

## Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Hiba Noor Khan and Eloise Wilson, author and editor of **Safiyyah's War**

Richly imagined and vividly drawn, **Safiyyah's War** is told by a young Muslim girl living in Paris in World War Two. When Safiyyah discovers her father's bravery and compassion as he and colleagues in the French Resistance work to save the lives of Jewish neighbours, she decides to do all she can to help, too. The judges were very impressed by this illuminating story of compassion and courage, which is inspired by real events. "It's a story I didn't know, and one that feels really needed right now".

### **Q&A with Hiba Noor Khan**

**The Branford Boase Award judges commented that the true story told in *Safiyyah's War* is one they didn't know. Where did you hear of it and why did you decide to write about it?**

There is an old Indian saying; a writer doesn't choose their story, the story chooses them. With **Safiyyah's War**, I feel this very deeply, and it presented itself through my wonderful editor Eloise. I always say that this book belongs to her just as much as it does to me; she was in an underground car park beneath the city of Paris when she learned about the concept of the catacombs! Eloise began researching the history of the treacherous souterrain and came across the history of the Grand Paris Mosque in WW2. We then had some exciting conversations about the potential for a fiction novel set around the real life resistance, and within the space of days, Safiyyah had vividly introduced herself to me. It felt like the story had been waiting for almost a century to be told, bursting to be written, and I'm eternally grateful to have been given the honour to do so.

Like the judges, not a single person in my life had heard about this shining chapter from history that has been covered over and forgotten, and we felt deeply that the moment had come for these heroes to be celebrated. As strange as it may sound, I learnt so much from the characters, about friendship, courage, hope, and being human, which are just as relevant today as they were all those years ago. In our modern world, revisiting this part of humanity and shared Muslim-Jewish history seems more pertinent and urgent than ever.

**What are the challenges in writing historical fiction and stories featuring real life events?**

Naturally there's great pressure to do the histories justice, and to be accurate and fair. Archive sources, academic papers and resources helped so much in building a framework for the story, as well as drawing inspiration for the smaller moments and details that bring it to life. I also found that immersing myself in such a horrific period of history to be very harrowing, especially knowing that the experience of children in war is sadly not something relegated to the past. There were times when I would have frequent nightmares about what I was writing, it certainly took an emotional toll on me.

**Please describe your working relationship with your editor, Eloise?**

Eloise has such a calming, warm, reassuring presence that comes through in every single email and message and meeting. She genuinely is just the loveliest person and such a dream of an editor, I really do owe her everything for my move into writing fiction for children, and am eternally grateful! She took a big chance on me, and her belief in me every step of the way gave so much strength and nourishment. I had never written anything of this scale or genre before, and in all honesty, experienced a lot of self-doubt and anxiety at the prospect. Eloise worked

with me so much compassion and nurturing to allay my fears and build up my confidence. Ironically, I don't feel like words could ever do her justice...

I was lucky enough to meet Eloise in Paris at the Grand Paris Mosque, just as I had begun writing and researching the book, and it was the most magical and inspiring morning. We sat in the colourful courtyard shaded by fig branches, and sipped sweet mint tea, imagining Safiyyah in her home. I remember feeling a quiet awe for what we were embarking on, and certainly had no idea how incredibly it would all unfold from there! I always love chatting to Eloise about anything and everything, and of course, collaboratively editing!

### **What do you enjoy most about working with her?**

Eloise has a brilliant imagination, and such a creative spirit. Having her as my editor has been immensely liberating, refreshing, and validating, I'm still frequently in awe at how immediately and closely she visualises the people and moments that exist within my mind! I'm struggling to answer this question, because working with her really is a delight in every way. Her good humour and patience is always a blessing, and her creative insights have shaped and illuminated the story in such wonderful ways. The story is steeped in Islamic tradition and infused with the culture and spirit of the mosque, and I was consistently heartened and inspired by how Eloise honoured, respected, and channelled this so beautifully.

### **What were the aspects of your book that you worked on most closely?**

We had very regular conversations throughout my writing process. I would bounce ideas, present knots that Eloise would help to refine and untangle, and consider the general flow and feel of the story as it unfolded. Her wisdom and imagination really does glow from every part of the book! The story ended up being too long, and Eloise channelled the spirit of kind-hearted botanist, Monsieur Cassin, as she expertly pruned and trimmed the text down to size, which was such a huge help!

### **What advice would you give to young people wanting to write stories set in the past, or to tell stories they feel deserve to be known?**

I would refer to the saying I mentioned above about stories choosing their writer, rather than the other way round. If a spark of an idea, or a particular moment or person from history nudges you, there is a reason for that. It might not be possible to explain it rationally, but so much of the creative realm is like that. Trust your gut instincts, and honour what speaks to your heart. There is so, so much from the past that has been intentionally or unintentionally erased or glossed over, and the truth needs to be known. Perhaps it has been waiting for you to uncover it, to sing it to the world. Literature is a brilliant way to connect hearts, communities, and truths, even if there are centuries between them.

I would say, immerse yourself in the relevant period of history, visit libraries and museums, speak to people who are connected to it, read newspaper archives or whatever source materials are available to you. Step with your heart and being back into the time or place that is calling to you, and see what unfolds. Don't give up, every author faces rejection at many stages of their journey, it is part and parcel of the work. And if you feel a block, or sense of stagnation, I highly recommend getting out into nature! Taking a walk and watching a cloud float by, or sitting in the presence of trees, somehow works wonders in getting things moving again.

### **Q&A with editor Eloise Wilson**

### **What was it about Hiba's writing that most excited you about her book?**

There is so much of Hiba's own warmth and light in her writing. Her characters are full and alive – I had to remind myself at times that Safiyyah is fictional and wasn't actually part of the mosque's resistance. Hiba has a unique style of writing; each sentence is beautifully and carefully crafted. Her descriptions of food, even the ones her characters were having to imagine in their wartime city, made me constantly hungry when working on the book! I feel like I have been to all the places in the book and can smell the tropical plants in the house of Monsieur Cassin, and feel the skulls on the walls of the damp and dark souterrain. I think most of all it is the heart and emotion of Hiba's writing style that draws me in every time, from the man crying in the street in the very first chapter, to Safiyyah drawing courage from Baba's soulful singing near the end.

### **What were the main things you worked on with her as her editor?**

I was lucky enough to get to work with Hiba from the moment this story was just the seed of an idea. We discussed who the child in the mosque would be and how she would become linked to the resistance. Hiba diligently researched the incredible true story that the book is based on, and was determined to bring to light the bravery of these forgotten heroes. She worked on the book in sections and would send them in so we could discuss each scene as it developed. I was utterly blown away by her beautiful writing, and the characters who felt so real from the first draft.

As the story came together, I helped break it up into chapters, and the long paragraphs into shorter, more accessible ones. I suggested ways to keep the plot pacy by merging the two pet rescue scenes into one. We talked about moving chapters around to keep the story nimble and the passing of time natural. I ensured that all the key characters were weaved in so they didn't just pop up sporadically, but grew along with the story, including Isabelle whose locket Safiyyah uses to buy an essential gift on the black market.

I moved paragraphs and sentences around to help with the flow of the story. We focussed on certain key scenes, like the one in which Safiyyah uncovers Baba's secret resistance work, and went over and over it to tighten the sentences and build up the tension and awe.

Although it was very emotional for us both, I suggested that Safiyyah's grandmother Setti should die to allow Safiyyah to find her own path by the end of the book.

Once the story was complete, I carefully went through it one more time to ensure the story and sentences all had the impact we wanted, without losing Hiba's beautiful writing style.

### **Do you have a favourite scene in the book? If so, which one and why?**

I have quite a few! But one that I often think about is when Safiyyah tries to help Monsieur Cassin after his home has been ransacked. She takes some pieces of paper and folds them into butterflies, and gradually and methodically he copies her. This small act of kindness and innocence against the backdrop of such awful horror is a hopeful, poignant and beautiful moment. This almost silent scene then leads into a thunderously frightening encounter with Nazi soldiers in a chemist, where Safiyyah courageously steals back Monsieur Cassin's life's work. These consecutive and contrasting scenes are so powerful.

### **What do you think marks out the most successful writers for young people?**

I think the most successful books, regardless of genre, have a strong personality in the narrative voice. Be that **Rabbit & Bear** with their wonderfully alternate perspectives and unlikely, but reassuring friendship; or **Skandar** that flips every so often into the stark voice of Kenna who knows less than more than he does; or the sparse words, each perfectly chosen, of Sarah Crossan's verse novels.

### **What do you find most satisfying about being an editor?**

Editing is quite compulsive! Though shaping stories and words is my favourite part of the job, there are so many other parts of the job that I love. As a book goes through its life, I get to be a cheerleader, negotiator, rouser, sounding board and friend. I love that moment when you really fall in love with a manuscript, see the potential in it, then get to persuade others to love it too. First, working with the author to get it to be the best possible version it can be, then launching it into the world. It's always thrilling the first time you see a book you've worked on in a shop.

### **What advice would you give to anyone wanting to become an editor?**

There is an amazing amount of variety in our jobs. We get to work with lots of different authors, and every single book, even those in a series, will be different. Each day is varied, you might be working on a big structural edit in the morning, and then discussing covers with the design team in the afternoon.

I would recommend reading critically, thinking about what works well and what doesn't. Read widely, outside your usual choices. Look at illustrated fiction and graphic novels too, see how the pictures work with the words.

Speak with booksellers and librarians, ask them what's popular, what they're recommending at the moment, and what they'd like to see more of.

When you apply for a job at a publishing house, get to know the list very well.

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Thank you to Hiba Noor Khan and to Eloise Wilson for answering our questions.