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G. Willow Wilson: novelist, comic book writer

by NCR Staff

G. Willow Wilson, the first American Muslim professional comic book writer, draws on both American and Middle Eastern culture in her work, ranging from autobiographical essays to superhero sagas.

After graduating from Boston University and converting to Islam, Wilson spent four years in Egypt, where she wrote "Cairo," her first graphic novel. Now back in the United States, the 26-year-old has focused on three projects: "Vixen: Return of the Lion," a five-part series for DC Comics; "AIR," a monthly comic about a flight attendant embroiled in a terrorism plot; and "The Butterfly Mosque," a memoir slated for release in January. (Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.)

Q: You grew up in a secular Protestant household. What drew you to Islam?

A: I really didn't know much about it until I got to college and was assigned part of the Quran for a class. One of the first verses I read sort of spoke to this very private belief that I had held since I was a kid that I had never articulated to anyone else, and there it was in a 1,400 year old document: "And between the two there shall be a veil, and on the most elevated places there shall be men who know all by their marks, and they shall call out to the dwellers of the garden: Peace be upon on you." I knew at that point that it was only a matter of time. But, then Sept. 11 directly contributed to me putting off conversion -- I thought, wait, maybe I'm wrong about this whole thing.

Q: When you eventually converted, how did your family respond?

A: They were surprised. If they were deeply upset, they did a very good job not letting it show. It was important to them to be very supportive.

Q: Had you always wanted to be a comic book writer?

A: I'd wanted to be a writer all my life. The first comic book that I really latched onto was the X-Men, when I was 11 or 12. I bought the comic books, and I watched the TV series on Saturday mornings religiously, no pun intended.

Q: Did you move to Egypt to pursue your writing or your new faith?

A: I wanted to spend time in a Muslim country, to see if the religion in practice was what I had envisioned it being in my own mind, and by a series of coincidences I had a job offer there. I taught history at an English high school the first year, and then started writing after that. I met my husband there; he was a teacher at the same school.

Q: Have you felt conflicted about being both a devout Muslim and a comic book writer, particularly after the Danish cartoon controversy?

A: I don't think there's something inherently irreligious about comics. There are very religious people who write comics and who love comics. I think where the issues come up is what is satire, and where do the rights of people who worship as they see fit come into conflict with other people's right to free speech. I was in Egypt when (the cartoon controversy) was going on. This wasn't about free speech and iconoclasm. This is about a bunch of racist cartoons, and whether or not racism is protected as free speech. The people who were most pissed off were the people in Iran, where there's a picture of the Prophet Muhammad in every house. They're not angry because you drew a picture of the Prophet Muhammad; they're angry because you drew a picture as a dirty, hook-nosed, stereotypical Arab.

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Privacy by  SafeSubscribeSM what I write, there's a sense of displacement, of being rooted in multiple places, and how that can tug at your identities and your wants and your goals. Religion has been in comics for a long time -- but now unfortunately that it's become a source of tension, people are paying more attention.

Q: In most of your comics, even in "Cairo," where the characters include an Israeli soldier and a would-be suicide bomber, there isn't much religious discussion. Is that deliberate?

A: Religion is definitely there, but it's not proselytizing. I don't think being a writer who is religious means you have to write about nothing but religion. When I do write about religion, it's to inform the story, not to push a certain agenda. I hope I never write an evangelical comic.

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