

Born in London, brought up in America and of Pakistani heritage — **Jabeen Akhtar's** multicultural life is enough to grab anyone's interest. **Henna Achhpal** speaks to the author about her debut novel, quitting her federal job and India

# Between bureaucracy and books



#### WELCOME TO AMERICASTAN IN JABEEN'S WORDS...

"Welcome to Americastan is funny, irreverent, revealing and surprising. I can also tell you what it is not. It is not lyrical, beautiful or revolutionary. I don't think I could write something 'lyrical' even if my life depended on it."

**Welcome to Americastan is available at all leading bookstores across the city for ₹499**

>> Currently living in Washington, D.C., Jabeen is working on her second novel. She is also a speaker with the State Department's Citizen Dialogue program, which sends Pakistani-Americans abroad to speak about life in America.

**When did you realise that you have the writer's gene?**

I always wrote stories for myself, my family and friends but never for a larger audience and certainly never for a publication. Once, I wrote a humorous short story about my family and read it out loud at my sister's wedding. I was nervous because both my sister and her husband are academics, as were most of the guests, so it was a tough crowd.

The story was full of inside jokes that I thought only my family and friends would find funny but as I read through the story, everyone was in splits. That was the first time I seriously considered writing for a publication.

**So, becoming an author wasn't your initial plan?**

I always knew I was going to write some day but I kept putting it on hold to pursue safer and more practical things such as getting degrees in economics and working on government policy. It's not easy to pursue writing as an occupation and leave your well-paying career mid-way to chase a generally non-paying, self-esteem lowering venture. That being said, I can't imagine being anything other than a writer for the rest of my life.

**What motivated you to write *Welcome to Americastan*?**

I had just moved away from a big city, from all my friends and family, and found that I had a lot of free time after work. I used that time to compile my life's experiences in a document like a diary but in the very cold Microsoft Word format. I found myself adding content that belonged to other people — my friend's experiences, people I would read about online. I had no goal with this initially, but I found that a narrative was pulling itself together. Slowly, I started fictionalising many of these accounts — giving them different outcomes, adding players to the event that don't exist in real life. Again, I wasn't sure why I was doing it, but it was fun. Many of my writer friends encouraged me to put these collected experiences into some format for publication — whether short story, essay or novel. I chose a novel.

**How long did it take you to complete the novel?**

I started writing on evenings and weekends while I was working for the government. Then I quit my job and attacked the novel full-time. Overall, it took about three years.

**Can you recount a memorable incident while you were writing your novel?**

When I was drafting Chapter 8 of my novel, I was sitting in a coffee shop. I was preoccupied with my work when a tall African-American man stole my cell phone. He just grabbed it from my table and walked right out. Blinded by fury, I chased him, not bothering to notice a line of college students waiting outside an ice cream parlour right in front of me. I fell into the crowd, taking one girl down with me, tearing my jeans and bruising my knee. Still determined to get my cell phone back, I chased the man onto a bus. I walked up to him and said, "Give me my cell phone back, please." The man furrowed his eyebrows and replied, "I didn't take no cell phone." I realised, with horror, that he was the wrong person. "All black people look alike, don't they honey?" said an African-American woman and everyone was staring at me. This was a significant moment because here I was writing a novel about the minorities in America and I almost ignited an interracial war on that bus!

**Reading the synopsis of your book and then reading about you, immediately makes one think that the book is autobiographical. Is it?**

My personal experiences have inspired parts of the novel. There's a lot of me and my life in there. But it's not entirely autobiographical. I completely exploited true events for the sake of the novel, for example, taking something that happened in real life but changing the outcome, adding players to the scene that don't exist in real life and such.

**You spent seven years writing federal regulations for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency before quitting to write — that's quite a career jump! What motivated you to make the change?**

Generally, my life needed an overhaul and I had reached a point where I couldn't bear one more conference room meeting!

**Do you have a second novel in mind?**

The second novel will be inspired by one of my favourite television shows of all time, *Yes, Minister*. The novel will showcase all the pettiness and insanity that exists in the U.S. government.

**How does it feel to have your novel available to the Indian audience?**

It's a great feeling. I can't explain how wonderful and life changing my experience with India has been. I didn't originally plan to release the novel in India. I thought it would first be published in the U.S., then maybe Europe. India was an unexpected turn in my publication journey. The novel has been received very well but the best part is having Indian readers contact me on Twitter, Facebook and through my website telling me how much the novel spoke to them and made them laugh.

**You were recently in India to promote your book, how similar or different do you think India and Pakistan are?**

They are the same. Please, can we all just admit this? The food, the way we dress, the music, the movies and the family dynamics — not to mention that we all look alike too. The one difference I will note is that I felt more at ease walking the streets in India than in Pakistan. India's multi-religious, multi-ethnic tolerance serves the country well. There's a very casual, anything goes vibe in India that will keep me coming back.