

Interview with Faiz Kermani **Author of *My Alien Penfriend***

Reader Views would like to welcome Faiz Kermani, author of the new children's book "My Alien Penfriend." Faiz is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Faiz, thanks for taking time to talk with us today. Would you please tell us about the storyline in "My Alien Penfriend"?

Faiz: My Alien Penfriend is basically a story about friendship. In the story, a child from Earth joins the Inter-galactic Space Club and is put in contact with Zmod, an alien child from the planet Bartoch. Over time, they learn more about each other's planets and become friends.

Juanita: I understand this is your first book. What inspired you to write this story?

Faiz: I've been lucky to have lived in different countries when I was growing up and during that time I gained a lot of good friends. I still travel a lot and it's fun to meet people with different views of the world to your own. It helps break down the artificial barriers that are used to stereotype people. That's probably been the main inspiration for writing 'My Alien Penfriend'.

In the book, I think I wanted to express that idea that you can become friends with people from backgrounds that are very different to your own. I also had a few pen pals when I was young and so I tried to use those experiences when working out how the characters in the book would develop their friendship. In my case, I'm still great friends with my pen pal from Australia. She told me recently that her husband has nicknamed her the 'alien' because he thinks she's like Zmod from the book! Apart from all this I've always been fascinated by space and so I wanted the story of friendship to incorporate this theme!

Juanita: That's amazing that you are still in touch with a pen pal! As a child still forming thoughts about the world, what type of influence did a pen pal have for you and your perspective on a larger world outside your immediate setting?

Faiz: I loved to hear about how diverse the world was from my pen pals and it really was like a form of education about what was happening elsewhere. Even simple things were fun. For example, knowing that when I was going to sleep my pen pal in Australia was in the middle of her daily routine seemed hilarious to me. Ofcourse she probably also had to deal with my dumb questions

about “whether there were kangaroos around” where she lived! I think that the best thing we got from keeping in touch with each other was that that it made us much more open-minded. When we finally met it, we started a conversation as if we’d just seen each other the day before. Through the letters we already knew each other!

Juanita: Why did Darius and Zmod initially want penfriends?

Faiz: Well at first Darius isn’t interested at all in having a penfriend! However, he is one of those kids that gets bored easily and to give him something to do his mother suggests that he join the Inter-galactic Space Club. Zmod is on a distant planet and, as it’s a more isolated part of space, he’s more interested in knowing what’s going on in the rest of the universe. For him gaining a pen pal was a great opportunity to satisfy his curiosity.

Juanita: How did the boys find out about each other, and how do they communicate?

Faiz: Well they join the Inter-galactic Space Club which gives them a choice of pen pals. It’s really the club that brings them together. Once they start ‘spacemailing’ each other everything kicks off from there! Their messages take about two weeks to reach each other and are automatically translated by the club’s computer.

Juanita: What do the two children find they have in common? Why do they turn into such good friends?

Faiz: They’re both about the same age and so they find that they can discuss the usual issues that are considered important by kids growing up. For example they talk about school, their families and their pets. Darius has a dog – and Zmod has an unusual creature called a glod! I think that they become friends because they find that they can share their thoughts and problems with each other. It helps them deal with difficult situations and quite apart from that is just great fun! There’s actually a lot that they don’t have in common and it amuses them to find out about the strange habits of the other.

Juanita: I understand there is a disaster on Zmod’s home planet. What was the significance of this aspect of “My Alien Penfriend”?

Faiz: I think that it’s only in serious situations that you find out who your true friends are. In the story Darius takes his friendship with Zmod for granted at first, and he only realizes its importance when his friend gets caught up in a disaster. The significance is that true friends will stick with you through even the worst situation.

Juanita: Coming from different times and galaxies, do Darius and Zmod have anything significant to teach each other?

Faiz: Yes – that there are no barriers to friendship! Sometimes it is the differences between us that make friendship appealing. Zmod’s planet is very different to Earth and by learning more about it Darius starts to pay more attention to what is happening around him. Before his friendship with

Zmod, Darius just assumes that life is always going to be easy. It makes him a bit more responsible. In his own way, Darius gets Zmod to see more of the fun side of life.

Juanita: What is it about science fiction that uniquely opens the imagination of kids?

Faiz: With science fiction you can remove the limitations we're burdened with in real life and so it helps create unique and fun situations for your characters. For example, on planet Bartoch rocks can move! Kids love to be imaginative and it seems that when we grow up we lose that ability or repress it. I think it's rather sad that adults who like science fiction are often labeled as being odd or strange. Imagination is what allows new ideas to surface, which help advances in so many different fields. I'm sure that all the people at NASA were into science fiction as kids!

Juanita: What are the defining themes you address in "My Alien Penfriend"?

Faiz: It's basically a story about friendship, but through that I wanted to encourage people to take a look around them and see what is happening in their world and do something about the problems. Without making it too depressing, the book touches on themes such as the environment, terrorism and intolerance. At the same time, I tried to balance it out with humor – one of the things that helps humans deal with even the most difficult situations in life!

Juanita: How did you come up with this unique story and its interesting characters? Are you a science fiction fan yourself?

Faiz: The story just sort of came together in bits and pieces – usually when I was bored at work! I often find that the most boring situations, such as traffic jams or being in the gym, are great for exploring new ideas, as your mind tends to wander anyway! Once I'd get home I would transfer my scribbles onto the computer.

I've always loved science fiction so it worked its way into these ideas that I was developing. When I grew up it was the time of the Apollo missions and that really fascinated me. Then there were films such as Star Wars which stimulated my imagination even further. It made the world seem like an exciting and rapidly changing place.

Juanita: Faiz, I understand that you recently visited a school to talk about your book. Would you tell us how that came about, and the response from the kids?

Faiz: I've been lucky enough to have visited a few schools and have a number of other visits I'm lining up. I really enjoy them. As well as talking about the book I've been involved in a number of literacy projects. It's been great to be able to use the book as a focus point to encourage children in their reading and writing. One teacher told me that by meeting real-life authors it makes the idea of reading and writing 'cool' to the pupils! I have some photos of various events on my website at <http://www.myalienpenfriend.co.uk/media.html>

I've also done some book signings in shops, which has been great fun. It's a fantastic feeling to meet your target audience and find out what they loved (and didn't!) in the book. What was so reassuring

was that the really crazy ideas in the book were the ones that appealed most to the kids. For example, when I had the book in draft form a lot of adult reviewers were very critical and negative about some of the ‘mad ideas’ in the plot. When I met the children it was the opposite – they wanted more of them! A few days after one school visit I received 40 fan letters with all sorts of amusing suggestions for my next book. It was amazing – and gave me great confidence to carry on writing.

Juanita: What were some of the things the kids liked about “My Alien Penfriend”?

Faiz: Moving rocks on planet Bartoch was a favorite and lots of kids tell me that they’d love to have a glod as a pet! Zmod’s glod is called Darak.

Here are some quotes from the pupils in the Upper Fourth Class at Homefield Preparatory School (<http://www.homefield.sutton.sch.uk/>) in the south of London.

“I really like Darak the glod and I think he’s really funny. I also like the moving rocks”

“I love Darak and I especially like the bit when he was sick on the vet”

“My favorite character is Darak because of the bubbles he blows. What size are they?”

“I found it very interesting about the planet having two different colored skies. I would prefer to have a glod because they sound cool”.

“Can you do a dictionary of Bartoch to English and include all the words you used in your story?”

Juanita: What is the reading age for your “My Alien Penfriend”?

Faiz: I’ve had to say 7 years and upwards because you are often asked to set an age range, but to be honest I’m not sure if there is an age range. Younger readers can enjoy the pictures and my oldest reader has been closer to 70 ! Perhaps the only real requirement is an imaginative mind!

Juanita: A book that will appeal to all readers – universal! Tell us more about the pictures, who was the illustrator, and how many pictures are there combined with text?

Faiz: There are about 10 main pictures in the book in the book. My favorite illustration is actually the cover. As soon as I saw it I loved it!

The illustrator is a guy called Steve Adams who works at my publisher (Authorhouse: <http://www.authorhouse.com>). I sent some really basic sketches over to him (my drawing is awful!) and discussed the concepts I wanted for the characters with him. He sent me some of his suggestions and we took it from there. He did a brilliant job and I’ve told him that the kids I meet love his drawings. He really understood the themes in the book and it shows in his wonderful drawings. I really hope I get to work with him on my next book. I really like his original pencil sketches as they look really classic. I am intending to frame them.

Juanita: What has been your career prior to writing “My Alien Penfriend”?

Faiz: Well I’m a scientist by training, with a PhD in Immunology. My day job still consists of writing medical papers and articles – so writing fiction in my spare time is a fun change. I’ve always dabbled in it but it is only recently that I’ve had some success in getting short stories published and then ‘My Alien Penfriend’. In my day job, I’ve just co-edited a medical textbook called “Patient Compliance: Sweetening the Pill” (ISBN: 0566086581; Gower Publishing Limited), which is all about how patients take their medicines. An interesting anecdote is that the young daughter of my co-editor was one of the first people to read the draft of ‘My Alien Penfriend’. Her enthusiasm was a real boost after the many rejection letters I’d previously had from publishers! I hope she’ll read my next book!

Juanita: Do you have any other plans for writing, and how can readers find out more about you and your book “My Alien Penfriend”?

Faiz: I’m always thinking about possible ideas for stories! I’m currently in the middle of writing my second children’s book, which will have a similar space setting. ‘My Alien Penfriend’ took me about 5 years to complete so I’m hoping the follow up won’t take so long! Another project I’m involved in is a French translation of ‘My Alien Penfriend’ (*Mon Correspondant Extra-terrestre*), which my wife is doing. We’ve already translated the main website (<http://www.myalienpenfriend.co.uk>) into a few languages and hope to extend this idea to the book over time. The more global (or should we say galactic?) the audience for the book the better! Apart from that I’ve just started a ‘blog behind the book’ at <http://www.zmodsworld.com> . I hope that people will take a look!

Juanita: I understand that another one of your current projects is an education charity called “One Life for Education.” Would you tell us more about this charity and your involvement?

Faiz: Among the literacy work with my book, I’ve helped set up an education charity called "One Life for Education" (<http://www.onelifedevelopment.com/charity.htm>) with friends of mine who are also interested in this area. The charity sets up partnerships between disadvantaged schools in developing countries and more fortunate schools in Europe. We also want to encourage “the partnerships” cross-cultural understanding and sharing of ideas between children and between educators. We already have a few schools in London interested and are talking to others in South Africa so it’s looking pretty exciting! Our eventual aim is to provide less fortunate school children with simple educational equipment such as pens, books and blackboards

Juanita: Faiz, I want to thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. We certainly hope much success for you and “My Alien Penfriend.” Your story touches on very important themes in such a fun and imaginative way. Do you have any last thoughts for your readers?

Faiz: I just hope that people enjoy the book. If that’s the case then it has done its job!