

ALUMNI BOOKS



Three Books and a Baby

FOR THESE NEW PARENTS, NAP TIME IS WRITING TIME

IN THE LAST TWO years, fiction writers Saher Alam and Marshall Klimasewiski have published three books, despite an even greater — and more time- and energy-consuming — achievement: their son, Aziz, who turned two in May.

"A friend told us his wife was writing a book, went into labor, stopped in midsentence, and didn't finish that sentence until four years later," says Alam (GRS'98). "That put such a fright into me that I got as much done before the due date as possible, feeling the keyboard getting a longer and longer reach away."

Klimasewiski (GRS'93), whose novel, *The Cottagers* (Norton, 2006), "came out more or less the same time Aziz did," was finishing a story collection as the birth approached. "Then, in that first three or four

months, it seemed like a foreign country we went to, where we didn't speak the language," he says. "One thing I remember doing in that country is giving a reading on very little sleep. It's a smudged memory."

When Aziz was born, in 2006, his parents put writing aside. "I didn't intend to; I just didn't have time to return to the book," Alam says. "There was one chapter that I really needed to think about a lot and rewrite, and that's what I didn't get to do until September. I think that was useful, to read it with fresh eyes, even though those eyes were pretty weary."

Now they write during nap time and while the other tends Aziz. "We both have trusted readers with whom we exchange manuscripts, but the first exposure is usually to

each other," says Klimasewiski, who also teaches at Washington University in St. Louis. "We like each other's work a lot, which means if the other person really doesn't like what you've just showed them, you can be pretty sure you won't either, shortly."

Alam and Klimasewiski met in 1998 as creative writing fellows at Emory University. "Both of us were at the same stage: prebook," Alam says. Klimasewiski adds, "We did months and months of talking shop before we exchanged the first romantic words."

The arranged marriage at the core of Alam's novel, *The Groom to Have Been* (Spiegel & Grau, 2008), may seem about as romantic as shoptalk. Nasr, son of Indian immigrants to Canada, and his fiancée have barely spoken when their extended families launch preparations for multiple elaborate wedding events. But they "come from a tradition in which this route to marriage contains all the romance within imagination," Alam says. Amid the frenzied planning, disagreeing, compromising, anticipating, and shopping, in which they are largely uninvolved, this twenty-first-century couple achieve more private time than their parents had managed, largely via cell phone.

Why, despite a successful New York career and a thirty-something social life, has Nasr complied with his parents' desires? The novel is, finally, about "cultural fidelity," says Alam (she calls herself "Indian and Muslim by inheritance").



Marshall Klimasewiski and Saher Alam, at home with their son, Aziz.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAHER ALAM

The course of Nasr's romance, running no smoother than any other, offers a new definition of true love.

Klimasewiski also writes of love. At the center of *Tyrants* (Norton, 2008), both organizationally and conceptually, is the wry title story, with Stalin and Beria as love's victims. Flanking "Tyrants" are separate sets of contemporary linked stories, generally about ordinary men and the occasional woman tyrannized by love. Opening and closing the collection are Klimasewiski's fanciful takes on parallel historical events that had something of the unreal about them: Umberto Nobile's dirigible flights over the North Pole in the twenties and Salomon August Andrée's similar quest by balloon three decades earlier. "The other side of love, of course, is isolation," Klimasewiski says. "That those two things are in opposition, in a push-and-pull throughout the book, is something I recognized as I was writing the stories and then thinking about how they would fit into a book."

It's become difficult for one parent to write while the other occupies Aziz at home. "He has some sheepdog in him: we have to be herded together," Klimasewiski says. Both are working on their next book, hers a collection of stories about people from Lucknow, India, her parents' hometown, and their children; his, a novel that "feels like a departure, different enough to be interesting to me." Just like fatherhood.

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