



NOTE TO PARENTS

BYOND THE FOREST NARRATES, in a lively and interactive way, some of the accounts of the great figures of Islam, who were renowned in their time and afterwards for their towering piety, profound wisdom, compassionate humanity and miraculous blessings. They are the Awliya Allah, the Friends of God, and are sometimes known as Muslim saints. This is a reference to the verses of the Quran: ‘*Take heed! These are the Awliya Allah – on them will be neither fear nor grief – those who believe and are reverently heedful – for them will be glad tidings in this world and the hereafter...*’ as well as a number of well-known hadith.

It is in these figures that one finds the fullest expression of the Islamic life-model – the Sunna of the Blessed Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings on him and his family). The characters depicted in the stories of this series, ‘*Adventures with the Awliya*’, are drawn from different time periods and places across history. Although the stories are dramatised, their core is events that are recorded in reliable Islamic historical and biographical accounts.

Rabia al-Adawiyya / al-Basri

Rabia al-Basri (95-185H, 714-801CE) is unquestionably the most renowned female saint of Islam, with the distinction of being the very first of more than eighty entries in Al-Sulami’s biographical work on great early female worshippers. She was born in Basra and enslaved at a young age, though later freed by her master upon witnessing her sanctity. She spent her life around Basra, though there exists a famous *hujra* (cell for retreat) on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem where she is reported to have spent much time.



She was an ascetic who entirely renounced the world and was engrossed in her worship of God. She was held in awe by many of the great early male spiritual masters, including major scholars of fiqh and hadith such as Sufyan al-Thawri. She lived a solitary life, though was frequently visited by mystics and worshippers who would seek to benefit from her wisdom, supplications and spiritual state.

She is considered the founder of the mystical tradition of absorption in Divine love (*'ishq*), and her poetry on this subject has been preserved. The stories (Chapter 13) depict her relationship with her Lord and contemporary mystics - though it should be said that the 'Hasan' referred to in the stories of Rabi'a is almost certainly not the towering figure Hasan al-Basri, who passed away before she was born.

Ibrahim ibn Adham

Ibrahim ibn Adham (100-165H, 718-782CE) was one of the most celebrated ascetic worshippers and mystics of early Islam. He was from the generation of the *'Tabi'in*, and traced his lineage back to Umar ibn al-Khattab. He was indeed a prince in the eastern city of Balkh (modern day Afghanistan) who renounced his throne after experiencing a spiritual awakening. This is one of the most famous 'repentance narratives' in early Islam - where a powerful reminder causes its recipient to turn away from worldly life towards the hereafter.

In some accounts, this occurred at the hands of a stag that he was hunting (as in chapter 6), whilst others indicate that Khadir, the mysterious spiritual teacher of Moses, was the one who awoke him (as in Chapter 7). He spent the rest of his life living as a renunciant, travelling throughout the Muslim world and performing



menial labour to earn an honest living. He became renowned for his wisdom and piety, accompanying a number of great spiritual masters and in turn being a mentor to others, such as Shaiq al-Balkhi and Sadid al-Din al-Mar'ashi. He passed away during a naval expedition against Byzantium at the age of 65.

Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani

Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (470-561H, 470-1166CE) is the most important figure in the medieval classical period of tasawwuf, revered as the greatest of the saints. He is the founder of the Qadiri tariqa, which is the oldest and largest of the classical spiritual orders. His titles include Muhyi al-Din (the Reviver of Religion), Baz-e-Ash'hab (the Grey Falcon), and al-Ghauth al-A'zam (the Great Helper).

He was a Hanbali jurist based in Baghdad, born to saintly parents from the household of the Prophet (s) himself via both Hasan and Husayn. After his religious education, he spent 25 years in seclusion in the deserts of Iraq, before returning to Baghdad to teach fiqh, tafsir and hadith. He was most renowned in his time, however, for his powerful and penetrating sermons on renunciation, spiritual purification and God-consciousness.

Several of his works are preserved, examples of the pinnacle of both religious discourse and Arabic prosody, such as 'Revelations of the Unseen'. He attracted many thousands of followers, and sent out his students to different corners of the Muslim world. The story depicted in chapters 9&10 is one of the most famous regarding him, and foretells the power of his sincerity, spiritual state and oratory even at a young age. It is further narrated that the bandit chief repented and became a sincere worshipper himself.



Abdullah Ba ‘Alawi

Shaykh Abdullah ibn ‘Alawi ibn al-Faqih al-Muqaddam (638-731H, 1240-1330CE) is one of the earliest of the spiritual masters from a family that has produced many generations of them: the Banū ‘Alawi of Tarim in Yemen. He visited a number of cities, including Makka and Madina, where he remained for some time, but spent most of his life in seclusion in Tarim and the deserts around it. He was renowned for his gnosis (ma’rifa), piety and strenuous exertions in worship, for example reciting the entire Quran in two rakats after Maghrib during Ramadan. He was also a renowned scholar and teacher.

In addition to this, though, many accounts have been preserved that detail his humanity and compassion, such as the one told in chapter 12. It is through such stories that we come to realise that proximity to Allah is attained not merely by strenuous exertion in worship, but also strenuous exertion in service of people. It should be noted that the dua of intention versified in this chapter is that of Imam al-Haddad, who was from the same family, but several hundred years later.

Sufi Sahib

Ghulam Muhammad al-Habibi (1267-1329H, 1848-1911CE) will be perhaps the least well-known of all the Awliya mentioned in this book. Known simply as Sufi Sahib (or Soofie Saheb in the local spelling), he was a spiritual master of the Chishti tariqa, descended via a family of Qadi’s from Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, the first Caliph.

Living in India just after the end of the Mughal Empire, where the Chishti tariqa had been based for hundreds of years, he was sent



by his spiritual master Khwaja Habib Ali Shah to southern tip of Africa in order to minister to the needs of Muslim labourers indentured to the service of the British. With no material means at his disposal, he spent the rest of his life building institutions essential to religious and civil life, such as masjids, schools, orphanages, clinics and shelters. The vast majority of these survived Apartheid and are still functioning today.

The story depicted in chapter 14, as with many of the stories relating to Sufi Sahib, are almost within living memory of natives of South Africa, and the meeting with Gandhi is demonstrated by documentary evidence. The author's own teacher - the grandson of Sufi Sahib - heard these stories on the lap of his mother, and they are common knowledge in Durban.

Madam Rifqa

Madam Rifqa is, of course, a fictional character rather than historical, but one who represents the treasury of wisdom, spirituality and deep knowledge hidden behind the seemingly ordinary facade of a kindly old woman. She is a reminder that knowledge is not contained only within turbans and robes, but in hearts connected by love and the secret of direct transmission (*talaqqi*).

As such, she is drawn from mothers, grand-mothers and wise-women throughout the ages, in whom a people's history, culture and memory is stored. Oftentimes, in Muslim societies, this is expressed formally in the sense of reports authenticated via chains of transmissions. As an example, both the shortest and the most prized unbroken chains of transmission for the entirety of Sahih al-Bukhari that exist in the world today run through women – Aisha bint Abd al-Hadi and Karima al-Marwaziyya respectively.