

Islamic-Friendly Comic Book, Film Content on the Rise

In a November panel at San Diego's famed Comic-Con, Sohaib Awan described *Beyond the Forest*, an upcoming graphic novel series, as "a Muslim Narnia," referencing the fantasy novels written by British author C.S. Lewis (a series that, itself, includes a handful of references to Islamic culture).

Beyond the Forest, by Noor Yusuf, Tati Nuari and Anny Maulina, focuses on a group of children guided by an ostensible "wise-woman" who helps the party travel to a mystical land in a magical Mihrab—or prayer niche that typically points toward Mecca. The fantasy series is part of *Fictional Frontiers*, a new initiative announced at Comic-Con, which seeks to support Muslim voices with key roles in developing creative storytelling.

Fictional Frontiers will launch in early 2022 as a subscription-based, all-digital platform to tell stories that often, but not exclusively, have an Islamic frame of reference. While comics will be a key part of the content on offer, Fictional Frontiers hopes to also develop prose, poetry and video.

"Graphic novels are often a way to test new stories and new ideas that are eventually developed into TV shows or film; everyone is hungry for great content right now," said Awan, the CEO of Jabal Entertainment, which is behind the new effort.

The first two comic books under the initiative were announced at the fall Comic-Con, including *Beyond the Forest*, which draws on fantasy themes. The other, *MODAL*, a science fiction series written by Ink and Hack and drawn by Dedy Koerniawan, takes place in the near future, where data is used to

micromanage the lives of ordinary people.

While the July Comic-Con attracts 130,000 participants to San Diego, the smaller fall event is focused on industry insiders with an eye to developments in the next year.

Awan, who is of both Czech and Pakistani heritage, had no intention of getting into the comic book industry when he had an idea for a comic book series. But his unique story about battles between jinn and aliens drew the attention of one of the major publishers in the comic book industry. When the publisher offered to purchase it, the Philadelphia-area attorney found himself refocusing on creative efforts.

"I just knew there would be interests in dynamic storytelling outside of the superheroes, wizards and dragons out there," Awan told Religion News Service. Awan launched the Fictional Frontiers radio show, initially focused on the Philadelphia area. It grew to become, as Awan put it, the "nation's only weekly radio program dedicated to serious discussion about popular culture."

Awan's associate in the new Fictional Frontiers initiative also has a background outside of the comic industry. Sarah Mughal is a literary fiction writer who practices kung fu in her free time and has a background in creating more inclusive spaces for creative content. Mughal founded #APIpit, a Twitter pitch event in May 2021 designed to draw attention to self-identifying Asian and Pacific Islander writers and illustrators. A second event is planned for 2022.

"The entertainment industry has often limited portrayals of Islam to certain acceptable archetypes for Muslim characters and an overuse of a desert aesthetic as well. Yet, most Muslims are not from the MENA region," Mughal told RNS, referring to the Middle East and North Africa.

The Pakistani-Canadian writer is based in the suburbs of Toronto. Her writing has drawn on the Quranic tradition and is

also dedicated to exposing the violent history of colonialism.

The duo believes the initiative arrives at the right time as the consumer base for comic book stories has diversified. The November panel was reportedly the first since the event was founded in 1970 to feature Islamic content developed and written by Muslims.

But if Muslim heroes aren't yet visible on the big screen, Muslim comic fans can increasingly be found at comic book conventions, such as the attention-grabbing group of Muslim women who appeared at New York's Comic Con dressed as the various Avenger characters.

San Diego's 2019 Comic-Con event included a panel titled "SuperSalaam: Muslim Nerds, Geeks and Fandom." Just as newsworthy was Blair Imani, a Muslim woman who attended the panel in cosplay as the *Star Trek* character Geordi LaForge—with the addition of a hijab.

Her costume drew international media coverage and praise from LeVar Burton, the actor who played LaForge in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* television series. Imani reported some Comic-Con attendees opposed her inclusion of a hijab, but she pointed out that LaForge may have been of Muslim heritage, given that the fictional character was born in Somalia.

While Fictional Frontiers and Muslim cosplay may be grassroots reflections of growing Muslim engagement in comics, a number of new initiatives are underway by major studios to bring Muslim actors and heroes to the screen. Egyptian American actor Abubakr Ali was cast this year to star as the hero in Netflix's forthcoming *Grendel* series. He is the first Arab Muslim to be cast as a superhero in a major franchise.

Meanwhile, Disney is working on new *Blade* and *Ms. Marvel* streaming series. Both projects will include significant Muslim talent. *Blade*, which begins filming next year, will feature two Muslim Americans in prominent roles—actor

Mahershala Ali in the title role and Bassam Tariq as the director of the film. *Ms. Marvel*, set to release in early 2022, will be the first comic-book-based streaming series to feature a Muslim character in its titular role. {eo}

© 2021 Religion News Service. All rights reserved.

Follow breaking news like this on our new platform, CHARISMA PLUS.