

My journey as a writer

SF Said

Whenever I visit schools as an author, there's one question that I'm always asked. 'What's your real name?' they want to know. They think SF Said must be a pseudonym.

But SF Said is my real name. The initials stand for Sabah and Falah. These are Arabic Muslim names, because my family is originally from the Muslim world. My ancestors were Iraqi, Egyptian, Kurdish, Circassian; I also have family who were born and lived in Bosnia, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. My name is very ordinary if you speak Arabic, but very unpronounceable if you don't. That's why I've ended up using initials as an adult, because no-one could ever say my name right when I was growing up.

I came to Britain with my mum when I was two years old. I can't remember living anywhere else. I don't look obviously Middle Eastern, so I never had to deal with sight-racism on the street, but as soon as my name came up, everything changed. 'What kind of name is that?' people would say. 'Where are you from? No, where are you *really* from? And... why don't you go back there?'

Back then, in the 1970s, Britain was just beginning to change, but even where I was, in London, there weren't a lot of other Muslim kids around.

Negotiations around identity, difference and belonging were daily facts of my life. In Britain, I was seen as a foreigner, while on holiday in the Middle East, I was seen as British. My feeling was largely one of exclusion: a sense that I belonged nowhere.

Well, that's not quite true. There was one place where I felt at home and included, and that was in books. I was lucky to grow up in a family in which everyone loved books.

My very first memory is a memory of a book. I remember my uncle reading me *The Cat in the Hat* (1957) when I was three years old. I thought it was brilliant! I wished the cat would visit me; I wanted him to come to my house and smash everything up! From that moment, I think I knew I would always love books and stories, because anything you could imagine was allowed.

So books were a massive part of my childhood. They were always there for me. Whatever else was going on in my life, books gave me access to other worlds – fantastic worlds of unlimited imagination – but also glimpses into other people's experiences of the real world. And books showed me that it might be all right to be different; that difference might even be something to celebrate.

My favourite book as a child was *Watership Down* (1972) by Richard Adams, an epic story about rabbits trying to survive in the wild. This was the book that began my journey from being a reader to becoming a writer. Because as I read it, I remember thinking that one day, I wanted to try and write a story that was even half as good as this. That moment – the first moment I can remember in which I imagined myself as a writer – has defined everything else that's followed.

One of the things I loved most about *Watership Down* was the fact that the rabbits' legendary ancestor, the hero of all their myths, was called El-Ahrirah. The greatest rabbit who ever lived had an Arabic-sounding name? I can't tell you how deep a chord this struck for me. The sense that my background might not be a burden, but was taken seriously in a book I loved: it was incredible. That was perhaps when I first began to see Arab and Islamic history, culture and civilisation were things I could be proud of.

Around the age of eleven, I decided I no longer wanted to read children's books. I didn't see myself as a child any more, and wanted to get on with being a grown-up and reading grown-up books. That was a shame, because it meant I missed out on some of the very greatest children's literature, which I was just about ready to read.

I missed out on Susan Cooper, and Alan Garner, and Ursula Le Guin, who would've been among my favourite authors. Because that's what they turned out to be when I read their work at university, where my friends and I rediscovered children's books, even if they weren't strictly relevant to our studies. (I studied Law, but spent most of my time reading children's books!) We learned that children's literature was far richer, deeper and more rewarding than any grown-up books we could find. Because it turns out that children's literature is literature written for an audience that includes children, but excludes no-one. Children's books are really books for everyone.

When I re-read *Watership Down*, I thought it was even better than I had thought as a child. Back then, I'd seen a thrilling adventure story about rabbits. Now I saw it as a story about us, and about the big questions of human life. It was still thrilling – but now I saw it was full of thrilling politics,

philosophy, mythology, ecology. It dealt with the most profound themes imaginable. But did it in a totally accessible and page-turning way.

And when I read Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* books, I found an astonishing inversion of every fantasy story I'd ever read. The great wizards, the good guys, the point-of-view characters – they were all people of colour. Their skins were brown, or copper-red, or black. This was something I'd never seen before: a brilliant shift of perspective after which everything looked different. Years later, Malorie Blackman would do the same for another generation with her *Noughts & Crosses* books. I only wish they had existed when I was a child.

Books like these showed me that children's literature could be great literature, using fantastic stories to communicate deeply resonant thoughts about the real world. And as I realised that children's books had given me a way to think about myself and my place in the world as a child – I decided to put everything I had into trying to write them myself.

I never thought it would be easy. But I was, perhaps, unprepared for just how hard the journey would be. My first attempt was rejected by every publisher I sent it to – 40 of them, in fact. The same thing happened with my second attempt. I was up to 80 rejections in total now, and I will admit there were times I wanted to give up. But this was my dream, the only thing I'd ever really wanted to do. So I kept going, working every day, trying to develop the discipline and stamina as well as the skills to write books. My third attempt at a children's book was rejected by another ten publishers, bringing my lifetime total of rejections to a truly horrifying 90 – but then, unbelievably, the ninety-first publisher said yes, to *Varjak Paw*.

With this book, I wanted to write a thrilling, page-turning adventure story about a cat learning to be a great warrior, full of all the fights and action I loved in movies and comics, but rarely found in books. But at the same time, I wanted it to be a story that dealt with the big questions of identity, difference and belonging that have run through my life and can be found in many of my favourite books.

In *Varjak Paw*, you can see these questions played out between the cats and dogs. To most cats, dogs are huge, noisy, stinking monsters. Every cat knows you cannot talk to them! But Varjak thinks differently; he is able to go beyond prejudice. He makes friends with a dog, and learns that a dog can actually be the best, bravest and most loyal friend a cat could ever have.

In *Phoenix*, I did the same thing with humans and aliens. The story is set in a galaxy where the humans and aliens are at war. The humans have even built a great spacewall to keep the aliens out. The main characters are a human boy on the run and an alien girl who is a refugee from the war. As they get to know each other, they discover that they have much more in common than either of them knew – and together, maybe, they can even save the galaxy.

With my latest book *Tyger*, I wanted to go even deeper into these questions. So *Tyger* is set in London, in the present day, but in a strange alternate world where history has gone very differently. In this world, the British Empire has never ended, slavery has never been abolished, and huge numbers of animals have been hunted to extinction. Yet it's in this world that a boy called Adam and a girl called Zadie find an incredible, impossible tyger.

Like me, Adam and Zadie both happen to be Muslims; it was important to me to write a book that had Muslim main characters. But there are also Christian characters, Jewish characters, and characters of no faith at all in *Tyger*. I've tried to fill the book with characters of all sorts of backgrounds and identities, hoping that this will create space for all readers to imagine themselves in the story – to see themselves reflected, or to enter other points of view.

In many ways, Adam is a lot like me. He's a Muslim whose family came originally from the Middle East, although he's always lived in London and thinks of himself as a Londoner. Many of the things that people say to him as he walks around London are things that people have said to me. Even today, I can't tell you how many times I still get asked, 'No, where are you *really* from?'

On the other hand, Adam lives in a world where children like him aren't allowed to have dreams or ambitions. He wants to be an artist, but he isn't even allowed to go to school. He just has to work incredibly hard every day, doing deliveries for his family's shop, to help them to survive.

That's nothing like my own experience. I've been incredibly lucky to be able to write and publish books, although it has taken a huge amount of dedication and perseverance on my part. Even now, when I have a new book published, I'm already hard at work on the next one. I never really stop working. But in my case, it's a choice, a commitment that I've made freely, and a dream that I am living.

My highest hope is that my books might help readers of all backgrounds to think about the world, their experiences of it, and other people's experiences, as books like *Watership Down* have helped me. And I hope all

readers will come away feeling that they too could be artists or writers, or whatever they might dream of being. I really do believe that whoever you are, there is no limit to what you can dream, and what you can do. And we all have stories to tell!

SF Said

SF Said is a British Muslim author of Middle Eastern origin. He was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1967, and came to live in Britain when he was two years old. His first book, *Varjak Paw*, won the Nestlé Smarties Prize for Children's Literature, and was listed by BookTrust as one of the 100 best children's books of the past 100 years. The sequel, *The Outlaw Varjak Paw*, won the BBC Blue Peter Book of the Year. *Phoenix* was selected to represent the UK on the IBBY International Honour Book list, and was shortlisted for the Guardian Children's Fiction Award. His most recent book *Tyger* won the Foyles Children's Book of the Year award. Like his other books, it is illustrated by Dave McKean, and is currently being read in classrooms around the UK and elsewhere. SF Said has also written about children's literature for both the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*, and is a passionate campaigner for literacy, libraries and reading for pleasure. More information can be found on his website <http://www.sfsaid.com> and Twitter @whatSFSaid.

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

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