

## The Size of A Mustard Seed by Umm Juwayriyah

Reviewed by W.B. Abdullah

Meet Jameelah Salih. She's the 27-year-old Muslim woman whom people are asking, "When are you going to get married?" Jameelah, protagonist of Umm Juwayriyah's *The Size of a Mustard Seed*, is a wonderfully complex and realistic character.

On the outside, she seems to have her life in order with a cosmetology career, a car, apartment and an education. However, Jameela must count to ten frequently throughout the day in order to keep her cool and she keeps a "do-right list" in order to stay on track. To say the least, she has anger management issues.

During Ramadan, stress abounds as she endures pressure to marry a very notable imam whom everyone thinks would be good for her, including Jameelah herself. Who wouldn't want to marry the city's most eligible bachelor? Yet, everyone has secrets and Jameelah's struggle to find Mr. Right forces the reader to question whether marrying because someone is "good for them" is enough. Jameelah's search to find a husband will resonate with any female reader asking herself whether true love exists and whether heart flutters, smiles and genuine joy deserve to take a back seat in the prospect of marriage.

Our beloved Messenger, peace be on him said, "Marriage is half of faith." He also said that faith goes up and down. In the Qur'an, Allah says He will bring forth to light every deed, good and bad, even those the weight of a mustard seed. Jameelah definitely has faith more than the size of a mustard seed, and her story is great for picking up the Muslimah who is down.

This is especially important in the wake of an *ummah* plagued with "old maid" syndrome. There is a lot of fear



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and anxiety about not being married by a certain age, and even more, about not finding "the one", let alone anyone to share in the rest of one's life. Because of it, many Muslims are making hasty decisions that don't always end up in "happily ever after". Through Jameelah's example, readers are reminded of patience and putting our complete faith and trust in "The Only One unable to break it" (to borrow the words on the back cover). In the words of Umm Juwayriyah, Jameelah shows "... how faith isn't constant. We're all in a faith cycle. Sometimes it's high,

sometimes it's low, and sometimes it's the size of a mustard seed. The size doesn't always matter the most, but what does matter is that our faith in Allah is there, and that we hold on to it with all our might through everything" (p.86).

This is an easy read that I'm sure you'll love. I must say that I'm not really a fiction lover, but I had to pull out the night-light for this one! If there are more Islamic fiction books like this to come, then our hearts, minds, and souls are in for a treat. Umm Juwayriyah has a gift of storytelling that makes you believe the characters are real; they are so believable that you'd swear you know them in real life. In fact, by the end of this story, you may be ready to pack your bags and visit Jameelah at the Covered Pearls salon for a chit-chat while getting your hair done.

While Islamic fiction has been around for several years, *The Size of a Mustard Seed* pioneers the genre of Urban Islamic Fiction, which relates the lives of American Muslims living in the cities. I love that this book features a multicultural group of Muslims – Latina, Black, Caribbean, Indonesian and those of mixed heritage. These are the Muslims that you would meet in the city.

Readers will love that this book is not preachy, and the characters portray real Muslims – flaws, baggage, faults and all. This is a staple for your bookshelves, and you might want to stock your friends' and family's bookshelves with this one, too. With three hundred thirty-seven pages of pure bliss, this is the first book in the Covered Pearls series. *Insha'Allah*, we will be reading more about the Covered Pearls crew very soon.

## Love in a Headscarf by Shelina Zahra Janmohamed

Reviewed by W.B. Abdullah

In her memoir, *Love in a Headscarf*, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed invites the reader to experience her world as an East-African South Asian-descent British Muslim hijabi looking for love, with a capital L. Shelina is like any other Muslim woman in the West, constantly negotiating her identity and trying to balance the double standards rampant in culture, with true Islam.

Shelina doesn't want to be put in a box. She says it best in her prologue: "I'm not Asian as you might think Asians to be, I'm not Muslim as you might imagine Muslims to be." This story, above all, is about how Shelina learned to be herself. It is Shelina's journey to a closer connection with Allah, her own self, and her faith in the process of finding her fairytale beginning of a married life.

You don't hear many Muslims talking about love. It is a topic designated for the private sphere, hardly ever discussed in public. Yet, as Shelina points out, Muslims are obsessed with love. The aunties, the matchmakers and parents in the ummah tediously spend time trying to help those who have come of age to find a suitable partner for life.

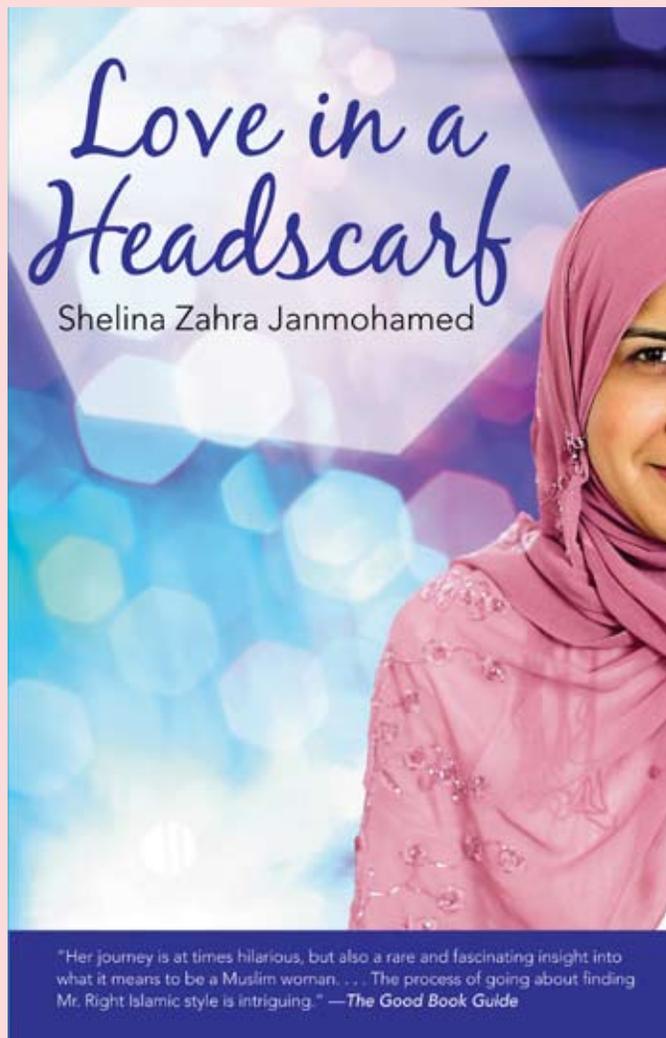
Of particular note is Shelina's constant pondering of the Qur'anic ayah: "And one of His signs is that He created pairs for you from amongst yourselves, so that you find peace in each other, and He puts love and mercy between you. In this are signs for those who reflect" (30:21). Because people were made in pairs, Shelina knows

that her one and only is out there. And she desires to find him in order to complete her faith and receive that love, mercy, and peace that Allah promises. It is this promise that Shelina holds dear, and gives her strength not to settle for any ole' Joe or Ahmad

*Love in a Headscarf* is a breath of fresh air in the genre of Islam-related non-fiction. Not only is it about Love, but it also exhibits a positive, uplifting and inspiring view of Muslim women. This is a godsend in a time when mass media is plagued with negative stereotyping and an overall misunderstanding of Muslim women. It's a complex task to be a Muslim woman in the West, without even bringing ethnicity and matrimony into

the mix. Shelina uplifts the tradition of the matchmaking and arranged marriage process, illuminating its wisdom for readers to see. She wants a love that's deeper than the romantic fantasy advertised in secular magazines. She wants to be in love, with a love that lasts. She believes that she can have it all and refuses to give up on her dream man, even with the high risk of becoming a spinster auntie herself while never finding that one.

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Shelina's story is exemplary, and I would share it with young women and men, both Muslim and non-Muslim. She does a great job of explaining Islam through the events of her life (without the no-no of being preachy) and brings up valid points from which to learn. This is a very approachable book. One finds oneself nodding in agreement, on the verge of tears and despair and giggling away like a girl with her girlfriends at a slumber party. There are moments of sadness and moments of joy. I cannot tell you if Shelina finds The One – that is for you to discover for yourself. I can tell you, however, that her search is as heroic as it is patient, exhibiting complete trust and faith in The One and Only Provider Who Is the Ultimate Matchmaker.