

Author Farah Oomerbhoy opens up on her flirtation with fantasy and adventure...

Manish Mishra

**S**hy and soft-spoken, author Farah Oomerbhoy's eyes light up when she fondly dwells on a parallel universe comprising mythical creatures, supernatural powers and the make-believe hysteria. The under-the-radar sophisticate likes to escape the grim reality of day-to-day life by taking a pell-mell plunge into the enchanted worlds of Narnia, Neverland and the Enchanted Forest. "I'd love to live in Narnia, Neverland, Wonderland or the enchanted forest. I believe in happily-ever-afters. I do watch the news and read the newspapers, but it's not something I enjoy doing. I like to explore a better life and deal with situations there," she says.

Farah's creation, *The Last of the Firedrakes*, Book 1 of *The Avalonia Chronicles* revolves around 16-year-old Aurora Dardington who is an orphan. Mistreated by her adopted family and bullied at school, she dreams of running away and being free. But when she is kidnapped and dragged through a portal into a magical world, suddenly her old life doesn't seem so bad.

**Creating fantasy elements**  
One's keen to ask her how she managed to create such a fantastical world. Also, of all the literary genres, what made her opt for myth. "It all started with Enid Blyton. Of course, when I was very young. Then I progressed to older fantasies. *The Chronicles of Narnia* is my favourite. I have read *Lord of the Rings* many times. Also, I like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. I love the *Percy Jackson* books. I also love Dis-



## Meet the Escapist

ney." That's easy to believe as she shows me her Ariel print phone cover with a smile. Perhaps there's a little child in Farah which succumbs to the charm of this mythical landscape straddling different cultures.

**Take-off point: An unhappy household**  
Most fantasies start with unpleasant circumstances — sometimes an uncaring parent or an evil stepmother or some misfortune. Aurora's tale of fortitude and hope has a similar outline. "I guess you could say it's a bit similar but once she goes into tapestry, it's completely different. Themes of courage, bravery, duty, losing family, finding family, being an individual come into play. It's set in a

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fantasy world where anything is possible. There's always hope. It's a coming-of-age book. She's learning about the world. It so happens, she learns about that world rather than the world we live in," she shares.

Through fantasy Farah likes to explore different aspects and character-

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istics — how Aurora's very naive in the beginning even though she's brave and she wants to do things, and she's curious about everything. "And that's how we are when we are young. She makes mistakes, gets into trouble just like everyone else. A lot of my readers tell me, 'Why is she so silly?' She frustrates us, we get angry," even though they love the book. She's naive, she trusts people foolishly and always sees the good in people. A lot of people are like that. However, some are not and are suspicious of everyone they meet."

Now Farah has got into the second book and explains that Aurora will change due to circumstances. "She won't be naive hopefully in the second book and won't get into as much trouble," she smiles. Farah is already busy with the sequel now.

### Farah in Aurora

Most authors derive inspiration and character traits from real-life people. Is there a bit of Farah in Aurora? "I would hope that some of the good traits are something that come from me. She's her own character and when I imagined her, she's not me. There are a lot of things I admire about her. I also think she's quite silly at times because she's naive but she's very brave. Sometimes the way she overcomes her fears, I don't think at 16, I'd be able to do it. You're thrown into a life-and-death situation and how a young girl will be able to deal with it and grow up. I love creating the world and most of time goes in that. If I have a scene in my head, I'd write out the description of the whole scene and then insert characters into that. It's sort of a movie playing in my head and these characters sort of walk around and do stuff."

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Farah did a lot of research on societies and cultures because each kingdom described in the book has its own society, culture, history and religion. Each character has a back story, they all have family connections. The readers learn everything as Aurora goes through it and as she learns. "I think in that way you see everything through Aurora's eyes. I hope that readers, at least, the young girls can identify with her and relate to her in that world and be her," she adds.

### Schooling and background

"I am from Mumbai and studied at Cathedral. I did my BA from St Xavier's. I did my masters in English Literature from Mumbai University. That time I enjoyed reading and discussing books. I read all the classics," she shares.



**Main catalyst**  
"It was a gradual process. I didn't really think I'd ever publish the book when I started imagining the world of Avalonia. I created the world, I enjoyed drawing the map, then I'd write a story about each kingdom. It just kept growing and growing. Once I was standing close to a tapestry in my grandmother's house and thought what if it was magical and if I step into

it and land up in Avalonia," she says.

### Parallel literary movement

With the popularity of fantasy literature and TV shows, one sees the emergence of the fantasy movement. "Fantasy has become more acceptable. People used to think that fantasy is something which only a certain kind of people read. However, now with crossover books like *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* becoming popular — people who read non-fiction like to read fantasy."

### A people watcher?

Sometimes people laugh at me. At times, I won't notice what someone's wearing. Sometimes, I will notice but it depends on what it is. If I am in a lovely countryside I'll be looking around and noticing the smallest flower, the way a tree is growing, things like that. If I am at a party at someone's house then I may not notice much," she laughs.

### Juggling family with writing

Now that I'm a full-time writer, I have to be, most of time goes in trying to work around my writing. Usually in the morning, when the kids are in school, that's a good time to write. Then the afternoon gets a little hectic, kids come home for lunch, there are school meetings. It's fun with the children but one hardly gets time in the day. So early morning is good or late at night. I keep that time. After 10 o'clock, I don't pick up the phone. I don't do anything else. I sit down and write. I'm trying to do 1,500 to 2,000 words a day. I need to get the second book ready soon because I'm planning to launch it by the end of next year," she informs.

### Being on the Amazon bestseller list

"I was quite surprised when I saw it even being on the list. Even being on the list was great but I was surprised to see it on number three, then two and then one. I have sold a lot of copies in the US. We were the finalist in the USA Best Book award."

### Books by my bedside

"The latest series which I enjoyed Sarah J Maas', *Throne Of Glass* series — with a female character who's actually an assassin and it's set in the fantasy world. I just finished *Divergent*. I have read *The Hunger Games*."

### Being low-key

"I do keep to my few close friends. I don't go out much. A lot of my friends laugh at me and say 'when are we going to see you?' I end up somewhere after two months. I do keep in touch with my close friends and people who I do meet. Maybe I'd attend one in 10 events. Unless something is interesting or it's a close friend."

### Travel inspires me

"Travel inspires a lot. Seeing different places, there's so much description I can imbibe from. It always gives me an idea of a scene or a snapshot. I do like art. I'm not an expert. Not like Roohi (Farah and Roohi Jaikishan are sisters-in-law) who's a collector in the family."

### Style to me is...

"It's important to be comfortable and wear something what you like. If something catches my eye, I'd probably buy it. I'm not the type to say 'Oh everyone has got this so I have to get it'. I do like vintage finds and I have a lot of old saris from my mother-in-law, my mother and my grandmother. My wedding outfits were all made by Pallavi Jaikishan. When you take them out, they all look brand new. I usually wear Pallavi's clothes."

### My Kids

"I have three kids aged nine, eight and four. They're excited about the book. They're a little young for it. Rahim is the eldest. He's read a part of it. Roohi (Jaikishan's) kids have read it and they were happy about it."

### Husband's role

"He's very supportive. He always says, 'it's the best book'. I don't think he's read it. He has no time. I have told him everything about the book. He knows about all the characters. He's heard me plotting it. He knows what's going on." manishmishra@chardand.net