

# TLC Showcase

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## AMBREEN & UZMA HAMEED

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## Introduction to *Undying*

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It is 1998 and the leader of the free world is under fire after an affair with a young intern. Meanwhile, in a corner of South London, the Malik sisters - biologist Sufya and dramatist Zarina - have also committed a sin: they are in their thirties and still not married. Now the unexpected return of their childhood playmate, Heathrow – named for the Terminal 3 concourse on which he was discovered as an abandoned toddler - spells the chance of a happy ending: but only for one of them. And this time, younger sister Zarina is determined she won't be second in line to Sufya, even if it means resorting to dubious occult practices. But as tensions rise across the Muslim world, sibling rivalry and Sufi spells are not the only forces with which the three lovers must contend.

Written in the alternating voices of Sufya and Zarina, and described by one reviewer as “The Bronte Sisters meets Four Lions”, *UNDYING* is a black comedy about identity, sibling rivalry, ancient magic and what lives on when we die.

*UNDYING* was championed many years ago by the wonderful Becky Swift at TLC who read our first draft and selected it to receive support in the form of a subsidised script report. We were matched up with Anna South whose brilliant and kind suggestions helped us develop the manuscript into its published version. The novel came out in 2021, and we were thrilled to be longlisted for the Bath Novel Award that year.

*UNDYING* is a two-book novel. This extract is taken from Book 1 *The Kinship of Djinn*s. In it, elder sister - evolutionary biologist, Sufya - is taken on a tentative first date by Heathrow, who has returned home after many years away. The couple find themselves at the opening night of *Ishq*, a fashionable club in Clerkenwell, to which Heathrow, as an award-winning documentary film-maker and therefore a member of the nascent category of cool, celebrity British Asians, has been invited. Here, they encounter Asif, a former boyfriend of Zarina's who – to the latter's indignation – has also recently re-entered the sisters' lives, and who is now part of a Muslim rap group.

## Extract from *Undying* by Ambreen & Uzma Hameed

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'Hey, guys, what do you think of the vibe?' Hairy Asif came out of the throng, giving me a distinctly un-Islamic squeeze, and grasping H's hand in the black-power style. Accompanied by two friends who appeared to be dressed as pirates, Asif clearly wanted to give the impression of being great chums with H, although as far as I knew he had only met him that once at my parents' home a few weeks ago. He slid me aside so that he and his companions could stand next to H. '*Salaam*, man, *salaam*,' he beamed, affecting a smooth cannabis drawl. 'Yeah, it's all good, it's all good. Wanted you to meet my band, we're on later – the Orthodox. This is Bashi,' Asif indicated the shorter, more chunky of the pirates, who was hopping from foot to foot energetically, a black bandanna tied, Amitabh-style, above his meaty little ears. 'His real name's Bashir, but he's better known as Bashi the Paki!' (Here Asif and Bashi uttered high-pitched hyena chuckles and slapped each other's hands.) 'And this is Jehangir, man.'

Jehangir, tall and cool, with a diamond stud in his ear, offered H a cigarette, which I accepted, and then silently lit one himself, while Bashi the Paki yapped excitedly in an exaggerated East End street-speak: 'Yeah, man. *Salaam*. Saw your films, innit? Wha' can I say, man? We need more bruvvers like you, kna' wha' mean?'

'Thanks,' said H. 'So what kind of music do you play?'

'Orthodox, man!' yelled Bashi. 'We is the new religion, innit: rappin' about troof, man, wha's really 'appenin' in the communi'y – the grassroot bruvvers, kna' wha' mean?'

'It's a mixture of *qawwali*, rap and acid house, wouldn't you say, Jehangir?' interrupted Asif, seeming a little embarrassed at his colleague's raving. Jehangir blew a slow jet of smoke and said nothing.

Bashi flinched, perhaps with the realisation that he had not come across as cool. 'Yeah, man,' he said, less confidently. 'Talkin' the troof about bein' young, Muslim and proud...'

'Looking forward to it. What time are you on?' said H, and Bashi puffed up again.

'Soon, man. Tennish!'

'Nah, man! Is that the time?' drawled Asif, looking at his watch and gesturing to the others. 'Sorry, would be great to stay and chat, but they'll be wanting us backstage... You know what it's like in the business... Safe, man, safe.'

And with that, the Orthodoxos swaggered away, their tails high.

When H asked me to dance, I was unwilling at first. For the last few years – in fact, dating back precisely to the time of my Loss – it was as though my physical self had coldly withdrawn cooperation, and an ice-like rigidity would creep into my limbs if called upon to dance. All the ecstasy-and-acid-driven raves of the last ten years had done nothing to thaw the cold war declared on me by my own body.

But H smiled, placing an arm around my waist to move me closer to him, and once again I felt an unfamiliar sense of safety.

It can only be like this, I thought to myself, as the music wove its spell inside us and around us, easing us closer, with someone who knew you as a child, someone who hasn't forgotten who you used to be, even if you've forgotten it yourself. I found myself taking deep slow breaths, as if I had not breathed for years.

Some time later, the spell was broken by loud shouting into a microphone. It was Bashi the Paki calling on everyone to give it up for the Orthodoxos, voice of the new religion tellin' it like it is, innit? And, generous with the glow of our dance together, H and I did as we were requested, applauding as Jehangir started up a hypnotic beat on tabla, accompanied by a simple, but effective, swaying riff on bass guitar from Asif. Bashi was leaping around the stage clapping his hands above his head, shouting '*Bismillah!*' like a battle cry, and drawing whoops from the crowd as they eagerly took up the luscious rhythm of a *qawwali* hand-clap.

'We is growin', bruvvers and sisters! We is GROWIN!' Bashi yelled into the microphone. 'We is not hidin' it any more! We is wearing our Islamic clothes, man,

we is growing our beards mightily, yeah! We is saying: WATCH OUT, MR AND MRS KAFIR! THIS. IS. WHO. WE. ARE!

A huge cheer went up from the crowd. There was no doubt Bashi's exuberance was infectious, but this noisy flag-waving from the beardy brigade was beginning to make me uncomfortable.

'*BIS-MIL-LAH!* BRING-IT-ON!' roared Bashi, now leaping into a semi-squat position and thrusting his pelvis as he threw down the gauntlet to 'Mr and Mrs Kafir'. 'Say it with me, bruvvers and sisters: *BIS-MIL-LAH!* BRING-IT-ON!'

Inhibited at first, but encouraged by the enthusiasm of a smattering of obvious Orthodox followers who were leading the response, the crowd – Muslim and non-Muslim alike – took up the refrain: '*Bis-mil-lah!* Bring-it-on! *Bis-mil-lah!* Bring-it-on!' Bashi's response in turn was to utter a long guttural whoop, turn his backside to the audience and thrust his pelvis even more violently.

Male birds, such as ravens, often compete with one another to attack larger individuals, seemingly deliberately seeking out danger – a behaviour that at first sight is difficult to explain. After all, what's in it for the winner of such a competition, except the likelihood of injury or death? Observers have noticed that males alternate such acts of aggression with gestures of courtship towards females, suggesting that demonstrations of 'bravery' might make male ravens attractive to the opposite sex. And in the singles-bar world of raven relationships – where the feeding crowd changes constantly – a male has only a fleeting moment in which to grab the attention of a passing female onlooker. He needs to demonstrate a stand-out capability for aggression, and he needs to do it right here, right now.

As if aware of my musings, the pumped up Bashi now turned to the audience and singled out one of the golden-shouldered beauties near the front row. 'All right, darling?' he leered and thrust. 'You like what you're looking at, innit?' The beauty looked slightly uncomfortable at having the attention of the crowd, but all around the stage I could see feminine bangled arms reaching up towards Bashi the Paki's gyrating pelvis.

'Like I was saying earlier, we're *all* angry,' murmured H, as though deep in my thoughts. His eyes were on Bashi.

'You mean that? Every one of us?'

'You don't agree?'

'I hadn't really thought of it in those terms. I suppose we all have the capability to be *aggressive*—'

'The trick,' interrupted H, as though thinking aloud, 'is to know your anger. To *befriend* it. Otherwise it jumps out on you when you least expect it.'

It sounded like psychobabble, and with someone else this would have been the point at which the conversation fizzled out. But H had never said anything which did not turn out to have unexpected layers, so I did not hesitate to give him the benefit of the doubt. Moreover, the control of aggression was emerging as a key issue in my research on the biological evolution of moral codes, so I was curious about anything H might have to say on the subject, even if it was a little peculiar.

'OK. So how do I "befriend" my anger then?'

H thought for a moment. 'Well, this might not be the best place.' He indicated the pumping furore of the Orthodox, now in the throbbing climax of their first song – clearly entitled '*Bismillah!* Bring It On!' – and the increasingly excited audience. 'But what I do is I close my eyes and imagine my anger is standing in front of me – I literally try to see it there, like a person, what it looks like, how tall it is... and then I try to hear what it wants to say to me...' He closed his eyes and his voice trailed away.

Despite the heat in the room, I felt a shiver. It was as though H were listening to something – or someone – that was actually speaking. Then, his eyes still shut, he smiled warmly... but *not at me*. After a moment, he opened his eyes.

'What did it look like then, your anger?' I couldn't help asking.

'Monstrous, as usual! You don't want to know!' laughed H. 'But he's OK – we're on good terms right now, so don't worry!'

'That's good to know.' I smiled, but I was feeling odd. Suddenly there was a side to H that I had no idea about. It was not the fact that he admitted to having a 'monstrous' anger that bothered me. It was more his mode of operation – his referring to his anger as 'he', and that weird, inward smile.

'Don't be freaked out, Dr Malik,' H smiled, and led me off to dance again.

## About the Writers

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**AMBREEN HAMEED** is a writer, television producer and journalist. Ambreen's career in television began at the BBC on the Asian programme *Network East*, after which she worked for London Weekend Television on the channel's flagship current affairs show *The London Programme*. She was series producer of Channel 4's award-winning *Devil's Advocate* presented by Darcus Howe. Three of her *London Programmes* were nominated for Royal Television Society awards including an hour-long Special on the experiences of Black and Asian officers in the Metropolitan Police Service. Other career highlights include the award-winning series *Second Chance* for Channel 4, and *Dispatches*. She has also written for *New Statesman* and a short story for Radio 4's *Pier Shorts*.



**UZMA HAMEED** is a writer, director and dramaturg. For ten years she led The Big Picture Company, an innovative theatre company combining new writing with choreography and film, for which her plays included *A Dark River* (UK tour & Young Vic) and *Taj* (UK tour & Riverside Studios). She has also been Associate Director at Derby Playhouse, directed for Kali Theatre, and led projects at the National Theatre Studio. As a dramaturg, Uzma is a long-time collaborator of the choreographer Wayne McGregor, including on the Royal Ballet's *Wolf Works* (Olivier Award) and *The Dante Project* (South Bank/Sky Arts Award). She has given talks and workshops for organisations including The Royal College of Art, Dulwich Picture Gallery, Edinburgh International Festival and Playwrights Studio Scotland.

Both Ambreen and Uzma Hameed live in South London.