

Helping Islamic kids be proud of identity

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The Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio, October 7, 2005

*Distributed by the Religion News Service with the title **Muslim Author Addresses Prejudice in Children's Book**, October 10, 2005*

The way it started out, the way it was originally written, the child in the story only had to deal with a basic fear shared by kids everywhere. That maybe, because he wasn't exactly like them, he wouldn't be liked or accepted by his peers.

But events took a hand, and the story subtly changed in a way its author could not have foreseen.

Instead of just worrying about being accepted by his grade school classmates, the boy in her story has to face the real fear that something bad might happen to him because of who he is, an American Muslim.

His fictional story is told in a book called "My Name Is Bilal," newly published by Boyds Mills Press. Its author, Dr. Asma Mobin-Uddin, is an Ohio pediatrician and former Westlake resident who wrote it out of necessity -- first for her own three children, but now for a much wider audience.

"I had taken some time off from my practice when I had my kids," she told me, "and I was trying to look for books that would reflect Islamic themes or Muslim-American characters." She found little except for stories with sultans and camels that weren't "any closer to my kids' experience than any other American family."

That's when she started thinking about writing herself, sharing the struggle she went through as the only Muslim in her elementary school and the only non-Christian in her high school.

Mobin-Uddin grew up in Marion, an hour north of Columbus, where her parents, who were both physicians, settled a few years after emigrating from Pakistan. Weekly religious school in Columbus and annual visits with relatives were about her only contact with other Muslims.

"I didn't feel like people were harassing me because of my faith -- they just didn't know anything about it," she said.

"I spent a lot of time trying to sort out who I was and how I fit in. I think a lot of kids in other immigrant communities go through that. The specifics of my book are set in the Muslim-American experience, but it speaks to a bigger question and wider audience. I wanted to help kids know you don't need to be like everybody else to fit in."

Bilal, the boy in her story, hides his religion and calls himself Bill to be accepted by classmates. But he struggles with his deception until a teacher gives him a book about Bilal ibn Rabah -- a beloved figure in Islamic history who withstood religious persecution to make the first Islamic call to prayer.

Mobin-Uddin, 38, submitted her manuscript five months before the terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists on Sept. 11, 2001. Resulting fears and stereotypes gave more importance and urgency to the book's message of understanding and tolerance, and only the need to illustrate it as a children's book delayed publication.

“Kids have different challenges now,” Mobin-Uddin said. “We had people just not knowing what Islam was.”

She got used to answering questions while attending Marion Catholic High School, where her parents felt that people who respected God would respect her and her own faith.

She earned undergraduate and medical-school degrees at Ohio State University and did her internship and residency in Cleveland, at Rainbow Babies & Children’s Hospital, while her husband, Cleveland native John Kashubeck, was getting his training at Mt. Sinai Hospital. They now live in the Columbus suburb of Dublin.

She has a second children’s book in the works, does community work and speaking engagements through her Web site, www.asmamobinuddin.com, and serves as vice president of the Ohio chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Librarians and educators greeted “My Name Is Bilal” enthusiastically. World events helped fuel interest, but Mobin-Uddin hopes more comes from a focus on understanding and respect of different religions during the holy month of Ramadan, which began Tuesday.

“It has become more difficult for people to be comfortable with their identity,” she said, “but the Muslim community has seen a lot of people reaching out and trying to build bridges. That’s very positive.”