



Changing The World One Book At A Time

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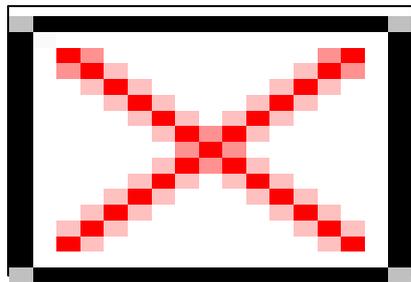
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[245](#) [2]

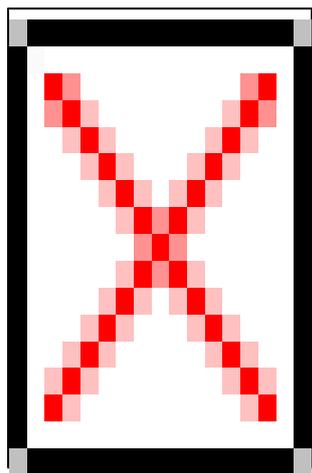
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Onjali Q Raúf interviewed by Clare Zinkin

Onjali Q Raúf interviewed by **Clare Zinkin**.



Onjali Q Raúf is a busy woman. The week we are due to speak includes publication day for her new children's book **The Night Bus Hero**. But she also finds time to speak on BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour about diverse texts in the curriculum, visit a school, celebrate the fact that her award-winning novel, **The Boy at the Back of the Class** has sold a quarter of a million copies, and champion World Homeless Day. This will come as no surprise to those who know Raúf, seeing as she declared herself a feminist at seven, and aged 30 formed her own not-for-profit, **MakingHerStory**, which works to promote women's rights and protect women worldwide.



So, we speak the following week, when Raúf is campaigning on the Lords Amendment to the Immigration Bill, although she tells me she never wants to go into politics, 'I never want to be an MP, but I do think everything is political, from what we buy in our supermarkets to what we wear.'

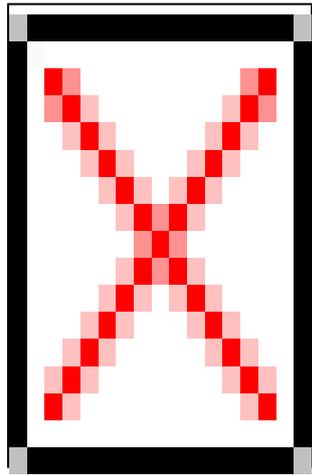
She is happy to note that there are female leaders doing terrific jobs, such as Jacinda Ardern and Angela Merkel, and has hope for the future. Raúf's role will be to continue writing books which, through their social activism agenda and empathetic storytelling, will inspire a new generation to be the kind of leader that she would like to see.

'I have hope for brilliant leaders who have heart, who have empathy for people who are struggling.'

Raúf's latest book **The Night Bus Hero**, features characters who are struggling in society, including Hector, a bully in and out the classroom, and a local homeless man called Thomas, whom Hector bullies.

It was a risk, centring a story on homelessness from the perspective of a bully, but I've seen people tease the homeless, and I've always wondered what makes those bullies tick, what makes them do something like that. Hector helps me to answer that question.

Answering children's questions in a safe space is something that Raúf strives to do through her storytelling. All people face bullies at some time, whether it's children in the playground or a horrendous manager at work, and it's good to know how you can change the bully's behaviour. When children see issues such as homelessness in the news, or hear about the refugee crisis (a topic addressed in Raúf's book **The Boy at the Back of the Class**), there are very few spaces where they can have their questions answered.



The Night Bus Hero also shows the importance of friendship. In all her books, the protagonist is helped by their friends or peers, and Hector is no exception. He is eventually shown the error of his ways by a girl called Mei-Li, who volunteers in a soup kitchen. Raúf believes that it's our peers who help us see who we are, although mischievously adds that they can also lead us astray, It happens to all of us. You're desperate to fit in, and the last thing you want to do is listen to your parents. I think I was about thirteen, and my best friend got a bob haircut with curls, and I was desperate to have the same, but my Mum said it's not going to match your face, it's not going to suit you. Of course, I had to have it done. And then I looked horrendous and I cried my way through the year, pleading with my hair to grow out. I think it's true for most children school and your friendships are your world.

But despite going against her mother about her hair, Raúf names her as a key role model. She has never been afraid to answer my questions, which is partly what led me to where I am.

Because, busy woman that she is, Raúf is changing the world not only one book at a time, but also through her work. Learning of the tragic murder of her aunt, Raúf set up a book club raising money for women's refugees. Before long it had turned into **MakingHerStory**.

It began with books and then a film club, then there was a **Harry Potter** dinner, an **Alice in Wonderland** tea party, and suddenly it began to grow and grow. I'm not sure how really. It began as a book club about feminist literature.

Which just shows the power of a story. In **The Night Bus Hero**, the homeless man Thomas says that there's no one to fight for us. We're just problems, remember?beggars who people are frightened of. Telling children's stories is one way that Raúf fights for those vulnerable people.

Most children's books are for social purpose as well as for pleasure. The books highlight that there are amazing people out there trying to do good things, even if they're not the ones in the news all the time. There is a soup kitchen in the book, but there are hundreds across the UK, and I champion those people who aren't famous, but are working in them. I want to highlight the fact that for every person struggling in the world, there will be someone out there who will help

them, and the fact that I get to do that through a book is really great.?

Food poverty is another issue that matters to Raúf, and she has been following the free school meals campaign, as well as championing the anonymous volunteers who run the numerous food banks in her locale.

But speaking with her, Raúf reveals herself to be more than just a powerful campaigner and excellent storyteller. Despite being trapped inside the 'bubble of urgency' that is our Covid Lockdown, which makes writing hard, reading is still a pleasure, from **Rebel Girls: 100 Immigrant Women Who Changed the World**, to **High Rise Mystery** by Sharna Jackson. And having fun and self-preservation is good too. Raúf makes time to watch a film, and play Lego every day, which means that many children (including mine) may want to join her.

Although she doesn't cook, laughing that all she'd be able to offer is a fish finger sandwich. That's okay for me though, I'm happy just to feed off her stories.

Clare Zinkin is a children's book consultant, writer and editor.

The Night Bus Hero is published by Hodder Children's Books, 978-1510106772, £6.99 pbk

Page Number:

6

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