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Interview with Sherry Jones by Sadiya Abubakar

May I know you at a glance?

I am an author, journalist, freelance writer, poet, and feminist. I am 55 years old, divorced three times, and an atheist. I believe in love and equality for all.

Tell me all about your educational background

I graduated from high school at the top of my class, as valedictorian, in 1979. I enrolled in college but left before finishing to work as a journalist, which was my career for more than 30 years. I finally finished college in 2006, graduating in English creative writing with highest honors.

What does your childhood look like?

I had a very unhappy childhood. My father was an alcoholic and a member of the military. My mother was depressed and abusive, physically and emotionally, to my younger sister and me. My parents also took my sister and me to pornographic films when we were young. My family moved frequently, which meant that I had no community or even other family members to turn to in my misery. My teachers at school and church were my only sources of comfort and inspiration.

Tell me more about your childhood with respect to family ties. Would you like to live it again? Which phase of your life would you like to live again to re-do or correct if given the chance?

I would not want to live my childhood again. I would like to be a young adult again, so I could realize my true potential which was vast. I should have applied to the best colleges and earned advanced degrees. I should not have made love and men the focus of my efforts. I thought having a husband and family would make me happy, but I did not have the self-esteem to choose well for myself and so all my efforts at marriage and relationships were wasted. I wish I had focused on my career and on becoming a great writer.

Where and when was your first direct contact with Muslims? You took up the study of the history of Islam after the 9/11 event and the War on terror, do you have any better knowledge of Muslims or Islam prior to that?

I knew little about Islam when I began researching “The Jewel of Medina” and “The Sword of Medina.” I knew that Muslims worshipped the same god as Christians and Jews, and that Muslims had a prophet named Muhammad. After I decided to write about A’isha bint AbiBakr, I enrolled in an Arabic class at the University of Montana and became friends with my *ustaz*, my teacher, Samir Bishar, a Palestinian from Jerusalem. He taught me much about Islam and about the shameful treatment of Palestinians by Israelis.

Did you aspire to become a writer right from the start or did it just come up by chance, out of admiration for Aisha’s epic which you stumbled upon while researching on Islam?

I have been a writer all my life. I had always wanted to write novels, but didn’t know what to write about until I discovered A’isha’s story in books on women in Islam that I began reading after 9/11/

In this era where different styles and genres of literature, how did you come to the idea of historical fiction? Why did you settle for it?

Writing about A’isha made me an historical novelist. I so enjoyed the experience of inhabiting the skin of a women who had lived before and bringing her to life again that I continued writing historical fiction. I would also like to write contemporary fiction, examining the lives of women in American society today.

Are there any awards or nominations for your writings or activism?

“The Jewel of Medina” was a semi-finalist for a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association award, and was named to a number of “best historical fiction” lists. “The Sword of Medina” won a silver Independent Publishers Association award. Both novels were internationally best-selling books.

As an active feminist by works (of fiction) and action, do you think there is any positive turn from fiction to reality? All your works are with the aim of empowering women, have you achieved what you set out for?

In reading about the lives of women of accomplishment, we can gain inspiration for our own lives. We see the obstacles that women have faced as they strive to attain their full potential as human beings, and understand that they are not so different from our own. This can give us courage, and encourage us to keep striving as well as to help one another.

I learned you worked as a journalist, are you still one? Or have you given it up for writing?

I gave up journalism to write novels, but as a feminist activist with the National Organization for Women, I still write articles that I hope will bring about positive changes in society.

What are your hobbies and which religion do you practice now? I mean what is your perception of God?

I like to read, play the piano, cook, dance, and travel. I enjoy the arts, and love going to the opera, theater, dance performances, and museums. I also like to dance to blues and rock music.

“God is love” is my religion—and “Love is a verb,” meaning that it is something you must do, not just something you feel. Feeling love or compassion is useless unless you put that feeling into action.

Who are your favorite music artists?

My current favorites are Beyonce and Alicia Keys for their powerful music about social injustice, and Bjork because she is a musical genius.

Favorite actor and actress and Why

I don't watch TV or even see many movies, but I love Judi Dench for her powerful, nuanced performances, especially in "Iris," a film about the author Iris Murdoch. Meryl Streep is also amazing. I don't have a favorite actor.

What is your favorite food, color and the best place you've ever been?

My favorite food is fresh oysters, eaten raw. They taste like the sea! Indigo is my favorite color. And Paris is my favorite place in the world—I have traveled to Paris six times, and hope to go many more time.

Where do you see yourself in the next decade?

I would like to find a writers' community and dedicate the rest of my life to my craft. In these times, writing feels like the most important thing I can do for humanity.

For how long have been divorced?

I have been single since December 2007. After three failed marriages and three live-in relationships.

Are you happy with your status? So do you encourage married women to break up their marriages when facing the same or similar marital problems?

I love the freedom and autonomy of living on my own, with no one to tell me what to do.

I would advise women not to marry. Marriage involves compromise, and women almost always are the ones who lose. It is far better to take care of ourselves and one another so that we can enjoy success in live and work. For companionship, have friends. For sex, have lovers.

"So many books to write, too little time" this is said to be all about you in eight words. If you have the time—say additional ten hours a day, what and what would you have written about?

I would write my memoir, contemporary fiction, and poetry. Maybe screenplays, also. I would write about what it feels like to be a woman today. I would write about being a girl growing up in the South. I would write about being a transgendered person—I am not one, but I have great empathy for our trans brothers and sisters and all the terrible hatred and discrimination they encounter constantly. I would write about human trafficking and sex slavery. I would write about the terrible dark side of humanity that leads us to abuse and oppress others.

From all you have studied about Islam and Muhammad, do you find anything worthy of emulation? Do you personally practice any?

My favorite verse from the Qur'an is, "We are all made from a single soul." The social justice and equality of all—male, female, rich, poor, adult, child, Muslim, Christian, Jew—is the aspect of Islam that resonates most perfectly with me. Of course, if you read "The Sword of Medina" you can see how this beautiful vision of the Prophet Muhammad's was changed by the flawed men who ruled the Muslim *umma* after his death.

With the growing stereotype and bigotry against Islam, do you think the history of Islam correlates with the practices of some Muslims? And should these fractions be used to judge the whole of Muslims?

Of course, Daesh and the Taliban and Boko Haram and all extremist, terrorist groups are antithetical to the teachings of Muhammad, who showed mercy to his enemies and admonished his followers to fight in self-defence only. These people fighting in God's name are not godly at all, but the opposite—they are evil personified.

The inequality and oppression of women that we see in many Muslim countries are not Islamic, either. Muhammad honored women and gave them many rights they had never known before. Nor did the women of the *umma* cover their hair, except as protection from the sun, or have their movement restricted or monitored by men. They were not segregated in the mosques, either, but prayed alongside the men. Women were among Muhammad's trusted advisors. Harassment of his wives caused him to impose some restrictions on access to them, but never did he say that all women must sequester themselves from men, or from the world at large. Women even fought in battles with Muhammad! They participated fully in the life of the *umma*, and enjoyed equality in Medina, which was a matriarchal culture. Muhammad himself was a feminist, giving women rights they had never known before: to inherit property, to say "no" to marriage, to testify in court.

As with Christianity, however, Islam's god is male. Having a male god relegates women and girls to second-class status. I've said I'm an atheist. What I mean by that is, I don't believe in an external "god." I think "god" resides inside us. I believe in the Quaker religion's "Inner light." We are all gods and goddesses in our own way—all part of that "single soul" Muhammad spoke of.

Thank you very much for giving me your time and the chance to do this interview, I am honoured.

Sherry: I am most pleased.