Saadia Faruqi's New Novel Explores Racism Against Muslims After 9/11

By Lela Nargi

Saadia Faruqi was in college when the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks happened in 2001. Faruqi experienced the aftermath of the attacks differently than many other people in the United States.

She is Muslim. The hijackers who flew airplanes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania also were Muslim. But they were part of an extremist group that believes in using violence to spread their religion. The connection between the religion and the attacks caused a steep rise in Islamophobia – the fear of, hatred of or prejudice against the religion of Islam or Muslims, people who follow the religion.

Faruqi, now an author, wanted to share with kids part of what Muslims in the United States have experienced since 2001. She wrote "Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero," published this week, about a fictional boy in Texas who is navigating middle school. He and his friends and family deal with Islamophobia as the country gets ready to mark the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. Through a journal given to him, Yusuf also learns of his Uncle Rahman's experience as a boy at the time of the attacks and their aftermath.

We talked to Faruqi about how she experienced 9/11 as a Muslim Pakistani immigrant in the United States, how kids are still affected by 9/11 and why she wrote this book.

Q: Where were you on 9/11?

A: I was in Florida studying for my bachelor's degree. It was morning and I was still getting ready and I was on the phone with my husband. He asked, 'Have you seen the news?' I remember thinking, 'This is not real.' On subsequent days as a Muslim it became harder to process.

Q: Did people start to treat you differently?

A: I didn't wear a hijab (a head covering some Muslim women wear) then, so I blended in. But if I had been in middle school or high school it would have been pretty awful, like it was for so many people I interviewed when I was writing the book.

Q: How did you do research?

A: I talked to adults who were kids when it happened. I had two questions: What happened on that day? I needed that for the journal written by Yusuf's Uncle Rahman when the attacks happened. I wanted to describe what happened that morning, if school closed early or not. And I also asked how they felt about themselves and their life in general, and how people treated them after 9/11.

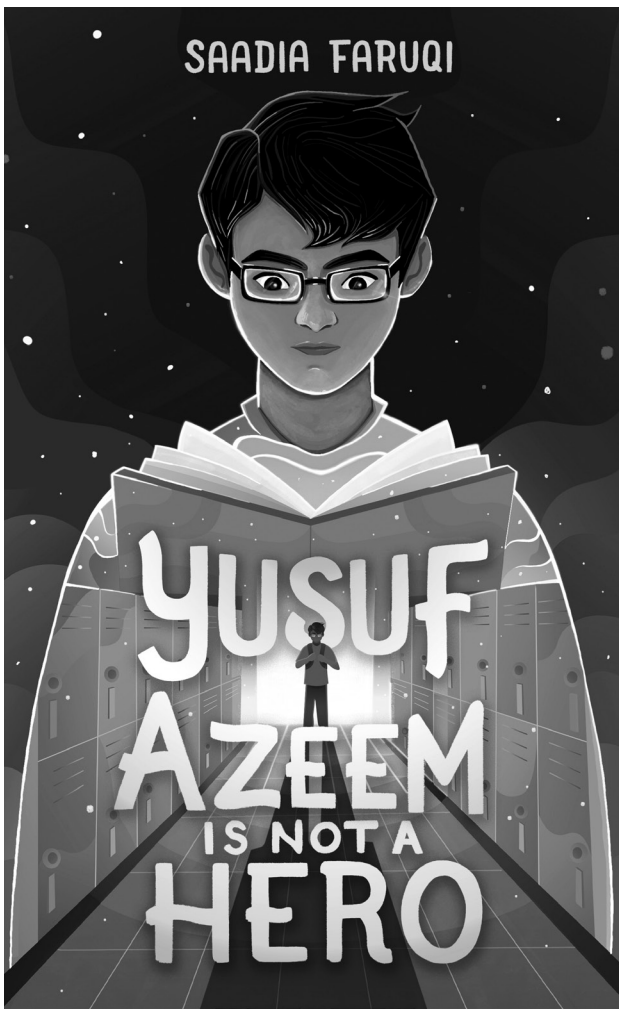

Photo: HarperCollins via The Washington Post

Saadia Faruqi's new novel "Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero" features a middle school student who deals with Islamaphobia as the United States marks the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Q: Were you surprised by what they told you?

A: It wasn't anything I didn't know, but I still wanted to capture it. They said they felt like strangers in their own country, like their friends weren't their friends anymore. That happens in the book, too. In the journal entries, Uncle Raman has a huge rift with his best friend.

Q: Why was it important to you to write this book?

A: For young readers, their whole life was shaped by 9/11. If they're Muslim, or brown and look like they're Muslim, they are treated like they're the "enemy." A lot of their parents have experienced discrimination at their jobs or lost friends. They're on the receiving end of this hatred. I wanted to show what happens when the entire country is living in post-9/11 trauma: why there's surveillance, and airport security, of how, if you're Muslim you (aren't considered) a patriot.

Q: What do you hope kids learn from it?

A: I hope (kids who are like Yusuf) get the message to be strong and understand what are the motivations for people (being racist). Yusuf has to finally stand up to his bullies, not only his age but adults, too. If you are not from the Muslim community, I hope reading the book can offer some tools to help neighbors who are going through discrimination, how to be allies, how to make sure you're not one of those people causing hurt. It's a sad book; really bad things happen. But the end is happy and hopeful. I believe the worst things are managed by the loving work you do and the actions you take.

Q.: There is still a lot of Islamophobia in America. Do you think that will change?

A: It's been festering for 20 years. But I believe we can address these things by talking to people and learning about people who are different from us. Reading books, meeting people from other cultures, asking how things are. Those things go a long way.

-Special To The Washington Post

How 9/11 Altered The Fiction Landscape In 13 Novels

By Ron Charles

The demonic choreography of al-Qaeda's attack on the United States instantly rendered Sept. 11 the most documented act of terrorism in human history. As the North Tower of the World Trade Center burned, cameras already on the scene filmed the second plane soaring into the South Tower. Those appalling images, infinitely reproduced, colonized the minds and imaginations of a generation.

Almost as quickly as the U.S. military geared up to unleash America's retribution, the publishing industry jumped into active duty, too. A nation seething with rage and incredulity felt desperate to know how the attacks of 9/11 happened, who carried them out and why. Within days, previously published books - such as Ahmed Rashid's "Taliban" and Yossef Bodansky's "Bin Laden" - shot up on the bestseller list. Sales of Bibles, Korans, spiritual guides, prophecy titles and works on comparative religion ascended toward the heavens.

Advances in technology allowed the production and distribution of an unprecedented number of new books in record time. On Oct. 1 - while Ground Zero was still burning - students and professors at the New York University Department of Journalism published "09/11 8:48 am," an anthology of accounts by survivors and witnesses.

But of course, readers wanted more - so much more. Journalists and scholars, politicians and photographers, along with spiritual leaders, self-help gurus and conspiracy theorists, all rushed to their computers. Dozens of 9/11 books appeared before the end of the year; as many as 150 more by the first anniversary. If paper could have salved our wounds, we would have been healed.

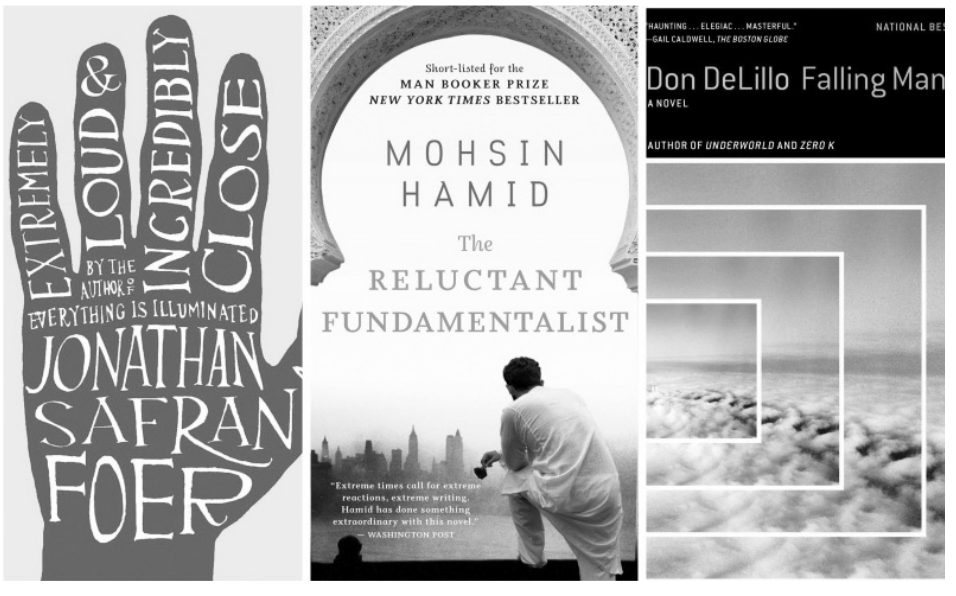

Photo by: Houghton Mifflin Harvest Books/Scribner — Handout via The Washington Post

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close; The Reluctant Fundamentalist; The Falling Man

There was certainly an exigent need to record, analyze and explain Sept. 11, but it was not at all clear if there was a parallel need to fictionalize Sept. 11. Indeed, hours after the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the novelist Ian McEwan confessed the limits of fiction. "Even the best minds," he wrote in the Guardian, "the best or darkest dreamers of disaster on a gigantic scale, from Tolstoy and Wells to Don DeLillo, could not have delivered us into the nightmare available on television news channels yesterday afternoon." And before the year ended, DeLillo himself suggested in Harper's that the destruction of the towers was "a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions."

Literary novelists, so many of whom lived in New York and couldn't get the ash of death out of their clothes, faced a barrage of practical and theoretical threats to their creative enterprise. Martin Amis wrote that, in the aftermath of 9/11, "The so-called work in progress had been reduced, overnight, to a blue streak of pitiable babble. . . . A feeling of gangrenous futility had infected the whole corpus."

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