

The Reluctant Mullah by Sagheer Afzal.

Halban Publishers Ltd 2010.

With the exception of the brilliant stand-up Shazia Mirza, I doubt that many people, stupidly but not without some cause, associate Islam with humour, or Muslims with a sense of humour. And yet, of course, Muslims have as much of a sense of the absurd as the rest of us, and in my experience love to laugh as well.

The Reluctant Mullah, a first novel by Sagheer Afzal, is a wonderfully observed story of one particular Muslim family, as one of the sons, Musa, the Reluctant Mullah of the title, is given a month of days by his mystical grandfather, Dadaji, to find himself a wife before having to accept one who has been chosen for him.

Musa's quest, and the efforts of those around him, are frequently hilarious, and the characters who fill the book, notably the sex god Titty Soups (you'll have to read the book!) and Musa's mouthy sister Shabnam, are drawn, I'm sure, from the life and have an awesome and endearing credibility to them.

The Reluctant Mullah is not a laugh from beginning to end, its journey is one of torment and tragedy as well as laughter and love, but it is a story of masterful completeness and I, for one, cannot wait for Sagheer Afzal's next book. Many congratulations to the Halbans for giving this first time novelist a richly deserved break.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh