

Young New York author on a whirlwind adventure with her first "salaam" book

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"The Gauntlet" by Hebah Uddin, written under the pen name of Karuna Riazi. Photo from Simon & Schuster/Tribune News

Farah, the 12-year-old main character in Hebah Uddin's new book has to rescue her younger brother. He is trapped in an evil board game come to life, so it is up to his sister to save him. Farah happens to be a Bangladeshi-American Muslim, though that is not what the story is about.

However, it is the reason Uddin's middle-grade adventure story, "The Gauntlet," was chosen to be published in a new collection of books called Salaam Reads. Uddin is a student at New York's Hofstra University, and she is thrilled that Simon & Schuster will publish her book as one of its Salaam Reads titles.

"Peace" In Any Language

The word "salaam" means peace in Arabic. Salaam Reads wants to publish stories with main characters who are Muslim.

"The first time I saw the cover I actually cried," says the 24-year-old Uddin. She was born and raised in New York's Long Island. Uddin wrote her novel under the pen name of Karuna Riazi, a combination of her nickname and part of her grandfather's name. "I was

overwhelmed because when I was growing up it wasn't common to see Muslim girls on the cover at all. There are going to be kids who look at the cover and feel that they see themselves."

In addition to Muslim kids seeing themselves as they read, children who are not Muslim will also learn about those who are different – but not so different – from themselves, says Zareen Jaffery. She is the executive editor of Salaam Reads and is Muslim as well.

"There's so much misinformation and misrepresentation about Muslim lives," Jaffery says. "It's impossible to ignore the fact that Muslims are very demonized due to the actions of a deviant minority."

Blending Cultures

Salaam Reads published its first book, "Amina's Voice," in March and "The Gauntlet" on March 28. Jaffery says they plan to publish nine books a year. This will include children's picture books, books for middle grades and books for young adults. The books will not be about the Islamic religion or Islamic history, she says, but rather stories that are emotionally compelling and believable.

Early in "The Gauntlet," for instance, there is a conversation between Farah and her friends Alex and Essie. Alex is African-American and Essie is white. The conversation serves as a good example of how the novel blends items familiar to people from Muslim-majority countries and references to mainstream American pop culture. The three friends are all ethnically different from each other and live in New York.

They have entered into the board game called The Gauntlet of Blood and Sand to search for Farah's 7-year-old brother, Ahmad, who ran into the game without realizing its danger. They land in a Middle Eastern marketplace.

"A souk," Farah said.

"It's beautiful," Essie whispered.

"We're definitely not in Kansas anymore," Alex pointed out, "but I think this is the closest to a yellow brick road we're being offered."

As the characters face challenges, readers also learn about some different foods and clothing. They learn that chenna murki is a treat made of sweet cheese, and they discover that a salwar kameez is a traditional outfit worn on special occasions.

No Place Like Home

Uddin is a senior-year English major at Hofstra. Before college, she was home-schooled along with her younger sister, Sumayyah, who is 22, and younger brother, Sahnoon, 15. Uddin's mother, Javette, who works in education, is African-American and American Indian, and her father, Mirza, who makes perfume, is Bangladeshi, which is why the character of Farah is from Bangladesh, Uddin says.

Uddin has visited Bangladesh, but not since 2003, she says. "This has always been home," she says, speaking of Long Island, New York. "Most of the cultural background is from my experiences growing up here with my cousins. I have a really huge family."

A Whirlwind Book Adventure

While Uddin was in high school she became a book blogger, reviewing books for young readers at Watercolor Moods. In 2014, she joined an online movement called #WeNeedDiverseBooks. The movement wants there to be more books featuring characters and authors who come from different backgrounds, or who belong to a group that has not been represented well in books for young readers.

Through #WeNeedDiverseBooks she got to know Jaffery, introduced by a friend through email. Later, when Jaffery was seeking writers, she came in contact with Uddin again and learned she was working on a novel. Uddin finished it in March 2016, sometimes working on it in the university library. She chose to use a pen name because she wanted to protect her privacy, she says.

"It's been very whirlwind," Uddin says of getting a book contract and being stunned. "I had to sit down, I was literally shaking. I had been totally working myself up for rejection. It still doesn't feel real."

Quiz

- 1 Based on the article, Uddin, author of "The Gauntlet," would MOST LIKELY agree with which statement?
- (A) Books for middle grades and young adults should include Islamic religion and history.
 - (B) It is very difficult to write books that represent what life is like for a Muslim girl.
 - (C) Children's books about Muslims should be fun and interesting to read.
 - (D) Salaam Reads should publish books that have only Muslim characters.
- 2 What is the MOST important reason why Uddin wrote "The Gauntlet"?
- (A) She wanted to support the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement.
 - (B) She wanted to honor her grandfather by having her Muslim pen name on a book cover.
 - (C) She wanted to write a biographical novel about her Muslim family living in New York.
 - (D) She wanted to write a novel featuring a Muslim character that children would identify with.
- 3 Read the paragraph from the section "Peace In Any Language."

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Which word could replace "overwhelmed" WITHOUT changing the meaning of the fourth sentence in the paragraph?

- (A) stunned
- (B) disturbed
- (C) impressed
- (D) jubilant

- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "Peace In Any Language."

"There's so much misinformation and misrepresentation about Muslim lives," Jaffery says. "It's impossible to ignore the fact that Muslims are very demonized due to the actions of a deviant minority."

In the second sentence, the word "demonized" has a connotation that is:

- (A) positive
- (B) somewhat negative
- (C) neutral
- (D) strongly negative