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DAVIS PRESS AND *MECCAN MADNESS*

After 25 years of career success in a leading U.S. publishing firm, Carol Davis harnessed all of the monetary and human resources she could to launch her own publishing firm. The company created a niche for itself in high-adventure, factually based fiction, and Davis, a risk-taker, profited from the national resurgence in adventure novel sales. In late 2005, Davis Press was celebrating its sixth year since inception and its first year in the black.

In June 2005, author Jonathan Taajwar submitted a manuscript to Davis Press called *Meccan Madness*. The book had been reviewed by the editorial staff and was now on Davis's desk, where it had been sitting for six months while Davis had pondered what to do. She had read the manuscript the week she received it and found it to be a fascinating and riveting novel about a Muslim woman who attempts to lead an underground movement to take control of the Kaaba, the holy sanctuary at Mecca. Davis was sure the book would be a bestseller, which would give a large and welcome boost to her embryonic bottom line.

Davis's confidence in the success of *Meccan Madness* was also, however, the very reason for her serious concern about publishing it under her company's name. She was well aware that the novel's basic premise made it controversial, as did the fact that the author, Jonathan Taajwar, was a self-professed lapsed Muslim. Needless to say, any publication critical of Islam would be badly received, primarily by people of the Islamic faith. Although the tragedy of September 11, almost four years earlier, had created interest in learning about the Islamic faith and consequently would probably boost sales, it had also created a far more volatile climate that could mean a potentially hostile reception to Taajwar's novel. In addition, the Iraq War, waged by America in the spring of 2003, had created a lot of anti-American sentiment, not only in Iraq, but also in many other Muslim countries.

Two other events also weighed heavily on Davis's mind. Most recent was the controversy surrounding *Newsweek* magazine's accusations that interrogators questioning prisoners at the U.S. Naval Base prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, had desecrated the Qur'an by, among other things, flushing it down the toilet. Those accusations, printed in the magazine's May 9 issue, had

incited violent riots in Afghanistan and other Muslim countries, resulting in more than 20 deaths and many injuries. Desecrating the Qur'an was punishable by death in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and several other Muslim countries, and the incident, even after *Newsweek* retracted the story in late May, had further inflamed anti-American sentiment.

Thinking further back, Davis remembered the saga of Salman Rushdie and his novel *The Satanic Verses*. She feared that *Meccan Madness* might incite the same anger and fury in the Muslim world that Rushdie's book had almost 16 years before. While she read and reread *Meccan Madness* for six months, Davis recalled the events that began on September 26, 1988, when Viking Penguin launched its official publication of Rushdie's novel.

In the frightening, chaotic months between late September 1988 and March 1989, controversy over the publication of *The Satanic Verses* led to loss of life, the disruption of billions of dollars in trade, a break in diplomatic relations between Britain and Iran, an international death edict (*fatwa*) for Rushdie, censorship, worldwide protests, and the destruction of public and private property, not to mention a host of more mundane disruptive incidents around the globe. It also led to the introduction of a bill in U.S. Congress to provide security for the executives and employees of Viking Penguin, Waldenbooks, B. Dalton Bookseller, and independent booksellers nationwide. No other book had so shaken the modern world.

On this particular morning, Jonathan Taajwar had called Davis Press to inquire about the status of his manuscript. Taajwar was getting anxious and impatient. Apparently (judging by his intimations), another publisher was showing aggressive interest in the book. Taajwar pushed to meet directly with Davis and she agreed, scheduling an appointment for the following afternoon. Davis then scheduled an early morning meeting with her board of directors to consider and discuss the release of *Meccan Madness* and its possible ramifications.

Davis planned to remind the board of the Rushdie incident and the repercussions that followed the book's release (although she doubted they had forgotten), give her opinion of the literary merits of his book, explain as best she could what the Islamic interpretation of *The Satanic Verses* was, and discuss the publishing climate since September 11. In her discussion with the board, Davis thought it was important that she include the themes of the two books as well as Taajwar's lapsed faith and how those factors might affect publicity and sales. She wanted to present what she saw as the risks and benefits to Davis Press in publishing *Meccan Madness* and then to solicit the board's recommendation. *The Satanic Verses* had sold extremely well, which was in no small part due to the controversy. By early February 1990 (almost two years after its initial publication), more than one million copies had been sold—approximately 740,000 of them in the United States. Viking Penguin's profits in early 1990 were (pounds) GBP1.8 million.

Usually, the board, which was purely advisory, had little to do with editorial matters and left the final decisions to Davis. Only two of its eight members had any financial interest in the company. Nevertheless, the board members were individually and collectively at risk both legally and morally. In this case, Davis was also concerned about their personal safety.

