

## **S. K. Ali's Morris Speech for *Saints and Misfits***

**As-salaam-u alaikum. Which is the Muslim/Arabic way to say *May the force be with you*. Actually, before any literalists pounce on me, I better tell you that it actually means *May peace, salaam, be with you*.**

**Peace. That one word, that one thing, our world is in dire need of. *World* peace – but what if inner peace was important to world peace? A precursor to world peace?**

**And what if inner peace starts with speaking the truth?**

**This is the heart of my book, *Saints and Misfits*: making peace with yourself as a first step to making peace in *your* world, then in the greater world.**

**I am truly grateful to be standing here today. For me, gratitude starts with acknowledging the source of all in my life: God. And then my family, every single one of whom has accompanied me on this book journey, but especially my parents who nurtured my love of stories and words, my three children, Hamza, Bilqis and Jochua, and my soulmate of a husband, Jez. I thank my agent, my superhero**

**agent, John Cusick and also the team at Simon & Schuster – especially my cherished editor and publisher at the imprint Salaam Reads, Zareen Jaffery and Justin Chanda, who, a few years ago, asked a brave question: what if we looked for narratives starring young Muslim heroes?**

**And, WOW, the way the book world – librarians, educators, reviewers, booksellers, bloggers, bookstagrammers, aka some of the best people in the world – the way *the bookish ones* received these Muslim protagonist-led stories with open arms, these stories featuring girls and boys breaking out of the shadows of words like *terrorists* and *oppressed*...there's only one way to describe it: wow.**

**Thank YOU to the Morris committee and YALSA for being these “wow” bookish ones. Thank you for seeing the beauty in *all* the titles you selected, these amazing stories of resilience and hope from my fellow finalists, Akemi Dawn Bowman, S. F. Henson, Nic Stone and Angie Thomas. I call this nomination a dream I dared not dream coming true and to be amongst these fellow dreamers is a true blessing.**

**And I must of course reserve my biggest thank you to readers who said, *I loved seeing myself, my community, the Muslim community, depicted with nuance and positivity!* or *I got to be a part of a Muslim girl's life!* or, increasingly, *Me too.***

***Saints and Misfits* was written before the hashtag MeToo went viral on social media in the fall of 2017. But it wasn't written before #MeToo was coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006.**

**And, sadly, it wasn't written before the trauma of sexual violence entered the lives of too many people, the world over.**

**When we talk about sexual assault, we are careful in our language, aware of the weight of using words like victim, survivor, shame, evidence, allegedly, and on.**

**Janna, the main character in *Saints and Misfits*, grapples with the weight of these words, how to reconcile their limits with the situation she faces: summoning the bravery to reveal the monster in her midst.**

**And yet, it is words that ultimately save her – *and us.* It is through words we reveal secrets,**

**Speak words of support, and offer hope, that we break taboos and the chains of shame.**

**It is through words we say MeToo.**

**And, of course, it is *with* words that we writers weave stories, speak truth and make peace – within – and in our world. As-salaam-u alaikum. May peace – and the force of it – be with you.**