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Nothing but the truth

Imran Mahmood

The barrister and novelist wants us to think more deeply about the conditions that lead people into crime. Here, he talks about moonlighting, de-stereotyping and the ‘manipulated fate’ that brought him to the Bar

Interviewer
Jamil Mohammed

A criminal barrister, a family man and a published author – in no particular order. Who is Imran Mahmood, and how did he get here?

Before we go any further, let’s go back to December 2021 when *Counsel* asked if I’d be interested in interviewing Imran. It was around this time that the first episode of *You Don’t Know Me* (YDKM) aired on BBC One. In case you aren’t aware, the BBC drama series was adapted from Imran’s first published book of the same title (Penguin: 2017) and, having already watched YDKM, the chance to speak with the author was a ‘no brainer’.

Fast-forward a few months and we are sitting down for the interview. It very quickly stops being an interview and becomes a conversation. Here’s just some of what I learned...

Born in Liverpool 1969 to first-generation immigrant parents from Pakistan, Imran tells me about his upbringing and his school life which, he cautions, is ‘a hard story to digest’. His state school he politely understates as ‘a pretty bad one’. Nearly every pupil was in poverty due to the high levels of unemployment in 1970s and 1980s Liverpool. It was a school that boasted few resources and where, all too regularly, the teachers were on strike.

In his academic year, he estimates that no more than 20% of students sat their O-Levels and a lot less than that would have actually passed.

This was a school where racism was not hidden: ‘I was one of the very few people of colour in that school. There were maybe 10 in a school of 6-700. The initials “NF” and “APL” carved into desks... that was just the reality of that place; that’s what school was. Honestly, it was awful.’

Violence was common; it sounds from what he is saying that some students attended for the bouts rather than the lessons. A school where rankings might have been more about weight class than academic class. In fact, that’s the key word, ‘class’. Imran isn’t from the ‘class’ one would necessarily associate with a barrister, especially in those days (and perhaps still today, but that’s a conversation for another time).

So, what made Imran aspire for more? What made him think he could become a barrister? He credits much of this to his parents and their industriousness: ‘My parents believed that education was important. We were encouraged to study... they came from a country where there was no such thing as a free education. [It] was an opportunity too good to miss.’

He also gives a great deal of credit to the one teacher who inspired him. In a school that was patently deteriorating remained Mr Lynan. He would appear every day, in a three-piece suit and sporting a pocket watch, to teach Latin. I know what you’re thinking (and you’d be correct); Latin was not an oversubscribed elective. In fact, Imran made up 50% of the class. This ended up being a fortuitous situation. ‘You should think about going to the Bar,’ said Mr Lynan to Imran, and he did.

Looking back, Imran describes his initial desire to join the Bar as ‘naïve’. He remembers writing to every set in the country for pupillage. He was

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formally rejected by each and every chambers polite enough to respond. His pupillage offer came about unexpectedly. On his way home from a Middle Temple mentoring event (coincidentally about pupillages), he bumped into a Bar Course friend on King's Bench Walk, who was already in practice, who told him that one of the pupil masters (as they were then called) was in need of a pupil to start immediately. Was Imran interested? There's no need for dramatic suspense... of course he was, and he got the job. 'It was bizarre and a total fluke.'

I ask if he's fatalistic and whether he thinks becoming a barrister was somehow meant to be? He pauses, thinks about it, and comes to the realisation that 'to some extent it does feel like a manipulated fate'.


We talk about pupillage and what it was like back then. He describes the steep and fast learning curve. At this point he wasn't just a pupil of the law; he was a pupil of this new world.

'I'd never met people from public school before. I didn't know any barristers or any lawyers at all... I'd walked into this world with a lot of white people who spoke in ways I couldn't always tap into... it took me a long time to work out all of the rules – and there were a lot of them back then – all of the things that were unsaid that you had to pick up. There were codes buried in sideways looks... you would go to the Hall for lunch and someone slicing a bread roll rather than tearing it might attract a look; a signal that it's not the "done thing".'

He opens up about his early experiences in court: 'It might seem that I was always a man with confidence, but I wasn't at all. I was the opposite of a man with confidence. I had none. And being in court in front of judges who were quite often rude and bullying didn't help.'

'There were days when I wondered what I was doing there. I found it terrifying for years.' He describes having children as the shift in his mindset, which also, in turn, made him a better barrister. 'There's an existential change which happens when you have children. You suddenly realise that nothing [else] really matters that much... you're feeding them, not getting enough sleep, trying to keep yourself sane... At that point, if a judge says the wrong thing to you, it doesn't matter. You don't have the fear because you don't have the time or the energy to cultivate it.'



 Imran's first novel, *You Don't Know Me* (Penguin: 2017), was dramatised for BBC One in a four-part series in 2021 (and is currently streaming on iPlayer). On trial for murder, the defendant sacks his barrister and tells his own story in an epic closing speech. 'The story asks questions about humanity. Not just did he have a gun? But why did he have a gun?'

Listening to Imran, it's evident that all these experiences have shaped him not only as a person and a barrister, but as an author. He wrote his first book at a time when he was in court daily and with a new-born at home. I ask how he balanced it all. Somewhat surprised by the question, he smiles: 'No one has ever really asked me that.'

We talk about how consuming a criminal law practice can be. When writing YDKM he was in a lengthy trial at Hove Crown Court. He took the opportunity of the two-hour commute each way to write. Outside the courtroom, waiting to be called on, he would write as much as he could. He would write on weekends and while the family was asleep.

YDKM was, though, very much a side project: 'The court work takes precedence; that's the thing you can't let slide in any way. If you go in front of a judge, you're expected to know everything about your case. People's lives and livelihoods depend on it so you can't let that suffer. Writing has to come second... No, family has to come second. Well, not second, but you know...'

When did he first think he could become a writer? His intention wasn't to become a published author and he reminisces about writing short stories – all of which, he was told, were slightly depressing. When it came to YDKM, he wanted to get all these thoughts and experiences out of him and onto a page; a creative purging, if you will.

'I wrote the first draft of YDKM in about four months. I gave it to my wife to read and asked whether she thought it could be published, to which she said, "Yes, I've read loads of books that

are published that are much worse than this.” So, I sent it off to publishers and upon receiving responses thought this could really be something.’

YDKM is a story told through a court setting, where we see a young Black man on trial for murder who, having sacked his barrister, embarks on his own epic closing speech. I ask him why this particular story: ‘The most important thing for me was to help the wider readership understand that when you’re dealing with people in the court and criminal justice system, you are not dealing with people who are “other”... people like to look at defendants and say that would never happen to me, but that’s because they can’t understand their lives, they’ve not experienced having choice taken away from them... let’s say there are ten paths and you take away nine, you’re left with one...’

‘So, to make people really understand they’ve got to see that accused people are people just like themselves and then develop empathy... Then start to think maybe by sheer fortune I am not suffering the way they are, then think about the conditions that lead people into crime, rather than thinking of defendants as “other people”.’

Imran discusses his 30 years of practice and how he has learned from the very defendants he is representing, often themselves pointing out unexplored and key components in the case. ‘The common perception is that defendants are “stupid” – based on a prejudgment formed by listening to their language and accents. I’ve always thought that was a powerful piece of misinformation. You have to stop yourself from reaching conclusions in this way. I’ve seen defendants talk their way around silks and murder charges in ways that were surprising, elegant and stunning. I’ve seen people be underestimated all the time.’

Perhaps in a roundabout way his clients remind Imran of himself and what could have been if opportunity had been taken away. ‘The story [YDKM] asks questions about humanity. Not just did he have a gun? But why did he have a gun?’

On the parallels between writing and being a barrister, Imran says: ‘The nice thing about writing is that you can control the outcome. You can bring a chaotic world into order. In crime fiction I can add authenticity because I know the world of the courtroom. We meet so many different people as clients. You can meet a Russian billionaire and then someone who is homeless in the same day. When writing you can understand characters, and how they are layered... The work definitely helps the writing.’

‘I don’t think it works the other way round, other than being a way of de-stressing. I get to switch from being in a case to something else.’

Going far deeper than your average crime thriller, there is a theme to Imran’s work. An indictment of society, messages throughout his books

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highlight inequality, de-stereotype, and challenge prejudice. His main characters could be a different version of any of us, in the wrong circumstances. He considers conundrums within criminal justice, too. For example, in YDKM Imran poses a dilemma in readers’ minds – if a defendant is caught in a provable lie, should that necessarily negate the credibility of everything else they have said?

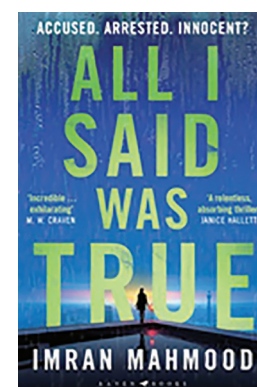
‘Actually, I always felt the central question was whether the moral question outweighed the legal one,’ he says. ‘If someone legally is guilty of a crime – are there circumstances – personal to the defendant – that can so overwhelm culpability that it becomes morally acceptable to find him not guilty? And is truth a true compass for guilt? Often truth is a casualty of proof. Only proof matters in a court. Not truth.’

His second book, *I Know What I Saw* (Raven Books/Bloomsbury: 2021), sees a homeless man witness an ‘impossible’ murder only to find he is not believed by police. This is an exploration of privilege and its loss (the homeless witness was formerly a wealthy Oxbridge-educated banker), mental health and human fragility but the book also uses memory as way of exploring the nature of truth and the nature of identity. I ask Imran to expand on this: ‘How what we choose to remember is a way of forming self-identify. How what we deliberately ‘forget’ is a way of shedding what we find unpalatable about ourselves.’

In his third offering, *All I Said Was True* (Raven Books/Bloomsbury: 2022), which is out this summer, a young lawyer accused of murder has to beat the 48-hour custody time clock. What deeper dive we can expect in thematic terms? Imran tells me that this book goes into the nature of free will: ‘Do we have it? Are we a domino fall caused by the previous domino? Or do we have agency? And how much agency can we have if our circumstances and background narrow our choices to nothing?’ His fourth book (title I cannot share with you yet) he has just finished drafting. With no signs of slowing down, he’s adding screenwriting to his resume.

If you take just one thing away from this insightful conversation it’s that your background, upbringing and circumstances need not define you; nor should you let it be the definitive definition of somebody else.

We all have a story to tell. ●



Published in July 2022, Imran Mahmood’s third novel (*All I Said Was True*, Raven Books/Bloomsbury) centres on Layla, a young lawyer accused of murder who is trying to beat the 48-hour custody time clock and convince the police of the truth. The book also delves into the nature of free will: ‘How much agency can we have if our circumstances and background narrow our choices to nothing?’



About the author

Jamil Mohammed is a junior barrister at 33 Bedford Row, with a multidisciplinary practice. Jamil is the 2021 recipient of the Pegasus Scholarship Award and ambassador for the programme, spending spring of 2022 in Washington DC, with the American Bar Association.