

Q&A with Shugri Salh

Shugri Said Salh was born in the Somali desert. In 1992, she immigrated to North America after civil war broke out in her home country. She attended nursing school at Pacific Union College and graduated with honors. Although “The Last Nomad” is her first book, Salh has been storytelling since she could talk. From her grandmother and the nomadic community in which she was raised, she heard stories and learned of their power to entertain, teach and transform. When she isn’t writing or telling stories, she works as an infusion nurse. She lives in San Diego with her husband and three children.



Q. What inspired you to write “The Last Nomad” ?

A. In Somali culture, we say “Waarimayside war hakaa haro.” This proverb loosely translates, “You are not going to live forever, so you may as well leave your words behind.” From a young age, I knew my story was unusual, even within my culture. I love listening to other people’s stories just as much as I enjoy sharing my own, and sharing our stories and experiences helps to bring people from different backgrounds together. But one of the driving forces that urged me to sit and write down my story, unique or not, was my quest to get to know my mother, who passed away when I was about six years old.

In “The Last Nomad,” I explain how my memory of her is like a mirage that refuses to give up the promise it once held. Whenever I think of her or see my mother in my dreams, she is standing in our backyard among her nine children. I can see that she is pregnant and wearing a guntiino, a sari-like garment. But when my eyes move up to see her face, the details end just above her neck. I have always been frustrated by not being able to see her face. When my oldest daughter turned six, the need to excavate my dead mother’s story gained urgency. When I learned that there were no pictures of my mother, I became determined not to let her stories die as well. My book is not just about me: it encompasses three generations of my family, and the beauty of a waning culture. One of my favorite African proverbs says, “When an elder dies, a library is burned.” I did not want any more stories to be lost.

Q. What is one thing your readers probably don't know about you?

A. I have a few chronic conditions that I live with; migraines and digestive issues. These issues make it hard for me to consume restaurant foods. In Sonoma county, I had few spots where I could trust their food when I wanted to dine out. I am new to San Diego and have yet to find a restaurant where I can eat their food without getting sick afterward. The good news is, if I watch what I eat, I can keep my migraine and stomach issues at bay. I can take a small taste of something and instantly tell you if it is going to disagree with my body, and that is a blessing. I have a list of ingredients that don't bother me and I can cook using them. I also carry an EpiPen with me. I suspect both my migraine and stomach issues are tied to food allergies, specifically additives and processed foods.

Q. What are you looking forward to next as an author?

A. I have so many stories to tell that characters in my head are fighting to be put into my next book. With all the occupations I have, there is a hectic dance going on in my life. However, I am very committed to telling the untold stories of Somali people, especially Somali women. I just finished a children's picture book called, “Suuban’s First Day of Herding.” The plan is to turn “The Last Nomad” into a young reader version. I am also actively working on a novel about three generations of Somali women. Since many people wanted to know more about the desert after reading my memoir, this upcoming novel opens with a young teen girl running for her life on a moonless night in the desert. I am beyond excited to bring this story to life, so stay tuned for more tales.

Q. What is your favorite children's book?

A. When I was a child, I did not have books to read. Living in the nomadic lands of Somalia, I was immersed in our oral tradition of storytelling and reciting poetry around the fire at night. I heard traditional tales and poems composed on the spot, such as stories of brave ancestors battling other tribes or wild animals. One of the stories that enchanted and frightened me as a little girl was the story of Dhegdheer, a long-eared evil witch that ate disobedient nomadic children. The story was designed to scare children and keep them from wandering off into unsafe territory, but there were also a few wise children who outsmarted Dhegdheer. This is what really captivated me about the story - I envisioned myself as one of those heroic children who could outsmart Dhegdheer.

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