

# The best defense

*Iranian-American author Negid Farsad uses comedy to tackle social justice issues*

**BY MIKE WOLD**  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

It may be possible to change the world one joke at a time. At least, that's the thrust of the new book by Iranian-American comic Negin Farsad. Half comic autobiography, half serious examination of the ways that stereotypes play out, the narrative follows Negin from her childhood in Palm Springs, where she had to sort out what it meant to be ethnically different. "Here's the thing: I used to feel black ... there's the kind of blackness that's defined by its opposition to whiteness."

Farsad was actually one of two Iranian-American kids in a school that was otherwise white and Latino. So she tried to identify with Mexicans, too, without much success. It wasn't until she was in college that "it struck me. I wasn't black, or Mexican or Asian or Russian. I was an Iranian-American Muslim female ... To large swaths of the American public, that means I was a possibly dangerous brown person who potentially sympathized with Al Qaeda ... People needed to know that secular, fun Muslims who smell nice are the norm ... And I had to let people know it with the only tool I had: comedy."

Farsad is not a stereotype. Besides being a stand-up comic, she holds two master's degrees, in public policy and African-American studies from Cornell University. She's also not a Polyanna or someone who lives in a bubble — one of her social justice comedy projects was a tour of red states in the South and West titled "The Muslims Are Coming." She was sometimes confronted with picketers who believed that her purpose was to convert people to Islam. But, as she put it, you wouldn't actually learn much about Islam from her comic routine, which would likely be offensive to Muslim and Christian fundamentalists alike,

mostly because of references to lady parts and sexual activity. The purpose of the tour was more to let people understand that Muslims are as varied as Christians in their activities and political beliefs. She writes affectionately of holding a sign in a square in Salt Lake City, "Hug a Muslim," and finding that Mormons actually like to hug.

In 2014, she initiated a comic counter-campaign sparked by anti-Muslim ads on the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). After taking the MTA to court to get a ruling that posters promoting positive images of Muslims did not violate a new "no politics" rule, the posters went up with slogans like "Muslims! They invented coffee, the toothbrush, and algebra ... Oh wait, sorry about the algebra. That's a year of class you'll never get back" and "Beware The Muslims are Coming! And they shall strike with hugs so fierce, you'll end up calling your grandmother and telling her you love her."

Farsad details some of the personal experiences that led her to politically active comedy. One of the earliest was being cast in a play where a boy had to choose between her and a blond white girl, and all the boys in the middle school audience were calling her ugly and telling the boy to pick the blond girl. Luckily, the script dictated otherwise. Similarly, in an Ivy League college, she found that being brown definitely was not the way to make it in the dating scene.

Some people tell Farsad she should just identify as "American" rather than "Iranian-American." The problem, she says, is that she grew up in a non-American culture for her first 18 years, and it's part of who she is — you can't understand her without understanding that side of her experience. That isn't to say she prefers Iranian culture to American cultures; there are parts of her



ILLUSTRATION BY JON WILLIAMS, REAL CHANGE

parents' culture she loves and parts she hates.

Farsad makes some cogent political points. "It is hands-down the strangest form of white privilege for mass murderers who are white not to get the 'terrorist' label ... We're so committed to maintaining white privilege that even murderers have a better go of it. So if you or anyone you know uses the word terrorism, then let's just dole that out equally."

But she doesn't agree with the idea that people of color shouldn't have to be the ones to teach white people about anti-racism. "Do people ask where you're from? That's great! Let 'em know ... they should know where you're from, because in that moment you are the PR for your ethnic group." What she doesn't like is having to do "terror-splaining." "I go on a TV show and I

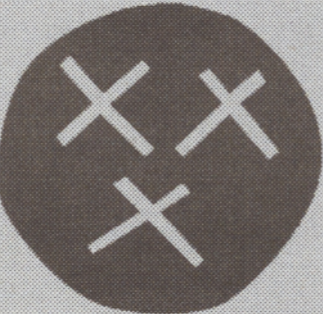
was asked if I could terror-splain why the Charlie Hebdo cartoons had motivated the attack ... I don't know any terrorists, I'm likely to know more about the history of capri pants."

Addressed both to whites and people of color, this book will make both groups laugh. The only weakness is that Farsad doesn't seem to have much grasp of class realities; they just don't seem to be a part of her experience. So social justice comedy gets to be a matter of talking about diversity and social privilege within a middle-class milieu.


Still, there aren't that many social justice comics around as it is, and we're lucky Farsad is one of them.

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