

The Jewel of Medina

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—Asra Nomani decries the indefinite postponement of the publication of Sherry Jones’ novel, *The Jewel of Medina*, which was originally slated for publication on August 12th. The novel — ostensibly the first in a two-book, \$100,000 deal with Random House — portrays the life of A’isha, who is typically characterized as the prophet of Islam Muhammad’s favorite wife. The novel charts A’isha's life from her engagement to the Prophet Muhammad at age six up through his death.

Nomani, a former reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, argues that Random House cancelled the novel’s upcoming publication due to fears that Jones’ book would instigate an upheaval similar to that caused by Sir Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*. Sir Salman’s 1988 novel was condemned as blasphemous, and Iran’s late Ayatollah Khomeini declared a non-binding legal opinion, or fatwa, urging the execution of Sir Salman. Nomani penned an opinion piece this past week in *The Wall Street Journal* that laid the blame for the book’s cancellation on Denise Spellburg, Associate Professor of History and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Spellburg served as a consulting historian and was asked to comment on the book by Random House.

Defending herself against accusations that she derailed the publication of *The Jewel of Medina*, Denise Spellburg wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*:

As a historian invited to "comment" on the book by its Random House editor at the author's express request, I objected strenuously to the claim that "*The Jewel of Medina*" was "extensively researched," as stated on the book jacket. As an expert on Aisha's life, I felt it was my professional responsibility to counter this novel's fallacious representation of a very real woman's life. The author and the press brought me into a process, and I used my scholarly expertise to assess the novel. It was in that same professional capacity that I felt it my duty to warn the press of the novel's potential to provoke anger among some Muslims.

Random House neutrally insists that the decision was made "for the safety of the author, employees of Random House, booksellers and anyone else who would be involved in distribution and sale of the novel.”

Readers will have to judge the work for themselves. The only excerpt currently available includes Jones's portrayal of the consummation of A'sha's marriage to the Prophet Muhammad: "the pain of consummation soon melted away. Muhammad was so gentle. I hardly felt the scorpion's sting…”

It may be that this feat of fictional imagineering may have almost nothing in common, save for its foray into the politically and religiously sensitive, with Sir Salman's novel.