

INTERVIEW

A NEW BROWN

Jabeen Akhtar puts her heroine in a world full of American confusion and Asian chaos. And skirts all the clichés.

By Sanchita Guha



WELCOME TO AMERICASTAN
By Jabeen Akhtar
PENGUIN (VIKING)

(₹ 499)



In an essay on her PETA protest, Pakistani-American writer Jabeen Akhtar describes the day she sat in a cage, wearing only body paint, protesting against cruelty to circus animals. Public opinion boiled over when it came out that this radical protester was also a US government employee. “It’s absolutely disgraceful, and she should be whiskered out of the EPA,” said a web comment. Complete strangers started demanding that Akhtar be fired from her job.

Her new novel, *Welcome to Americastan*, continues that thread of people jumping to conclusions. The protagonist, Samira Tanweer, gets marked as a terrorist when her name matches that of someone in a US wanted list; her Pakistani circle is rabid about being upstaged by American Jews... the plot is peppered with such instances of assumptions, proven wrong, and the subsequent shift in dynamics.

The girl on the cover is very like you. Is the book semi-autobiographical?

A coincidence! My personal experiences have informed parts of the novel, but

it isn’t autobiographical. I wouldn’t subject anyone to a book about my life.

Which writers inspire you?

Most are contemporary white males (not exactly my peers) – Garrison Keillor, Tom Perrotta, Nick Hornby. Their books are about average people thrown into compelling situations, and their prose is often folksy and humorous. My novel is in the same vein, only Pakistani-style. A central theme here is that Muslims can be like everyone else – awkward, petty slackers who sometimes find themselves in outrageous situations.

Do you label this a diaspora novel?

The chaotic families from the Indian subcontinent make for better stories than Western societies, don’t they?

I’d call this the anti-diaspora, diaspora novel. The conflicts and motivations are very different from what you’ll find in most South Asian literature. I think the genre has become reduced to clichés. Many stories are falsely romanticised portrayals of South Asian immigrants and turn us into one-dimensional exotic

creatures. Like most second-generation children, the Tanweer kids [in my book] have bigger problems than ethnicity.

I agree that it’s easy (and fun) to write about South Asian families – there’s more material to mine out of people who are fighting, shifting allegiances, eating, gossiping, etc. than quiet, polite people who say nothing to each other at dinner except, “Please pass the gravy.”

Samira gets marked as a terrorist by accident. What do you think of the US response to Islamic terror threat?

There’s no real, objective definition of terrorism to guide policy. Our leaders decide on a relatively *ad hoc* basis who we will bomb, who we will impose sanctions against, and who we will ally with.

Will your environmental concerns come up in a new book?

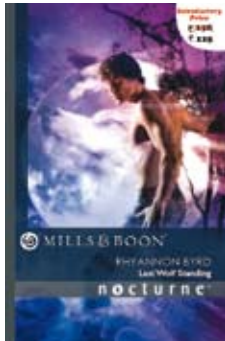
I worked for the US Environmental Protection Agency and I’ve been a PETA activist and vegan for most of my life. My protest got much media attention in the US. Animal rights is my passion, and will often find its way into my writing.



INTERVIEW

UNDEAD AFFAIRS

Inspired by the huge success of the *Twilight* series, romance veteran Mills & Boon sinks its fangs into the succulent publishing pie of otherworldly love. By Sanchita Guha



Love is so much more potent when experienced through the peternatural senses of a werewolf or a vampire. If the object of this otherworldly affection is a human, the romance deepens, as every fan of the

Edward-Bella story knows. The new Nocturne series from Mills & Boon takes this trend forward, bringing together feisty yet vulnerable human women and the alpha male undead. Clare Somerville, GM (India & UK), tells us more.

Who are you targeting with this?

Paranormal romance attracts readers across age boundaries. Besides, if you've enjoyed *Buffy* and *Twilight* and the whole gamut of Dark Romance writers, you might naturally progress to Nocturne.

A real woman is now too strong for the quivering jelly stereotype in the old M&B books, so maybe it needs the undead to reduce her to that state?

I wouldn't agree that the lead woman in a Nocturne book is helpless jelly! She is a strong character. But the heroes in this genre are powerful alphas with great sexual magnetism, so this can be overwhelming, if you are a mortal heroine. This conflict can lend great excitement and intensity to the plot.

How have the normal male-female dynamics changed in the new titles?

Mills & Boon always reflects current society. Nowadays, the heroine is an independent spirit, who will only accept the hero on her terms. Reader identification is central to our genre. You have to be able to put yourself in the heroine's place, so you have to like her.

The Nocturne stories have very graphic sex scenes. Is India ripe for it?

A strong sensual overlay is part of the appeal of paranormal romance. The adult paranormal market is well established in India. And we publish six series in India with varying degrees of sensuality, so there is something for all tastes.

NEW RELEASES

Destress and dream with these new titles that can change your life, awake or asleep



THE GUIDE TO NEAR-NIRVANA

The order of the day is to give life lessons in the garb of someone's story. So it is with Shubhra Krishan's *The 9-to-5 Yogi: How to feel like a sage while working like a dog* (Hay House, ₹ 250). Uma, a bank manager, has a meltdown, and then finds almost-nirvana in old Indian wisdom. Recipes, exercise tips, and nuggets of dietary knowledge pepper the story, taking the tedium out of advice.

As the mind sees it

Delving into the uncharted territory at the edge of our psychological knowledge, *On Dreams and Dreaming*

(Penguin, ₹ 399) analyses the images that flash before our eyes as we sleep. Edited by noted psychoanalyst Dr Sudhir Kakar, this is a compilation of lucidly written essays. The book discusses topics as diverse as memorable dreams; dreams and the waking state; and the role of dreams in the evolution of human consciousness.

