

'The 99' as religious as Spiderman

Powerful Islamic superheroes take on Indonesia

By **Nabiha Shahab**

An apparent explosion has levelled high-rise buildings in the Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah, triggering a security alert. It's the work of an Islamic superhero, a giant, confused teenager who sneezed.

Jabbar the Powerful, the alter-ego of teenager Nawaf Al-Bilali, is the first of 99 superhero characters in an Islamic culture-based comic book series called "The 99" just launched in Indonesia.

The comic seeks to act as a metaphor for what's happening in the Islamic world, its creator, Kuwaiti-born Naif Al-Mutawa, told AFP during a recent visit to Jakarta to launch the colourful, action-packed comic.

"Islam or the Holy Quran can be used for good or for bad," Al-Mutawa said, adding that when either are misused, people blame the Holy Quran, "when in fact they should be blaming the person interpreting the Holy Quran".

Each of the superheroes personifies one of the 99 attributes of God in Islam, with their individual powers derived from mystical gemstones originating from 13th-century Baghdad, and infused with lost ancient knowledge.

Jabbar, for instance, has extraordinary strength that gives him "near-invulnerability and durability". Indonesia's own character, Fatah the Opener, can create a portal dimension used to travel anywhere on Earth.

The main struggle in the story happens between two characters representing the classic good-evil dichotomy, with each competing for the allegiance of "The 99". Even the superheroes themselves are sometimes deceived into crossing to the side of evil, Al-Mutawa explained.

But while the comic is based on Islamic archetypes and culture, there's nothing overtly Islamic in them, he said.

"They are as religious as Spiderman," Al-Mutawa quipped. "There's no mention of prayers or prophets, none of that."

The characters, who work in threes, do not carry weapons and are evenly split between males and females.

In a bid to represent Islam's spread around the world, characters frequently hail from two nations, which also helps to "make sense of the Islamic diaspora".

"For example, Bari is from Sudan but grew up in France, Hadya is from Pakistan but grew up in the UK," he said.

Al-Mutawa worked as a clinical psycholo-



A young boy reads a copy of the 'The 99' comic book at this school in Jakarta, Oct 1. Jabbar the Powerful, the alter-ego of teenager Nawaf Al-Bilali, is the first of 99 superhero characters in an Islamic culture-based comic book series, 'The 99,' launched this month in Indonesia. The comic seeks to act as a metaphor for what's happening in the Islamic world, its creator, Kuwaiti-born Naif Al-Mutawa, told Agence France Presse. (AFP)

gist for more than a decade before he started his own media company. He had treated former prisoners of war in Kuwait and worked with survivors of political torture in New York.

"The Iraqis that I treated were tortured by Saddam or his people. These are people who grew up with Saddam as their hero and yet they were tortured by (his people)," he said.

"What kind of message are we sending our children? Is this what heroes do?"

This disillusionment drove him to write several successful children's books and then to create and co-write "The 99," with former Marvel and DC comic artists helping out, hoping to fill a gap in the global market.

The comic, co-written with Fabian Nicieza, who has worked on hit Marvel titles such as X-Men, is now published across the Middle East in Arabic.

"The 99' is selling as well in Kuwait and the Emirates as Spiderman is. I know because I sell Spiderman," he said.

The comic will debut in the United States in October, followed by Malaysia next year, while Al-Mutawa is in talks with publishers in Turkey and France.

Yudha Kartohadiprodo, general manager of "The 99's" Indonesian license holder

Femina Group, said he believed the comics would find a receptive audience in the world's most populous Muslim nation.

"In the market today there are no contemporary comics based on Islamic values," he said. "The creator understands Islamic history, and that's important for this Islamic-based story."

Indonesian Muslims can be sensitive when it comes to religious-based stories, with any criticism from Islamic groups potentially risking a nationwide boycott.

A poem recently published in a newspaper in West Java, for instance, sparked outrage from a local religious group for its "un-Islamic" depiction of angels, forcing the writer and the newspaper to print a public apology.

Kartohadiprodo said he was confident in Al-Mutawa's Islamic credentials.

The 68-page, full-colour first issue of "The 99" had a print run of 25,000 copies and is selling at bookstores for 18,000 rupiah (\$2). A few national newspapers are considering printing extracts, Kartohadiprodo said.

And of course, merchandising is to follow soon, with the Islamic superheroes preparing to infiltrate homes via notebooks, T-shirts and mobile phone paraphernalia. (AFP)