

Here Come the Dogs

AUTHOR: OMAR MUSA

Q & A with Omar Musa

Congratulations on your first novel. Writing as a slam poet or hip hop MC, you know the words will be performed by you on stage – presented by you personally to the audience. How did it feel to write a novel, knowing that your words would be more open to readers' own interpretations?

It was a totally different experience. A novel is so much huger than writing a poem or writing a song. The way I see it, it's almost like I was getting quite good at creating stained glass windows, but I didn't know how to build a cathedral yet. And this novel was like making a cathedral. It was a huge, gargantuan task that drove me almost mad several times, drove me right to the abyss. I was looking down into the abyss at times and I had to just leap into it.

But I was also very mindful that I wanted it to work really well on the page. I didn't want people to think I was all style and no substance – that I'm somebody who can perform words but can't write things that really stand up. The burden of that weighed very heavily on me. I really wanted to do justice to this story and make it something that when I'm dead, whenever that is - in five years or fifty - that it would hold up on the page.

***Here Come The Dogs* has won some impressive fans, even before publication. Christos Tsiolkas has said the book “speaks to how we live and dream now”. Irvine Welsh has said, “This stunning debut novel has such swaggering exuberance that it will make most other fiction you read this year seem criminally dull.” How does that feel?**

Firstly, I am a fan of Irvine Welsh's, I'm a fan of Christos Tsiolkas who gave another great quote. Of course it's great to be validated by people that you really admire and look up to and respect.

Irvine Welsh, he changed my life in a certain way. I snuck into Electric Shadows cinema in Canberra when I was 13 to watch *Trainspotting* with my mum. I came into the theatre just as there was the toilet diving scene. I just loved the movie, loved the world that it created, and I noticed as I was looking at the closing credits, 'Oh, it's based on a book.' So I went and bought the book, and it completely blew my mind, it completely changed my mind about literature. How colloquial language could be raised to something very high and literary, how you could look for stories in unlikely places and look for redemption in unlikely places.

So being able to then meet Irvine Welsh 17 years later, hand him a manuscript and say, 'I wrote a book, and you really helped me along the way and inspired me' . . . and then the fact that he really like the book and gave this beautiful quote! It means the world to me. It's a beautiful feeling.

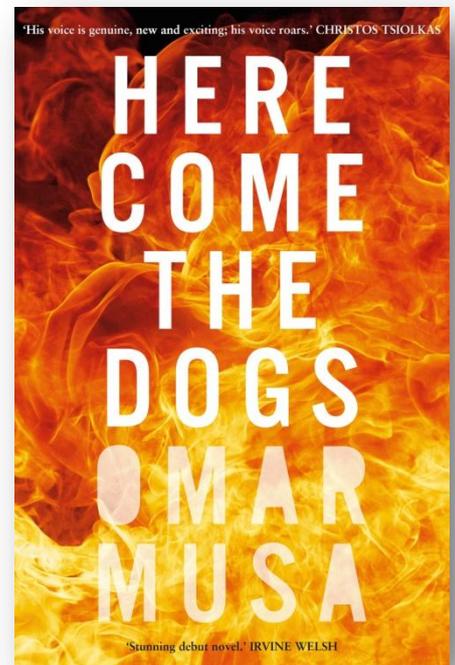
That's not typical fare for a 13-year-old reader. You were always deeply involved with writing and language?

I'm an only child, so I became quite extroverted because of that. I'd go out and play sport – Queanbeyan's pretty well known for its sporting heritage – but I also spent a lot of time by myself, reading and writing.

My parents would always encourage me, they'd say if you're bored, as long as you've got a piece of paper and a pen, that boredom will fly out the window. You can draw something, you can write something, and I just took to poetry immediately. My father was a poet in Malaysia, so he encouraged me. So I always loved writing and reading, it helped me escape the day to day and really go into different worlds.

That was part of the reason I wanted to write this exuberant, strange kind of fiction – to ground it in real life, in the gritty the day to day, but then to fly off somewhere completely weird.

Some people never find an outlet for personal expression that works for them. You found yours very early.



I think I was really lucky. I come from an artistic family. I was never any good at maths or science, I was never that good at sport, even though I enjoyed it. I just loved the arts. I loved painting, acting, poetry. It wasn't really the done thing, where I come from, so I had to kind of keep it on the low a little bit. But I always knew it was my passion and I followed it right from the beginning. Which I think is a privilege and a piece of enormous good luck.

Here Come The Dogs explores issues around changing expectations of masculinity. Did growing up as a guy who loved poetry introduce you to those themes?

Yeah, I guess it did. In Canberra and Queanbeyan, rugby is huge, soccer, and sort of fighting and exerting yourself in that way was seen as the archetype of manhood or manliness, machismo. And poetry definitely didn't fit into that whole matrix.

I was looking for a form of poetry that was exciting and accessible, for young people by young people, and that's when I came across hip hop music. That's what really got me into it. And it's been the catalyst for all these things that have happened to me since then. The slam poetry sprung out of that; the novel sprung out of slam poetry. But it all really started with that catalyst of hip hop music.

The novel has been described as kind of a new thing, “hypercontemporary” and “a hip hop novel”. But some passages where you write about hip hop have a real nostalgic quality.

Yeah people have said that and I think that's true. I am very nostalgic for a certain era of hip hop and I love hip hop culture, with all its flaws and foibles, so I have tried to paint a picture of it that explains why people get into it. It's not all just gangsters and thoughtless energy. There's something beautiful and resonant about it.

But when people say it's this hip hop novel, I don't know about that. It's influenced by hip hop, it's about people of the hip hop generation. But I'm just as influenced by Robert Browning or T. S. Eliot as I am by Nas or Master Ace. I draw my inspiration like a thief, from everywhere, as I wander through the world. Probably more from novelists than anything – or poets like Anne Sexton or Dorothy Hewett.

So the novel has been written, the cathedral has been built. What happens next?

I handed in the final manuscript and immediately at 4.30am the next morning I was working on the next novel. You can't stay still in this life. A moving target is harder to hit. I've just got to keep going, keep moving, keep trying things. I'm working on a play that I was commissioned to write, called Bone Gatherer, and I'm already working on a new novel. It's about a blind Malay transgender sea captain. There you go, that's your exclusive.