

The Write Stuff

Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa has penned his way to global and international acclaim

WORDS | ZOE MOLESHEAD

AS a man who has achieved global recognition and acclaim for his groundbreaking media series THE 99, not to mention spawned a burgeoning business empire, Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa is decidedly modest.

For those of you perhaps not so familiar with Dr. Al-Mutawa, he is the creator of THE 99, a group of superheroes first evidenced in comic form and based upon Islamic archetypes. He is also the founder and CEO of Teshkeel Media Group, which publishes THE 99 comic book series, not to mention a fully qualified clinical psychologist. Most certainly an impressive and intriguing combination. "When I was growing up I told my parents that I wanted to be a writer. They told me that writing was a great choice for a hobby, but not a profession. I could not put out that fire so I chose to contain it by learning what makes people tick, learning how to create and solve conflict, learn how to read into the unconscious, and learn how people tell their personal stories. Psychology was my Trojan horse into the world of writing that I so desperately craved being a part of," Dr. Al-Mutawa explains when questioned on his career choices.

Unable to quench his thirst for writing and fuelled by his patients and their often heart-rending personal stories, Dr. Al-Mutawa began to pursue his passion for prose, and says that "quite by accident" found himself an award-winning children's writer. "I never intended to write for children. My first book was written and illustrated in a very simple way. I wrote it as a consequence of a man who was fired from his job [unfairly]. I wrote it to describe the dangers of prejudice but I wrote it in a very simple way. Months later UNESCO awarded me with a prize in children's literature in the service of tolerance. They labelled me as a children's writer, and I didn't argue!" he says.

This initial book and subsequent UNESCO award was perhaps an early indication of Dr. Al Mutawa's talent for combining sensitive and often emotive topics in a manner that not only drew positive and universal response but also captured the interest of audiences both young and old. With early success in his writing career, not to mention his well-established profile as a clinical psychologist, Dr. Al-Mutawa admits that finding



An animated Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa.

further inspiration for his writing was something of a challenge. However, a conversation with his sister whilst he travelled in a taxi through London served to stimulate his creative juices again and planted the seed of an idea in his head. When his sister probed him about why he wasn't continuing with his writing, he explains his response: "My answer to her was a flippant: 'For me to go back now, anything I do has to have the potential of Pokemon.' My answer was predicated on the fact that I had attained my doctorate and three master's degrees at that point in time. A string of thoughts sprung from that conversation and by the time we got to Knightsbridge I had the very beginning for the idea."

Casting his mind back to the some of the people he had encountered in his role as a clinical psychologist added further weight to his idea and provided additional stimulation, as he reveals: "When I was training at Bellevue Hospital, part of my rotation was in the Survivors of Political Torture Unit. You heard countless tales of those who had been tortured at the hands of leaders whom they grew up reviling as heroes. I decided that our part of the world needed new heroes to aspire to and to emulate... enter THE 99."

As Dr. Al-Mutawa began to think more deeply and thoughtfully about THE 99, he began drawing up a concept paper and mapping out some initial storylines for the characters. In parallel to this he also considered the financial and business framework for launching the series. Now firmly committed to the idea of THE 99, Dr. Al-Mutawa set about convincing others of the need for a new order of superheroes. Within a few months, he had established an investment of \$7 million, with \$1 million coming from former business school classmates.

At the same time, Dr. Al-Mutawa decided that launching THE 99 in comic book series was the safest option with which to familiarise audiences with the characters and to develop and polish the superheroes. "A story in a comic book costs 15 times less than the same animated. So I could stretch the life of the project looking for the right mix of characters and storylines," he comments.

The characters are, of course, fundamental to the appeal of THE 99, and naturally they are something to which Dr. Al-Mutawa devoted great time, thought and energy. He explains that from the outset, he determined they would have global appeal, but their fundamental attributes would be those Islam. "I knew that to get traction in [all] markets, we needed to get buy in from people all over the world. So I made THE 99 characters from 99 countries. And I based their powers on universal attributes that Islam shares with the rest of the human civilizations. The storylines shy away from religion and instead focus on what unites the world, not what separates it." And it is a concept that has clearly struck a chord: "This message [has] met with incredible support from the world media in a way that is both humbling and intellectually gratifying at the same time," Dr. Al-Mutawa adds.

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This support has not just resulted in a healthy readership for the comic books; it has also sparked a series of international awards, including the UN Alliance of Civilizations 'Marketplace of Ideas', FHIQ Comics Award from Brazil, The Elliot Pearson Award for Excellence in Children's Literature from Tufts University and the Ecademy Award from Columbia University's School of Business. Furthermore, academic papers and courses have been penned and studied on THE 99.

The solid business framework that Dr. Al-Mutawa and his investors put in place is also helping to further the brand identity of THE 99. In March this year the first THE 99 Village theme park opened in Kuwait and there are plans to open six more in the next six years. Plans are also well underway to bring THE 99 series to the small screen. ▶

Rola Hadramy aka
Batina The Hidden



"The animated series is being co-produced by us, Teshkeel Media, and media giant, Endemol for global audiences. The writing is being done by top tier Hollywood writers and the series is set to hit global airwaves by the end of 2009. The success of the animated series, Inshallah, will lead to a great deal of licensing potential in theme parks, toys..." says Dr. Al Mutawa.

For Dr. Al-Mutawa the success of THE 99 is, of course, gratifying. He is thrilled that he has been able to repay the faith of his investors: "I promised to build a brand that was based on an Islamic archetype that could be leveraged as a global intellectual property. And my team and I delivered," he says.

More importantly, however, he is encouraged by the receptiveness of audiences to the original concept of THE 99. "I love my job. There is nothing that I could do that can give me the satisfaction of living the ethos of social entrepreneurship, of doing well by doing good. The fact that I am involved in project that has made headlines about the positive values in Islam, while building a business and creating the first ever media entertainment property that has been licensed in so many formats and territories that Forbes has named it one of the top 20 trends sweeping the globe is amazing," he says.

With such overwhelming success and acceptance, and in a relatively short space of time – only six years since the original development and investment – it would be easy for Dr. Al-Mutawa to be carried away by it all. However, when posed with the term 'media mogul', he shies away from it. Instead, offering a line from another iconic artist, and one well-known for his peacemaking antics. "As John Lennon put it to his son Sean in the song *Beautiful Boy* 'Life is what happened to you when you're busy making other plans.' I plan every minute, but remain flexible as the biggest deals we got for THE 99, including the theme park, were not planned," he says.

While his life and success may not be rigidly planned, one thing is for sure, we will be hearing a lot more from Dr. Al-Mutawa and THE 99 team in years to come. ■

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Dana Ibrahim aka
Noora The Light

SUPERHERO SUPERGUIDE

Whilst the superheroes of THE 99 are a growing family, here's a few of our favourites:

DR. RAMZI RAZEM – While not in possession of any superpowers, Dr. Ramzi is a born and gifted leader.

JOHN WELLER AKA DARR THE INFLECTER – This wheelchair bound American can manipulate nerve endings and therefore cause or prevent pain.

HATEM AL JOFRY AKA BAQI THE EVERLASTING – This superhuman Egyptian never tires or gets hungry.

FADI HASSEM AKA BAETH THE SENDER – Jordanian Fadi can transport inanimate objects anywhere.

AMIRA KHAN AKA HADYA THE GUIDE – With dual nationalities of Pakistan and the UK, Amira is a girl who can map any route, ensuring she can never get lost.

DANA IBRAHIM AKA NOORA THE LIGHT – This talented young lady from the UAE can create holograms, levitate and see the good and evil inside of people.

ROLA HADRAMY AKA BATINA THE HIDDEN – This girl from Yemen can make herself invisible as well people and objects around her.



John Weller aka
Darr The Inflecter

