

## ALUMNI BOOKS

# Heart and Soul

G. Willow Wilson's memoir of embracing Islam and finding love

BY SUSAN SELIGSON

IN G. WILLOW WILSON'S lyrical, crisply observant memoir, it quickly becomes apparent that this daughter of atheists did not turn inward at a tender age to ponder the nature of faith because she was particularly austere, self-mortifying, or friendless. She was then, as she is now, with prominent bylines and a highly regarded book under her belt, well-rounded, witty, and endlessly curious.

Born in New Jersey, Wilson (CAS'03) quietly warmed to Islam as a BU student, while reading the Quran. *The Butterfly Mosque: A Young American Woman's Journey to Love and Islam* (Atlantic Monthly Press)

After graduating from BU, G. Willow Wilson traveled to Cairo to teach English, and eventually became a Muslim.



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centers on her time in Cairo, where she traveled to teach English after graduation, sharing with her trusted friend and roommate, Jo, her decision to become a Muslim.

Not long after she arrived, Wilson met Omar, the devout, thoughtful Sufi she rather hastily married, if only as a technicality, so they could share their days without a chaperone. Despite having to navigate an unending current of cultural misunderstandings both trivial and profound, it's a good match, infused with humor and mutual respect.

Laced with sensory details and anecdotes about the Cairo of tourists and the crowded, dust-choked neighborhoods Westerners rarely see, the book is the story of affectionate, principled people (the portrait of Omar's family is priceless) from divergent cultures learning to co-exist at the very least, and blend joyfully at best, sometimes to the point where Wilson and her readers dream of the possibility of something similar—with the sweetly improvised cross-cultural bath of Wilson's wedding as a metaphor—on a far greater scale.

*Bostonia* reached Wilson at her home in Seattle, where she and Omar settled three years ago.

### ***Bostonia*: How often do you return to Cairo?**

WILSON: We go back to visit about every year. We have a life on hold there, an apartment with all our stuff. We stay around a month.

### ***When you're in each place, the United States and Cairo, what do you miss about the other?***

When I'm in Egypt, what I miss about the United States is largely the developed world stuff. I miss being able to roll into Trader Joe's and find cilantro, chutney, and mint from all over, being able to order food over the internet, and all the comfy technological stuff.

When I'm here, what I miss about Egypt is the history and being close to so many archaeological sites, to ancient and modern history. It's such an informal culture, with no bubble of personal privacy. It's kind of a mixed bag in both places.

#### **How is your Egyptian husband adapting to life in the United States?**

He really blew me away in how fast and how dedicated he was about getting into the swing of things. He works as a legal advocate at a non-profit for refugees and asylees. I can only imagine it was a huge transition for him. I can only hope I handled my transition to Egypt as well as he handled his. He's a polyglot and learns languages really fast. On some days I'm afraid that his English is better than mine.

#### **Do you pray at a local mosque?**

In the United States, all but the very dedicated pray at home except on Fridays. I go to mosque when I can, and I'm really lucky. We live in a neighborhood with a big Muslim community, so there are a couple of mosques within walking or driving distance. Women can choose to go to prayers or not; it's only men who absolutely have to go.

#### **You were already a writer, but so young during that first, life-changing year in Cairo. Did you think of writing then about the experiences that grew into the memoir?**

No. To me, writing a memoir was something you only did when you were old and wise, and everyone you wrote about couldn't get mad at you because they were dead.

The book came out of a critical mass of friends and family who saved my emails from that time and said, "Put these into a book." It really grew out of something much more modest. I envisioned a book that was a travelogue, more like letters home. But when I started working with an agent,

he said, "There's real depth in here; expand it into a memoir with real meat on its bones."

#### **Have you encountered skepticism for writing a book sharing your beliefs about life and faith while still in your 20s?**

I've heard no criticism, and I've been really humbled by all the support. It seems like a lot of people, especially women, have responded to the book in a really emotional, positive way, and said, "This is a much more heartfelt vision of the Middle East and Islam than I've ever read before." I'm really grateful for that.

#### **Have you been called upon to be a voice for humanizing a much maligned and misunderstood faith?**

It's a pigeonhole that I've resisted. I say in the book and at events, too, that I only speak for my own experiences. We forget when we talk about nations and conflicts that we are really talking about people. I'm not trying to stand for anything, and the last thing I want to be is a pundit.

#### **You write several times about having to explain, and sometimes defend, wearing the headscarf to Western friends. Is this something you continue to face in the United States?**

My experience in the West has been very positive. I expected some hostility, even threats, but if anything, people go out of their way to be nice to me. It's like they're saying, "I don't hate you!" I had one problem, which I attribute to people's drunkenness.

However, in the press and national culture hostility toward Muslims appears to be getting worse. As a group we are far more Islam-phobic than we are as individuals. Individually, people seem very tolerant and very friendly.

#### **How have you and Omar dealt with phobia about Islam?**

We had to cut our cable. It just got so bad every time we turned on the TV. Even on programs that have nothing to do with religion, there's a dig against Islam. It was like death by a thousand cuts. But now that we've gotten rid of the TV, it's gone.

#### **You have a following as a writer of comic books. Tell us about that process.**

I write something that looks like a screenplay, or sometimes I write up a pitch and an editor will say yes or no. Sometimes I'm approached with an idea. It's a handshake industry. It's really fun, and I do it practically for free. It's much more collaborative than writing a prose book, which is a very isolating experience. You're only responsible for a portion of the work; the artist will pencil it and ink it, then it goes to colorists, then a letterer. It's

a lot more dynamic, and the drawings will inspire me to write the next issue differently.

#### **What writers do you admire most?**

My absolute favorite writer of all time is E. M. Forster. I think it's because of his particular kind of humanism and ability to write about people's flaws without condemning them. Jhumpa Lahiri (GRS'93, UNI'95,'97) is someone I really admire. I admire her ability as a cultural mediator who explains Indian culture to Americans and American culture to Indians.

#### **What new projects are you working on now?**

I'm working on a novel, and I have a couple of comics projects. We'll see. My instincts post-*Butterfly Mosque* have been toward fiction. I've spent so much time examining real life, I almost feel like I need a break. I don't want to get stuck in a single genre.

