**Interview with Chris Aslan about Alabaster (interview may contain spoilers)**

*Q: Alabaster is your first published novel. Where did the idea come from?*

A: I happened to be at a church service and the sermon was on the Gospel story of Mary breaking a jar of pure nard over the feet of Jesus, earning a rebuke from Judas, who states that the jar was worth a year’s wages and could have been used to better purposes. I got to thinking; how would a seemingly ordinary family come into possession of something so valuable? I reasoned that perfumed oil must have some kind of sell-by date, so it couldn’t have been a family heirloom. I flicked through my Bible to the different accounts of this family. There was no mention of parents, just the three siblings, in the home of Simon the Leper. I was left with a whole load of questions, and my exploration and speculation about these became the genesis of this novel.

*Q: How easy was it to find Maryam’s voice?*

A: Maryam came to me fully formed. She’s a composite of many of the girls I worked with in the carpet workshop in Khiva, who have talent and ambition but are considered too spirited for a patriarchal society and therefore need ‘putting I their place’. I loved giving them a voice.

*Q: Many readers have commented on the twist which they hadn’t seen coming, which is that the time period and location of the story aren’t immediately obvious. They had assumed that Alabaster was set in, perhaps, Afghanistan or somewhere like that.*

A: I’ve found that one of the pitfalls of historical novels and particularly ones set in Biblical times, is that they can feel bogged down in attempts by the author to show all their historical research. I wanted to give this story a sense of freshness, and immediacy so, instead of terms such as ‘centurions’, I used, ‘western soldiers’. I also opted to use the original Hebrew/Aramaic names for my characters, not the Hellenised ones that are better-known in the West, as I wanted to ground the story more in its original Middle Eastern context. All this ended up throwing readers off the scent, and often surprising them when they discovered when and where the story is set.

*Q: What message were you hoping to get across through the novel?*

A: Well, the story deals with lots of different issues, which I’ve tried to handle with sensitively and a sense of fairness. With all the novels in this anthology I want to get across how destructive and man-made religion is, and how Jesus brings something different and better – even if Christendom has hugely undermined that message. I also wanted to undo some of the unhelpful Sunday school imagery of people at the time of Jesus walking around in dressing gowns looking happy. First century Palestine was not a nice place to live, and for women in particular, they were both oppressed by Roman occupation, but also by the patriarchal culture and religion around them. It felt important to capture that.

I also wanted to write a novel – and then a series of novels – that aren’t about Jesus, but rather about the impact of Jesus. So often we read about encounters with Jesus in the gospel accounts, which are so fleeting and yet so life-changing. I wanted to explore some of these and imagine what might have come before and after. I also walked a tightrope of writing for a predominantly English-speaking readership, but wanting the story to have a Middle Eastern feel and worldview. Most followers of Jesus today are not from Western countries, and I wanted to affirm this and to establish that Jesus is for everyone.

*Q: Did writing the novel affect you in any way?*

A: Very much so. I tend to really imagine myself there as whichever character I’m writing about. So, for the rape scene, for example, it was pretty grim writing that. However, for other scenes, I felt as if I’d had the privilege to hop into a time machine and watch Jesus in action. I remember crying as I wrote the scene where a group of people with leprosy are all getting healed, one after the other, because it felt so worshipful to be there, in a way, and to record the wonders of Jesus. Interestingly, I wrote most of the novel in one relatively quick chunk just before moving to Oxford to study theology. I found this chapter of my life so full of religion, and yet so spiritually barren, and it felt as if my encounters with Jesus through writing *Alabaster,* were like water in my camel hump, that kept me going through this desert.