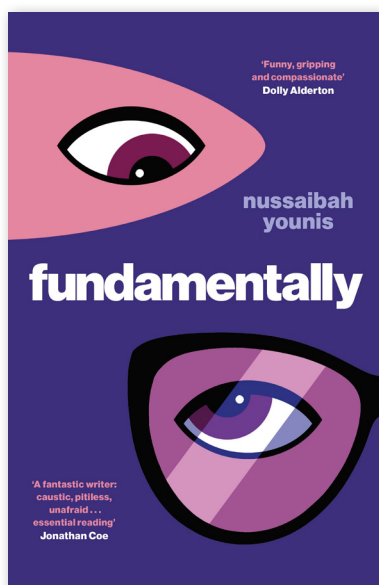


Fundamentally

by Nussaibah Younis



SHORT PLOT SUMMARY

Nadia is an academic who has been disowned by her puritanical mother and dumped by her lover, Rosy. She decides to make a getaway, accepting an UN job in Iraq. Tasked with rehabilitating ISIS women, Nadia becomes mired in the opaque world of international aid, surrounded by bumbling colleagues.

Sara is a precocious and swearsy East Londoner who joined ISIS at just fifteen. Nadia is struck by how similar they are: both feisty and opinionated, from a Muslim background, with a shared love of Dairy Milk and rude pick-up lines. A powerful friendship forms between the two women, until a secret confession from Sara threatens everything that Nadia has been working for.

A biting original, wildly funny and razor-sharp exploration of love, family, religion and the decisions we make in pursuit of belonging, *Fundamentally* upends and explores a defining controversy of our age with heart, complexity and humour.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

A fascinating and often humorous book about the realities of international aid work, terrorism and women's lives, *Fundamentally* also considers how family relationships shape our lives.

Nadia has a strained relationship with her mother, who refused to have contact with her for four years after Nadia told her that she was no longer a strict Muslim. When the book begins, their relationship is full of simmering tension. Then, we learn about Nadia's relationship with Rosy, an alcoholic, who has treated Nadia with a lack of consideration – to the point of sleeping with her new boyfriend in their shared flat.



Shortlist
2025

“Fresh, fierce,
and above all,
incredibly funny,
I’ve never, ever
experienced
anything like it; it
sums up brilliantly
the madness of
the world from all
perspectives.”

BRYONY GORDON,
2025 JUDGE

W
Shortlist
2025

Nadia reflects that:

‘That’s the irony of being left by your mother, it leaves you so precarious, so devoid of emotional resilience, that you can’t say no to love, wherever it comes from, no matter the conditions attached’.

By the end of the book, Nadia can see that her toxic relationship with her mother had left her open to accepting bad behaviour from Rosy in their relationship. Yet, family is also what can heal, as we see at the end of the book when Sara’s parents come to Turkey to reconnect with her and her daughter, and when Nadia and her mother reconcile. In fact, it’s Nadia’s mother that proves to be the catalyst in persuading Sara’s parents to fly to Turkey to see her, by sharing her own experience of being estranged from her daughter and regretting it.

In both relationships, religion has proved both a bond and a source of tension, but family is something that can transcend, heal and nourish.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Younis addresses the theme of religious radicalisation in her novel. While Nadia never agrees with Sara about ISIS’s take on Islam, Younis takes the time to build Sara and the other women at the camp as three-dimensional characters with their own clear motivations for joining the terrorist group. Though Nadia cannot agree with Sara, she can understand how her radicalisation has happened.

Nadia muses on moderation versus extremism in religion:

‘God’s instructions, issued over a thousand years ago, will always be extreme by contemporary standards. We protect religious freedom, but expect people to cherry-pick which religious teachings they observe. Luckily, the vast majority of believers abide by the easy, sensible rulings, and sidestep the rest. It’s quite a hard skill to teach. Ignore that part, you have to say, I know God’s word is infallible, but obviously that bit is mental.’

When does religion become radicalised? How empathetic should we be with people who have been ‘radicalised’ and what do you understand that word to mean? How subjective is the term ‘radical’, and who decides what is radical and what isn’t? Were you sympathetic to the women in the camp, or did they deserve to be there? Does Nadia’s experience of losing her religion whilst at university represent a kind of reverse radicalisation – from religion through education?

QUESTIONS

How does Sara’s story reference the real-life experience of Shamima Begum? What do you know about that case – should Begum’s British citizenship have been revoked?

If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

How did you feel about Younis' representation of Tom? How did he compare to Farris?

Nadia realises that hard work isn't enough to be successful in her job, and that being working class, she can't compete with Pierre's upper class corrupt brown-nosing. How does Younis represent class in *Fundamentally*?

How inspired by real life did you think the 'failure olympics' were?

NEXT STEPS

Write a humorous account of a day in your job. Younis writes with acerbic wit about Nadia's experience in an UN-funded project and about other international development workplaces. What is unnecessarily bureaucratic or badly planned in your workplace? Are there any eccentric characters, like Lina with her parrot? Are there any funny stories you could recount or elements of your job that would surprise people if they knew about them? Consider using amusing metaphor, simile and idiosyncratic detail to enhance your comic writing.

Alternatively, write about your experience of another country – one you've visited, perhaps seeing family, for work or a holiday. How was it different to what you expected it to be? Record your memories of the sights, sounds, smells, food, the people you met there. What music did you hear? What was on TV, in the shops, did you speak the language? What was strange and what was familiar? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Nussaibah Younis is a peacebuilding practitioner and a globally recognised expert on contemporary Iraq. For several years, she advised the Iraqi government on proposed programs to de-radicalise women affiliated with ISIS. She studied at Oxford, Durham and Harvard Universities, and has a PhD in International Affairs. She has published Op-Eds in the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, and the *New York Times*. She was born in the UK to an Iraqi father and a Pakistani mother, and currently lives in London.



If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

In *The Bird Tattoo*, Dunya Mikhail tells the story of Helen, a young Yazidi woman, living with her family in a mountain village and experiencing two tumultuous decades in Iraq: upheaval, love and loss, beauty and horror.

A dazzling feat of storytelling from one of the greatest writers of our time, Elif Shafak's *There are Rivers in the Sky* is a rich, sweeping novel that spans Iraq, Turkey, London and ancient Mesopotamia.

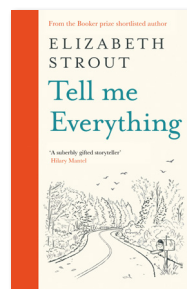
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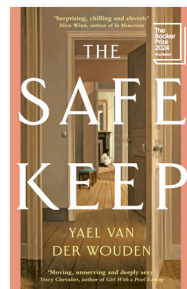
Good Girl
by Aria Aber



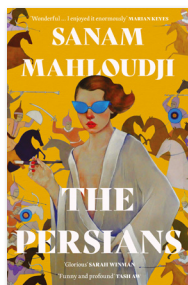
Tell Me Everything
by Elizabeth Strout



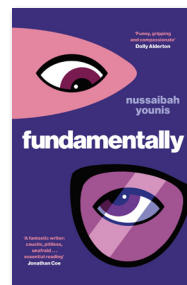
All Fours
by Miranda July



The Safekeep
by Yael van der Wouden



The Persians
by Sanam Mahloudji



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discusses the impact they have had on her life and career.

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