Being A Writer podcast - Farhana Shaikh

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**SPEAKERS**

Nelima Begum, Farhana Shaikh

**Nelima Begum**

Welcome to the Being A Writer Podcast Farhana, how are you?

**Farhana Shaikh**

I'm good, thank you.

**Nelima Begum**

So we're talking all about building a writing network today. And we thought that you were brilliant for this. But I do want to start at the beginning or your beginning rather, so when did you start writing?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Oh, that's a really good question. So I can't remember a time when I haven't been writing. So I was a child writer. And it started very naturally for me because I just loved reading and books. And that was my safe space to be honest. I did start with poetry. And I think it was just, you know, being at school being introduced to things like Haiku. I loved limericks as a child and making them up and you know, playing with rhyme and things like that. So I think the sort of moment I realised that you could actually be a writer was when I met Allan Ahlberg at school in year five. So I always you know, had books and things like that and written but it was like, what people do that for that job? kind of moment. And then after that, I was like, that's exactly what I wanted to do. I could be someone that you know, writes funny poems and goes to schools, and inspires other people. So that's how it started.

**Nelima Begum**

I love that you had that realisation and that ambition from so young. Do you remember the first thing you ever wrote?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Well, I remember in year six, there's been quite a big push around like we're doing this poetry night. And obviously, sort of towards the end of year five, had that experience of meeting Allan Ahlberg. I was very focused. It was literally like I was telling my parents and my entire family, I'm going to be a writer. I won't take this art really seriously writing poems and things. And so I think it must have been the first time I saw my words sort of published was in a school booklet that they created from our haikus. And then in year six, I performed at the sort of year six spoken word night. So yeah, I think it was interesting. That it started off really, really well and really positively.

**Nelima Begum**

Well, that's lovely, that you kind of had a taste of performance as well as writing when you were young. So you write a bit of everything. I know your background is in business and law, but you're also a copywriter and content marketer, ditor of anthologies, and you've published more than 20 books since 2010. Does your work ever overlap? And how do you balance it all?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, that's, you know what, I just loved all your questions, actually. But this one, especially gave me a lot of time for reflection. And I think it's really interesting, what skills you gain from sort of stepping out of the creative world, you know, what is perceived to be creative writing. So writing for a brand writing a blog or writing tweets. And I would say actually, it's definitely given me more focus in terms of what am I trying to say? Because obviously, you know, when you're sort of trying to hone down on like a key message in how we're going to communicate that message across to an audience and as you know, a lot of my work involved trying to get quite serious kind of health messages or that sort of copy across and communicated. How do we sort of convey something in short space of time like on Twitter, you're constrained by that? It was for a long time 140 characters, and I really learned a lot from that. It sounds ridiculous, but I think like I have a tendency not to be as organised and disciplined when it comes to my creative life. So it really I learned a lot of lessons from that experience. And I think that it's been really useful.

**Nelima Begum**

Because it kind of also, I imagine, that it would help you work out messaging and tone and refining what, what you're trying to say to various audiences as well, depending on what you're writing.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, absolutely. It's all of those things, you know, while the two things are very, very different, that there's so much overlap between them in the sense that, you know, you're constantly thinking is that what I want to say? What am I saying? And I think what I've learned most of all, is the ability of words to betray, you know, like, are your words betraying you? In a sense, that's what I always come back to that because when I read over a sentence, whether it's for a bit of copy, or whether it's a line or paragraph in my novel, I'll also always say, is that exactly what I'm trying to say? Is there a better way of saying this? Have I used the right words? And I think that it's I am a little process obsessed. So perhaps, in a sense, it's been helpful that the thing has to get done, you know, like the client will want that copy on their desk, by Friday morning to sign off those tweets. And I feel like, yeah, maybe I haven't been as good with my own writing. I love leaving things in drafts, and I've sort of spoken at length about this thing that I'm sort of thinking about at the moment. In terms of what, what are the lines between, what's the line between a professional and an amateur writer? I feel like I've kind of played around with being an amateur writer for a really long time. And it's actually afforded me lots of opportunities, not that I would encourage it, but I just think it's to give yourself time not to rush to publication is a thing that we sort of, don't always convey very well I think to new writers.

**Nelima Begum**

I like how you've kind of made a connection between the two and how they explored how within the realm of creative writing, your other work, sometimes creates discipline and structure and outline for you in that sense, because you are basically working to deadlines and audiences and thinking about what readers want as well. When you began your writing journey, how did you find a sense of community because obviously, that's quite a lot to think about on your own.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, I mean, I shouldn't say there was a period for a long time when I didn't write so I had this kind of wonderful period as a child, and I felt very loved and I felt like I had recognition, even if it was in the wrong places, like, through, you know, poetry.com - that was kind of like it's kind of like a vanity thing that you send off your poems and they sort of say, Oh, this is wonderful, and we want to publish you. So I think early on, I had that sort of school based community, with teachers, you know, wanting to photocopy my poems and put them upon display and ridiculous things like that. Which was lovely because I felt like yes, I can do this.

**Nelima Begum**

It's a confidence boost in those early years as well, I guess.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah. So I felt supported, but then I didn't write for a really long time. I think I sort of did get a bit distracted in terms of with questions as a young person of whether this is viable from a career point of view. And that led me down a kind of path. So when I came back to writing it was because I was a mum and I didn't really have academic commitments or work commitments. So I felt very isolated if I'm completely honest, and there wasn't, there wasn't a sense of community out there that I felt that I could belong to. And the ones that were maybe, in close proximity didn't feel like they represented the world that I knew and that I'd grown up in. And that's really why I did start The Asian Writer in the first place because I was trying to kind of find people like me that might sort of share their wisdom or in some kind of naivety, I think, and selfishness. Just find out how they did it, you know?

**Nelima Begum**

So in a way it was kind of looking for, basically trying to find a sense of comfort and familiarity as well that could help him like progress further.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, but you know, I was in my I was in my 20s when I got it feels like a really long time. i It's been a long time since I set that up. But I was in my 20s. I was a young mum, I was totally isolated. I felt kind of cross and a bit angry and a bit frustrated that, you know, the same old sort of voices were given a platform on pages of The Guardian and things like that. And like, I remember just feeling and reflecting back on something that lecturer of mine at university had said that even when he had made it, it was actually really difficult for him to navigate the industry. Yeah, and I just thought, you know what, we can do this for ourselves. You know, why can't I sort of connect and I was probably a little bit overconfident...

**Nelima Begum**

You had you were full of ambition and why not? Because it led to some incredible things for you further down the line. But going back to what you said about feeling isolated, I mean, writing can be a very isolating activity at times. What advice would you give to those who are trying to find their place in the writing community and basically connect with others?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, again, this is a good question, because I think before so been forced, due to the pandemic, in a sense of isolation. I think one thing that has been a real lesson is that there's a lot of energy and there's lots of community - writing communities, and on the whole, they are very supportive. So what I would say is, if it doesn't exist in the way that you want it to be, you can sort of set it up like when I started The Asian Writer, I had 13 people who signed up on my newsletter list, on my email list, it wasn't even a newsletter at that point. You know, I started off with just myself and 13 other people that I happen to find in a forum for Asian people. So I think the internet for me was something that really helped me to find those connections because they were not immediate in my immediate community and I would not have I would not have found them if I'd gone to say, the local writing club here. So I think, you know, we've got a really wonderful thing called Twitter where I think a lot of writers hang out and procrastinate, and it's just really easy to find people who speak in the way that you do or see the world in a way in which you where you can feel safe and encouraged to continue to write, because I feel that is critical.

**Nelima Begum**

Of course, and I feel like regardless of what genre or formats people are writing, and they're still they've still got things in common. Like there are lots of things on the writing journey that will bring people together, whether they are things to celebrate or things that are slightly more difficult to deal with, like writer's block or struggling to put pen to paper. They're still you know, this sort of sense of connection there, that people are going through the the exact same things that you are.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, absolutely. I think also, I would say try different, you know, like, try and find your tribe. And the way you can do that is by going to lots of different things and actually trying your hand at different types of writing. I always say to writers that I work with, who are very kind of new to the journey, like don't feel like you have to define what kind of writer you are really early on because I think losing that sense of playfulness, and let's be honest, like maybe we don't articulate this very well but you know, we are in the Arts where we are supposed to be experimental and playful. And what we are not doing is not going to have any kind of there's no real life or death consequence to what we're doing. And therefore, you know, maybe we do need to feel a little sense of comfort in places where we would not normally so for example, and I think that's what I guess I'm trying to say is step out of your comfort zones because I think that in itself that will teach you a lesson about what you want to say and what you want to write about. And I always see a lot of people who are very good at writing, but they're not really saying anything. So I would always say like to help find your tribe. Try lots and lots of different things and don't feel like Oh, I'm just a poet. I want to be my poet space. Be in my poetry community. I think like that's what I've kind of reveled in, just like trying ok, well, I'm going to do a bit of travel writing or I'm going to write a poem and I think like, there's no real expectation right now, on any of us. Unless you when you're published, maybe people then start putting labels on you. And then the pressure becomes like, oh, I've got to write another novel, so just enjoy it.

**Nelima Begum**

I think that's fantastic advice, I think to just keep it playful. And remember why writing in itself fulfills you is really important. And to not just, you know, don't bog yourself down with so many labels early on. And I think it's brilliant that you've said, to kind of venture out and try new things and keep it experimental because that's what writing is essentially.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Exactly. It's supposed to be a playful thing. What it isn't which unfortunately, I feel like maybe we don't make the case enough. Even reading, you know, reading is supposed to be we don't sort of convey too much about reading for pleasure. It's always like oh, write this and submit to this. And then oh, you need to know about oh, do you not know about different voices like, do you not know like, I go to a lot of these workshops and people start worrying that they don't know about like, different points of view, like they get bogged down with the technical stuff, before they've even really figured out who they are as a writer or what they want to say. And I'm like, no, no, no, you can't worry about these things right now. Really, all you need to think about is why are you in this room? And what do you want to say? Who are you? I think a lot of new writers that I work with probably get freaked out by the transformation that they have when they do something like becoming a writer, which I've been doing for a number of years. Just because I think I pose questions that they probably didn't want to answer...

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah, for sure. Because they might not be happy with the fact that they do have to kind of interrogate that further to get the answer. But it brings us really nicely on to our next question actually, on the subject of voices and reading and figuring out who you are. You're very passionate about amplifying diverse voices and giving them a platform. What inspired you to start Dahlia Books?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, again, I think it's been a very organic process. So I would love to sort of say, oh, I had a grand plan that has just been mapped out, you know, and written in a kind of business planning way. But I think it was actually born out of the community if I'm completely honest, and really having my ear to the ground to think about the needs of that community. So Dahlia Books just to set that in context, and was set up in 2010. That came three years after The Asian Writer. And one of the things that was really immediate was from from my point of view anyway, so as soon as I sort of set up The Asian Writer website, it was kind of like, oh my god, I didn't realise there were that many writers and be I didn't realize myself that there was so much range in what they were writing. And that's because obviously, I wasn't necessarily just now connecting with published writers, which of course, I've always tried to sort of profile on the site. However, there was a lot more people who are very frustrated, angry, felt kind of what can I say? How can I articulate this in a kind of way that makes it feel, that's true to what their frustration was, I guess that they didn't feel heard by the industry. They felt like the industry kind of expected them to like write literary fiction, and they were writing crime. Yeah, things like that, you know, and they've been told things like, well, we don't feel like your writing is commercially viable. And language that is possibly a little alien, alien to them, but also, that doesn't help anyone say no, well, what you're writing about sort of doesn't really have mass appeal and things like that, or your themes aren't universal. I just kind of felt really annoyed because I was like, all these writers are talented. I know they're talented, and it shouldn't be this way. So again, I think it comes from kind of being young and feeling a little bit like, yes, I know, I tried to navigate myself through this journey in a way. But very quickly, I think I realised that The Asian Writer became something bigger than myself and it it might have started with a very selfish need. I had to find other people that look like me that wrote. However, I always felt like a sense of and still do feel a sense of kind of responsibility for that community. So it was about platforming their voices and giving them a chance to shine. And, you know, write, whatever they wanted to be fair.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah. This actually half answers the next question because on the subject of The Asian Writer, so I wanted to ask if that work felt a bit closer to home as you were trying to create spaces and representation for people with a similar background to yourself and as you're saying, people look like you because I that's really important, like even working on the other side of publishing. It's, I think it's a really special moment when you can see people or a person who looks like you that you feel a connection to and you kind of look at them and say, well that person looks just like me and they've done all of these great things. I can do it too.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, I mean, it's really interesting how, you know, it's kind of easy to have these conversations kind of looking back about what that might do. And even the tagline was always like inspiring the next generation of writers of you know, Asian writers or something. So I think I always knew that maybe this was a way of documenting the experiences of writers, first of all, who had navigated themselves successfully through you know, the process of writing which as we've identified is incredibly isolating in itself to to get either getting an agent or a publisher and being published. And then at the same time, I think I was always conscious of the fact that yes, I was sort of trying to, not necessarily in a too selfish way, but I was trying to be part of a world that I'm possibly felt like I'm a, you know, Muslim girl from a working class background in Leicester. This is all happening in London. These people are all cool. The first people that I interviewed, were like Mohsin Hamid and Roopa Farooki. Like, you know, they were like my rock stars. Yeah, so, but, you know, this was back in 2007. They were still, they were rock stars to me, but they certainly weren't in the mainstream. Yeah. You know, so I think I was always having my ear to the ground and just reading things. And, again, going back it was really because I was really really annoyed. I know it's probably not a good thing to say because I think something kind of bubbles in you. And you're like, oh, you have to keep doing this or and you're doing it really, even, it sounds awful. But I was doing it for myself. Because I wanted to keep writing I was maybe in a way it was like trying to prove to my parents like look other people have made it. You know, they have made it they've kind of been successful, they've got published.

**Nelima Begum**

I don't think it's selfish or awful to say that you are you know, that you were thinking of yourself in the beginning. Because in doing that, you know, you've kind of you've carved out a space for other writers like you, and you've given them a platform too so I think something brilliant did come out of your anger, it clearly wasn't a bad thing. It wasn't misplaced or anything in the work that you've done, what kind of communities have you seen come together because I think that must be really interesting for you to kind of look back on it now.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, I mean, I'm thinking some of it has probably been, first of all, I should say like, I'm very, very, very reluctant to sort of say, oh, I think this may have happened because we did this. And I would I in on the one hand, that's what's lovely about when other people say, so you know what we recently had or Dahlia books 10th year anniversary was on Zoom, which was a bit weird because of the pandemic. But we had Deepa Anappara there. And you know, she has hit mainstream, her novel is incredible, and I was so pleased for deeper that he got picked up and that she was finally recognised for the talent that she is, but one of the things that I sort of realised with The Asian Writer and I don't know how I and when I started recognizing it, but the power of prizes. So I set up The Asian Writer Short Story Prize, and I a deeper actually won our very first prize back in 2012. I believe it was. So that was five years. I was running The Asian Writer for five years by that point. And I think what's been interesting, maybe that those writers haven't, maybe stayed together and been a community but they certainly have continued to write short stories or continue to write and celebrate one another's work. So I think that's a very loose community. I think the one that I feel very close to now is the communities that I've formed out of becoming a writer, because that is aimed at primarily South Asian women that do feel a sense of isolation. And the coil writers that include writers who I really love their writing like Anita Goveas and Nazira Vania and Sarah Jasat. That's been really interesting to see how they've developed a coming on the course so they're complete strangers, they don't know each other before they come on. Join me for 12 weeks and then continued to support, nurture, encourage one another. And this speaks back to the thing I was talking about about finding your tribe, because they were individually not feeling, like I think when I first worked with like, Nazira, she she was not even calling us that a lot of these writers do not call themselves writers and there's writing which, you know, always seems absurd to me. And then the other community that I think feels very close to my heart is Middle Way. And that's because, you know, they're they're writers, and that has included you know, two of those writers from becoming a writer. And the ones that I've just named Nazira Vania and Sarah Jassat who applied but what I love about that project is that they're seven brilliant writers all writing really different things and we worked on a project together for two years. So their community is a lot more... it feels like you know, they really know each other as writers as well as people. Yeah, and they've kind of gone through a sort of process together and kind of probably helped each other through it, because I think any kind of mentoring scheme or the Middle Way, the Middle Way mentoring project included both mentoring for a year and workshops and industry speakers. In the second year, so it was really intense. But I think the seven writers that were involved are like they call themselves a family, which is wonderful.

**Nelima Begum**

Ah, that's fantastic! What a brilliant end result as well.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah. And that we have regular meetings and things like that. And we check in with each other even despite the fact that the you know, the project ended like last year.

**Nelima Begum**

But it's brilliant because it's about building those connections and those ties to other writers that will last you know, beyond a certain project or beyond a certain difficult period that you're having. Yeah, it's nice to have it as a consistent running thing throughout your writing journey, regardless of where you're at.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, and I think the other thing that we don't always sort of speak about especially when we're doing work on the ground, it doesn't it doesn't always, it's not necessarily about the writing, you know, we all kind of navigating our lives and lives of as we know, messy and complicated. So, while the writing, you know, we hope to work with writers to develop their writing talent, we're also people at the end of the day and I think that we we sometimes kind of lose sight of that when we are maybe in a more superficial environment, say, like on Twitter, where it feels a little bit more like we are a bit more geared towards maybe sharing our successes or sharing very kind of positive things about our writing lives. Whereas when you're working in a space, where people are meeting on the ground, on a month to month basis, there are going to be things like tragedies, accidents, family, you know, family stuff spills over yeah, exactly as life happens. And I think that that's what I'm kind of looking forward to coming out of the pandemic and just reconnecting. With writers on the ground a bit more.

**Nelima Begum**

What are some of your favorite ways to connect with writers?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Ooh, so for many, many years, I used to run this thing called Writers Meetup Leicester. And all it was was on a Tuesday morning once the first Tuesday of every month. And we'd get together in a cafe and talk about writing so really laid back...

**Nelima Begum**

Sounds so chill!

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, no commitment, no, no sort of expectation to read work. I think it was just a sort of safe space to say yeah, I'm a writer to sort of thing.

**Nelima Begum**

Oh, lovely. And how has having a network helped you as a writer?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Hmm, I think that's a really interesting question as well, because I think we sometimes, we sometimes forget how hard it is, especially once we've kind of connected made connections to recognise actually that there are still people without access. So I think it's helped me in terms of picking up the phone to people that I wouldn't normally feel like I would have been able to building a network has helped me to access kind of guidance and advice that I feel has been really valuable to me. In terms of then, I guess, seeking ways where I could be more effective. I'm not sure if it's helped me with my own writing. And that's because for a very long time, probably up until really recently, to be fair, I've not really been seen as a writer, I've been sort of seen as an editor and a publisher, and someone who sort of runs things for other people to support their writing. Up until very recently, actually to the fact that I went to do a talk just this year, and someone said, well, but you're not a writer, are you? And I think, yeah, it was a bit of a moment because I was like, oh, yeah, maybe I have to try more to articulate the fact that I'm a writer as well.

**Nelima Begum**

That's a really interesting space to find. yourself because obviously, you do a lot of advocacy for writers and you offer so much support for them. I mean, do you feel like sometimes you're maybe not giving the same amount to yourself?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Oh, yeah, yeah, that happens...

**Nelima Begum**

Does it ever happen where you're kind of just like, well, I'm not gonna write for a period of time. But it's fine because I'm focusing on other people's writing.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah. And that happened, really, between probably for the first seven years that was running Dahlia. And I think it wasn't until I went on a and this is gonna sound bonkers to be honest because I think that this is why I always say like, keep an open mind for opportunities and things that are maybe not writing related because I applied to do a cultural leadership program here in Leicester, which was hosted by the Curve Theatre. And that's when I started really feeling quite ok, so they see me as a cultural leader. I don't I mean, I can't even understand why I applied. I just thought it would be really probably as another procrastination you know, a way to get away from writing, which is probably what I've done, and I have sort of expressed that publicly that I think a lot of times I've just spent a lot of time as an adult running away from writing. Whereas it's weird because as a child I used to run to writing it was my sort of way to make sense of the world. But this cultural, cultural leadership program led me to start thinking about what I needed to do for myself, and my mentor was excellent. She was Sarah Weir. And she said, Look, you know, you've got so many roles, but you do realize that there's one thing that's at the center of all of them. And we just had like these really in depth, emotional conversations in every mentoring session, about maybe how much I needed to step out of trying to sort of do too much for everyone.

**Nelima Begum**

As a way to focus more on yourself but sometimes it's just a really difficult process of interrogating what it is that you need, because we're so used to kind of catering to the needs of others.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, and obviously it sort of comes back to my you know, I, I've been, I've been a mum for most of for nearly all of my adult life as well. So the idea of putting myself first just doesn't sit well with me. I find that really difficult...

**Nelima Begum**

So maternal instinct just kind of kicks in on the writing front as well.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, yeah. And then there's the guilt isn't it - that feeling of have I abandoned people?

**Nelima Begum**

Interesting. That's actually brought me on to the next question, because I was going to ask how being exposed to all these writing networks and things and all these groups of people that you work with, how they shape the way that you approach your craft?

**Farhana Shaikh**

So one of the things I realised, I think, from doing the Middle Way was, firstly, I'm still a really strong believer in the fact that the talent does lie within - I do have a sense that creativity is sort of innate to everyone. It's either just been, you know, sort of mum, which which was a bit like my mum, like all gone, just work at the bank kind of drilled into that it's not a good route to go down. And I think what I have tried to do with every project that I've run, is almost savedmyself to tell myself that I need to keep writing for a reason. And I think the craft elements, I feel like every project, not that I'm doing it for myself, but it feels like a wonderful gift to myself. So last year in the pandemic, I ran a brief course through Dahlia, which was a short story development scheme. And we got 20 writers who wanted to take the next the next step, if you like in their writing career. And we had 12 tutors who wanted to learn about how to deliver online classes because of course, you know, we weren't delivering things face to face. And we we had like month fortnightly workshops. And for me, I guess what I do, whether I'm teaching or hosting something I'm learning at the same time. Like I'm completely obsessed with learning. So I think through everything that I've done, I always take it as a wonderful learning experience. Like, I will be the first person to say, I don't know, if someone asked, you know, I don't know. I don't know, I'm not an expert in this and I think that having that sense of discomfort or feeling, I guess it comes back to what I was saying right at the start, like reveling as an amateur affords you the opportunity to, like have that curiosity like I'm going to find out more about this. I want to do that workshop. So if I set a task in a workshop, I will do the task as well myself to see what happens. Does that mean I've been I've answered the question.

**Nelima Begum**

No you have! It's an interesting way to look at it, to keep it you know, experimental and playful and...

**Farhana Shaikh**

So you develop, don't you?

**Nelima Begum**

Well it's all about exploring, isn't it? It's yeah, there is no one concrete way to write.

**Farhana Shaikh**

I will never sort of go yeah, I know what my thing is that I do well, so therefore, I'm willing to give memoir ago if there's a task that we have to do a bit of memoir if I set it out. On, you know, come up with 20 words beginning with M and now we're all gonna write a piece of flash fiction or poetry on motherhood, using all the 20 trying to incorporate as many of those words that we came up with - I just feel like yeah, it's a bit of fun. And it's stakes aren't high Nelima make the stakes and lower. You can raise the stakes later.

**Nelima Begum**

I actually think that's a problem of mine, that I think I put too much pressure on myself with writing or anything really and I was talking about this yesterday, actually, about how sometimes I overwhelm myself and I overthink and I just want to hide under the desk, when really it's not that serious most of the time. And as you said earlier in this conversation with what we do, it's not life, it's not a matter of life and death. You know, it doesn't it doesn't need to be so heavy on you all the time. And I think having a network of people who kind of have - they're on the same wavelength of that can be really helpful because though you know often bring you down to Earth. Remind you why you do what you do.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Although I'm kind of concerned slightly because someone tweeted just this week, in fact that they wrote the most weird and wonderful, notwonderful, he said it was the weirdest thing he'd written and we published it. And we love that story. So I do feel I've kind of influenced a lot of people to write a lot of weird stuff, which is fine.

**Nelima Begum**

Why not? Be weird. Yeah. What are your top tips for building a network especially for writers who don't have one and they're not really sure where to start?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Okay, so I think, firstly, just a bit of reassurance that people are out there, people like you are out there. And I think one of the ways now that is really helpful is to kind of connect with organisations who, you know, you admire or you share that values with? So, like through The Asian Writer, I guess people have found out about becoming a writer. And then they've come on, like a course or done a workshop. There's also lots of conferences now that sort of speak to lots of different themes. And I think that's a really great way of finding people who, just who you don't feel like you have to be someone that you're not like, because you're just great as you are, but we never really tell people that they don't have to be someone they don't have to try and kind of hide behind a label. Like just being who you are is such a wonderful thing and you're totally unique. So I think it can be tricky at the start because you're also feeling a little bit and I've kind of written a book on like trying to navigate myself while feeling like an imposter in most spaces and feeling like an outsider. However, I will say that just be brave, like you have to find your thing that makes you feel like A) you deserve to be in this space. B) step out of your comfort zone to do a workshop and if it's scary at first, just do it over Zoom and leave your camera off and you find these wonderful things actually all over the country where they're doing like these right together, events where you turn up and sort of free so you're not risking like you know, not for me, it would be like missing Holby on a Tuesday. Please guys do not do events on a Tuesday night because I do not want to miss Holby!

**Nelima Begum**

So just find your people. I really do believe in like for like and just as you are nervous and just starting out and unsure there are gonna be other people out there just like you and sure enough, you'll find that you gravitate towards those people like you will attract what you're looking for, I think in a bigger picture sort of way.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Exactly. And I think the thing with the pandemic, as horrible and awful as it being is it has opened up access for a lot of people who didn't feel like they could step into a room because I think sometimes that is the most difficult thing.

**Nelima Begum**

I agree. It's definitely like built its creative bridges, though. So a lot of people are now able to step into spaces with a bit more confidence than they previously might have been.

**Farhana Shaikh**

Mm hmm. Absolutely.

**Nelima Begum**

And what kind of networks do you hope to build in the coming years?

**Farhana Shaikh**

I think I will continue to work with South Asian female writers. I think that there's something really joyous about doing that work. And I think one thing that I realized very, very recently and that's this round of becoming a writer is that there's a lot of things that we can learn not only about craft but about our shared experiences of being brown women across borders. So this time we ended up with like having three writers from India and four or five writers from the UK. And that exchange was really interesting to me. So I do want to do more international work in that regard.

**Nelima Begum**

What a brilliant way to round off! So just to finish up, we've got some quickfire questions. So these are a little less serious. Just give it a few seconds, say the first thing that comes to mind, basically. So what's your favorite thing to write?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Ooh, I would say fragments, like flash fiction.

**Nelima Begum**

Is there anyone who has shaped your writing in any way?

**Farhana Shaikh**

That's really difficult. I don't think it's in terms of the writing but I think the person that's had the most influence on me as an artist is Julia Cameron.

**Nelima Begum**

Fantastic. What are you currently working on if you're allowed to share with us?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah. So at the moment, I'm working on my novel, which has taken no lie, I started off when my son was born, and he turns 20 this year so yeah, I'm still working on my first novel.

**Nelima Begum**

That's great - yeah. Why not have it ticking along over two decades? Marinate your ideas? What's the greatest piece of writing advice you've ever received?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Oh, God I'm not very good with advice in a in any shape or form because I just run away from it. There's too much of a rebellious nature in me. But I think it oh the best advice...? Oh, God. I'm going to say something horrible controversial and I would never have said this like 10 years ago. But I interviewed a writer once and he I asked him, what's your what's the best advice that you would give to a writer and he said, write that damn book, but like, sit down and write like show up? Show up for yourself on the page. And I think that that is the best advice. And I think actually, it's nicer way of putting it. So I would attribute that to Elizabeth Gilbert - show up at the page.

**Nelima Begum**

I wholeheartedly agree. So would that be the number one piece of writing advice you'd give to others as well?

**Farhana Shaikh**

Yeah, I think showing up for yourself sometimes feels like the most difficult thing. But you are continuing and I say this to myself, like the reason why you're continuing this project this creative pursuit is that there is something willing you on no matter how hard you try to run away from it, it will come back to you and it will keep coming back to you. So just showing up at the page, whether it means that you're journaling and I've spent a lot my time journaling which I think is just a wonderful thing in itself as well. So maybe try that. If you're too scared to like the idea of a blank page is daunting. Just write three three pages in the morning like Julia Cameron says, and I think it's a wonderful thing, to reconnect with yourself.

**Nelima Begum**

Absolutely brilliant advice to finish up with thank you so much for your time Farhana. It's an absolute pleasure to speak to you!

**Farhana Shaikh**

It's been lovely! Thank you so much for having me.