

Dear reader,

I was a very fortunate kid growing up in the Bay Area, surrounded by a variety of different cultures that I learned about firsthand. I grew up meeting actual members of the Black Panthers, visiting The African American Museum and Library at Oakland (AAMLO) blocks away from home, and attending the annual Black Cowboy Parade. I learned about the land that I lived on and the various tribes that lived there before me, like the Emeryville and Berkeley Shellmounds that belonged to the Ohlone tribe of Natives Americans. The Bay Area is also home to some of the largest populations of Asian American and Hispanic communities, which I've had the honor of working and learning alongside in various art groups.

The one community that I didn't learn much about growing up was my own Arab American / Muslim community. My parents were hardworking immigrants who well-meaningly left me to my own devices. Our neighborhood in Oakland, made up of mostly blue collar African American families, was great and also well-meaning but didn't know how to embrace us. Even though I was born and raised in the United States, I was sent to English as a second language (ESL) classes, not because I needed them, but because I seemed ... different. I was left rudderless as a kid, but never one for trouble, I turned to art, and to comics in particular.

In contrast to the great lessons of other cultures that made up my Bay Area community, Arabs / Muslims were seen in a very negative light, and often as the enemy or as the butt of jokes in a lot of entertainment of my youth. With America at war with Arab countries for most of my life, and the current state of affairs in regard to the Israeli / Hamas / Palestinian conflict, there remains a heavy focus on how Arabs and Arab Americans differ from other Americans, instead of on the things that bring us all together.

I didn't set out to write *Almost Sunset*, but it sure came from the heart. As my friend and colleague Jesse Hamm once said, "Somewhere out there are people who need to hear a story you're uniquely able to tell. Art by others, even better art, won't do; only yours." That has never been more true for a book than it is for *Almost Sunset*. With it, I have an opportunity to showcase my Arab heritage in a positive light! I get to show Arabs and non-Arabs that we are all very much alike, with similar desires, upbringings, and lifestyles.

My hope is Arab American kids are just as proud of *Almost Sunset* as I am, as they read along, laughing and relating to Hassan's story. I hope it's as much an American classic as *A Christmas Story*. And for the non-Arabs that read it, I hope they find themselves being able to relate, just like I did as a kid: learning about other cultures and being proud of my neighbors.

Thanks,

Wahab