

VERVE SCAPES

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IMAGINE THAT!

Debut author **Farah Oomerbhoy's** world revolves around family, fashion and, to a very large extent, fantasy, finds **Simone Louis**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TEJAL PANDEY

When it comes to decor and design, it's often professed that imagination and individuality is key to bringing one's living spaces to life. The former is, quite unquestionably, discernible in the aura of Farah Oomerbhoy's South Mumbai home, the interiors of which ooze quaint personal touches. The soft-spoken fantasy-fiction author - who could herself pass off as a nymph or a similar mythical creature - luxuriates in her own little bubble of secret gateways, happily-ever-afters and enchanted forests. "Every reader at some point in their lives comes across a book that inspires them to think beyond the boundaries. For me, that book was C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The wonderful world of Narnia, and the magical beings that lived within it, made me look at fantasy in a completely different way," she muses, seated gracefully on a plush sofa against floor-to-ceiling windows that look out at the quiet end of the Chowpatty beach.

The starry-eyed romantic is presently lapping up the astonishing success of her debut novel, *The Last of the*

Firedrakes - the first book in a series called *The Avalonia Chronicles*. First published in the United States, the YA novel was acknowledged as a finalist in the 2015 USA Best Book Awards before going on to win a Watty Award for the most-added book on Wattpad in the same year, with over 1.5 million reads on the online writing community and a legion of fans. After hitting number one in the category of hot new releases in children's fantasy on Amazon, it was launched in India at the end of 2015 and is a bestseller. "I started thinking about this book nearly 10 years ago; building Avalonia whenever I got the time," she says. "I didn't really think I'd ever publish it when I started imagining this world."

The compelling story follows its protagonist, Aurora Darlington, a 16-year-old orphan who is kidnapped and dragged through a portal into a magical land called Avalonia. "One of the first scenes that I thought of was in a fairy market. But it was only when I stood before a tapestry in my grandmother's house that I realised the magical market could easily be situated in the forest depicted in the tapestry. And so the world sprang into existence. From then

Facing page: Farah Oomerbhoy: erudite escapist



on, the person who stepped into the tapestry was a young girl who didn't know who she really was."

Youthful, relaxed and witty, Oomerbhoy has an instinctive understanding of design, not to mention fashion. Her understated, informed look complements her unruffled demeanour that I am privy to in the expansive ancestral family cottage, designed in most part by her late mother-in-law, Nurjehan Oomerbhoy. "I don't like to change much of the main house, as it is a perfect mix of Islamic and European traditions," she states. There's something appealing about a home that is chic without being the least bit snooty, where rather fine antique-looking furniture, family heirlooms and marble statuettes share space with quirky knick-knacks and animal prints. Then again, that reflects the personality of its occupant, who combines sophistication with playfulness and a flair for entertaining. "What I construct in my fantasy worlds does not always correspond to my design sensibilities in the real world, but in essence they are similar."

Farah Oomerbhoy spent her formative years nurturing a taste for mysticality. Like many of us, she grew up fantasising about the lands of Enid Blyton's *The Magic*

Faraway Tree, T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Among those that moved her to write fantasy for children were Diana Wynne Jones' many magical worlds, Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Earthsea Quartet*, and J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. "Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* and Robin McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown* were very instrumental in the creation of my main character, Aurora," she elaborates. "They made me better understand what fantasy looks like with a young girl as the hero. I was inspired to write what would combine the best of everything I had learned from all these wonderful stories, and so *The Last of the Firedrakes* started to take shape."

On reading the book, it's easy to be amazed by the vastness and intricacy of the world-building; the many cultures and races, including mages, fae, witches and a host of other magical creatures. "A lot of research went into it, from the trade and commerce of each of the seven kingdoms to castles and palaces, medieval villages and magical artefacts...and I enjoyed every bit of it. I created different kingdoms, imagined their different societies, and even drew detailed maps of certain towns and cities. Some of them are planned right down to which shops and buildings go where and on which street," Oomerbhoy says of Avalonia, which was partly inspired by the Arthurian legends of the mystical isle of Avalon.

Walking through a charming corridor with glistening marble flooring, natural lighting pouring through wooden windows, we're led to a breathtaking, warmly-lit dining room where one almost immediately envisions enthralling dinner parties and stylish soirees. The writer's favourite room, however, is her bedroom – the couch in it serves as her

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favourite writing and reading spot. "It's where I shut myself away from the rest of the world. Since I have three children, it does get difficult to find quiet time to immerse myself in writing," she explains, listing her books, bed and desk as things that she could never live without in her home. Big windows, high ceilings and airy rooms make up all of the living spaces here, each one inviting and comfortable since the writer loves "beautiful, peaceful designs, pleasing to the eye, which are harmonious within their surroundings". From certain elements across the home, one can see an evolution from a vivacious to a more delicate aesthetic. "There was a time when I loved bold colours and opulent fabrics," she admits. "But lately I prefer clean lines, softer colours and open spaces, without too much clutter."

A different setting presents itself with each corner that we turn, almost like the portals Oomerbhoy loves so much. She smiles, "I have always loved the idea of being able to enter into another magical world from our own. Worlds like Narnia, Hogwarts, Wonderland and Neverland have always been at the heart of my inspiration. One of the main concepts of my story is that Aurora could be anyone; that at any point of time it could be you who could open a cupboard, enter a library, or step into a tapestry and be transported!" And as I exit the sunny yellow building, past blossoming flowers and tall trees, onto the sea-facing road, I find myself 'believing' just a little bit more. 



Farah Oomerbhoy: working her magic