

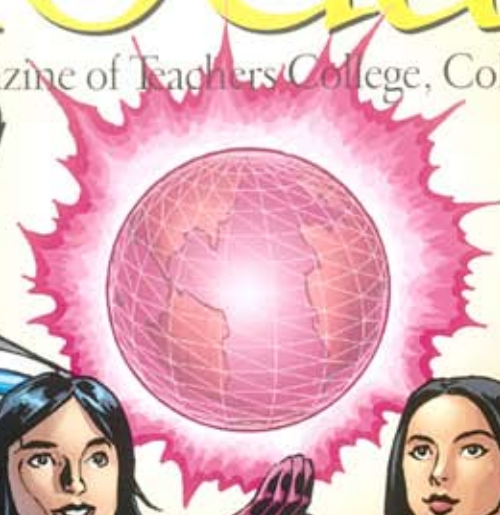
TC

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AROUND THE GLOBE WITH TEACHERS COLLEGE

The One Behind “The 99”

Naif Al-Mutawa thought kids in the Islamic world lacked modern-day superheroes to root for. So he went out and invented some

In 2003, Naif Al-Mutawa (M.A., 2000)—then 32—already held a master’s degree in business administration from Columbia; a master’s and Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Long Island University; and a master’s in organizational psychology from Teachers College. He’d worked at Manhattan’s Bellevue Hospital with survivors of political torture and authored three children’s books, one of which had won a UNESCO prize for its message of tolerance.

“I had all these ideas and degrees, but I didn’t know how to put them together,” says Al-Mutawa.

So the Kuwaiti native, whose growing family already included three sons, decided to address what he saw as a lack of culturally relevant superheroes for youngsters in the Islamic world to identify with and root for. The result was “The 99,” a comic book series whose characters are each based on one of the 99 attributes of Allah. The attributes are universal qualities, such as wisdom and creativity. And though “The 99” is based on Islamic archetypes, the stories are non-religious. That, along with their adventure-packed plots (which Al-Mutawa co-authors) and flashy graphics (inked by artists who also work for D.C. and Marvel) may help explain their widespread popularity.

The strip’s backstory is also pretty cool. As the Web site for “The 99” tells it, in the thirteenth century, when Baghdad fell to invading forces, the city’s librarians managed to transmute “the sum total of knowledge of world culture”—Muslim texts, Christian texts, Jewish texts, texts from the Greek philosophers—into 99 gemstones “crafted to absorb the very light of reason.” The gemstones were “scattered to the four corners of the world and subsequently lost to time and tide.” But more recently, they have been found...

The series has been wildly popular, with major circulation in 10 countries in the Arab world as well as in Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and the United States. French and Turkish editions will be coming out soon, and in February, the first of six



Above: “The 99” in Arabic.

Below: Naif Al-Mutawa

planned “The 99”-inspired theme parks opened in Kuwait. Al-Mutawa also recently signed a deal with Endemol, the world’s largest independent TV production company, to create a TV series based on “The 99” that will be broadcast around the world by the end of 2009.

With its focus on diversity and positive role models, the comic book series has earned the TC alum a place in the international media spotlight. “The 99” has been covered in publications ranging from *The New York Times* to *Le Monde* to *Egypt Today*, and a feature-length documentary about Al-Mutawa and “The 99” is currently in production.

“I always dreamed that one day my writing would be read all over the world,” Al-Mutawa says. “But if I ever expected this, I should have been the one being treated at Bellevue.”

Despite the demands of running Teshkeel Media Group, the company that produces “The 99,” Al-Mutawa somehow finds the time to teach at Kuwait University’s Faculty of Medicine. He is opening a private psychology clinic in March and is now the father of five boys, ages 11 to 2 months old.

Asked about his time at Teachers College, Al-Mutawa recalls the certificate he earned at the school’s International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution. “My life is conflict resolution,” he says. “This is the only way you can win the war on terror. We have to focus our attention on the way we teach kids.” ❖

—Emily Brady

