

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Ayaan Mohamud and Sarah Stewart, author and editor of *You Think You Know Me*.

Hanan is a clever, highly motivated student, keeping her head down at grammar school, all too aware of the Islamophobia visited on her. When the school's former caretaker is murdered, there's a predictable backlash against the Muslim community and Hanah decides to make a public stand at the school's conference on diversity. Mohamud, a Somalian, has written from her own experiences of Islamophobia, vividly creating a community with a rich and vibrant culture. Hanan's quiet courage moved all the judges, who admire the storytelling and the quality of the writing. 2023 winner Christine Pillainayagam says, "The way micro-aggressions faced by people of colour are described is powerful."

Q&A with author Ayaan Mohamud

When did you start writing *You Think You Know Me* and can you tell us about the inspiration for it?

I started writing ***You Think You Know Me*** in the summer of 2020, during lockdown, and finished a first draft in November of that year with the help of **NaNoWriMo**. The main character, Hanan Ali, was inspired by the tragic death of Shukri Abdi, a 12-year-old Somali refugee from Manchester. Shukri had faced horrific bullying at the hands of her classmates in the two years prior that she'd been living in the UK. Her story stayed with me and made me want to write a book that centred the Muslim and Somali refugee experience.

Judge and 2023 Branford Boase Award winner Christine Pillainayagam commented that *You Think You Know Me* is important for young people who don't find themselves in books, and particularly for young Muslims. How much did you have this audience in mind when you wrote the book?

Young Muslims were very much at the forefront of my mind as I set out to write. At times, I did feel a lot of pressure in trying to make sure I got the representation right, especially because there are so few Muslim characters in YA books. This representation dwindles even further when we consider books that feature Muslim main characters or practicing Muslims.

But while I did have young Muslims in mind, I was also very much thinking about all young people. I was keen to offer a story that could lend itself as an antidote to rising anti-Muslim hatred, by encouraging empathy and compassion. In a world that's becoming increasingly divided, I wanted to offer something different: a story centred on love and hope.

What did you most enjoy about working with your editor Sarah on the book?

Working with Sarah was an absolute dream! Editing is such a long and emotional process but I really looked forward to getting editorial letters from Sarah and seeing what more we could do to push the story and really make it shine. I loved how collaborative the whole process was. Though editing certainly felt like a mammoth task, I never felt like I was in it alone. I often think back to those intense edits now the whirlwind of debut year is over and find myself filled with gratitude to have worked with someone who understood, exactly, the story I was trying to tell.

What was the best piece of advice she gave you?

To always remember that this was my story to tell how I wanted. I am so grateful that Sarah reminded me of this time and time again because, as a debut author, it would have been easy to fall into the trap of thinking an editor's suggestions was where the line ended. But editing a story

is so much more nuanced than that and Sarah continually encouraged me to listen to the characters and do what felt right.

What would you say were the elements of *You Think You Know Me* that were hardest to get right?

There are so many things I could list here, particularly because what felt ‘hardest’ changed with every round of edits. But I think my biggest challenge and what I consistently tried to focus on was ensuring that Hanan’s character arc felt believable. That it engaged readers and made them want to support her. That the pacing of her evolution from the quiet, good girl to the girl finding and speaking her truth felt genuine so readers could believe in her growth.

What advice would you give to anyone writing a contemporary YA novel?

The advice that I hear most, and would second, is to read. Read lots of contemporary YA to start with (narrowing this down to books that have been published within the last couple of years) and read widely in other YA genres too if you can. I would also say it’s key to nail down what is about your book that would relate to teens. It’s easy to get swept up in the latest trends, but ideally you want your story to be relatable to teens in the long run and not only in the year you’re writing or publishing your book. So you want a story that feels universal to the teen experience in one way or another.

And finally, work on making your dialogue sing! Teens and young adults will adore a book even more if it feels authentically written for a YA audience. Workshop your dialogue, read it out loud, do everything you can to make sure the world and characters you’ve created feel as real as possible.

Q&A with editor Sarah Stewart

What most excited you about Ayaan’s book when you first read it?

It can be rare to find a YA novel where the voice feels truly authentic but from the moment I met Ayaan’s characters they felt so real to me – so human and funny and flawed and loving and loyal and desperate and brave – to the point that I felt like I was listening in on their private conversations. And then to couple that with the incredible power of the story, of the trauma Hanan and her family go through, set it apart as something very special.

What were the main elements you worked on editorially with Ayaan to help her make the book even better?

Mainly we looked at balancing the drama. It was so fascinating to meet the characters in the opening half of the book, and of course there is the very dramatic kicking-off point of Hanan’s friend’s death early on, but it was the violent confrontation later in the book between Hanan, her brother and her bully that really took the drama to another level. So we worked on developing suspicion and mystery around Hanan’s brother’s activities across the early half of the book leading up to that scene, to build the tension and really keep the reader hooked in.

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

Ayaan constantly surprises me. The fact that *You Think You Know Me* was so incredibly accomplished even though it was her first book, written in lockdown while she was studying as a medical student, blew me away. And in her second book, *The Thread That Connects Us*, she

has interspersed some beautiful romantic fable passages with the contemporary narrative, which I was not expecting but which I love wholeheartedly. She works so hard at her craft and she's not afraid to try new things.

What do you think is the most effective scene in *You Think You Know Me* and why?

The scene where Hanan and Hussein are attacked is obviously incredibly tense and had me on the edge of my seat, heart racing – from that scene onwards I literally could not put the book down. But following that is a scene which I think is perhaps even more effective, where Hanan has a flashback to the tragedy that happened when her family fled from Somalia. Throughout the story, we know that Hanan's Aabo has died, but we don't know the details of what happened until this point. So there is a sense of a mystery being revealed, but it is so much more than that – despite the violence of the scene, it is so beautifully and sensitively handled, as we watch what unfolded through young Hanan's eyes, that it moved me to tears.

What would you say is the hardest thing for debut authors when working on their manuscripts?

I imagine it can be daunting to discover how long the editorial process is and how many stages there are. And it's probably even more daunting to be presented with pages of notes at the first stage about how much we love their book but at the same time how much we are suggesting should be changed, and to be left wondering where to begin. So we always have conversations with authors to chat everything through and remind them that all of our comments are only suggestions – the book is theirs at the end of the day.

What would you say to encourage someone to become an editor?

Maybe it sounds obvious, but if you love books, then editing can be the most enjoyable and rewarding career. At the heart of things, I'm just a reader, trying to help make books the most entertaining and affecting they can be so that other readers can enjoy them even more. And knowing that I've played a little part in bringing some incredible books to thousands of young people – books that can soothe, inspire, excite and even change people's lives – makes me pretty happy!

[You Think You Know Me](#) is published by Usborne, 978-1803704500, £8.99 pbk

Thank you to Ayaan Mohamud and Sarah Stewart for answering our questions.