

By Theresa Weaver (March 2008)

Melody Moezzi, the Muslim American-born daughter of Iranian parents, talks about her new book, *War on Error: Real Stories of American Muslims*.

**What do you want readers to get from this book?** My greatest hope in writing this book was that it would open the minds of my readers. People always want to relate their experiences to those of others, and I think that's great and helps a lot when it comes to improving understanding. But just because you may relate to me, that doesn't mean you know what it's like to be me, to live inside my skin. After 9/11, I began to relate a hell of a lot more to black Americans. I suddenly felt myself and my people turn into walking targets; I began to experience a lot more racism and xenophobia on a very personal level, and things that were previously purely political began to become increasingly personal for me. Does that mean I know what it's like to be a black American? Hell, no! No matter how many black friends I have, no matter how many African American history books I read, I know that I will never fully get it. That doesn't mean that I won't fight for the right of a young black man to drive a fancy car more than five miles down Peachtree without getting pulled over. I may just be a passenger, but I'm still in the car. Does that make sense? I feel like we're all passengers when it comes to understanding the lives and experiences of others, but we're all human, too. Oppression is oppression—whether it's in Downtown Atlanta or Mogadishu or Tehran.

**Did anything surprise you in your interviews?** Not really. I've always

known that there are as many different ways to be Muslim as there are ways to cook a chicken. But I certainly *learned* a lot from the people whom I profiled. I think that people who know a lot (or at least, who think they know a lot) are surprised to learn new things. But I'm pretty cognizant of the fact that I don't know all that much, so I'm never surprised to learn new things really. I learn something new every day.

**You seem to have gotten your subjects to speak very honestly and openly about very personal beliefs. Was it difficult?** I think it's hard to be honest when you know that people are judging you. All of my "subjects" knew where I was coming from—that we shared being Muslim and being American in common, that I valued their experiences, and that I was writing this book from a place of love, not hate. I think all of that helped, but mostly, I was able to get these people to speak honestly and openly about their own most personal beliefs because I chose honest and open people.

**Was it more difficult to interview people you knew very well or those you didn't know at all?** It was somewhat harder to interview the people whom I already knew because they just assumed that I already knew their answers. Once I convinced them that I still had a lot to learn from them and their experiences, it became much easier. It's baffling how much we assume and how much we just miss or get wrong about those closest to us.

**How hard was it for you to share your own personal experiences?** It sucked. I didn't want to do it—my agent forced me to do it before she

would send out the proposal to any publishers. I'm glad she did, though, and I think the book is better for it.

**Were there any frustrations in writing this book? Anything you had hoped to accomplish but weren't able to?** It was a serious feat to get this book into print. Writing this book was a joy, but it was a serious feat to get it into print. While I initially had a lot of interest from agents and publishers, once they found out that "writing a book about young Muslim Americans" did not include bashing Islam, they lost interest. I had a good number of agents and editors ask me to include a terrorist. Ultimately, I realized that if this book was going to get published any time in the near future, it wouldn't be by one of the big trade presses. And so I amicably parted ways with my agent and set about finding an academic publisher willing to take on a not-so-academic book.

**What are you working on next?** Freelancing—just trying to make enough money writing so I don't have to practice law. I'm also working on two other nonfiction books. One is a memoir/critique about my run-ins with the American healthcare system. I've been in and out of hospitals for the past ten years with what was first a pancreatic tumor, then was removed, and now my pancreas doesn't work all that well, so I can't eat most everything that tastes good, and I have chronic pain.

Also, I'm writing a book that will likely be called *The Principle Principle*, about some of the things people lose out on when they stand up for what they believe in. You know, freedom, life, livelihood, etc.