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Mayor Emanuel Interviews Novelist Fatima Farheen Mirza on “Chicago Stories”

Belonging, identity, family, faith, and self-acceptance. These are only some of the themes Fatima Farheen Mirza explores in her masterful debut novel, “A Place For Us.”

On this week’s episode of “[Chicago Stories](#),” Mayor Emanuel sat down with Fatima to share a funny and sensitive conversation about her own story and journey as a novelist, the moment that sparked her book, the writers that inspire her, and what she plans on doing next.

Both Fatima’s book and her career as a writer began during her freshman year in college, where she had enrolled in the school of her choice, but—due to an agreement she made with her father—enrolled as a pre-med.

It didn’t go well.

“I hated my chemistry classes, I hated my bio classes, I’m terrible at math, and so I would take creative writing classes just for me,” Fatima told Mayor Emanuel.

It was there in those freshman writing classes that she first encountered the image of a family at a wedding that inspired her whole book. For Fatima there was no going back.

“I had broken our agreement, and that inevitably caused lots of tensions,” Fatima said, “but the more I was working on the novel the more I felt as though my duty and my obligation was actually to the family I was writing about—more so than even what I owed to my family in a way. I just felt that this is what I have to do.”

Fatima’s novel—which was also the first novel published under Sarah Jessica Parker’s new imprint, SJP for Hogarth—is strongly connected to her own experience, but it isn’t autobiographical.

As she told Mayor Emanuel, “A Place For Us” is instead grounded in a context that was very familiar to her—what it was like to grow up as the daughter of immigrants from India, what it was like speaking Urdu at home and English elsewhere, what it was like to create bonds among siblings separate from their parents by virtue of their shared experience *as* siblings.

And, importantly, reconciling the personal struggle of faith in a family so rooted in faith and its ties to identity, culture, and community. It's a struggle captured in the title itself.

“Even within this family there’s a discord—there’s not quite a harmony where all of their desires can co-exist,” Fatima said. “But there’s also a hopeful reaching in the novel, and I think that the title implies that maybe there is a place for us where we can move past these things.”

Be sure to listen to the entire conversation as Fatima tells Mayor Emanuel about her love of teaching, her admiration for James Baldwin, and some of the most moving responses since the book’s release.

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