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"...Rhubarb rose the next day with the first rays of sun hitting the sand, lighting up the grains. He noticed the sand grains for the first time. He picked one up and marvelled at it. He felt like he himself was a grain amidst a sea of sand. What if he was ignored and left to perish? Every grain of sand has its own journey and story and every one of those stories deserves to be told."

This is an excerpt from Bangalore's first radio jockey (RJ) Shabbeer Ahmed MS' debut novel - *Djinns & Kings - The Curse of Zoia*. Shabbeer truly believes in the aforesaid words and admits that invariably as an author, "you always put a little bit of yourself into the book".

"My work taught me not to be afraid of failure. If people were afraid of failing, nobody would come up with new ideas, they would always stick to the same trusted path and hence no new cutting-edge technology or creative ideas would be propagated. The people I met, the extensive travel and the places I have visited have all influenced my book," he says.

'Fantastical' journey

Shabbeer's *Djinns & Kings - The Curse of Zoia* fuses fiction with fantasy with a mix of multidimensional characters, who chart their trajectory in a world of imagination, where the narrative keeps a grounded connection with the readers.

For someone who always wanted to write a book, Shabbeer has spent his life reading great authors but simply could not put pen to paper. "It was 2019. During one uneventful night, Haruka Murakami, the great Japanese writer, appeared in my dream and asked me to write. By then, I had not read a single book of his. In fact, I didn't even know how he looked. I took that as a sign and started writing the book. Then Covid happened and I could give my full attention to my writing project. It took me three years to write this book," he says.

Shabbeer admits that he loved writing this book, but also confesses the challenges and how the act of writing mentally drained him. "Writing fantasy genre is very challenging because you have so many possibilities and you do not know where you are going with the plot. I have written four extra chapters that I will never use. My book has an Eastern tilt, so I had to research the usage of words and mannerisms. The Western fantasy fiction books are filled with magical creatures like dragons, phoenixes etc. My book has a menagerie that includes creatures from the Eastern folklores like simorgh, serpopard and manticore. The only exception, are the Greek centaurs but there is a Persian connection to the centaurs as well," he says.

Flash back

Growing up as a child, Shabbeer completed his schooling in Chennai before coming to Bangalore to pursue a degree in Mechanical Engineering. "After completing my engineering, I tried working but unfortunately, my degree lived up to its name - it was indeed mechanical. I quit my job. I did not know what I specifically wanted to do, but I was clear, it was not going to be engineering. I spent a significant portion of time conducting house at a nearby country club. By then, the only thing 'creative' I ever did was while calling numbers during tambola. Luckily, someone took notice of me and offered me a chance to host a show. I have been a professional MC since," he recollects.

With over 20 years of experience in hosting events, he has hosted various genres of events that include shows featuring Bollywood actors, eminent sportspersons, and corporate honchos all over the world. He also had a long run at the radio station and worked briefly as a VJ. "However, my true love lies in conducting team-building activities. I love designing and conducting team-building activities. Also, I always wanted to write a book, and after four years of hard work, I finally managed to get my book *Djinns & Kings - The Curse of Zoia* published."

'Voicing' thoughts

Shabbeer is also the first person to host a Hindi and international music show on 101.3 FM Rainbow in Bangalore. He joined the radio industry as a student while doing his engineering and witnessed the radio industry evolve over the years. The first song that he played on AIR was *Truly, Madly, Deeply* by Savage Garden and spent 12 years as an independent RJ, which, he says, was a very enriching experience.

"Although the format was FM and fast-paced, I could still afford the pregnant pauses and sometimes even the occasional dead air. Radio as a medium is very intimate and I will never forget the love that my listeners showered on me. I felt as if I was a part of people's lives. Unfortunately, I did not pursue a full-time career at the radio station. I spent 12 years as an independent host and I yearned to do something different. I learned a lot from radio, however did not want to make it my career as it would still tie me down to a chair," he said.

Charting the trajectory

Naturally the question of how much of his journey has influenced the book pops to mind and Shabbeer admits that having worked in various creative fields improved his creative thinking. "I believe that specialization and sticking to a single field of work are often overvalued. While focusing on one subject can enhance efficiency, it doesn't necessarily foster creativity. I've been fortunate to brainstorm a diverse range of ideas across various fields, which has significantly enriched my creative thinking," he says.

As a piece of advice to closet writers, who are still mulling over foraging into the world of writing, Shabbeer has a piece of valuable advice. "Do not shy away from telling the world your story, if you have a skill, go ahead and display it; if you have an idea, express it. Do not fear that you will be wrong or unsuccessful. After all, one of the greatest countries in the world today was discovered by someone's mistake," he signs off.

'DON'T SHY AWAY FROM TELLING YOUR STORY TO THE WORLD'

... Says RJ-turned author Shabbeer Ahmed as he opens up about his journey from being the first radio jockey for FM Rainbow Bangalore to writing his debut novel

