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Q & A with Aisha Saeed

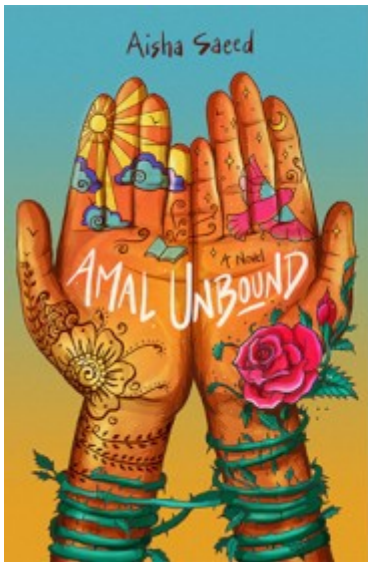
By Patricia J. Murphy | Mar 22, 2021

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Aisha Saeed is the Pakistani American author of the YA novel [Written in the Stars](#), the middle grade novel [Amal Unbound](#), and the picture book [Bilal Cooks Daal](#), among other books. She is also a former second grade teacher,

education attorney, and a founding member of the nonprofit [We Need Diverse Books](#). Recently, she tapped into [Wonder Woman](#) lore to create her [Wonder Woman Adventures](#) trilogy, including [Diana and the Island of No Return](#) and her latest, [Diana and the Underworld Odyssey](#); book three is on the way. PW spoke with Saeed about how her early experiences and teaching background have allowed her to discover her own powers to tell her stories, to create diverse characters, and to take down stereotypes.

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Can you tell us about your teaching background and how it has inspired and influenced your writing?

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I received my bachelor's and master's degrees in elementary education at the University of Florida, and went on to teach second grade in Michigan, Florida, and Georgia. Second grade is what I mostly taught; it's my favorite year! I also have specialties in special education and ELL. I especially love working with elementary students because they're so curious about learning, and school is their whole world. They are also still getting the fundamentals of reading and writing down. So it was a magical place to see them developing and blooming as readers and writers. I primarily taught at at-risk schools. I specifically chose schools where I could contribute the most personally.

Being a teacher is part of who I am, and it hasn't gone away. I often channel my former students and my children as I write. I think about what interests and matters to them, and keep these things in mind as I write. For example, I have a new book about bullying called *The Together Tree* (Simon & Schuster) illustrated by LeUyen Pham coming out in 2023. The students that I taught, and the moments I experienced as a student in the classroom, inspired the story. Being a teacher and interacting with students every day gave me, and still gives me, a different lens when I write and when I visit schools.

When did you actually start writing?

I've always loved writing and thought I might write a book one day. Writing has always been an escape for me—and part of who I am. For a time, as I began college, I stopped writing when I looked at the kind of stories that were on bookstore bookshelves. I never saw any Brown, Asian, or Muslim stories for kids there, and I started thinking there was no space or interest in my stories.

And, then when I began writing again, I found it difficult to start writing without having publication in mind. I started comparing my first drafts to other published works, became so overwhelmed, and thought that publishing a book was so inaccessible that I almost gave up.

I was in my last year of college when I was also working at Borders Bookstore that I found the book *The Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri, a South Asian author, and it was selling well. It was then that I thought, maybe, there was a market for my stories. My co-workers also encouraged me, [saying] that just because I don't see my stories there, that maybe I could be the one to add them to the shelves.

In addition to teaching, you also practiced law, and became a mother. How have you balanced your legal work, writing dream, and motherhood?

After I graduated with my master's, and taught for 4 1/2 years, I went to law school. I became an attorney so I could help kids with chronic illnesses and disabilities in the education system. While teaching, I saw so many gaps in services, especially in low-income schools, that I wanted to do something to help. I didn't practice very long, only 2 years, but, I liked it, and I'm proud of the work that I did helping the kids that I did.

Then, when I realized I was pregnant with my son, I realized I couldn't be a mom, a lawyer, and a writer, and do them all well. So, I decided to leave the law, and to parent and write full-time. I thought that I would give myself a year or two of balancing parenting and writing to follow my dream of becoming a published writer. Luckily, it happened!

So when did you start writing and publishing your books for kids?

I had started writing my first YA novel, *Written in the Stars*, while I was teaching and through law school. I finished it while my first son was napping, and at nighttime. When I began submitting *Written in the Stars* to agents, I started *Amal Unbound*.

While I was able to find an agent who loved *Written in the Stars* quickly, it wasn't published right away. My greatest fears, the ones I had when I looked at the bookshelves in college, had come true! Publishers would say to us that they already had an "Indian book," but I'm not Indian, or that my book would not be commercially successful. It was very

disappointing to hear that there was no place for my book or room for a South Asian author because “they already had one.” It had nothing to do with my voice or the book.

However, after two rounds of submitting to publishers, *Written in the Stars* found a home with Nancy Paulsen Books at Penguin. The publisher had published a number of South Asian stories, and was looking for quality—not a quota.

Can you tell us how *Amal Unbound* came to be?

It came from my desire to set a story in Pakistan, in my family’s fictitious ancestral village. I felt there were not a whole lot of books set in Pakistan, and I wanted to set one there. Also, at school visits I’d hear kids share that before they read *Written in the Stars* they thought that Pakistan was a place with only sand and terrorists. This contrasted so much with the Pakistan that I knew growing up. So, I thought that I would write a story for kids who might never get to visit Pakistan, but could with my book.

On top of the setting, I also wanted to write about a girl. I had read about Malala Yousafzai, and how the world was rallying behind her. And I started thinking about all of the other kids who never get their names in headlines who also matter. I thought about my own students that I worked with—so many refugee children—and the stories they had about losing parents in land mines. I wanted to capture the bravery of all of these children in a story. This bravery is at the heart of *Amal Unbound*.

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Being a teacher and interacting with students every day gave me, and still gives me, a different lens when I write.

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part of it.

With your background as a Pakistani American Muslim, can you share why representation and inclusivity are important to you and your books?

Growing up I never saw it, or knew to want it. Shortly before I read *The Interpreter of Maladies*, I had discovered *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* by Suzanne Fisher Staples and saw for the first time anyone like me—a South Asian—on a cover of a book. I was in college at that time. And the power of seeing someone who looked like me, it stayed with me. It’s hard to put into words. There’s a power in being seen, and for others to see you as you really are—beyond the stereotypes. Because that’s all I got when growing up—“unnamed terrorist #1 or #2” or “the man who owns the convenience store.”

These negative stereotypes contributed to the bullying and the things I experienced. Because of the certain stereotypes created by the media, it is important for me to have authentic representation in books. This helps shape how you relate to the world around you—both by being seen and seeing others.

Can you talk about the importance of inclusivity and representation in the greater landscape of children’s literature?

What has the response to the book meant to you?

I have been completely taken back by all of it. This is especially true when I was visiting schools for *Written in the Stars*. Someone at a signing had heard about my writing *Amal Unbound* and said to me that books set in other countries don’t sell because kids are only interested in reading about kids that they could relate to, in their own countries. So, as I continued writing it, I kept hearing this person’s words in my head. But I also kept writing it because the story mattered to me. But then Nancy Paulsen Books and the PRH marketing team connected with the story; and, then the book was chosen as a Global Read Aloud, and that gave it a huge boost.

With the GRA, teachers around the world opt in, pick one of the chosen read-aloud books, collaborate on curriculum surrounding the stories, read certain chapters together, have Skype visits, send postcards, etc. As a result of this, I did a lot of school visits and compiled many of the resources that teachers pulled together on my website to offer another avenue to find these resources. It was an honor to be

They remain as important as ever. But I think it can feel misleading for authors, educators, and certain publishing people because you are in this particular bubble of being aware of more diverse books coming out, and seeing that there is more diversity. I'm not sure it always translates to libraries and classrooms.

It's wonderful that there are so many diverse books coming out, but I want to see a greater awareness of those books, and to see more of them implemented into the curriculum. I have seen it happening with the Global Read Aloud, and Project Lit bringing greater awareness of diverse books into more classrooms and libraries. And there are many conscientious teachers and educators that are doing the work. But, from first-hand knowledge, I don't think it is as mainstreamed as people think it is.

Can you tell us about your Wonder Woman Adventures trilogy in the works? How did you find yourself creating these stories?

Editor Chelsea Eberly at Random House approached me to write the WW Adventures trilogy. It was interesting to me because it's not typical of what I write. But I was excited about it because it's playing in such a big cultural space—*Wonder Woman* is everywhere! And I could bring myself, a Muslim South Asian, to the page and write WW's origin story—the story before she knew who she was.

While I explained to [Chelsea] that I don't usually write these kinds of stories, she said that she chose me because I write about friendship, girls, and girls having agency, and she wanted me to bring those things to the stories. That really hooked me, along with the fact they gave me so much freedom to write any kind of stories and to include characters I wanted to write in this universe. So Princess Diana's best friend in the series is Sakina, whose people are the scholars: the Keepers of the Libraries. And, while she's not explicitly named, she is coded as a South Asian girl. It was nice to include within this American story other Americans who historically haven't been depicted in this Universe. I feel incredibly grateful to play in this pond.

What are your greatest hopes for your growing list of books?

I want kids to read and to fall in love with them. I also hope that when they do that, they feel that they've read good stories that are fun, engaging, that have moved them, and that they have learned about a different culture or faith. But kids know when they're being taught something, so my goal is to tell good stories the best way that I can where readers can be seen, learn about other people, and see the shared thread of humanity that binds us altogether.

What you working on now?

I'm writing a companion book to *Amal Unbound* called *Omar Rising*. It's about Amal's best friend, Omar, as he heads off to boarding school. I'm also finishing my third book in the Wonder Woman Adventures. It'll be out in May 2022.

Do you have any advice for fellow teachers/librarians who might like to use the power of the pen like you?

Because teaching is all-consuming, there are often no boundaries. Teachers need to give themselves permission to carve out time just for themselves... to write. Even if it's just a few minutes a day or a few hours on a Sunday, they have to do this. I'm speaking from experience. I was writing my debut *Written in the Stars* while I was teaching second grade. But you won't find the time: you have to take it. So, take it!

Add a comment...



Judy Carey Nevin

I'm disappointed in you, PW, for asking the sexist, "How have you balanced work, writing dream, and motherhood?" question. Do you ask the male author interview about how they balance their work and fatherhood? Please try hard to acknowledge successful women for their successes without adding the implication it's hard for us to "do it all" when men are given a pass and can just be successful. We can do better.

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