"Maya Aziz is a teen everyone needs to know. Her story—an exploration of the unique challenges Muslim Americans face—is a much-needed addition to the young adult canon."—AISHA SAEED, AUTHOR OF *WRITTEN IN THE STARS*

LOVE HATE & OTHER FILTERS

SAMIRA AHMED

ON SALE JANUARY 16, 2018

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SOHO TEEN PRIORITY TITLE

LOVE, HATE & OTHER FILTERS

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IN THIS UNFORGETTABLE DEBUT, A MUSLIM TEEN COPES WITH ISLAMOPHOBIA, CULTURAL DIVIDES AMONG PEERS AND PARENTS, AND A REALITY SHE CAN NEITHER EXPLAIN NOR ESCAPE.

American-born seventeen-year-old Maya Aziz is torn between worlds. There's the proper one her parents expect for their good Indian daughter: attending a college close to their suburban Chicago home, and being paired off with an older Muslim boy who's "suitable" to her mother. And then there is the world of her dreams: going to film school and living in New York City—and maybe, just maybe, pursuing a boy she's known from afar her entire life who's suddenly falling into her orbit at school.

But unbeknownst to Maya, there is a danger looming beyond her control. When a terrorist attack occurs in another Midwestern city, the prime suspect happens to share her last name. In an instant, Maya's community, consumed by fear and hatred, becomes unrecognizable, and her life changes forever.

Advance praise for *LOVE, HATE & OTHER FILTERS*

"A heartbreakingly beautiful debut that weaves together the rush of new love and the shock of old hatred . . . A cinematic glimpse into one experience of growing up Muslim in modern America."

—HEIDI HEILIG, AUTHOR OF *THE GIRL FROM EVERYWHERE* AND *THE SHIP BEYOND TIME*

"Hit so close to home, it sometimes hurt to read. I laughed at Maya's wry observations and wept at her profound ones; this book is a searing, honest portrait of what it really means to be a Muslim American teen loyal to two cultures and figuring out how to carve out a space of her own in between."

—SARVENAZ TASH, AUTHOR OF *THE GEEK'S GUIDE TO UNREQUITED LOVE*

"Ahmed crafts a winning narrator—Maya is insightful, modern, and complex, her shoulders weighted by the expectations of her parents and the big dreams she holds for herself. Brief interstitials spread evenly throughout the text key readers into the attack looming ahead, slowly revealing the true figure behind its planning with exceptional compassion. Utterly readable, important, and timely."

—*BOOKLIST*, STARRED REVIEW

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote this book out of hope.

My old apartment in New York City's East Village once had a clear view of the World Trade Center. Every year on the anniversary of the 9/11 attack, I would stare out of my big picture window at the two bright shafts of light beaming up to the heavens. A beautiful and heartbreaking memorial for those we lost. Mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, brothers and sisters, friends, lovers, wealthy and working class, old and young. Americans. Tourists. Those who chose to make this place their home; those born here. Muslim and Jew. Christian and Hindu. Buddhist and Atheist. Every race. Every creed.

All of them, human beings.

To those of us who live, who bear witness, the Tribute in Light shines as a beacon, a reminder, that though we are many; we are one.

I wrote this book out of love.

Raghead. Terrorist. Paki. Illegal. I've been called lots of names that aren't my own and it stings every time, forever burned in my memory. But my experiences of Islamophobia and bigotry are mild compared to the violence many others have faced, will face. In this time of political uncertainty, we've seen hate speech emerge out of the dark corners to which it was once relegated. We've witnessed so-called leaders not merely casually accept cruelty, but engender it. Worse, we've seen horrific violence. But all around us, we've seen people rise up, not merely against the forces of hate, but for equality and justice. Bigotry may run through the

American grain, but so to does resistance. We know the world we are fighting for.

And for those who bear the brunt of hate because of the color of your skin or the sound of your name, or the scarf on your head, or the person you love; for those who are spat upon, for those who are told to "go home," when you are home: you are known. You are loved. You are enough. Let your light shine.

I wrote this book for you.

Getting to know

SAMIRA AHMED

SAMIRA AHMED was born in Bombay, India, and immigrated to the United States when she was a baby. She and her family were the first Indians and Muslims to settle in their new hometown, Batavia, Illinois. In 3rd grade, Samira's poem, "Rainbows in the City" was printed in the Batavia Public Schools newsletter. Her first brush with publishing cemented her passion for the printed word and its power on the page.

Samira graduated with joint degrees from the University of Chicago—a bachelor's degree in English language & literature and a master of arts in teaching. She went on to teach high school English for seven years in both the Chicago suburbs and New York City public schools. While teaching in the Chicago area, Samira served on the board of directors for the National Runaway Switchboard, the federally designated communications system for runaway and homeless youth.

Inspired by her classroom experiences, Samira left the school system in 2000, so she could devote herself to making it better. As Deputy Director of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, she worked to sue the state of New York for inadequately funding New York's public schools; the organization's success resulted in a multi-billion dollar remedy. As Director of External Affairs at New Visions for Public Schools, her efforts helped support the creation of over

seventy small high schools in New York City. A tireless advocate, Samira has appeared in the *New York Times*, *New York Daily News*, Fox News, NBC, NY1, NPR, BBC Radio and PBS.

In 2007, Samira merged her passion for social justice and community engagement and began working for political causes at local and national levels. She helped to register hundreds of new voters and trained community leaders to organize voter registration drives in their neighborhood; soon after, she joined Barack Obama's presidential campaign. Her service as Deputy Field Organizer for Obama for America was a personal and professional highlight—so much so that she postponed her wedding in order to temporarily relocate to Easton, Pennsylvania. There she worked with a local team to train and coordinate volunteers and election activities that contributed to Pennsylvania, a key battleground state, turning blue for Obama.

Moved by President Obama's oratory and admonition "to be the change we seek," Samira returned to her early love—that most powerful catalyst for social change—the written word. Her nonfiction essays and poetry have appeared in Jaggery Lit, Entropy, the Fem, and Claudius Speaks.

Samira currently lives in the Chicago area with her family but tries to get to Kauai as much as possible, where she once spent a blissful year searching for perfect mangos and secluded beaches.

You can find her on Twitter @sam_aye_ahm
and at www.samiraahmed.com

SAMIRA AHMED

Interviewed by her editor, Daniel Ehrenhaft

Q: At its heart, *Love, Hate & Other Filters* is a coming-of-age story about someone who longs for change on her own terms. Did you feel that same intense desire to break free—from family, community, and expectation—as an adolescent?

In some ways, I still do.

Since I was a kid I bristled against the idea of following a prescribed path. In part because I'm a contrarian, but also because I believe that freedom is autonomy. Only you can decide what is best for yourself, for *your* self. That said, I believe it is important to listen, and to keep your mind open to the experience and knowledge of others. In all likelihood there is no true "road not taken"; the paths we might take in our lives could be familiar to those who've trod them in the past. But the choice of how we approach each next step belongs to us. I believed that as a teen, and I believe that now.

Q: As a former teacher, you've played a huge role in the lives of teenagers. Did any of your former students impact *you* in similarly profound ways, and did that inform your writing at all?

I could tell stories for days about the many ways in which my former students inspired me.

There are three students in particular who showed me what it means to persist. Each came from a marginalized community, and each from a different background—one was a refugee from a former

Soviet Republic and spoke no English when she arrived in high school; one's family escaped Iran before the Revolution; one was the child of a single mom working multiple jobs to make ends meet. All three of these students worked incredibly hard. All were amongst the first in their families to go to college in America. None had the privileges that some of my other students took for granted. The system by its very nature was unfair to them. But even in the face of this unfairness, these three students leveraged a privilege they *did* have—the resources of good schools—to pull themselves and their communities up.

I'll never forget when a mom, a woman who had dropped out of school in 8th grade, implored me to push her daughter academically because she desperately wanted her daughter to succeed. That young woman, of her own initiative, stayed after school for extra help, nearly every day because she wanted to get her grades up to qualify for an advanced literature course. She did. But making it wasn't enough for her, so she stayed late to study so she could get an A, so she could graduate from high school with honors. So she could be the first in her family to go to college. So she could get her master's degree. So she could move back to her neighborhood and serve her community. She did all that while working after school, taking care of four younger siblings while her mom worked, and with all the odds against her.

Students like her made me want to tell stories of kids who persist, of kids who get knocked down and stand up, again and again. I hope the stories I write can show kids that they are not alone, that their voices and their contributions are important and needed. I

hope that if there is a reader out there feeling exhausted from battling a world telling them NO, they can look to my book and find a little hope.

Q: Without giving away any spoilers, Maya's life changes after a tragic newsworthy event, far removed from her day-to-day life. Were you in any way inspired by such an event or events?

Every Muslim I know in America has been burned by Islamophobia in varying degrees.

My first experience with bigotry was when I was about eight years old. Jimmy Carter was president, and the United States was reeling in the midst of the Iran hostage crisis—a terrifying episode in which over fifty Americans were taken hostage in the US Embassy in Iran by a group who supported the Iranian Revolution and were calling for the Shah to be ousted and tried in court. Even as a child, it was impossible to miss the details of this crisis as it was unfolding on the news every night. I was the only Muslim in my school and in my town and one of the only students of color in my school district. And it was the first time I remember my mother being scared of what someone might say or do to me.

On a day trip to Chicago, we were caught in traffic. My parents were in the front seat, talking to each other and I was in the back seat. I had my window rolled down because it was warm but I could still feel a slight breeze and I wanted to stick my head as close to the outside as my parents would allow because I loved looking around

the city. A car pulled up beside us—its front passenger side right next to my window. Two grown men were in the car and the passenger rolled down his window and pointed his finger at me and yelled, "Go home you goddamned fucking Iranian."

I was stunned. Not terrified because I don't think I knew enough to be totally frightened. But I couldn't believe that two adult men would yell at a kid they didn't know. I couldn't believe that they didn't realize we were Indian and not Iranian. It was the first time in my life anyone had ever directed the "F-word" toward me. And it was the first time someone tried to hold me responsible for the actions of other human beings—people I had no connection to or control over.

That incident is crystallized in my memory and I tried to bring the rawness of that moment—the disbelief and the disconnect to my story.

Q: Documentary films and filmmaking are a passion of Maya's, and it's clear that *you're* a cineaste. How does your love and knowledge of film influence your writing?

I love how film captures feeling in the sparest ways—light dripping off leaves or a close up of an actor's eyes or simply silence. I'm especially struck by all the elements that must come together to create these powerful, seemingly simple moments that speak to the human condition and touch us with their beauty or sadness or horror.

The best example I can offer of an artist whose painstaking work

appears both effortless and utterly stunning is master filmmaker Satyajit Ray. In a two-minute scene in *Pather Panchali*, with virtually no dialogue, Ray takes the viewer on a journey through a rainfall, first gentle then a deluge, that shows surprise and joy and purity and fear and the most touching moment of a sister's love for her brother.

A more contemporary example of a scene that speaks powerfully with imagery and with little dialogue is the No Man's Land scene in *Wonder Woman*. This scene is easily my favorite moment in any superhero film because director Patty Jenkins not only captures the truth and essence of Diana's character as she becomes Wonder Woman, but she speaks to every woman and girl who stands up, who believes in who she is and what she must do, when the world is telling her to take a back seat.

I hope my writing can distill truths in the way these scenes and so many like them do—to express a truth that speaks to my readers.

Q: Related, in an ideal world, who would you cast as Maya if *Love, Hate & Other Filters* were to be made into a movie?

In an ideal world, I would have many choices of young actresses who could portray Maya, but in the current state of Hollywood, I do not. South Asian actors have certainly been making breakthroughs in television and the big screen, but diverse casts still feel like an exception and not the rule. Even today, we see Asian roles

being whitewashed and hear false claims that diverse films and movies with female leads don't make money.

I could look to Bollywood actors, like Alia Bhatt, but young adult actors are rare in Bollywood and I would be choosing a twenty-five-year-old to play a seventeen-year-old. But Maya is a seventeen-year-old American, Desi Muslim girl and I would love to see an American actor chosen for my dream cast for the book. I have no doubt that that talent is out there—that on some high school stage or in some community theatre or on a YouTube channel there are Desi kids acting their hearts out, waiting to be discovered.

It's clear that audiences want these stories—that stories like Maya's are both singular and universal, mirror and window. It wouldn't necessarily take an industry iconoclast to bring Maya's story to the big screen, but it would take someone with vision who believes, as I do, that we don't live in a world of "others" but in a world of us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Maya begins her story with the phrase, "Destiny sucks." What do you think she means, and why does she start her story this way?

2. Maya tells Phil that she doesn't know how to be a good daughter while at the same time chasing after her own dreams. Why does she feel that these things are at odds? Does she change her mind over the course of the book?

3. Maya's story is told in the first-person POV. and the intercalary story is told from the third-person POV. Why do you think the author made that choice? How did that influence the way you related to the two narratives?

4. Why does Phil feel responsible for Brian's actions? What, if anything, could he have done differently that might have changed the outcome? What does this say about the broader theme of how events outside of our control affect us?

5. When we first meet Kareem he is a possible love interest for Maya but he transforms into something different. Why do you think Kareem still holds an important place in Maya's life?

6. Do you think that Maya is right to lie to her parents? Is there a difference between a protective lie and a self-serving lie?

7. Maya is a Muslim from an immigrant family. Even if you aren't from the same background as Maya, how could you relate to her struggles and dreams? What about her experiences felt familiar?

8. Consider the title *Love, Hate & Other Filters*. How does Maya use filters in her daily life? How do the other characters use filters? What filters do you use?

9. Maya inhabits a variety of different worlds. How are they at odds with one another? What (if anything) brings them together? Should they be brought together?

10. What is the significance of the Whitman poem in the last intercalary chapter? What values/ideals in the poem are reflected in Maya's choices? Why would this poem have had meaning to the bomber?

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