



Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Aisha Bushby and Liz Banks and Sarah Levison, author and editors of *A Pocketful of Stars*.

When her mum falls ill, something strange happens and Safiya finds herself transported back to her mother's childhood home in Kuwait, and presented with a magical puzzle to solve. An unusual and skilful examination of grief, love and growing-up.

The judges found this a very clever idea, and very well told. The magic is credible and they were very impressed too by the way the friendships described in the book are developed. 'I love the voice and the story brought me to tears', said one.

Q&A with author Aisha Bushby

*Where did the inspiration for **A Pocketful of Stars** come from?*

I wanted to write a story about someone who tries to save her mum as a way of coping with her grief, and I wanted to use the format of a classic quest, but in a contemporary setting. At first, Safiya was interested in gaming but it didn't feature in the memory chapters at all. As I delved further into my edits it became clear that the book would be stronger if I combined her love of gaming with the quest. That's when I decided to incorporate the video game elements into the memory chapters. The idea didn't arrive as a cohesive whole, and it didn't become what it was until a few edits into the journey.

As a debut author, what did you find the most challenging part of the writing process for the book?

A Pocketful of Stars uses quite a complicated structure and was much harder to write than anything I've attempted since. When I was working on it as a debut I still hadn't fully grasped the mechanics of storytelling, so I found myself getting quite muddled at times. Now I find I make much more deliberate decisions with my writing and editing, and I feel more in control of the process.

What was the thing you most enjoyed about working with Liz and Sarah on the book? Why?

Their willingness to listen and take on my changes. Quite far into the process (before I combined Safiya's gaming interests with the quest), when I was supposed to have finished my structural edits, I realised the book wasn't working. Liz and Sarah listened to my concerns and let me try something experimental. They helped me get to the essence of what I was trying to do as we moved into the next edit. It was at that point that the book came together. I'll always be grateful for their patience, and their faith in my ideas.

What was the best piece of advice they gave you?

Every chapter has to have a purpose and progress the story in some way. It's such a simple piece of advice that has had a huge impact on my writing.

What advice would you give to debut authors?

Think of your career beyond the first book. I put so much pressure on **A Pocketful of Stars** that it made publication hugely terrifying. Once my attention shifted to my next book the pressure eased a little and I realised my debut journey didn't have to be perfect, and I could start to enjoy it!

Relatedly, I would say try not to get too attached to any one book. It's difficult not to when you've worked so hard on a project, but I think building a writing career is partly about figuring out which projects to focus on. Both **A Pocketful of Stars** and my second novel were conceived after I made the decision to set something else aside.

Q&A with editors Liz Bankes and Sarah Levison

What most excited you about Aisha's manuscript when you first read it?

Liz: I was so excited when Aisha's manuscript was submitted to us, as I was already a fan of hers from her amazing story in the anthology **A Change is Gonna Come**. Aisha is so talented at really taking you into a character's head – picking up on those everyday details, articulating how things really feel and conveying emotion in an immediate and deceptively simple way. I connected with main character Safiya straight away, and loved the way Aisha wove magic into the story to explore her journey.

Sarah: The character of Safiya in **A Pocketful of Stars** leapt out of the page from the very first read. The extraordinary journey that Safi makes as a character is at the heart of the story and although the mechanics of the story did change in the rewriting and editing process – Safi's story remained compelling and hugely emotive; it is a stunning portrayal of love and loss and growing up, and it always makes me cry! We also loved the subtle weaving of magic that runs through the book – one of Aisha's trademarks.

What would you say are the qualities of her writing that mark her out as a talent to watch?

Aisha's writing is bursting with spirit and heart – she writes passionately and evocatively and completely inhabits the worlds she writes about, which in turn means that as a reader we become equally immersed in her worlds and characters.

We also love that Aisha's writing has the ability to surprise readers – she likes to play with form (as in the video game element in **A Pocketful of Stars**, and interweaving different narratives in her latest series, *Moonchild*) – she's still experimenting with different techniques and form and this is really exciting!

How did you work with Aisha on her manuscript, were there things you asked her to change?

Aisha always knows the story she wants to tell and so as her editors we will work with her to support and guide this story, making sure that the structure is strong and allowing the story to shine through. The heart of this story was always Safiya's journey in navigating her relationship with her mum, and working out who she really was. And Aisha always knew that this journey would involve magic coming into Safiya's life and allowing her to see into her mum's past. Through the editing process we interrogated what this magical device should be and how it would work – and it changed a few times – leading to Aisha's genius idea to shape it around a video game, set in Safiya's mum's childhood home, where Safiya had to unlock different levels to see her mum's memories. One of the key parts of editing is asking these questions – and then authors come back with the perfect answers, which you could never have thought of.

Aisha likes to write in a very organic way and so as part of this process new elements are woven into a story through the drafts. One of our roles as her editors is to make sure that everything that is there needs to be there and brings a necessary element to the story. The whole way through the editing process – from first draft through to final edits – we have regular chats about the story. These are really fun, productive and creative and make sure we're all coming from the same place.

What is the best thing about being an editor?

Sarah: It's an absolute joy and an honour to work with authors to shape their books. We are in awe of anyone who can write a book – it takes not only talent but perseverance, patience and trust! To be a part of taking a book and helping to shape it to be the very best it can be is an enormous privilege, and one we never take lightly.

Liz: I love getting to have long chats with authors where we can spend ages talking about their characters and the details of the world and the story. You basically get to go and live in people's imaginary worlds for bit, and nose around that world and ask lots of annoying questions, which feels like getting to go behind the scenes! Getting to work collaboratively with authors, and help the story they want to tell shine through in the best possible way is, as Sarah says, a huge honour.

What advice would you give to debut authors?

Liz: An important thing is to trust your instincts – and trust your writing. With Aisha's book, she felt that the magical element needed to change – which meant quite a lot of reworking – so it was a really brave decision to trust that feeling and go for it. Only you know the story you want to write. Another more practical thing is to push through on a first draft – it's really easy to start second guessing yourself and want to edit as you go, but try to just write through to the end. The shaping and rethinking comes afterwards – and we're there to help with that!

Sarah: I would always keep in mind that editors want the very best for your book – sometimes it can be painful when we suggest a cut or an edit that might mean the world to you and we don't do this lightly. I would urge against being too reactive when you get edits back – let them sit with you for a while (we rate thinking time very highly!). Writing and editing are organic processes – they shift and change shape and it's important to keep an open mind – but also be confident in your story. A good editor will listen and advise but we know that the story is your story – you need to own it and feel proud of it and in turn we will feel hugely proud of it and you!

A Pocketful of Stars is published by Egmont, 978-1405293198, £6.99 pbk.