

Mouth WHERE MY Mouth IS

BY SOPHIA AHMED

"AS A CHILD AND TEENAGER I WAS A BOOKWORM WHO WENT THROUGH AN AVERAGE OF TWO BOOKS A WEEK. MY LOCAL LIBRARY WAS A SOURCE FOR PLEASURE AND FILLED THE GAP WHICH COULD NEVER BE FILLED BY THE BUDGET OF MY WORKING CLASS PARENTS FOR NEW READING MATERIAL. THE LIBRARY BOOKS ACTED AS THE WINDOW TO ANOTHER WORLD – A WORLD WHERE FEMALE CHARACTERS WERE CONFIDENT, EMPOWERED AND GO-GETTING."

The above is what I decided to do when frustrated by the rejection of literary agents, I decided to set up my own publishing company. The confidence to publish my own novel was borne out of the feedback given to me by the gatekeepers of the publishing world. I was told I could write, that my material was readable but that my target market was: 1. too niche 2. untried and untested 3. hard to market

I agreed entirely with these points. This was precisely why I was writing this material. Yes my material was niche. The teenage fiction market has no books with central Muslim characters and I wanted to write about British Muslim characters with all their complex make up intact but who were proud to be British and proud to be Muslim, equally.

Of course I argued, this was untested area but it would work if they would just take a leap forward. But such reasoning does not get you anywhere against the formula of risks and profits and after a while the rejection letters can either sink you or motivate you to try another plan. I decided it was time for another plan to make my childhood dream of being a novelist come true.

I have always believed novels are reflections of society and what we read helps us form a lot of our views. As a child and teenager I was a bookworm who went through an average of two books a week. My local library was a source for pleasure and filled the gap which could never be filled by the budget of my working class parents for new reading material. The library books acted as the window to another world – a world where female characters were confident, empowered and go-getting. This exposure played a big part in my determination to get a career and move my family out of the council estate I grew up on. I wanted my heroine to be an empowered go-getter.

The book I published was 'Zahra's First Term at the Khadija Academy'. The story is of Zahra Khan, a Muslim girl, who is sent to an Islamic boarding school, the Khadija Academy, by her parents. Zahra is not happy, is desperate to go home and will do whatever it takes to get her way. But as events unravel and a mystery develops, Zahra is prompted to forget her plans and focus on everything around her.

The novel has a British Muslim setting and is a light read about the adventures of a schoolgirl for the 8 to 14 age group. The main characters are proud to be British and Muslim and the novel also includes the message of the importance of Muslim female independence and empowerment through the value of education.

Once published I knew I would have to work really hard to market the book. This was the biggest challenge. I decided that a tour of schools with book clubs would be the best way forward. And it was. Unsure what kind of reaction I would get I began to contact schools in London and I was very pleasantly surprised at the positive response I received from librarians. I found sitting around a group of pupils discussing my book and answering their questions a highly enjoyable experience. At one school a girl who had already read the book said she couldn't wait for the second book about Zahra. I spent the spring and summer months of 2007 at Islamic bazaars and melas all over the country and through hired stalls, I shifted copies. The best part of being miles away from home in the wet summer of last year was the encouraging feedback I received from parents and young girls who recognize that there is a gap in the market. A gap that, hopefully, great initiatives like the Muslim Writers Awards will bridge.