

# B is for Books ... and Beards

Zanib Mian of Sweet Apple Publishers recounts to Azra Momin her page-turning life in the world of indie publishing.

## Love.

In the end, that's what it's all about. Zanib Mian left her career as a science teacher to return to her first love - the written word - and since then, she has been publishing books meant to make the world happy. "I'm a mother of two boys, and I founded Sweet Apple Publishers with my savings from teaching science in a secondary school. I loved teaching, and I love talking about science, but I felt so passionate about books," Zanib says. And so, in 2011, Sweet Apple Publishers was born. Since then, this one-woman operation has churned out five books for children, with one coming out this June, and another one slated to become available in September, insha Allah.

To find inspiration in what you love, what you are passionate about, and to make that your career path, isn't that a road that leads straight to happiness? And yet how many of us stumble from one near-epiphany to another in desperate search for this one emotion that overrides all others? Few, like Zanib, discover the inspiration they need right at home, and in their own heart.

"My boys, what they say and do, and my experiences with them in different environments often lights that bulb in my mind. My environment, my faith, my experiences and the hippy-type love I have for humanity all inspire me." What better conduit than sweet, quirky stories with playful illustrations for a mother and teacher seeking to inculcate in children that what matters most?

"I absolutely love children, their pure-hearted innocence. The way they so easily laugh and so easily cry. They are beautiful gifts given to us from Allah, and I wanted to do my part in ensuring we are nurturing their characters and making all children, irrespective of background, feel understood in the environment they live in. I felt that there just weren't enough great books which represent Muslim children in fun, well-designed and well-written works, and manage to teach good values and morals in a non-issue way. I wanted to change that."

This desire to bring about change has lead Zanib back into the past, to her own childhood, all the way to when, as a girl, she would jot down the poems that came to her head. "When I was little, I was known as the poet and story writer. I made up rhymes

about anything that mattered, and in fact sometimes still do! I still have cherished notebooks with some of my poems from when I was about 8-11 years of age, and I love sharing these with children at events to inspire the I-can-do-it-too attitude in them."

And so it seems, for Zanib, it goes beyond just the books, and the love of writing - this desire for change. "I see myself as more than a publisher. I feel that, given the right books in the early years of a child's development, they will learn to love reading and writing, and by extension become better academics," Zanib says.

Sending hand-written letters to some of her readers, and conducting creative writing workshops are some of the things Zanib does to inspire the love for words and stories in children. She does not forget the role of parents, and her aim is to educate and inspire them through her blogs and her quotes on social media. And behind all this seems to lay a broader vision, a desire to share the love she feels in her heart.

"Is it really cheesy to say, I want to make the world a better place? Because that's what I am trying to do! And it starts with the little people who will be tomorrow's adults. To send them the right messages, and make them people of impeccable character and integrity; people with love and respect for all, irrelevant of faith, background and differences; and people who are comfortable with their identities - that's what I want my books to do."

Zanib says she is happiest when she is driving, and when she is on horseback. Picturing those two activities, it comes as no surprise that Zanib describes herself as a cloud-gazer. "I find them just so magnificent and majestic. To me, it's a very spiritual experience, to gaze at the clouds like that. Most people can see the glory of Allah's creation in some aspect of nature. For me, it's the clouds."

"I'm also known as a bit of a nut", she continues. "You can find me making up silly words all the time, or doing Gollum impressions, and always smiling and laughing. And I think that helps with my writing. Often, the inspiration for a book will come to me because of a silly word I made up at some time." Consequently, in Zanib's book, a touch of humour is never absent. One of her best-sellers is all about ... wait, what? Beards?

"Hahaha! OK, I confess - I am an unadulterated pogonophile! I always have been. I wrote My Dad's Beard because I understood that children see their father's beards as an integral part of them, to the extent, that their admiration for their dad could be personified through the beard and make for an interesting, fun and quirky read. It was quite a happy accident that subsequently the world hit 'peak beard', and that book received a lot of attention from families all over the world, Muslim and non-Muslim."

Zanib decided to pledge part of the profits from this bestseller to orphans and then thought of a "really warm (and beardy!) campaign" involving dads from all the world standing in solidarity to tell the orphans 'The World's Dads Are With You'.

This campaign can be found on social media platforms as #TheWorldsDadsAreWithYou and is, alhamdulillah, generating global traction. Unusual as it might be to pair beards with books, the popularity of *My Dad's Beard* has been quite phenomenal.

"My ideas, most of the time, come at once. A particular word, sight, thought, or some other stimulus seems to trigger the release of an almost evasive little bouncy thing that I have to capture right then and there before it escapes. I know in that moment that that bouncy thing is absolutely priceless and is made up of experiences I have gathered over 35 years." And then of course are the shining words people are saying about the books.

"Alhamdulillah, I've only ever had positive reviews, and some of them have been immensely touching." Reviewers everywhere have lauded the inclusiveness, the diversity, the gentle humour, and underlying it all, the very human depiction of the frailties, fears, hopes and aspirations of children. And there's more coming. "I've

been aptly nicknamed 'Road Runner' from the old Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote cartoon - you hardly see me still for a second!" she says.

So what's next?

"Oh, some wonderful new releases are coming up!" says Zanib. "*It Must Have Been You* is a quirky, rhyming story of a cute little girl who always finds herself in an innocent mess with fingers ready to point blame at her, until she does just the right thing to turn the pointing fingers into kisses and hugs."

"Another picture book, illustrated by the amazing Bill Bolton, is *Oddsockiosaurus*. This one is so much fun! The little character describes his various human characteristics as if he were a dinosaur. Last to be published will be *I Promise*, a picture book with the deep messages of the value of the spoken word, women's empowerment and the beauty within the diversity of this world - all told through a beautiful story."

Titles from Sweet Apple Publishers are available in all major bookstores and independent bookshops in the UK, as well as in Canada (Read It), Singapore, Malaysia (Buatsimanja) and Australia (Read Little Muslims). Get updates at <http://www.sweetapplebooks.com>, as well as on Facebook and Twitter.

*Azra Momin paints, makes jewellery and illustrates books, not necessarily in that order. In previous eras, her job titles have included interior designer, content editor, freelance writer and teacher. Mostly though, she likes to spend time with her favourite art critics, her husband and daughter; read mystery novels and dream about living in an earthship.*

