

- Rickerby Hinds: Welcome to the Creator State where we share stories of social innovation and entrepreneurship for movers, shakers, creators, and change makers.
- Rickerby Hinds: Each episode will celebrate success (and failure!), ingenuity, and the endless pursuit of knowledge. From education to implementation, join us as we explore everything in between: The Creator State.
- Rickerby Hinds: Today's guest, Fatima Farheen Mirza, started writing her first novel in a classroom at UC Riverside. Following her passion to pursue writing full time, she changed majors from premed to creative writing and went on to become a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop.
- Rickerby Hinds: Fatima's debut novel, *A Place for Us*, was the first book to be released by Sarah Jessica Parker's new publishing imprint, SJP for Hogarth. It became an instant New York Times bestseller and was named one of the best books of 2018 by the Washington Post, NPR and People Magazine.
- Rickerby Hinds: We sat down with the author in the Middle Eastern Students Center at UCR for a conversation about how characters evolve and teach us to reflect upon our own lives. Join us as we explore identity amid powerful family dynamics and how freeing it can be to allow yourself and your art to become what they need to be.
- Rickerby Hinds: I'm your host Rickerby Hinds. Welcome to the Creator State. I wanted to begin just broadly talking about your creative process and what is, if you have one, your creative process as a writer?
- Fatima F. Mirza: I think for me the most important part of considering my creative process is just my approach to the characters that I'd be writing about. I always think about the questions that they're turning over in their mind while a moment is happening, while they're entering a scene. So the scene could be them at school or at home, but what really helps me is to always think what question are they trying to figure out in a way through this interaction?
- Fatima F. Mirza: And that changes the way that they move through the scene, the emotional notes it lands on. So that was always really helpful for me. I would write these questions down on Post-its and put them all around my desk. And I'd also write different kind of quotes or anything that I needed for that day to be a reminder to me in Post-its. And so that is something that I still do now like long after I finished the novel.
- Rickerby Hinds: Wow. And do you have, within that process, is there a time of the day or night that you accentuate as your writing time?
- Fatima F. Mirza: If I'm lucky I get to start working right away, if I don't have any other obligations of like working or teaching or whatever my week looks like. The best time for me is when you wake up and that's the first thing that you do. Like before you
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check your emails or check your phone, you just sit down with your paper and your Post-its.

Rickerby Hinds: Yes. I used to do the same thing. Now I don't have the ability to do it in the morning as much as I would like to, but I like that as well.

Fatima F. Mirza: I just love that time, and it's so quiet and you're not trying to like undo something that you've done in the day, like an interaction that you had that you're trying to put out of your mind before you begin working. You're just... Yeah.

Rickerby Hinds: Can you talk a little bit about what made you decide to write A Place for Us?

Fatima F. Mirza: Sure. It's kind of a long story and it's amazing to tell it here actually. So I moved to UCR because I was going to study premed. I've made a deal with my dad that if I could come here, I'd study premed and I really hated my chemistry classes. I was so bad at them.

Fatima F. Mirza: I was taking creative writing classes as a way to honor what I really wanted to do or what I enjoyed doing, and one day I was in class with Charmaine Craig in the INTS Building. She gave a writing assignment, like a writing prompt, and it was the first time that I wrote down the name Hadia, which is one of the characters in the book.

Fatima F. Mirza: And it was also the first time that... I had written my whole life, but it was the first time that I ever wrote a name down of a woman who could have been me or my sister or somebody from my community. I had always written names like Cory or like really culturally and racially ambiguous names. I'd never come close to my own story, if that makes sense?

Rickerby Hinds: Well, why do you think that was?

Fatima F. Mirza: I think for a lot of reasons. One is that I'd never read about a girl like me in a story, and so I thought maybe at some subconscious level I had absorbed this idea that those stories don't belong, that no one would care maybe, or that other people had stories to tell, but not somebody named Hadia, which of course I completely disagree with now.

Fatima F. Mirza: But who knows what had kept me. At some level when you're creating, you're mimicking what you're seeing in a way. So if I'm reading, if I'm being assigned works in high school or if my librarian is passing me works and it's never diverse or reflective of my experience, then of course I'm going to think, "Well, that's what novels are," at some level.

Fatima F. Mirza: And I think that another part of it was that I was really afraid when I first wrote down her name, because I didn't want to write her story or the family's story eventually, and do it badly and do injustice to their lives in a way. I felt like I had

been so frustrated as a kid growing up and seeing how reductive and stereotypical the portrayals of Muslim characters are or South Asian characters and how it's like so far from my own experience that I just didn't want to contribute to something that had really angered me growing up. And so I hadn't tried until that day in that classroom.

Rickerby Hinds: Okay. So you're in Professor Craig's class and you've had this moment of somewhat of an epiphany, but you're a premed major. So take me down the continuation of this journey?

Fatima F. Mirza: So I didn't want to... I was hesitating for all the reasons that I described. And at the same time every week, Professor Craig, she was assigning different writing prompts and for some reason I decided I was going to return to the same family through different perspectives.

Fatima F. Mirza: And I realized like no matter what the prompt was about, I kept returning to that same family through different moments in their life, but they were all kind of focusing on the same moment, which is the moment that the novel begins with. It's the wedding of the eldest daughter and the youngest son, Amar, has just come home and you realize he ran away three years before.

Fatima F. Mirza: So I'm realizing that I'm writing about the same family and they're all thinking about the same moment in a way. And the more I'm writing about them, the more I feel like this overwhelming kind of duty towards them and also love for them, and curiosity. And I remember I submitted from the novel to workshop, and it was in that workshop actually that somebody, I think one of my classmates, I don't remember who said something like, "Have you considered making this a novel?"

Fatima F. Mirza: Because I had squeezed it into 12 pages, and I hadn't considered it. I don't know what I said at that moment, but that was the first time somebody posed that question. And also Charmaine was so kind and nurturing and attentive to, on one hand this desire I had to write this, and also an awareness of what were the factors that were keeping me away from committing to doing so in a way.

Fatima F. Mirza: And so she went out of her way and asked me to meet her in office hours. And I remember I was so nervous because I looked up to her so much and I loved her class. It was like my... I remember I would leave that class and I would look out, because it's the fourth floor of the INTS, and you know the grass out there is so long sometimes.

Fatima F. Mirza: And I remember I would look out and the other classes I was taking was like chemistry and bio and I would leave them feeling horrible and so sad and I was so bad at it, and I would leave those classes, the creative writing classes, and just feel like this is where I belong or this is where I'm meant to be. This is where my mind is most excited.

Fatima F. Mirza: When the teacher says something and I just... Like that kind of feeling. And so I remember I was so nervous to go into her office hours and she says to me, "Let's discuss your future in fiction writing." And I said to her, "What are you talking about? This is my personal class for me." And also it's the first time that somebody had invited me to have a conversation about my future.

Fatima F. Mirza: I mean, I feel like my family life up until that point, my parents, at the time they had all these ideas for what I would do with life, held these expectations, which is why I was pursuing premed. And so the conversation was more like, "Well, this is what you're going to do." And I would say, "Okay, let me try to do it," in a way. And so that was the first time somebody said, "Let's discuss." And I started crying.

Rickerby Hinds: Crying in the office. I think there's a story there. I think it's that moment of conflict of what you believe you are supposed to do.

Fatima F. Mirza: Yes, really want to do.

Rickerby Hinds: You mentioned duty and love just earlier as being part of the foundation for your writing, or some of the things that when you sit down to write are preeminent in your process.

Fatima F. Mirza: Yeah, maybe that's because I felt like I had this obligation and duty to the promises that I had made to my family in a way, and who they thought I would become. And so to feel that I could actually just transfer that to this fictional world was maybe what gave me permission.

Fatima F. Mirza: Because it did feel like actually my obligation is not to my promise that I made with my dad, it's like to completing this story. And so maybe that's just what I was telling myself to kind of helped me do this.

Rickerby Hinds: So I'm diverting a little bit, but then at some point you had to say to your family, "Hey, guess what? The bio class..."

Fatima F. Mirza: Yeah, actually it was immediately after that conversation with Charmaine.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Fatima F. Mirza: All it took was for her to say that she believed that if I really wanted to put my heart and mind to it, I could do this. And my reaction in that moment was like, that's the only thing I want to do. Like I actually don't want to be doing chemistry and bio, and that conversation made it so clear to me and I'm always so grateful for it.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow. So you leave that meeting-

Fatima F. Mirza: And I call my dad.

Rickerby Hinds: And you say?

Fatima F. Mirza: And I say, Baba, I'm switching majors. I'm not going to be a doctor. I'm going to pursue a major in creative writing.

Rickerby Hinds: So how did you go from that meeting to going, "Hey, wait a minute, I'm going to write a novel?"

Fatima F. Mirza: Right. Well, I made three promises to myself and it helped me ease those doubts that I was talking about earlier, which is that what if I inadequately portray them? What if I do wrong? What if I bring more harm to a community that I've just been so upset in a way seeing harmed? You know what I mean?

Rickerby Hinds: Yes.

Fatima F. Mirza: Like through really reductive and offensive depictions or like a lack of any kind of other alternative narrative. The promise that I've made in a way to myself was like, one, that my goal was to do justice to the characters lives, which meant not only writing in the perspective that is most close to me, which is Hadia or Amar, the children of this family.

Fatima F. Mirza: Because they grew up here, they were born here. They're navigating kind of very similar concerns and questions that I was as a teenager growing up in California in this family. But I also wanted to include the perspectives of the parents, Layla and Rafiq, as a way to kind of give a full picture of what it was like for this family and what was at stake for each of them, so that you can kind of understand where everybody's coming from. So that was my first decision.

Rickerby Hinds: So let me ask you about that, because as a playwright, I believe I probably have avoided characters who could be based on, or could be identified as family members. How did you navigate that concern, or was it a concern?

Fatima F. Mirza: Yeah, it was a concern. So the way that started thinking about it is that I'm going to create a completely fictional family, but in a context that is so personal and close to me in terms of the parents have immigrated from India to California, their friends are their community members from the mosque.

Fatima F. Mirza: They're trying to raise their children to uphold Islamic traditions and values as well as Indian culture, to speak in Urdu in the home and English outside. And so I placed them in a context that was very familiar to me, but the characters, even if in the beginning maybe I had a similarity with Amar or Hadia, once they begin making decisions, they become their own people in a way.

Fatima F. Mirza: And the plot also becomes a reflection of them as characters. So what happened to me is not what happens in the novel, because they begin making these decisions and my job is just to follow them. But the amazing thing is like when I was talking earlier about the questions that they are asking, those questions that they're asking in these moments are ones that are personal to me, even though the situations are different and the personality of them is very different. I'm not like any of them, in a way.

Rickerby Hinds: This is one of those answers to a question that I didn't ask, but oftentimes when I have students who are working on things, be it screenplay or something else that's very personal and I will ask, "Well, why did this happen? Why does this happen?" And I tell them that this is always the wrong answer, "Because that's the way it happened in real life."

Fatima F. Mirza: To me, yeah.

Rickerby Hinds: And what I mean by that is exactly what you just said, is that if you are building a character, you're creating characters, you have to pay attention to them and not just force them.

Fatima F. Mirza: Try to recreate something.

Rickerby Hinds: Yes. So when did you discover that? When... What was... How did-

Fatima F. Mirza: I don't know, but I love that you said that. It's something that I think about a lot now that I'm looking over the novel in a way, or like trying to see the parts that were dimly me but now are their own thing. It's kind of exciting and crazy to think about. I don't know how to answer it. Like there's on one hand it's true, and I'd fight with my dad, I'd go and lie down in our driveway.

Fatima F. Mirza: And so the character, Hadia, after a fight with her dad, she goes and lays down in her driveway. But when I did it, I didn't understand any of the forces that led me there. All I knew is that this happened to me and that's it. It happens once and it's over. But when you put it in a context of a novel, you can kind of understand, you can see that moment not only from Hadia's perspective, but also from the fathers.

Fatima F. Mirza: But also over time, also you're on the page with these characters again decades into the future. The father is sitting with his daughter on the driveway and in your own life you don't have access to these things. I don't have access to that kind of self awareness. If I'm interacting with my dad, maybe decades later in the same driveway, to that memory or to what it meant. But in fiction, what you're after is not like what happened, but what it meant in a way.

Rickerby Hinds: It's so great because once again, as a writer, I will often say there are no coincidences in your stories.

Fatima F. Mirza: None, yeah.

Rickerby Hinds: Not for you as the author. For the audience, for the reader, "Oh wow, that happened and then that happened." But for you as the author, there's something that you're trying to say with every single thing that happens in the story. And so these moments, the driveway, if it wasn't, and if it wasn't doing that thing you wanted it to do-

Fatima F. Mirza: It has to go.

Rickerby Hinds: ... the answer can't be, "That's the way it happened."

Fatima F. Mirza: Yeah.

Rickerby Hinds: I mean it's a great thing to discover, I believe, as a writer. So you mentioned that you had made three promises when you embarked on this shift in your existence, this change in your education on process.

Fatima F. Mirza: I like thinking of it like that.

Rickerby Hinds: It has to be. So what were the other two promises that you had made?

Fatima F. Mirza: The second one was that I... at the time I was 18, I wasn't a writer, and so I just thought to myself like if I really want to do this story, then I want to make myself the best writer that I can possibly be in order to do right by them.

Fatima F. Mirza: And so that is why I really switched to creative writing because I wanted to make sure that all of my classes were in service of that goal. I was so fortunate, I worked with so many amazing professors, one being Andrew Winer. He would assign me different books and we would have conversations after I read them. And what I realize now is those conversations were helping me to see how to read as a writer.

Fatima F. Mirza: And through these kind of classes, through sharing workshop stories, through reading these books with professors and having them help you see how does the writer read and think and all of that, I started becoming that writer I think. And then I applied to Iowa. I applied to different grad schools because I didn't want to stop. I just wanted to make sure that I did my best.

Fatima F. Mirza: And so the third promise was that I'd give myself up to 10 years to do it, because I didn't want to rush it. I didn't want to just do like a first draft and then be so excited that it's done that I rush it. And so I told myself, if I give myself this much time with these two goals in mind, then hopefully I'll get to a place that I feel proud of.

Rickerby Hinds: These promises are very interesting, because at least the last two really speak to something that I think oftentimes as artists we don't necessarily give ourselves the permission to do. So if you had pursued becoming a doctor or the medical field, you would have put in the time to become that thing.

Fatima F. Mirza: Right.

Rickerby Hinds: You sat in an office, you know this is what you wanted to do, and then you get a call from Sarah Jessica Parker.

Fatima F. Mirza: No.

Rickerby Hinds: And then she says, "Listen, we want to do..."

Fatima F. Mirza: Eight years later.

Rickerby Hinds: Okay, so tell us a little bit about that time and what it meant and what that was like?

Fatima F. Mirza: That time was spent writing, rewriting, drafting, going to workshop, figuring out how to deepen the consciousness of the characters, realizing that... Printing out all the different sections on the floor and rearranging them to figure out what the effect would be.

Fatima F. Mirza: If I do this, then this impact is different, and then, I don't know, figuring out everything that's redundant and cutting it, deciding I'm going to just start at page one all over again. Because my prose style from when I was a student at UCR was so different than what I was writing at 25. And if I kept... At some point I realized I have to stop because I'm continuing to grow.

Fatima F. Mirza: And so that I'll just, I don't know, at some point I have to just say like, "I've done the best I can for this time," and then I can begin again years from now. But up until that point it was like a lot of writing and rewriting and figuring out.

Rickerby Hinds: And I did that jump in a way, but this is such an important part of understanding this type of a process and knowing that it doesn't go from, I have this great idea to the phone call. So what was that moment like or what was it like to get that affirmation, that call?

Fatima F. Mirza: Yeah, it was huge. I remember I had just stepped out of the subway. I knew that Sarah Jessica had liked the book, but we hadn't spoken. When you are working on something for so long in the dark, you don't know if it'll connect with anybody. And also you don't know... I don't know, you just develop this relationship to it that the publishing side of things is so different than the creating side of things.

Fatima F. Mirza: And so it was kind of a scary juncture. And I, more than anything, I wanted it to be in the hands of somebody who understood what I had been trying to do. And so it was kind of a miracle of a call, like not only because she's Sarah Jessica Parker and that I didn't think this path would be possible for me at all in a way for so long, but also because of the way that she was speaking about it.

Fatima F. Mirza: The way that she really talked about the characters and the story as though she had spent so much time living inside of it. The book touches upon all these different themes and one that's very dear to me is the spiritual heartbeat of it, like what happens to this family when one child decides that he cannot practice the way that the rest of the family can and the pain of that, which it doesn't make for the most dramatic of stories.

Fatima F. Mirza: And yet it was one of the most tender parts of it for me. And that was what we spend our time talking about, like those scenes in a way. And I just kept thinking, "No matter what, you would have been the ideal reader that I would have imagined for this."

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Fatima F. Mirza: And then after that I decided, yes, I totally trust you. I trust your vision, I trust how you read. And I greatly admire, going back to what you were saying about never seeing these kind of stories told, that she chose the launch of this book. I really admired that decision and like what that meant for Fatima of 14 years old who never saw a novel that was reflective of my experience.

Rickerby Hinds: Yes. And at some point you contacted your family and said, "Hey..." speaking of chemistry.

Fatima F. Mirza: Yeah, exactly. Oh, way back you mean? Yeah. My parents are so... at first they were so upset, as anyone would be when you turn against this kind of an agreement. But what I've been so fortunate, with my parents in particular and my brothers, to find is that like no matter what I say, this is what I'm going to do and this where I am.

Fatima F. Mirza: Like at first they might be frustrated or afraid, because sometimes the thing that I'm saying is like... In this case it was about my education. In other cases it is about how I practice or don't practice the faith that's very important to them, or how I uphold certain traditions that were for them just the way of moving through the world.

Fatima F. Mirza: But in those moments, in those instances, after the initial whatever it's going to be, I've just been so fortunate that they try their best to like understand my experience and my motivations and accept them, and it just kind of on one hand it just allowed me to keep going with it.

Rickerby Hinds: Of course.

Fatima F. Mirza: But now what it's allowed is that we have like an honest understanding of each other and the kind of lives that we want to live, if that makes sense? And I've been so lucky.

Rickerby Hinds: Absolutely. What have you learned about, if you want to call it success or even about this process of getting from that moment to where you are now?

Fatima F. Mirza: One thing that I've been kind of surprised to realize about what feels successful to me, is that it is never what you think it will be. I don't know how to articulate that other than to say when I look back on this publishing side of things, that felt like the most success to me was that my grandmother read it.

Fatima F. Mirza: Even though English is not her first language, even though I have never seen her read a novel, that she sat down and read it and that she was so excited that there were phrases from Urdu in it, and that there were different traditions that, even though growing up she'd fight me on, like, "Why can't you do this or that?" But then that she saw it honored in the book in a way, even if I'm... You know what I mean?

Fatima F. Mirza: Like that to me or the way that my parents reacted to her, the way that Sarah Jessica like read the book and understood the book and then talks about it in the world. It's like it's never what you think it's going to be. In a way I was so excited that like I'm like, "Wow, the cover is so shiny," things like that. And then at the same time it's that my brother, the first day that the book came out he went into the bookstore and took the books and made them face the windows and took a picture of it for me outside of it where I could see.

Fatima F. Mirza: I don't know, it's always those things I think. And I also think that at least this is one thing that I'm... I don't know what it will be like going forward. I haven't started writing again, but there's a part of me that thinks that in a way you have to separate it from the creative process again, if that makes sense?

Rickerby Hinds: Wow. Yes.

Fatima F. Mirza: And so who knows what that will be like, but I do feel like I want to... One thing that I loved about writing this novel is that I felt like I had something to prove to myself and to the characters and then therefore to the world, I guess. But I want to remind myself that each novel, each story, each whatever, is its own thing. And so you have to like maintain that feeling, if that makes sense?

Rickerby Hinds: Yes.

Fatima F. Mirza: And not just be like, "Well, because I was successful in this way and this definition of it means that this..." You know what I mean?

Rickerby Hinds: Yes, yes, absolutely. Now, let's get into the Creator State of mind. In each episode we ask our guests to share what's been on their minds, something they

can't stop thinking about, a new challenge they're facing, or what's inspired them into action recently. We call it the Creator State of mind.

Fatima F. Mirza: Today is a complete trip because this is my first time back on campus. And yesterday was also wonderful because I spent time with the first friend that I ever made at UC Riverside. And so it's like this return to this time, a friendship that I formed when I was 18 or a place that I moved to when I didn't... So that is inspiring in a way to see like how your life layers on itself.

Fatima F. Mirza: And then also how something remains consistent, but something changes, even in that friendship or in these interactions or in going to the Coffee Bean. Just this feeling like this was such a crucial time in my life where I was figuring out for the first time who am I and who am I going to be and who are these friends that I'm making and what will it be like 10 years from now? And then to feel like your life is like... I don't know. I'm not articulating it properly because it's kind of a difficult feeling to inhabit.

Rickerby Hinds: Absolutely. And if you can articulate it, somebody once said, you know, you make it much smaller than it actually is. So you turn it into these little blips.

Fatima F. Mirza: Like little soundbites.

Rickerby Hinds: Yes.

Fatima F. Mirza: But it just feels totally bizarre to be like, "I was there and that was my friend skateboarding, and this is where I got coffee every day before going to class." Or even like seeing INTS as I walked over here and just being like, "That is where I sat down and wrote this first paragraph." Like it's.... yeah.

Rickerby Hinds: No, and that's, I think... I'm here on campus all the time and I started writing here at UCR as well as a playwright, and I was sneaking in the classrooms to rehearse and doing shows at Watkins 1000 where I wasn't supposed to necessarily be there. So I get that feeling of renewal or reflection simultaneously.

Rickerby Hinds: It is always a valuable learning opportunity to take time to reflect. At the end of each interview, we like to ask our guests this, in hindsight, what is something you wish you would've known when you were starting out?

Fatima F. Mirza: I just wish I could go back to myself and tell her like, "It's going to be okay." Like, it feels so scary at every juncture, like before you decide that you're going to commit to writing the novel, before you call your dad and say that. I went through so many different changes during while I was a student here, and all of them are so frightening.

Fatima F. Mirza: They felt like I could possibly isolate myself from the place I've come from and the people that I love, or I could write this novel and I kept choosing the novel in

a way. But it was so constantly painful and frightening, and I wish I could just be like, "It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay." But at the same time I think that was necessary, because I think it helped me realize how deeply committed I was to this thing. And also once I had committed to that, once I found myself in Iowa and I had made all these changes, there was no going back. You just had to do it and you had to get it done. And so I think it's... Yeah.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow. Well, I want to thank you. This has been a really great time getting to know you and talking to you.

Fatima F. Mirza: Thank you. I feel the same.

Rickerby Hinds: Absolutely.

Fatima F. Mirza: I want to continue this conversation.

Rickerby Hinds: I know, but really thank you and I am so proud of you. I mean, there seem to be some parallels that we can't get into, but I'm really-

Fatima F. Mirza: Thank you so much.

Rickerby Hinds: ... I had that same kind of thing happen on this campus, so it's so cool.

Rickerby Hinds: On the next episode of the Creator State, we're talking rock and roll and gospel with UCR graduate, Nwaka Onwusa. Join us as we discuss her career path to curating music history at the Grammy Museum and her new role at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Rickerby Hinds: Thanks for listening. Find more information about our guests at creatorstate.com. Do you know someone creating something great? Send us what you're creating for a chance to be featured in an upcoming episode. Write to us at creatorstate@ucr.edu. There's a team creating this podcast. Help us by subscribing on iTunes, SoundCloud, or wherever you listen, and while you are there, leave us a review.

Rickerby Hinds: Our producer for the show is Jennifer Merrett, with audio and editing by Chan Moon and Kevin Williams, digital strategy by Kelly McGrail and Madeline Adamo, design by Chrissy Danforth, Denise Wolf, Brad Rowe, and creative director Luis Sands.

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