

Stereotype-defying young Muslims make writer's point

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By Phil Kloer
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When Melody Moezzi was looking for a publisher for her first book — a look at the lives of young American Muslims — two companies offered her the same deal:

Find and interview a terrorist, and we'll give you an advance.

Her response: "I don't know any terrorists. And there's enough of that. That's .00001 percent of our population, and that's all anybody gets to see on the news or gets to read about."

That is, indeed, the entire point of the book she was trying to get published. "War on Error: Real Stories of American Muslims" (University of Arkansas Press, \$18.95) is a collection of profiles of young Muslims, as wide-ranging as they are peaceful: a feminist Muslim, a gay Muslim, a rapper, a convert from Catholicism, a buff Muslim with tattoos and one who sounds like a surfer when he tells her, "Dude, I think I'm like one of the worst Muslims I know."

Moezzi, who lives in a condo near Emory University with her husband, Matthew Lenard, two cats (Olyan and Talula) and a great many books, is an Iranian-American, the daughter of two physicians who came to this country after the Iranian revolution. She's an attorney who doesn't practice law at the moment, a self-described activist, a devout Muslim whose Apple laptop sports a large bumper sticker that reads, in Arabic, "All praise is due to God."

And finally, without interviewing any terrorists, she is a published author. Moezzi will discuss and sign "War on Error" today at 7:30 p.m. at Wordsmith Books in Decatur.

"I wrote this book because I was sick of how the media was portraying something that was incredibly important to me," she says. "My faith. Most of us are no different from any other people of faith. We want to do right by God."

If she's frustrated with how Westerners view Muslims, she's every bit as upset with what's happening within her religion, and the confusion in many minds — Muslim as well as American — of what's actually in the Quran and what's Arab custom.

"There is nothing in Islam that says you have to have a government that is religious," she says. "They're using Islam to control people. Consistently in the Quran, it says there should be no compulsion in religion."

"I'm not the kind of person who likes to say that someone else is right or wrong," she continues, "but when it comes to some things that are being done in the name of Islam, I am 100 percent sure that I am right and they are wrong."

"She does not shy away from conflict or putting people in their place," says Sanida Halebic, who became friends with Moezzi when they were classmates at Emory Law School. Halebic, now a prosecutor in New York City, is one of the people Moezzi writes about in the book.

The young Muslims of Moezzi's world defy stereotypes in all sorts of ways. Like people in their 20s of different faiths, many of them question their religion, or their practice of it. They don't fast sufficiently during Ramadan, then feel guilty about it. Some abstain from alcohol, some don't.

Sarah (last names are not used in the book) gets irritated when fellow Muslims criticize her for being bisexual. "I find it so tiring how so many of my self-proclaimed Muslim brothers and sisters are so intent on expressing their disapproval of my life or views," she tells Moezzi.

Moezzi's last name (rhymes with "noisy") comes from the Arabic name for one who leads prayers; her first name comes from the Bobby Vinton pop song "My Melody of Love," which her mother listened to when she was pregnant.

"It's a hideous song," she laughs. "I wish I never heard it. But I love my name."

When Moezzi and Halebic first met at Emory, Halebic recalls, the first thing Moezzi told her was that she didn't look like a Muslim. "I said, 'Well, you don't even have a Muslim name!' " she recalls. "Then we became good friends."

Moezzi grew up well-off and high-achieving in Dayton, Ohio; graduated from Wesleyan; moved to Atlanta and got her law degree from Emory Law School. Although she passed the bar, she chose to be a writer rather than a lawyer.

"Some people go into law because they want to make a lot of money," says Halebic. "Melody was always more interested in how the law can help the little people, and in its philosophical issues."

"A lot of the nonprofits I applied to were more interested in me having corporate experience," Moezzi says. "Life is too short. Freelance writing pays less, but it has dignity."

Her husband, Matthew, taught in the Atlanta public schools for two years on the Teach for America program, and now works as a researcher for the Southern Regional Education Board. They married in August 2001, one month before 9/11.

"After 9/11, there were so many people writing about and reporting on Muslims and the so-called Islamic world who knew absolutely nothing about the faith," she says. It bothered her "how easily Americans bought into the lie that Islam was a violent religion."

It was 9/11, and the reaction to it, that ultimately led to "War on Error."

"It makes sense," says Halebic. "She was always really more of a writer."

"I fully believe in Providence," says Moezzi. "And I think that right now, I'm doing what I'm meant to be doing."