

99 ways to SAVE THE WORLD

The first comic book series inspired by Islamic legend, The 99, is making waves across the world ■ DIPANITA NATH



IT IS HOW UN-ISLAMIC THE BOOKS ARE THAT CREATES A SENSE OF WONDER. "I WAS OUT TO BREAK STEREOTYPES," SAYS AL-MUTAWA



In 1258, a bloodthirsty warrior called Hulagu Khan got ready to wreak destruction on Baghdad, home to the biggest library of the time, the Dar al-Hikma. Desperate to save their wealth of learning, Dar al-Hikma librarians instilled all their knowledge into 99 gemstones, called the Noor stones, crafted to absorb the light of reason. In time, the stones were lost. Only the legend remained.

Then, in 2006, a new comic book series, *The 99*, announced that the stones had been found — they were with 99 children scattered across the globe who had strange powers. This band of 99 would fight evil and save the world with their extraordinary qualities, qualities that only Allah could possess.

This makes *The 99* possibly the first comic book series inspired by Islamic history and culture. "According to the Koran, Allah has 99 traits like generosity, mercy and wisdom. Each superhero embodies one trait. Baqi the Everlasting never gets tired or hungry, Mussawwira the Organiser can make order out of chaos, Rafie the Lifter can control gravity and Hadya the Guide is never lost as she can map a route to anywhere," says Naif al-Mutawa, the 38-year-old Kuwait-based psychologist who publishes the books under his label Teshkeel Media Group.

The 99 comics bust the stereotype of a Muslim, especially the linking of Islam with terror. As it entered bestselling lists in one country after another, from West Asia to the US, *Forbes* called it "one of the top 20 trends sweeping the world". "Shortly after 9/11, I decided that I would take Islam back from the people who had taken it hostage, but I did not know how. The answer was staring me in the face. It was as simple and as difficult as the multiplication of 9 by 11," says al-Mutawa.

In India, where the books arrived in May 2008 in association with Chandamama, the response has been mixed. Major cities have taken to it, smaller ones haven't. Only a few characters are introduced each month with each book. India knows 12 though there are 20-odd out in the world today.

They have a powerful enemy, the evil Rughal, who wants to reduce the world to rubble. Rughal, once the guardian of the Noor stones, is now a human figure packed with pure energy. The full extent of his powers remains a mystery.

The superheroes are headed by Dr Ramzi Razem, who has no special powers of his own but is a brilliant leader and teacher. Both Dr Ramzi and Rughal dress in western suits and form a good-versus-evil axis that results in high-energy adventure. "There is a good group and an evil ageless person who wants to rule the world. Children like the conflict and these superheroes are different, so that makes them more interesting," says Subramanyan L, CEO, Chandamama.

Al-Mutawa says he had an inkling that the books would "create a tremendous impact in the Islamic world". "That's why I didn't consult any Islamic scholars," he says. Instead he concentrated on a gripping storyline with a contemporary edge. In *Storm Front*, for example, there's a familiar distress call: "Weather patterns are changing, sea levels rising, glaciers melting.....this isn't greenhouse emissions we're talking about."

As for the artwork, al-Mutawa provides a basic archetype before his team of experts takes over. Team 99 comes from across the



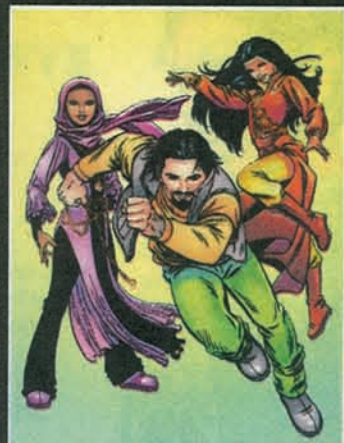
world ("Sometimes, I am the only Muslim in the room. Even our animation studio is based in Chennai," says al-Mutawa). It includes seasoned artists like Neal Adams of DC comics, Dan Panosian, who has worked on Spider-Man and The Hulk, and writers like Fabian Nicieza, who wrote for X-Men and Power Rangers.

But it is how un-Islamic the books are that creates a sense of wonder. "I wanted to highlight Islam as loving and tolerant. I was out to break all stereotypes. There's no religion or prayers; the daredevil is a girl called Mumita who has grown up fighting on the streets. Only four characters wear the veil," says al-Mutawa.

The characters also come from across the world. The mysterious Batina the Hidden is from Yemen, Bari the Healer is a black boy from South Africa, Sami the Listener is from Sudan, Mussawwira from Ghana, Hadya from Pakistan and the UK and Wassi the Vast, who can change his size at will, goes by the name Ashok Mohan in India. There's inclusiveness in other ways also. Darr the Afflicter is wheelchair-bound and Sami cannot speak. "Kuwait isn't the most secular society in the world, so imagine how great it feels to see kids idolise heroes from Portugal, Hungary and the US," says al-Mutawa. One of the impulses for the books, he says, came from the fear that the world which his young sons had inherited was increasingly seeing Islam linked to terrorism. "I started thinking seriously about who your heroes were going to be," he said once in a letter to his sons.

Among the first to oppose the comics was Saudi Arabia, where a stringent version of Islam prevents personification of Allah and other religious figures. "For two years, they shut us out. Then, on our second round of financing, I approached an Islamic bank which had seven religious scholars on board. Once they approved the books, it was smooth sailing in that country," says al-Mutawa.

The irony lies elsewhere. The US, which not all of the Arab world considers a friend, is where the 99 superheroes may find seasoned guidance. According to an agreement signed earlier this month, the Justice League of America, comprising Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman among others, will soon accompany the 99 on their adventures. "We're still working on the storyline. Perhaps it will start with US President Barack Obama's Cairo address," says al-Mutawa. The world is safe. The 99 are here. ♦



(Clockwise from left): Characters from the series, the cover of the first issue, al-Mutawa, Wassi, the superhero with an Indian link and Batina the Hidden, a burqa-clad superhero from Yemen