

FARAH OOMERBHOY

**HINTING AT AN AFFAIR DU COEUR
WITH STORYTELLING YEARS AGO,
THIS MODEST MOTHER OF THREE
SURPRISES WITH HER PASSIONATE
REVELATIONS ABOUT WRITING HER
FIRST WORK OF CHILDREN'S FICTION**

It was only after her daughter, Inaara, (seen here) turned three, that Farah ventured towards fulfilling her dream of publishing her debut work of fantasy fiction

What were the real triggers for you to write this story?

"I started thinking about this story nearly 10 years ago, building the world of Avalonia, whenever I got time. The actual world creation started with a tapestry in my grandmother's house. One day I stood before it and wondered, what if I could step into the tapestry, where would I end up? And so the world of Avalonia sprang into existence. From then on, the person who stepped into the tapestry was a young 16-year-old girl who didn't know who she really was, her name was Aurora, and this is her story."

Most protagonists of children's tales seem to be orphans – from Harry Potter to Cinderella... when one first started reading your story, one immediately felt a sense of déjà vu. Your views on this?

"Traditionally, many children's classics feature a protagonist with one or two parents that are missing or presumed dead. Usually, it allows the main character a lot more freedom without their nosy parents getting in the way! Most of the books that I read as a child, or at least the ones that left an impact on me, lacked a parent or sometimes both parents. From

very beginning of the book, that is where the similarities end."

Who would you consider influencers in this genre?

"There have been many influences on my writing; from Enid Blyton's *Magic Faraway Tree* series and CS Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, to TH White's *A Once and Future King* and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

JK Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Roald Dahl's *Charlie & the Chocolate Factory*, Diana Wynne Jones' magical worlds, Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland* books, Ursula le Guin's *Earthsea Quartet* and JM Barrie's *Peter Pan*, have all in some way contributed towards my love for magical adventures and fantasy worlds and inspired me to write fantasy for young people. Also, David Eddings' *Belgariad* series and Terry Brooks' *Sword of Shannara* books made me realise the true extent and scope of epic fantasy."

Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness Quartet* was very instrumental in the creation of my main character Aurora. It made me better understand what fantasy looks like with a young female as hero. My book is a culmination of all these reading experiences."

They say with technology taking over every aspect of life, abbreviated fiction alone has a chance. What kind of adventures did you

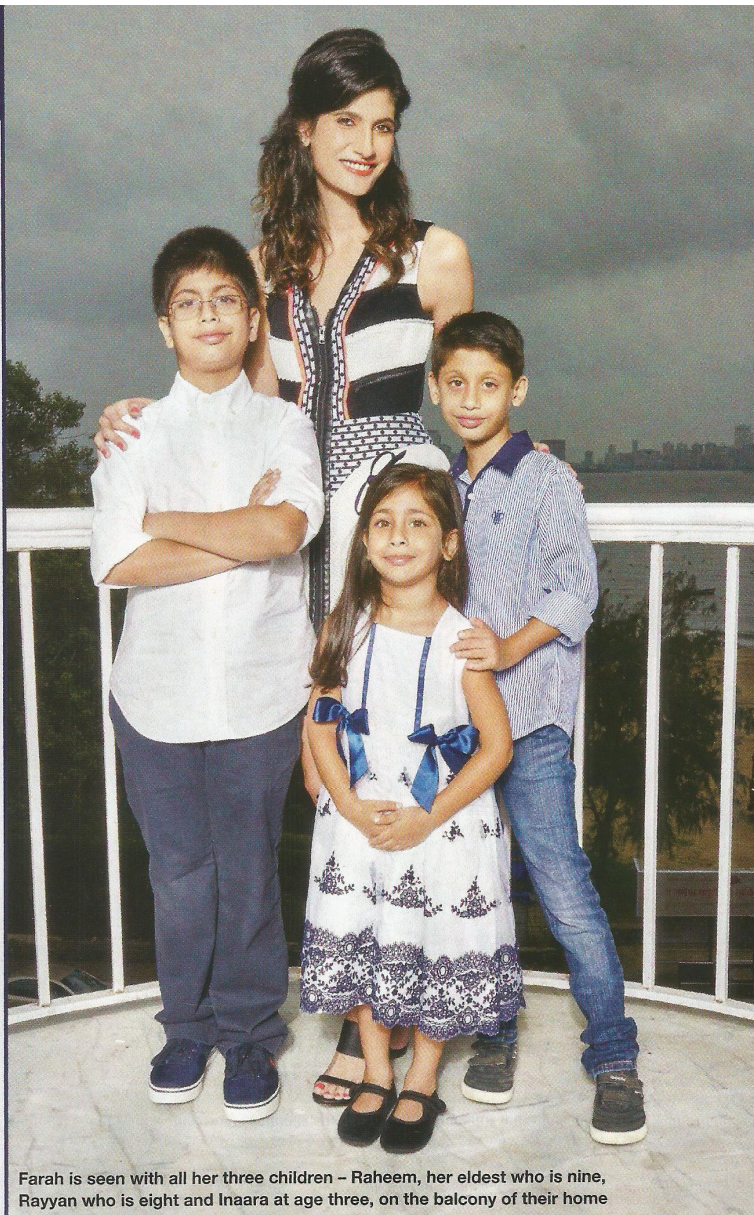
'Having three children made writing take a back seat for a while, which gave me more time to plan, actually. After my daughter was born three years ago, I finally finished the book and sought to get it published. It was something I just had to do, like breathing'

the orphan boy who pulled the magical sword Excalibur from the stone, to Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, Oliver Twist, Tom Sawyer, and Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Harry's orphan status is not really that uncommon in children's literature. Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*, and Diana Wynne Jones' *A Charmed Life*, to name a couple, also feature an orphan protagonist. All these were written long before Harry Potter came on the scene. That is not to say that Harry Potter did not have a big impact on me as an author – I am a huge JK Rowling fan. All literature is an amalgamation of past stories, and the ambiguous place orphans take in society lets them experience and immerse themselves in magic in exciting and interesting ways. Although there are parallels between Harry and Aurora in the

undergo when dealing with local publishers?

"Last year, I did query a few publishers in India, but I have to admit that the book was still in a first draft stage and wasn't very well received here at the time. Most of the publishers felt that this type of book was not suited for the Indian market. That's when I started looking for publishers in the US and finally signed up with Wise Ink to publish my book."

The Last of the Firedrakes, Book 1 of the Avalonia Chronicles, has been out in the US for a month now and we will be launching in bookstores all over India in October. So far, the book has received very well! When it launched on the 15th of August 2015, *The Last of the Firedrakes* hit the number one position on the Hot New Release list and is now



Farah is seen with all her three children – Raheem, her eldest who is nine, Rayyan who is eight and Inaara at age three, on the balcony of their home

at number three on the Amazon US Bestseller List in Children's 'Coming of Age Fantasy' books."

Did the story tell itself, as the creative process unfolded?

"I wish it were that simple! It would be easy for the characters to just write themselves and create a wonderful story, but it doesn't really work that way for me. There does come a point in the book where the characters' personalities play a vital part; but initially, a lot of planning goes in. The creation of the world itself took me years. From detailed maps to notebooks filled with information on all the different kingdoms, their politics, societies, trade routes, race, cultures, etc. Each character has a backstory and a whole history including character traits, their likes, dislikes, family connections, physical descriptions, and more

are all drawn out. In addition to all this, there is a whole mapping out of the magic system used in this world. Everything has to make sense. Once all this is done and I have an outline for the story then yes, the characters do start talking and doing things that I did not expect. But this is only if they have a set personality in place."

How do you think being a mom helped you write for today's kids? How do you feel your kids have a radically different experience of the world, than you did in your childhood?

"I think being a mom does help to understand the mind of a child much better, and that does come in handy when I write. Of course the world today is very different from when I was a teenager and yes, the E-revolution has made ►



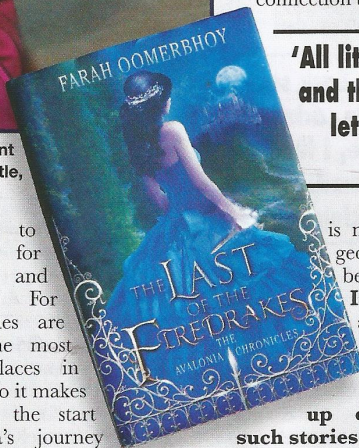
Farah is seen in a moment of poised reflection, in front of her bookshelves at home. Inset: The cover of her title, *The Last of the Firedrakes*

children much more dependent on technology than we were as kids. But children are still reading, they may read on a kindle or an iPad, but they still do like to read. I cannot stress enough the importance of reading books for the development of a child's mind. TV and iPads cannot compare and I aim to write stories that will make a child shut off the television and pick up a book instead.

As Ursula Le Guin wrote, 'We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel... it is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become.'

One noticed that Aurora gravitates towards good old-fashioned books, not kindles or iPads; your story appears to be set in the pre-tech era. "Yes, Aurora loves old-fashioned books and that is probably

connected to my love for reading and libraries. For me, libraries are one of the most magical places in the world, so it makes sense that the start of Aurora's journey begins in the library at Redstone Manor. Although the world of Avalonia is essentially medieval, Aurora is in essence a modern teenager. She has lived her whole life in this world with modern technology, so she is more relatable to the readers. She only enters the fantasy world of Avalonia after she turns 16. Everything is seen through Aurora's eyes. And, Aurora could be anyone; it could be you who could open a cupboard, enter a library, or step into a tapestry and be transported to a magical world.



In my opinion, stories do not need to be set in a contemporary modern, technological world to be relevant. Stories are about people, and as such, are universal and timeless. They explore the human condition and lead us to dream the impossible. 'Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It is a way of understanding it' said Lloyd Alexander."

The universe of your characters and setting is England...

"The first two chapters of the story are set in England, but after that the rest of the story takes place in the fantasy world of Avalonia. I was born in Mumbai and grew up here. I did travel to England a lot with my parents when I was young during school holidays and I love the English countryside, but that is not why it is set there. England is the birthplace of King Arthur, the land of Merlin, the home of JRR Tolkien, CS Lewis, JM Barrie, TH White, JK Rowling and Enid Blyton. Middle-Earth, Narnia, Hogwarts, Neverland, Camelot and the worlds on the top of the Faraway Tree influenced my understanding of concepts within children's fantasy literature as well as help shape the creation of Avalonia. Therefore, the connection to British culture

English. The *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita* even the Persian epic, *Shahnameh*, are a few of the myths and legends that I have an interest in researching. I also like the Graeco-Roman myths. Eventually, I want to explore stories involving Indian mythology, but not in this series."

What are some responses you have got to your book from other mums?

"The responses have actually been quite fantastic. I even got one message from a dad complaining that his daughter refuses to talk to him because she's too engrossed in the book! Though it's a 488-page book, some of them have finished it in two days."

How easy was it to do this book, from idea to execution?

"It has always been a dream of mine to write fantasy books for children and teenagers, but having three children made writing take a back seat for a while, which gave me more time to plan, actually. But it was only after my daughter was born three years ago that I finally finished the book and sought to get it published. It wasn't easy, but it was something I had to do, like breathing. I just worked on it piece by piece and let it build."

Do your kids love your book... do you read to them

'All literature is an amalgamation of past stories, and the ambiguous place orphans take in society lets them experience and immerse themselves in magic in exciting and interesting ways'

at bedtime?

"This book is a little advanced for my children to read on their own, it is for 10-16 year olds, but my eldest son, Raheem, has read it and loves giving me suggestions on plotting book two. They are all very understanding and don't disturb me if they know I'm meeting a deadline. Mostly I write at night, after they're asleep. I do read to them almost every night. We have just started the *Magic Faraway* series and they are all enjoying it!"

What are you writing next?

"Right now, I am focusing on writing books Two and Three of the series. I hope to have the second book out by December 2016 and the third book, if all works out, soon after."

TEXT: SANGEETA WADHWANI
PHOTOS: RYAN MARTIS
MAKE-UP AND HAIR:
RECINDA MARTIS
STYLING: SONAM POLADIA
ASSISTED BY: RICHA MEHTA