

San Francisco's Afghan American Author:

An Interview with Jonah Raskin

Tamim Ansary came to San Francisco to settle down. He found a job, got married, had children, and reared a family. Then 9/11 came along, lifted him out of his anonymity, and thrust him into the global spotlight. Soon after the World Trade Center was destroyed, he wrote and sent an email that went viral, travelled around the world, and made him an instant celebrity and a spokesman for reason in the Age of Terrorism.

His life hasn't been the same since. In 2002, he published a memoir about his life as an Afghan American entitled *West of Kabul, East of New York* that was the "One City One Book" selection in 2008. The next year he published an award winning history of the world told through Islamic eyes entitled *Destiny Disrupted*.

This Sunday he will receive the Fred Cody Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Northern California Book Reviewers in the main branch of the San Francisco Public library. I talked with him recently about the award, his writing and sense of identity.

Q: So, Tamim, how does it feel to be honored?

A: To tell you the truth, I feel like I'm just starting out in life, and that my work is just beginning. An award for lifetime achievement might be more appropriate a few years from now.

Q: But you've written and published more than 40 books, if you count the children's' and young adult book you authored.

A: I've done a lot. In addition to my books, I've been teaching writing workshops for years and have helped a generation of young Afghan writers in the Bay Area who were born here and don't really have memories of Afghanistan. They have been overshadowed by their parents, but they have marvelous stories to tell. I'm especially proud of my work with them.

Q: These days most writers define themselves as American and not as Chinese American or Italian American. But you describe yourself as an Afghan American writer.

A: For a long time I wanted to run away from my origins, but I feel that I have an obligation to work in the gap between Afghani and American cultures and to persuade Americans to see Afghans and Afghans to see Americans.

Q: You speak all over the country about Afghanistan and Islam don't you?

A: I go to synagogues and speak to Jews and to Mosques to speak to Muslims; it's tough to get Muslims to see that Jews have a point of view, and tough to get Jews to see that Muslims have often been made into the latest scapegoats.

A: You were born in Kabul and still have family there, but you're also very much an American.

Q: The seminal experience of my life was coming through the counterculture of the 1960s. Living in a commune in Oregon was like living in a tribe in Afghanistan. Of course, the counterculture is still alive, especially in the Bay Area.

A: You're a San Franciscan to the core of your being aren't you?

Q: I have lived here longer than anywhere. My heart is here. Bernal Heights is my neighborhood. And now there's an incredible literary Renaissance in the city that I'm proud to be a part of.

A: What are you working on now?

Q: A history of the past 200 years in Afghanistan told from the inside looking out. It's bottomlessly complicated, as you might imagine. I'm reading history books in Dari, the language I studied at school in Kabul, and I'm going back there hoping to sort it all out and to come out alive. Please wish me well.

Jonah Raskin has been a book reviewer for *The Chronicle* since 1982.