

# The Imagination of Rukhsana Khan

by Iain Goodall



Khan was born in Lahore, Pakistan on March 13, 1962, but by the age of three her family had moved to Dundas, Canada. Small-town Ontario was a cruel place for people of Pakistani origins in the 1960s and '70s. Her father endured taunts from co-workers who called him "black bastard." At school his daughter faced horrible insults from her peers. Khan can only describe her childhood as "unhappy." "Stories saved me," she remembers.

Imagination, although not a visible entity, powers the existence of literature. In young Rukhsana's world, the stories she read became incredibly alive. "I could be someone else, I could be somewhere else." Even though her library books were either void of Muslims or vilified them, the literary wings felt glorious. These book experiences were part of the reason why Khan began writing in grade school. "Writing was like reading, but," she differentiates, "it was more than an escape—it was fun." By the age of 16 she was submitting stories for children to publishers. She graduated from college as a biological chemical technician, but she was also treading the path to children's book publication. Khan began taking writing courses and publishing articles in Muslim magazines, all while mothering four children. In her adult life, Khan noticed anti-Muslim posturing on the rise. After the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, Khan notes it was a "hostile time to be Muslim." Muslims, she points out, are often perceived as "the other."

Rukhsana Khan's desire for cultural and religious equality for the disenfranchised has influenced her work. After her 1998 publishing debut with the picture book *Bedtime Jilae-e-ali*, the titles that followed showed Khan's theory that "the other" could be "humanized" by making it more familiar through story. There are three picture books set in eastern cultures outside of North America—*King of the Skies, Ruler of the Courtyard and Silly Chicken*. She has penned two books that impart religious information—*Muslim Child: A Collection of Short Stories and Poems*, and *Mary Windows: Six Kids, Five Faiths, One Community*, a book of related stories written with Elise Carbone and Uma Krieshawan. She has a middle grade novel, *Dahling, if You Love Me, Would You Please, Please Smile*, about Zainab, a Muslim girl of Indian heritage. Her short chapter book about two children newly immigrated from Pakistan is called *A New Life* in trade paperback and *Coming to Canada* in the edition that Citizenship and Immigration Canada distributes to newcomers. Her newest title, *Waiting Mr.*, is a young adult novel that takes place in Afghanistan. Khan believes that, "Once you have read a story set in another culture, you never see it in the same way as you did before."

Khan also promotes change through her fearless presenting at conferences, nationally and internationally, and at schools. Her schedule sometimes prevents her from writing for months, but Khan knows her visits are important. "I go to a school obviously looking Muslim and it does good for the kids and the teachers." That day, she might unwittingly tell a story that centers on a fat, but one that also gives listeners respectful Islamic information. Storytelling and classroom presenting remind Khan that a "good story" snags her readers' interest.

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Her culture and religion provide the texture and flavour for her material, but it is questions that set fire to her writing process. "Basically I am a very curious person," Khan says. "I like to ponder" a lot.

Rethinking her childhood helped her come up with one of the climactic scenes in *Dahling, if You Love Me, Would You Please, Please Smile*. A girl had been tricked and shamed, resulting in her suicide attempt. Her classmates' disrespectful reaction caused Zainab to finally explode. Khan wrote the novel to "deal with my own feelings of guilt because, when I was in Grade 8, the same scenario happened with this girl in my class, and I hadn't had the courage to say anything." Working backwards from this important scene to create a new story, Khan has perhaps influenced her readers to make their own brave choices.

Reading—and wondering about—a report from an Afghan orphanage led Khan to writing *Waiting Mr.* One paragraph reminded about a girl who was left in the marketplace after her father remarried and the stepmother didn't want her. "It tore my heart," Khan says passionately. "I wondered what it would feel like to be abandoned like that. And then I wondered what kind of father would abandon [a child] like that. And I kind of worked backwards. I had an idea that the climax of the novel would be when the girl realizes that her father isn't coming back for her." Once the key scene was in place, "I just kept wondering what would happen if..."

Rukhsana Khan stories begin when she hears a voice in her mind. What she picks up must "spark a strong emotional reaction in me, whether it be tears or laughter." The voice has to convince her that it comes from a compelling character. In *Waiting Mr.* Khan first heard Jameela, the main character say, "I thought she was sleeping." From the manuscript to the finished book, that sentence—Jameela's first impression of her mother's death—remained the opening line.

For added success, Khan puts a little bit of herself into each character. The amusing picture book *Ruler of the Courtyard* tells how a little girl overcomes her fear of chickens. "The part of me in *Ruler*," Khan confesses, "is the timid and scared part." When she began *Waiting Mr.*, Khan had stopped writing for two years following the death of her sister. Khan's tragic loss provided her insight into Jameela's feelings about losing her mother. Khan says quietly, "I was able to access that kind of grief."

It might take Khan five months or four years to complete a book. Along the way, she pays attention to the "emotional arc of the story." She describes her creative process: "If I'm setting a scene, I think rhythms of language, setting the emotional feel of the scene, honing the language of the characters to reveal what's going on emotionally in their heads. It's a very instinctive thing. It's all done by what 'feels' right to me."

However, finding the right words requires more than imagination—it sometimes takes research. Khan visited Pakistan to explore her roots, and feels the country is culturally similar to Afghanistan. However, for details about Kabul and Kandahar in *Waiting Mr.* she turned to in-laws who were from those places. She drew additional research about drug addiction from diverse sources such as television shows.

Sometimes, during the writing process, events occur that not even an author with an active imagination can foresee. Khan says that, at several points in writing *Waiting Mr.* "I was floored" by what happened. In one scene, not realizing that Jameela is right there, her father lies about abandoning his daughter. Yet, the girl clid in a chador (burka) stands before him, hearing every shocking word. Khan describes writing this passage as "such a powerful moment. It felt like a punch in the gut."

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Khan offers interesting advice about rejection for other writers, especially new ones. "The imagination is a lazy beast," she proclaims. "Without rejection it would not be forced to dig deeper and pull out something really amazing." She invites writers to find out more about such refreshing views at [www.rukhsanakhan.com](http://www.rukhsanakhan.com).

At the IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) Congress in Denmark in 2008, Khan's well-received speech challenged all those working in the field of children's literature. She told the audience, "...we still tremendous influences over the direction of our respective societies. We must not underestimate our capability, for we can help set the tone of the future." She believes children's literature professionals can help create a "global salad" culture, where individual identities are respected and protected. "And in the process," Khan concluded, "let's tell some darn good stories!"

Justice and equality for all is more than a noble thought for this author and storyteller. Rukhsana Khan sets an example with her work, taking particles of story and lighting up a world so full of possibilities that we can believe our place in the galaxy has room for all. Iain Goodall is a book reviewer and the author of a book about American child immigrant Yasuaki Kashi—*Photographing Greatness: The Story of Kashi*.

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I couldn't help thinking that as I listened to the storyteller and author speak. This fascinating woman tells stories, and has created picture books, information books, middle grade fiction and young adult fiction. She has dreamed up heroes ranging from the disabled boy with the soaring spirit in the picture book *King of the Skies* to Jameela, the abandoned Afghan girl in her new young adult novel *Waiting Mr.* If we could peek inside her mind, it would be fabulous to see the sunbursts and explosions of thought creating these characters and stories.