

The BiblioFiles: Nadia Hashimi

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The Bibliofiles.

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Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is Nadia Hashimi. Born to Afghan parents who immigrated to America in the 1970s, Hashimi began her career as a medical doctor, but also wrote stories about the rich and complex experiences of Afghan culture. This resulted in a number of bestselling international novels for adults, and the two books for children we will be discussing today-- *One Half from the East*, and *The Sky at Our Feet*.

One Half from the East is the story of Obayda, the youngest daughter of an Afghan family living in Kabul. When her father loses his leg in a car bombing, the family moves to a remote village. As her father retreats further into depression, it becomes increasingly more difficult for the family to live. This is when Obayda first hears the term *bacha posh*, which is the practice of turning a girl in the family into a boy by cutting her hair, dressing her in boys' clothing, and changing her name. Obayda, now Obayd, must navigate this completely different world.

In *The Sky at Our Feet*, we meet Shah, whose American name is Jason. On his mother's birthday, Jason learns that his father did not die in a car accident, as his mother has always told him. His dad is a murdered Afghan journalist, and his mother has been living on an expired visa, terrified she will be discovered, deported, and separated from her son. When her worst nightmare happens, Jason is left alone. His only hope, he believes, is to find his mother's friend in New York City and ask for help.

Hashimi writes with richness, emotion, and empathy, enfolding the reader into her characters' lives and families. Difficult topics, such as violence, racism, poverty, and misogyny are handled deftly, clearly, and with compassion. She applies the same powerful brushes to her beautiful themes as well, like friendship, identity, inclusion, and acceptance. The result is an intimate and uplifting reading experience. Nadia Hashimi, welcome to The Bibliofiles.

NADIA HASHIMI: So glad to be here. Thank you.

DR. DANA: You are a medical doctor, and I'm sure that keeps you very busy. You did, however, find the time to begin writing novels, and not just a few. [CHUCKLES] I'd be curious to hear when you first heard the call of your stories, and if it was a challenge to find the space to begin writing them.

NADIA HASHIMI: Absolutely. My story as a writer really started with me as a reader. I've been an avid reader all my life. I was the kid who stayed up late at night under the covers with a flashlight. And when I finished my residency, I was working in an emergency room in Washington, DC, seeing pediatric patients. And during that year, my husband took a look at the

stacks of books that I always had and said, “You know what? You love reading so much, and I really feel like you could write a story, too.” And that was that little bit of inspiration that I needed, that little spark. And I just decided to try it. So I started thinking of what would I spend all this time, if I were going to put that much time into trying to craft a story, what would matter most to me? And what mattered most to me was writing about, in particular, the girls, the women, the children of Afghanistan, what these families had endured, and the resilience that they were demonstrating. And so I started writing, pulled out a computer, and said, “Let me see what I can do.”

DR. DANA: *One Half from the East* is a story about *bacha posh*, girls who become boys in the Afghan culture. In becoming a boy, the girls have more freedom, privilege, and rights. In some cases, when they reach a certain age, they return to being girls, and the social rules change for them once again. The cultural inequality is stark, and the process is emotionally challenging for the two main characters in your book. At the very end of the book, you speak directly to your readers in your author's note. It's very powerful, and I'm wondering if you could read it to us today.

NADIA HASHIMI: Absolutely, I would be happy to.

"I was raised by parents who never clipped my wings. They taught me by example that girls and boys are equal in what they can achieve. I was cocooned with an extended family who applauded achievements and encouraged aspirations others might have reserved only for boys. For that, I am eternally grateful, for I would be a different person if I'd been taught that I should expect anything less from myself.

Though this story is set in Afghanistan, my hope is that it will inspire dialogue and reflection about the meaning of gender in any land. I chose Afghanistan as the setting because it is the homeland of my family, and also because when it comes to gender inequality, Afghanistan is infamous. It wasn't always this way, but the years of war and rise of brutally misogynistic regimes, including the Taliban, shuttered women in their homes and reduced them to shadows.

From such a plummeting fall, there was nowhere to go but up. In a swift and steep effort to recover lost ground, Afghan girls and women are bravely stepping into the sun. Who are today's Afghan women? They are fist-pumping politicians, soaring pilots, determined pupils, poised newscasters, bold artists, savvy businesswomen, probing journalists, and more.

And what about the *bacha posh*? The longstanding *bacha posh* tradition of Afghanistan as a curiosity for many, but it is also a remarkable way to explore what it means to be a girl. Families without a son may designate a young daughter to fill that void with a simple physical transformation, involving swapping out clothing and cutting hair. Before she reaches puberty, the *bacha posh*, a girl dressed as a boy, is changed back and resumes life as a girl, a gender that enjoys far less liberty and privilege.

The *bacha posh* tradition exists because sons are valued in a way daughters are not. It exists because there is a perception that boys are capable of things girls are not. Are these thoughts unique to Afghanistan? Sadly, not at all.

There are many ways to devalue girls. It can be as flagrant as barring girls from school or forcing them to become brides when they should be learning to read. It can also be as insidious as jeering that someone throws like a girl, or not blinking when a girl's voice is interrupted by that of a boy.

The *bacha posh* is a powerful teacher. By a simple change in attire, her potential changes, her confidence is lifted, her worth is multiplied, and yet she is the same person underneath a shallow veneer of boyhood. The moment we see past gender and look at the heart of a child, we will see a world of potential that can take him or her all the way to the mountaintop. What a world it would be to see them all soar under the warmth of a proud and nurturing son."

DR. DANA: Thank you. This essay alone could inspire an entire workshop on gender identity and gender inequality. When were you first made aware of the practice of *bacha posh*, and how is it, as a female, did you feel about it?

NADIA HASHIMI: So, great question. I get asked this a lot. I was born and raised in the United States. And here, I haven't seen anyone engaging in the practice of the *bacha posh*. But my parents, my extended family, my husband was born and raised in Afghanistan.

And if you talk to anyone-- and we've got circles of friends. If you talk to anyone, there's a one-degree separation. My own husband has two cousins who were dressed as a boy for some time in their lives. So it was common enough that everybody knew of one, or had one in the family or in the neighborhood, or had one nearby. But it's hard to know how many people engaged in this.

I couldn't tell you when I first learned about the practice. I think there are some things that when you grow up with it, you can't pinpoint when you first heard about it, like the Easter Bunny. It's just a thing that is introduced into your consciousness, into your vocabulary. And for me, I think, not as much as those in my family who grew up with this practice around them, but to some extent, the practice didn't strike me as odd, as peculiar, as curious, as it might have one of my readers who's learning about it for the first time, because I had heard about it from the time that I was younger. So this idea of normalizing things, because we grow up with it.

But the first *bacha posh* character I wrote was in one of my adult books, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. And in that book, I really wanted to talk about the differences in Afghanistan, how patriarchy shaped the lives of girls and of women. And it occurred to me that I could do that through the eyes of a *bacha posh*, because that is a person who has lived both lives, has had both those realities, and would be able to authoritatively say, this is the difference, and here are those two different experiences from one person's perspective.

I also did it because at one point in history, there was a king in Afghanistan who had used women dressed as men to guard his harem. And so I did a historical fiction link in that book where I talked about two women or a girl and a woman who both of them at some point in their lives, were dressed as the opposite gender for different reasons, but how that shaped their experiences in their own consciousness.

And then after that book came out, there were so many great book club discussions about it that my agent said, you know, you should do a similar story for a younger reader, to talk about some

of those issues. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, it would be a rough read for a younger reader, because a lot happens in that story. But I thought it was a great idea to introduce this conversation about where does our potential come from? Does it come from gender, or does it come from just the person inside? And so that's where this story came from.

DR. DANA: In the book, the character Rahim doesn't want to go back to being a girl. In fact, she tries very hard to prevent it. Do any girls continue to be boys through their adult lives?

NADIA HASHIMI: There are a variety of experiences for the *bacha posh*. And all of this is really anecdotal, because there hasn't been any formal anthropological study on the practice, to my knowledge. So, I have anecdotally heard of some individuals who refuse at the point of being transitioned back to a girl, because their experience has been so positive being a boy. I have heard some individuals who have said that they themselves decided to put their foot down and tell their family, no, I want to go back to being a girl. And then there are some who actually did refuse and went through, I have heard of one individual who actually decided that she wanted to pursue gender reassignment in adulthood.

So it's such a multifactorial experience, I think it depends on the context of a family, what are the dynamics, for what reason was the child dressed as the opposite gender, was it done for good luck? Because there is a superstitious belief that if you dress one of your children as a *bacha posh*, the next child naturally born into the family will actually be a boy. If it was done for that reason, and no other reason, then there may be a little bit more ambiguity about the feelings around being a *bacha posh*. If the realities are very, very different, and it's done because there are certain things that the boy can do, but the girl will absolutely never, ever be able to do, then that individual might have a very different feeling about going back to being a girl. So it really depends on so many things on top of just the individual themselves, and what they feel is natural for them.

DR. DANA: I'd like to switch to *The Sky at Our Feet*, which primarily takes place in New York City. Can you tell us a little about your relationship with New York City, and why you decided to set the book there?

NADIA HASHIMI: I love New York City. I was born in Queens, only lived there for about two years. My father worked in and then owned some fried chicken stores in various parts of New York City in the Boroughs and in Harlem.

And then we moved out to New Jersey for a bit, and I lived there, and then back to upstate New York. So we were in the New York/New Jersey area until I went to medical school. I went to medical school in Brooklyn. And at that time, I was living in Brooklyn. And then I did my residency at NYU in Manhattan. And while I was working there, under training, I was living in Queens. So New York is very near and dear to me.

And I decided to set that story there, because it's one corner of the world in which you can find any kind of neighborhood. You can find people from everywhere. And the food is authentic, the languages that you can hear, just everything. It is like, the heartbeat of the world is New York City.

On top of really loving the book, *The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* when I was a child. So I can't be discreet. I really loved that book, and it was, I would say, a good inspiration for the way this story unfolds.

DR. DANA: And just for the record, have you ever ridden a stolen police horse through Central Park like Jason does? [LAUGHS]

NADIA HASHIMI: I have not. I don't even think I've ever considered doing it. I don't think I ever looked at a police horse and thought, hmm.

But something strange happens when you're writing a story, where you really jump out of yourself. And it's awesome, because you can have those kinds of crazy thoughts, and your character can do things that you would never do, because you're a good person who follows all the rules. And yet your character can just be a bit more daring and adventurous.

DR. DANA: You write about challenging topics, and you write for both adults and children. In the first chapters of the book, Jason learns many hard truths about his father, who is a murdered journalist, and his mother, who fears deportation and separation from her son. How do you make the emotional and editorial decisions about what to include in your books for kids?

NADIA HASHIMI: That's a great question. It's a tough one, because we want to be gentle with our children. We want to be nurturing. We don't want to frighten them. But at the same time, I do believe as a pediatrician, as a mom, I have four kids of my own. I do believe in the responsibility that we have to also be honest, and lay out a set of truths for our children that will empower them, and that will enable them to become the people that they need to be in their adulthood.

So children are hearing about every issue under the sun. It's impossible to think that we can put them in a bubble and protect them from anything, whether we're talking about the impact of industry on the environment, or if we're talking about immigration, if we're talking about what's going on with health, with this pandemic that we're dealing with. And so I have found that being honest without being, you don't have to be totally scary with them, you don't have to be doomsday. But you can be honest, and children will have a very, very thoughtful engagement on the conversations. And we do it in age-appropriate ways, depending on what age we're looking at.

I know when I'm writing these middle grade books for 9 to 12-year-olds, I imagine in my head a 9 to 12-year-old child, and how would I explain these issues to them? Many children are dealing with this in their own family. They might be dealing with some of these issues. And so for them, it's not an issue that I'm just introducing. It might be one where I'm just laying out a story that gives them somewhere to see themselves, somewhere to see their own struggles, their family struggles, or their loved ones' struggles, and have a place to be able to think about it within the confines of a fictional story.

DR. DANA: Max is another character in the book. She's a girl Jason meets in the hospital, and she is very precocious. How much fun was it to write her character, and is she based on anyone you know?

NADIA HASHIMI: Max, I had a lot of fun talking to Max in my head before I could put her on the page. And she's really a child who is inspired by, I would say all the children that I've had the privilege of meeting and helping and taking care of in my work as a pediatrician. Particularly when I was in training at NYU, we took care of quite a lot of children who had epilepsy of various forms. And many of them had to undergo testing and surgical procedures and surgical treatments for that.

And the thing about pediatrics is that-- you learn it on day one-- the children are incredibly resilient. They can have incredible diseases that they're battling and struggling with and surviving from, and they will still find ways to put a smile on your face. And so that's what Max is. She is smart, she is crafty, she is not letting anything hold her down. And that, for me, there's no fiction in that. Max is very real.

DR. DANA: There are so many beautiful moments between Jason, his mother, her cooking, their shared languages, and how these things form his Afghan identity and impact his American identity. For many young readers, this is their first experience with Afghan culture. What sorts of responses and questions do you get from readers about your books?

NADIA HASHIMI: I get lots of questions that sometimes they'll ask about what's happening in Afghanistan today, what is it like for children. Those are really powerful questions to me, because it shows that there is some natural curiosity. And how powerful would it be if we could create a bridge for children here, to be able to connect with children in Afghanistan and really get to know each other, not just get to know a character in a book. If we could actually sit down and break bread together, if we could taste each other's foods and share some of those stories that really bring us joy, those kinds of experiences. And that's, I think what does happen in places where people are sitting down and deciding to get to know their neighbors in a place like New York City, or anywhere else in the world where people make the decision to step outside of maybe a comfort zone, or just have an open door and say, "I'd like to get to know you, I'd like to know more about you and your culture, and who you are." So that's an inspiring thing.

I've also heard, my best friend was in New York at a recreation center, a community center. And she happened to find this dog-eared copy of which book was it? *One Half from the East*. And in it, there is a conversation between one of the characters and the teacher. And this reader, this young reader had written notes all over the pages. And so my best friend, because she's awesome, had taken pictures of several of the pages and then sent it to me. And I could see, at certain points where the character says something, this young reader had written in there, I feel like that sometimes too. Or they would react and say, no, don't do that, that's a bad idea.

But it's really powerful to see that at certain moments in the story, that a young reader could connect and say, I feel like that sometimes too. And then following the character's journey, I'm hopeful that they found some moments where they could reflect on what they would do in that situation, what they wouldn't do, and maybe change their mind, or affirm that they are making the right decisions for themselves, or that they're not alone in having any of the feelings that the characters are demonstrating.

DR. DANA: Your latest novel for adults, *Sparks Like Stars*, will be released in March 2021. Do you have any current projects in the works for your younger readers?

NADIA HASHIMI: I am working on a young adult book. That will be my first foray into that genre. So I'm hopeful to get that done soon, although this is the year that the writing has become an extra challenge. But we'll see. The goal is to finish that soon. And then I do want to return to the world of middle grade, if for nothing else, because my daughter is on me to get something else out there. And she every day asks me, "Mom, when are you going to write another middle grade book?" Because she is a middle grade reader now. So it's really exceptional to have some personal nudging at home every day.

DR. DANA: Nadia Hashimi, thank you so much for coming on The Bibliofiles today.

NADIA HASHIMI: My pleasure. Thanks so much.

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