



◀ QATAR'S FIRST SUPERHERO, ALEEM, AUGMENTS HIS POWER OF KNOWLEDGE WITH A COPY OF SUR LA TERRE AS HIS TEAMMATES LOOK ON ▶
◀ ARTWORK BY JUNE BRIGMAN & ROY RICHARDSON ▶

ORIGIN STORY: THE 99

Self-confessed comic book geek, Senior Editor **Steve Paugh** leaps at the chance to explore the “**secret origins**” of the Middle East’s **first** superhero series, **The 99**, to find out the **truth** behind its **super-powered** rise to popularity

>>> Within the dust cloud that loomed like a billowing black leviathan against the ashen backdrop of the felled Twin Towers on September 11th, 2001, there began to stir the nascent malevolence of a great monstrosity. This beast, born in the din of rending metal and scorched earth, grew in secret over the years, fanning the flame of misguided passions in the global populace, infecting them with its sickening power for inciting divisiveness. It hissed into the ears of the fearful that the actions of a fanatical few represented an entire faith. It whispered false proverbs of an impending clash of civilisations with an “evil” Other, and drew lines of what it defined as fundamentally Western morals against what it called the “lack thereof” in the East. If ever there were an ultimate evil against which a collection of mythic heroes could rally, this would be its insidious unseen form.

And yet, even though the threat was larger than life, there were no super-powered saviours to respond to it, even those existing fictitiously within a collective Middle East imagination. What, then, do you do when there are no heroes to save the day? What do you do in a world without supermen? You do exactly what Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa, creator and founder of Teshkeel Media Group Inc. has done: you create them.

With a PhD in clinical psychology and a Masters degree in organisational psychology, Dr. Al-Mutawa is someone who, much like the classic crime fighter, The Shadow, knows what lurks in the minds of men. Having studied the global human response that took place after 9/11, he noted a palpable sense of what is now known as “Islamophobia” creeping its way into the collective international psyche. In a bid to combat this encroachment, the Kuwaiti-born, American-educated Dr. Al Mutawa decided to take a uniquely Western art form and apply to it some essential Islamic archetypes.

Of course, the application of religious allegory to the written word is nothing new. Even though the classic comic book style is usually reserved for the likes of Captain America and Superman,



◀ CROSS-CULTURAL HEROICS: TEAM MEMBERS FROM *THE 99* FIGHT TO SAVE THE WORLD ... IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE ▶

these stories transcend the truth and justice of solely the “American way,” having their basis in traditional Biblical storytelling. Where Naif’s stories diverge, however, is that they are instead based on Qur’anic archetypes. Instead of a Messianic allegory in the story of Superman, there is a tale about a young Saudi man named Jabbar, who discovers the importance in balancing physical power with moral discretion.

Instead of learning the lesson that, “with great power comes great responsibility” from Spider-Man’s origin, we learn the power and danger in seeking the truth in others from a young Emirati woman named Noora. Instead of following the valorous exploits of the Justice League, the Avengers or the X-Men, thanks to Naif, and his company, Teshkeel Comics, now we can follow the multicultural heroics of *The 99*.

BOOM!

The 99's plot, like its impetus for existing, begins in rubble and flame. When the Dar Al-Hikima library was razed in 13th century Baghdad by the Mongol hordes, the knowledge therein was in danger of being destroyed and forgotten. In an effort to preserve these values-based powers, the scholars collected them into 99 special stones. These gems were then scattered throughout the world and lay hidden until discovered by those destined to wield them in the never-ending fight against evil. Even on its surface, *The 99* has its roots firmly planted in the fundamentals of the Qur'an. After all, the name itself references the 99 names of God as stated inside Islam's holiest book, as well as the qualities attributed to each moniker.

Perhaps just as meaningfully, *The 99* also stands in direct contrast to the incidents during 9/11, as well as to the event's culturally debilitating aftermath. As Dr. Al-Mutawa explains it, he created the comic book series to take back the true meaning of Islam, which the perpetrators of the attacks spoiled in sullied symbolism. "On one level, you have 9 times 11, which is 99," he explains. "This is obviously a very important number in Islam, but that's just the tip of the iceberg. If you read 911 from right to left as Arabic letters, rather than left to right as numbers, you have 'Allah.'" When he saw how these symbols were being used against the very ideal of what, to him, helped establish the fabric of Islam, he felt compelled to step in and save it. "I wanted to go and grab those letters before they got dragged to hell," he says. In a way, Dr. Al-Mutawa can be compared to the scholars in his story, maintaining the true message of peace, preserving them within 99 chosen vessels and sending them into the world, not to proselytise but to foster understanding. "I don't care who was behind 9/11," he says. "The issue for me is that, whoever it was, they were taking down Islam the way I want it to be understood for my children." Of course, it wasn't just his children he was considering, nor just the children of Muslim parents. On the contrary, his stories apply to every child, regardless of race, creed or colour, and therein lies its appeal.



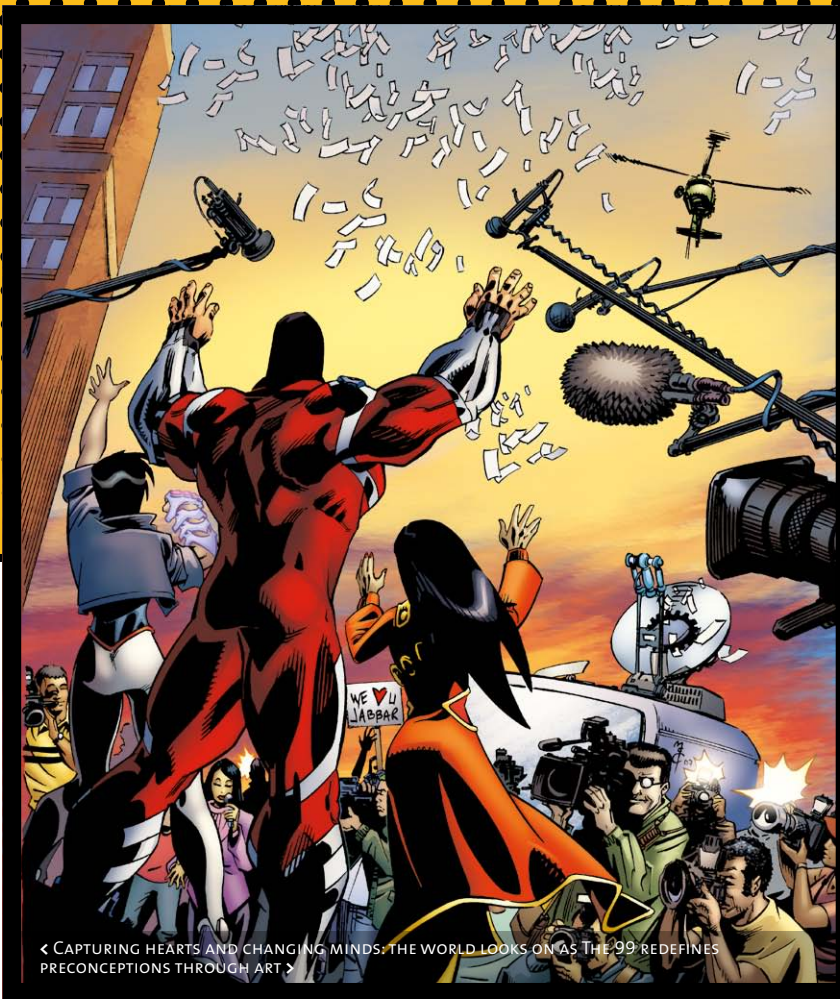
< BATINA - THE HIDDEN >

As much as *The 99* is tied into Islam, both in celebrating the religion's inherent values and resettling its global image, its creator wants it to transcend religion, and even culture. "I want any kid, regardless of where he is from, and whether he's a Hindu, a Jew, a Christian, a Buddhist or a Muslim, to see this and say, 'Wow, I'm like that character!'" To Naif, *The 99* is "all about normalisation and mainstreaming; seeing yourself and 'The Other' as one, and being surprised." After all, he says, "that message in Spider-Man (with great power comes great responsibility), is that Christian? Is that Muslim or Hindu? It's all of them. It's human!" The fact that *The 99* exists in many different cultures and within the strictness of both sides of the religious spectrum (Saudi Arabia and China, respectively), not to mention the fact that it exists in eight different languages, means that its appeal is at once universal in scope and individual in focus.

So, why a comic book? In a story where most of its pro- and antagonists hail from across the planet, why take such a region-specific shape? The comic book form has gained respect as a medium in recent years, with some seminal works even being described as high literature; however, this "sequential art," as it is more maturely known these days, is still largely a Western phenomenon (with an admitted portion of variant interest coming from places like Japan, where Manga rules supreme). But, again, why a comic book? "In the beginning," admits Naif, "I wasn't sure about how *The 99* was going to take form." He was eventually swayed to the medium when an old Columbia Business School associate called and persuaded him to meet with the executives at Marvel and DC, the two biggest comic companies in the world. "They convinced me that my story was a comic book structure, and to me, it just made sense."



< DARR - THE AFFLICTER >



< CAPTURING HEARTS AND CHANGING MINDS: THE WORLD LOOKS ON AS THE 99 REDEFINES PRECONCEPTIONS THROUGH ART >

Financially speaking, the initial investment on a comic book is much cheaper than, say, an animated series, but more importantly, it afforded Naif a bit of creative leeway. "In animation, things like character design are either hit or miss, whereas in a comic book, you'll see that some of the characters' looks change over time." In the end of course, *The 99* is, at its core, a story about superheroes, and he would be remiss to not present such a tale in its traditional form. Besides which, Naif had gathered quite a collection of "super friends" over the years, and it would be a shame not to implement their artistic powers.

As previous owner of *Cracked* magazine, Naif had come into contact with some of the former Marvel and DC creative talents that were working there and was able to maintain a relationship with them in the years that followed. From these connections, he was able to hook up with some of the greats in the comic book industry, from artists like John McCrea, who has worked on Spider-Man, Superman and The Hulk, and writers like Fabian Nicieza, who created major mainstream characters like X-Force and Deadpool while supplying witty comic repartee to countless others. The current wordsmith of *The 99* is Stuart Moore, who has provided word balloon prose for the likes of Iron Man and Wolverine. These artists and writers, much like the characters that they create in *The 99*, are from a variety of different cultures, be they from the US, Britain or in Naif's case, the Gulf, making the team as culturally diverse as its message.

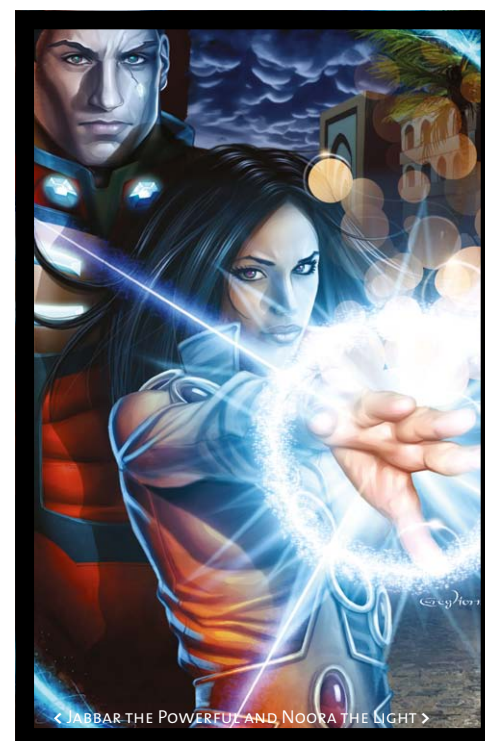
And that message is spreading, not only into more mainstream comic book fare in planned crossover events with characters like The Flash, Green Lantern and Batman of the Justice League, but also in a brand new animated series, which is slated to be aired through new television network The Hub (a shared project between Hasbro and Discovery) and will reach over 60 million American homes in October of this year. We haven't even mentioned "The 99 Village" amusement park in Jahra, Kuwait, which has been going strong for over a year now, or the soon to be released, feature-length documentary about Naif and *The 99* entitled *Wham! Bam! Islam!* Dr. Al-Mutawa also gingerly hinted at a few other possibilities for expansion in the works, like a feature length movie, possible series spinoffs and more collaboration with bigger brands; but he didn't want to spoil anything too specific, which we can understand. After all, he IS in the business of cliffhangers. Regardless of super-powered plot twists and shocking thematic turns, one thing that Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa and his multi-award-winning comic series *The 99* will not surprise with is unmatched artistic quality and uniqueness, particularly in this culturally untrodden territory.

It may not have been bitten by a radioactive spider or come to us from a far away world, but the true power of *The 99* is stronger than any mutation or otherworldly ability. Unlike some other projects that boast "edutainment" of some description, in *The 99*, there is pleasure in its purpose. As the issues fly their

way upwards in number, *The 99* may do the one thing that even these greatest heroes of fiction could not hope to do in the real world. It just might save it.

Up, up and away...

TO BE CONTINUED...



< JARBAR THE POWERFUL AND NOORA THE LIGHT >



DR. NAIF AL-MUTAWA

of Teshkeel Comics

Is it fair to say that the characters in The 99 were created in a very different social landscape to heroes like Superman and Batman? If so, what exactly would you say defines the origin of The 99?

Superheroes in the West are very much based on biblical archetypes, which is something Joseph Campbell wrote in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Like the prophets, these heroes are all orphans: Superman's parents died on Krypton, Batman's parents died when he was a young boy, Spider-Man lost his Uncle Ben. Also, like the prophets, these heroes have the message delivered to them by a messenger. So, Peter Parker, sitting there in a laboratory taking a picture while a spider descends from above is a metaphor for the Archangel Gabriel coming down to deliver a message from on high. Superman not only came from "the heavens" (Krypton), but he is sent to Earth in a pod like Moses was on the Nile; then, he hears the voice of his father, Jor-El saying to Earth, "I have sent to you my only son." This, of course, is God from the Bible, which is known as "the greatest story ever told." And so, storytellers have gone back to the foundation of these archetypes. Of course, the flesh on the bone is more modern and more exciting in its feel, but it still has remnants of that Biblical familiarity. What I do is base my stories on Qur'anic archetypes, which has never been done before.

On my website, www.al-mutawa.com, there are many of my personal essays that I have produced over the years. One of them, which was published in the Washington Post, is called "Concentration Camps and Comic Books," where I talk about how the creators of Batman and Superman, who were Jewish young men and teenagers, created these characters at the height of anti-Semitism. Similarly, *The 99* was created at the height of Islamophobia in 2003. You have to think back to 9/11, which shook the foundations of what Islam meant on many levels. So I went back to the same numbers and the same symbols they used (9/11), and created positive, multi-cultural messages to confuse the system. What I did was take that monkey wrench and stick it right in the middle of the machine to stop it.

You have a PhD in Clinical Psychology and a Masters in Organisational Psychology. From a psychological perspective, if we can say that, what is it about The 99 that so powerfully resonates with its readers? As it has been translated into eight languages, it also transcends, as art is wont to do, the psychology of variant and quite divergent cultures. Why do you believe that its premise and message have become so popular internationally and over such a dynamic spectrum of taste?

My work as a psychologist, my training, is all about perception: how people see themselves and how they think they are seen by others. The gaps and incongruences between the two are where you make a difference as a psychologist. Seven years ago, I decided to apply my training to Islam. I think that's what helped me create *The 99*; I wasn't playing by other peoples' perceptions or reality.

I consider myself "bi-cultural." I'm Kuwaiti, but I went to summer camp in New Hampshire growing up, so I kind of straddled East and West. Similarly, from day one, I created this concept to have international legs. The characters are from 99 countries, and I try to make those characters as appealing to the specific country as possible. For example, I created the Qatari member of *The 99* with the attribute of "knowledge," because of Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al Missned's interest in learning, with developments like Education City. Also, there's this element of pride. We're making superheroes for places that never had superheroes before, and I think our readers are beginning to identify with them!

You have received many honours in your short time with The 99, including the Davos World Economic Forum's Middle East Regional Social Entrepreneurs Award in 2009, the first ever Intersector of Religion Award and being named one of the 500 most influential Muslims in the world in the same year. Further still, you have just recently returned from a Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship held in Washington DC, where you were given a personal "shout out" by President Obama. Did you expect to receive such a strong positive response when you first set out on the venture-turned-phenomenon that is The 99?

If I had expected this kind of reaction, then I should have been the one locked up at Bellevue, and not the one treating people there. It was pretty grandiose what happened, with awards from the United Nations and the World Economic Forum. It's been amazing. I think all of us WANT

to change the world. Did I think that I could? Maybe, but did I think that I would? No, not really. You know, it's not exactly that I WANTED to do this, but it was more that I couldn't NOT do it. Of course, it's also a huge responsibility, not only financially, but also to be the one to redefine Islam. I have taken up that role, but it's a huge responsibility! I take it very seriously, of course, but I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it.

You work with some of the very best and most experimental comic book artists and writers on the scene today. Are there clashes that occur as part of the creative process, or is it a relatively smooth one?

Clashes do happen, but it's only conflict in that people have different visions for *The 99*. For example, when Fabian (Nicieza) was writing for us, he wanted to be just a bit too violent, because he thought he was writing for older people. He's an amazing writer, but we had a different view of who the audience was. On the animation, I had a conflict where one of the seniors in the project wanted to have people praying, which I didn't want. He wanted to show that the good guys can pray as a Muslim, which is a FANTASTIC message, but that's not necessarily MY message. I want to focus on the values we all share as human beings, irrespective of our religious belief or lack thereof.

Do you feel that the graphic novel form, or "sequential art" as it is often called, has a place in the politics and societal discussion within the Middle East region, at least in some way. Is this another of the aims of The 99?

I approach politics on the metaphorical level. For example, each of *The 99*, when they get their stone and their powers, uses them for the wrong thing, whether it's for revenge or even winning money on game shows. So, the struggle of using what you have for yourself vs. for society is something which each of them deals with. Beyond that, there are conflicts between them in the beginning to show, if you will, the state of Islam in the world today. If you peel that metaphorical onion, you'll see exactly what's going on in the Islamic world through creative storytelling. I don't want to get into specific issues, though. You can get to the heart of issues through metaphor while getting everybody in the world to agree, but once you start defining a world based on politics, you polarise it. I have an idea on what I can get from my characters and, God willing, I can get it without being specific. ●