.

AMD: Oh!

SB: And she then became an ambassador, which meant that she could help advise other people on their manuscripts in terms of representation.

AMD: Yes, yes.

SB: And I just loved the fact that there was a structure that was—that you had built, which meant that that young person wasn't just being gone to for their advice and then 'goodbye', but they were then being brought into a sense that they were readers; they were possible writers; that their vision of the world was really important too.

AMD: Yeah.

SB: So can you tell us a little bit more about that? Because it turns out that in publishing the idea of people commenting on other people's work turns into quite a controversial thing at a certain point!

AMD: Extremely controversial! [laughter] And the thing is, I think what people seem to not understand is that having somebody read your work and give you feedback on it is not telling you what to do. And we don't call them sensitivity readers. They're called authenticity readers. They're our Ambassadors because you're supposed to connect with them from the outside of your—outset of your project. You're supposed to work in

collaboration with them, seek their knowledge, if you want—you wish to, or maybe just have them read your work and let you know what they think. But again, we remind people that it's one voice. They are not representative of their communities. They are giving their opinion and it's always better. I guess through my writing I—as you know I will have multiple people read my work because I want to get the opinions of multiple people to inform my book and there's nothing wrong with that and just as people have editors. You know, you'll have an editor, you'll have—then have a copy editor and then you'll have a proofreader. That's three levels of three different editors that will look at your work and you will take on that—take on their feedback. You will answer their questions and you'll adapt or enhance your sentences in paragraphs accordingly. And that's exactly what you do with an authenticity reader; you know, they'll read your work and they'll say, 'well, not sure why these children have just run into the house with their shoes on if they're Hindu or if they're Muslim because culturally they would take off their shoes'. And then you can leave it because—if that's not your experience, or you can adapt it. Because again, it's up to you. Whereas I would probably ask three people and then make a decision. That's what it is, it's feedback, it's guidance if you want it. And I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting to make something authentic and accurate. You're enhancing your work. You're improving it and I think it's a responsibility. I don't understand why authors shy away from this responsibility to represent people accurately.

SB: If you are a person whose stories are little represented in children's literature—

AMD: Exactly.

SB: —And then you have a representation and when you're writing into that you're very aware, aren't you, of the—of what it might feel like to be that reader.

AMD: Exactly.

SB: Especially if that reader is within their cohort of classmates, or whatever, may be experiencing some level of difficulty—

AMD: Exactly, exactly. And I—you know, about the shoe thing, I remember watching a movie, it was—I can't remember what it was called. It was a—it was a movie about East Asians and I remember there was—the scene that I'm referencing is—it was a party scene. The doors were wide open. People were in the garden. People were in the house and these two children were chasing each other around the garden and then they ran through the house and they stopped, took off their shoes and then ran in the house, picked them up and then put their shoes on and went back around the garden. And that is the only scene I remember from that whole movie—

SB: Because it felt true to you.

AMD: Yes, exactly. Yeah, it is so insignificant. It has got nothing to do with the movie. The children aren't even in the movie, they were just extras but that is the only scene that that connected with me that I remember and that's what I want writers to take away: that if you focus on the details and you give respect to your readers and you're representing the ones that you're representing, you'll win them and why wouldn't you want that?
[Laughs.]

SB: And I'm just—in terms of the rhythm of that scene, so beautiful to have that as their internal—

AMD: Yeah!

SB: —knowledge of respecting the home. It says so much without saying exactly any words at all.

AMD: Exactly.

SB: Ah how fantastic! So I wanted to ask you about—you, you've had a really—it's been a full-on journey of publishing the last few years and you do a lot of visits out to schools and you meet your audience a lot. How do you, how do you manage that balance between—I'm asking as much for me as I am for you [laughter]. How do you manage that balance between

going out and talking about your work and then the immersive work of sitting at the desk and creating?

AMD: I find it very difficult, I have to be honest. Because I think when you're speaking, you're using a different part of your brain and for me especially, when I write I need to switch off from everything. I need to focus, and if I've done an event that morning, it's very, very difficult for me to then switch off that event and basically come out of that event and start writing. I can't do that. I then need to sort of—it takes me a while to get back into my work. so I prefer block out days when I just write, so I'm immersed in whatever chapters I'm writing. But that's not practical all the time, as you know, to earn money. You have to just—you have to take what you can [laughs]. So I—it's—with recent years it's getting more and more difficult. You know, when I wrote, well, *Everywhere* and *Fight Back*, you know, they were written pre-publication. The drafts had already had many editorial stages and so it was easier, but now all the books that I've written since I've found it quite difficult to juggle.

SB: You've had a World Book Day story too.

AMD: I have, yeah.

SB: And that's that's a lot of—that's quite quick that turnaround with the World Book Day story, isn't it?

AMD: Yes, yeah.

SB: And then you have to go out on the road and promote it as well because it's all about promoting books for—getting young readers, isn't it? A great honour.

AMD: Yeah that was—that was a huge one, yeah, exactly, because there was no way that books like mine would reach that many readers and in total it was 186,000.

SB: I know!

AMD: Exactly! I mean, when would we ever see 186,000 copies sold, right? But yeah, basically that's how many copies were so—well, 10,000 were donated, 176,000 were bought.

SB: So those people get to know your name as a writer and then they go to your other books and they find your other books.

AMD: So yeah, at the back of *Boot it*—*Boot it* follows on from *Boy, Everywhere* and so at the back of that you've got the first chapter of *Boy, Everywhere*, should they want to read it and then there was a little advert in the back for my forthcoming novel, *Kicked Out*. So they've got the whole series, essentially. But yeah, that was a reeeeeeally exciting project. When I was asked to do it I was like—you know, because when I saw the panel

itself that chooses—and the way that you're congratulated when people found out; other publishers that found out were emailing me to say 'Congratulations, you won!' because they all know how hard it is to get chosen. And I know you had one! [Laughs]

SB: Yeah I did. It was very sad, it was in lockdown but it was amazing to get chosen—

AMD: Exactly.

SB: You just think about all of these children that are reading your work.

AMD: Exactly and it's such—and I've got your World Book Day book. My kids, my kids read your book! [Laughs]

SB: Thank you!

AMD: But yeah, so—

SB: Because it's a free—it's a free book. Oh one pound!

AMD: No, it's one pound. but yeah with the token it's free.

SB: Yeah, with the token it's free but schools buy it, don't they? So like, my—the book *Boot It* has been bought as a transition novel, so even now,

just the other day somebody tweeted about 50 copies and said that they were going to give it to their Year 6s as a transition novel so they bought it ahead. Others read it during loc—you know, World Book Day. But it was great to connect with communities that ordinarily—you know, I went to Peterborough Football Club and I met kids that usually wouldn't be able to buy books and they got to meet me as an author and it was something that was celebratory for them and a real event and exciting. And it's really great to be part of something like that, that gives children an insight into books because, I don't know about you, but I grew up around books and I went to the library all the time but I didn't think that it was something that I could do.

SB: Yeah.

AMD: Exactly, because you don't; you don't, do you? You'll know that people create books but you're not those people, until you do some research. So it's nice for children to meet us and learn at an early age that they can do this, should they wish to and anybody can do this, should they wish to. But yeah, that was a great experience and it was just such an honour to have people from, you know, not just publishing industry but booksellers, supermarkets, all those people on that panel that choose those authors. It was really, really, yeah, big honour! [Laughs.]

SB: That story has influenced *Kicked Out* which is to be published in October 2023.

AMD: Yeah, yeah.

SB: So I haven't read that yet. Can you give us a little teaser about what that's about?

AMD: It's very different to the other books. It's got the same cast of characters from *Boy, Everywhere* and *Boot It*, but it's told from Ali's perspective. I don't know if you remember Ali from *Boy, Everywhere*?

SB: I do, yeah, unforgettable!

AMD: Yeah, so he—it's twofold. It's got two plots but basically Ali's dad, he abandoned his family when he was young, at five and remarried, and his dad has come back to the area and his half brothers joined his school and it explores that feeling of rejection, questioning your self-worth when you aren't loved by the person that you so wish to be loved by, when you seek that validation. And it's about him navigating that personally, but at the same time the boys are at Mark's house, whose mum, you know, he's he's a boy that's gone through poverty, eaten cold beans out of a tin and his mum's now won the lottery and she's in a house in Hale Barns, next to a celebrity footballer. She's living the life. And they are all swimming in his pool, living their best lives. And they're kicked out when Mark's mum's new boyfriend accuses them of stealing money and Adam, who is the unaccompanied young person from *Boy, Everywhere*, he is working

illegally in their garden doing their gardening and he is accused of stealing that money, but they're all kicked out. And so it's about them sort of seeking justice for him and proving he didn't steal it but also at the same time he's about to be deported, so they are raising money to pay for his legal fees so that he can stay and he doesn't get sent back to Syria and the boys basically—it's got the element of activism again and they organise a charity football match. I wanted to use football again as a means for good, as a means of community. So yeah, it's twofold. It's basically—they come together to help Adam not get deported. So you do get an insight and it shines a spotlight on the life of an unaccompanied young person and also personally how it feels to question yourself because of a parent that isn't there for you. And I wanted to explore that because, certainly in Muslim characters but certainly even in South Asian characters, what we generally—in publishing you'll see a lot of books about bereavement, grief or divorce, but you don't get stories about single parents and parents that abandon their children; certainly not in South Asian families. What a taboo! And it happens! Happened to me; so I wanted to explore that for children; to just—again, those who want to, who will be—feel seen because there are countless boys and girls growing up without a father figure and then also for those that have their families, to see how that might feel to not have your father in your life.

SB: So you're wanting to, within those communities, to open up wider representations within those communities, as well as without, as well.

AMD: Yeah.

SB: I have to say I had that experience with *When Secrets Set Sail* because Imtiaz is orphaned and in the backstory it says, it says it's probably two very young Bangladeshi parents—

AMD: Mmm.

SB: —that they trace her heritage to—

AMD: Mmm.

SB: —and it's very fascinating because nobody really asks me about that, apart from Bangladeshi children will often ask me about that—

AMD: Yeah! Yes, yes [crosstalk].

SB: —and they notice it, so it's a, it's a kind of small thread in the book but it's placed there and they do notice—

AMD: Yes!

SB: —and they want to know—

AMD: Yes!

SB: —they want to know that story.

AMD: Yes!

SB: So stories get stories don't they?

AMD: They do.

SB: And it feels like you're pulling the thread through from some of these characters, so that it's wonderful because you're getting to see them in their journey as refugees coming to this country and first established themselves and then you're seeing them later on, in the kind of infrastructure of the society—

AMD: Yeah.

SB: —And the equalities and the inequalities—

AMD: Yes.

SB: So that's, you know, put together—if people put your work together they *can* see a whole cohesive thread, really, of a vision of what you're trying to pull out for young readers.

AMD: Yeah.

SB: As an author who has published several books, what would you say to a young author coming up about entering this field of publishing? What would they have to get themselves ready for?

AMD: The one thing that we all have to be ready for is rejection. It doesn't matter whether you're, you know, multi-published, etc. Your ideas will always be rejected; they'll always be told, 'no do this again' or, 'this isn't right' and I think you have to have that resilience. I think it really is an industry not for the faint-hearted. You've got to have a bit of grit to keep going and also I think you have to be determined when someone questions you or when they question your work; just be able to have that confidence to stand up and say, 'no, this story needs to be told and this is why.' And I think I've done that every time I've been questioned and I've—I think I have a firm belief that there is a place for all of my stories and I'll hold on to them. I'm not going to bin any. I am really tight. If I've written something I'm going to sell it [laughs] one day so even with *Boy, Everywhere*, you know, I wrote it five years before it was published but I held on to it because I was like, 'no it will be published, whether I—if I have to do it myself, I will do it but I'm going to see this story through. And I think that is something that a young person has to have that—don't get disheartened. When you get feedback, don't, you know, don't feel that they are criticising you as a person. What they're telling you on your work is that you haven't reached your potential *yet* and that's something I've

always held onto. Whenever I had feedback, and you know this when you get feedback initially, when you get that editor's letter you're like, *oh god, how am I gonna do this? This is so hard! And it—this is awful!* But then you go back and you think, *well if I do the work I know I can make this shine, I've just got to do the work.* And I guess that's what it is, it's like understanding that it's not rejection, or it's not feedback that's saying that you're not worthy or 'this will not happen', it's about going back and working on it to make it shine enough, every time, over and over, every story, whether it's been bought or not, that is what you're gonna have to do.

SB: And what, what is the thing, to go back—it feels like we've come full circle in the conversation [AMD laughs]—What is the thing that gives you the grit to carry on when you think, *no this is just too uphill?* What is, what is it that's at the core that is making you carry on to get that book published?

AMD: I know that there's a child out there that when they read that book they're going to feel seen and they're going to get hope from that book and they're going to think, *oh my god that's me and if she, that character, did it, I can too.* I think that, for me, is the key. And then also that hope, that for me is a fact: I know that there are children out there, but then for me the other bit, the other side is that hope that the other children that read it will one day encounter someone else who's going through that and maybe think, *ah okay maybe I shouldn't say that or maybe they are feeling you*

know a certain way about this. Maybe I should try and understand and I guess, yeah, it's empathy isn't it? Building that empathetic world that we so need.

SB: Well Az, it has been amazing to talk to you.

AMD: Been amazing to talk to you!

SB: We've had, we've had a little bird that's come and sat on our table.

AMD: Sita attracts the birds! [Laughter]

SB: There's lots of—there's been lots of traffic, which there always is in life but we've had a constant birdsong and sunshine in our conversation and I wish you all the best in your amazing publishing career because your voice is a really important voice for us in this world today.

AMD: Thank you and I'm so glad that *you* paved the way before me. Thank you.

A.M. Dassu was in conversation with Sita Brahmachari

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

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