KNOW THE AUTHOR

RANDA ABDEL-FATTAH

Interviewed by Judith Ridge



RANDA ABDEL-FATTAH FIRST EMERGED IN THE AUSTRALIAN YOUNG ADULT SCENE WITH HER FIRST NOVEL, **DOES MY HEAD LOOK BIG IN THIS?** IN 2005.

DOES MY HEAD... AND HER SUBSEQUENT TWO NOVELS **TEN THINGS I HATE ABOUT ME** AND **WHERE THE STREETS HAD A NAME** ESTABLISHED HER, FOR BETTER OR ILL, AS THE VOICE OF MUSLIM AUSTRALIAN YOUTH — MUCH AS MELINA MARCHETTA HAD BEEN HANDED THE BANNER OF ITALIAN AUSTRALIAN WRITER SOME THIRTEEN YEARS EARLIER.

ABDEL-FATTAH IS ALWAYS KEEN TO BE SEEN AS A WRITER FIRST AND A 'HYPHENATED IDENTITY' (AUSTRALIAN-EGYPTIAN-MUSLIM-WRITER-LAWYER-SOCIAL-ACTIVIST) SECOND.

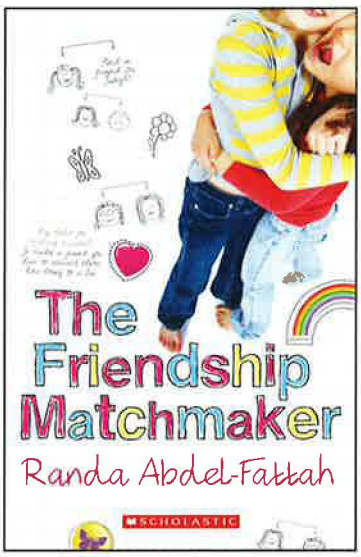
HER LATEST BOOKS ARE THE YA LEGAL THRILLER **NOAH'S LAW** AND THE JUNIOR NOVEL **THE FRIENDSHIP MATCHMAKER.**

SHE SPOKE TO JUDITH RIDGE ABOUT WRITING, CULTURE, CHARACTER AND INSPIRATION.

Your first novel for teens was published 6 years ago, and with your first three novels you've established yourself as a fresh voice for teens, notably (but not only) because of the Muslim characters and experience your early books explored. (I'd also argue that it is the humour in your first two novels, as well as the recognisable suburban milieu, that made them popular with so many young readers.) What was it that attracted you to writing for a young adult audience?

I don't know that I necessarily sit down to write with a specific young adult audience in mind (my junior fiction writing is quite audience-specific). I am one of those writers who subscribes to the view that the 'young adult' tag is a category imposed on novels by the publishing world (which may, or may not, have its merits, commercial and otherwise). All my 'YA' novels to date have been written with a much broader audience in mind — from the ages of thirteen upwards. **Where the Streets had a Name** *is a novel I particularly wrote for a deliberately wide audience. Having said that, I believe quite strongly that one can simultaneously write with two 'sub-audiences' in mind: a young adult audience and an adult audience. When I see the humour in teenage angst, for example, I write with a*

consciousness that such a scene will relate to a YA audience and adult audience differently. I would say that I'm attracted to writing about the young adult world more than writing for it. The adolescent world and experience fascinates me and it is my fascination with its particular challenges, joys and tribulations that draws me to write about that world. I suppose one of the reasons is the intensity of feelings and emotions. Will one ever love as strongly as one did as a teenager? Hate another as strongly? It is a stage of life where human emotion and zeal can be enjoyed (or suffered) without restraint and as a writer I'm captivated by the potential stories that are inherent in such experiences.

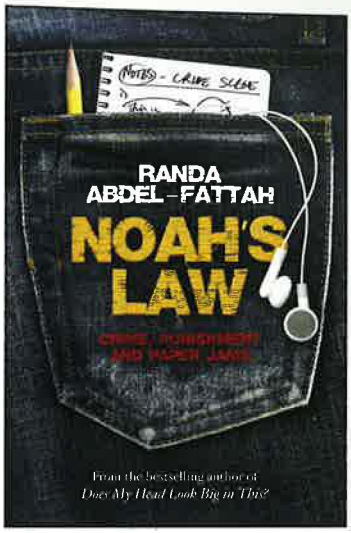


You've started writing for a younger audience with **The Friendship Matchmaker** and other junior titles from Omnibus/ Scholastic — and personally, I think you've found a wonderfully strong and natural voice in writing for this younger audience. Again, what attracted you to write for children, rather than adolescents, in these most recent books and do you think you'll continue to write for this audience?

When I write 'as a ten year old' I find myself writing with two voices in my head: my adult voice and my voice as a ten year old. The resulting product is a fusion of both levels of consciousness. It is that process and tension between young and old that I find most exhilarating. I have vivid memories of primary school and can recall with excruciating detail the agonies and joys of making and keeping friends. Writing for a younger audience has been an absolute joy for me because I feel as though I'm turning back time, diving into my own memories and experiences to share the stories and adventures that have stayed with me all these years. It's not that my writing is autobiographical, more than I am tapping into the emotional roller coaster of pre-adolescence that I remember so well. Writing for this audience, and from the point of view of a girl in Grade 5, came very naturally to me — which proves to me that I haven't really grown up all that much! Perhaps it also means that the insecurities and conflicts we experience as children never really change. That the emotions that drive us to crave other people's approval and admiration as adults are the same as those we experience as children, only the setting and circumstances change.

Following on from that, were there any particular challenges in writing your first male protagonist in **Noah's Law**?

I expected there to be. I started writing with a terrible lack of confidence in my ability to write from the point of view of a teenage male. But as I wrote I found myself snuggling into Noah's voice quite easily. I think that is because much of the work in creating a protagonist — whether they be male or female — takes place before you sit at the computer. Noah's character — his voice, quirks, habits etc — had already formed in my mind so that when I started to write I already knew him quite well and just needed to drown out the voices of doubt in my head and immerse myself in the story and character.



How much of yourself do you think are in your characters? — and by that, I don't mean the (apparently) obvious parallels we might expect to find with some of your Muslim characters, but also with Noah and Lara and perhaps even some of the secondary characters in all your novels.

I have no doubt that aspects of my character (or the character I wish I could be) subconsciously creep into my characters, whether in their personalities, a turn of phrase, a moral judgment or point of view. But the more I write, the more in control of my subconscious I am. Having said that, I believe most writers can't help but project something of themselves and their experiences onto the pages of their novel. Sometimes I am not aware that this has happened until well after publication. I may read a scene and make a connection to something in my past, or a particular quirk I share with one of my characters.

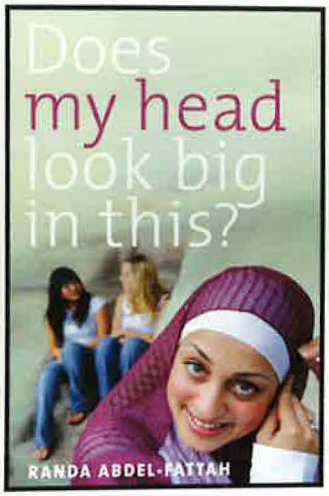
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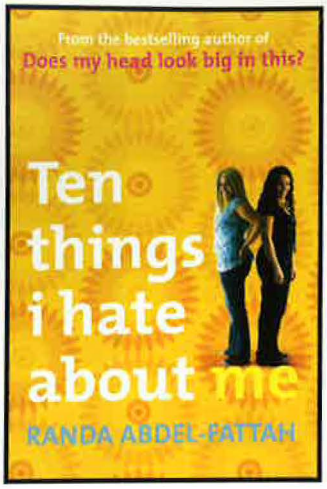
Where the Streets Had a Name was released in the United States in November 2010. It has been selected to be included in the New York Public Library's annual list for 2010 of ***100 Titles for Reading and Sharing***.

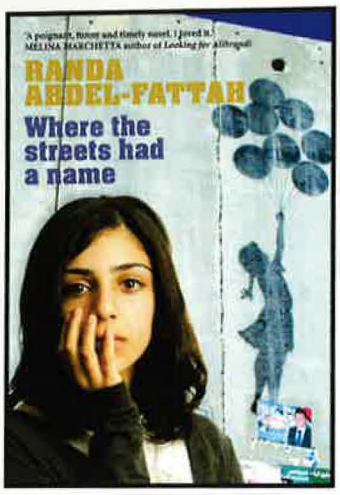
September 2010 Randa was invited by the US State Department as the only Australian representative in a delegation of fourteen international guests to participate in a multi-regional international visitor's leadership program looking at changing demographics, multiculturalism and immigration in the USA.

Where The Streets Had a Name won the 2009 Golden Inkys award!

Ten Things I Hate About Me was selected by a joint committee of America's Children's Book Council and the National Council for Social Studies, as a CBC/NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People 2010.







You're developing a strong media profile on shows such as Q&A, where you're often described as a 'young adult author and activist'. I always feel a bit tickled at that conjunction, because I think a lot of young adult authors are 'activists' in the sense that they often take on causes and issues in and outside of their fiction (for example, the YA for Obama website from a few years ago, the political and social justice issues John Green tackles in his vlogs with his brother for just a couple of recent examples). I wonder how you see this intersection between your writing and your work as a social justice advocate? Is it just inescapable that your personal concerns in this area move over into your fiction or is it more deliberate than that?

Perhaps the tag 'young adult author and activist' reflects a broader perception that YA writing is somehow frivolous and not to be taken very seriously. That somehow activism and YA writing are mutually exclusive. I agree that there are many YA writers whose books are platforms for raising awareness about all manner of social justice issues — from bullying to healthy body image to domestic violence and so on. Most of my books have a specific 'social justice' issue at their core and I'm not ashamed to say that was deliberate. I constructed stories around a theme that mattered to me and which I felt deserved a space. I sought to offer an alternative narrative about identity (with **Does My Head Look Big in This?** *and* **Ten Things I Hate About Me**) *and the occupation of Palestine* (**Where the Streets Had a Name**) *and that, in and of itself, was my advocacy effort. As for* **Noah's Law**, *it was ultimately a legal thriller but did raise, in the background, questions about the intersection between law and justice.*

You've moved on from the more overt cultural issues your first three books explored, although **Noah's Law** and **The Friendship Matchmaker** also have questions of fairness and justice at their heart (as many children's and YA books ultimately do). Where do you see yourself going with your writing in the coming years? Was there any difficulty 'breaking out' of being the token Australian Muslim YA writer, both with the industry and your readers?

I certainly felt no difficulty in Australia. My publishers have been very conscious of my desire to break free of the 'Australian Muslim' tag and supported my efforts to write broadly and freely. I never view myself as a Muslim writer. I honestly see myself first and foremost as a writer. That some of my books contain Muslim characters should not relegate them to a niche status. I am trying to challenge our notion of mainstream. It goes to the heart of our identity when characters of all kinds of backgrounds offer their own stories in and of their own right, without being seen as diversions from the mainstream. I am excited about writing whatever I want to write about for a long time to come (I hope!).

Tell me about the inspiration and writing of **The Friendship Matchmaker** and **Noah's Law**.

I do boot camp every week and at the start of each class the trainer asks us to separate into groups of three or four. Sometimes a feeling of dread overtakes me as I wonder if I'll be picked last or, worse, have to wait for the trainer to assign me to a team! I also remember my nerves on my first day in a new job or at a work conference, when I need to find somebody to sit next to. As adults we still deal with the ups and downs of making friends and feeling accepted and wanted. At school these emotions are even more keenly felt! First day of school nerves. Who to sit next to on the school bus? Who to pair with in Science class? Being the third wheel in a trio. (Boy, have I been there before!) I wondered what it would be like if somebody at school managed all of this and bossed people around to help them get through these challenges, especially kids who struggle to be popular and are bullied or feel left out all the time. And so Lara, Potts Court Primary School's official Friendship Matchmaker, was born!

As for **Noah's Law***? As a practising lawyer, I am exposed to a plethora of stories everyday. And that's just in boring old insurance litigation! I'm fascinated by people as it is. But people in the legal system are even more interesting. I wanted to write a fun legal thriller and have a go at all the special characters I've come across in my legal career!*

As you know, I am the Project Officer on the Western Sydney Young People's Literature Project, and part of what we're trying to do in the project is nurture writing from and about the western suburbs—so I'm keen on your thoughts about writing about this diverse and fascinating region!

I grew up in Melbourne's Eastern suburbs. Moving to Sydney eight years ago I started living in the western suburbs. I now live in the north-west but I still find that Sydney has a particularly snobby perception of its geography (see above regarding special characters in the legal profession) and that there can be a real divide between West and the rest. I think, though, that the demographics of the West (for example: proportion of age, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background) provides a rich backdrop to writing.

Randa's next book, **Buzz Off** (Omnibus 978 1 86291 848 1 Pb), will be published in May. It is her first book in the popular ***Mates*** series and highlights her sense of humour and understanding of the young.