

'After a period of denial we've chosen "conscious uncoupling"' – Colin Firth borrows a phrase from his fellow actor Gwyneth Paltrow to explain that he had parted ways with the forthcoming film *Paddington*. The British star was the voice of the marmalade-obsessed bear, based on the popular books by the UK author Michael Bond. The film is due out later this year



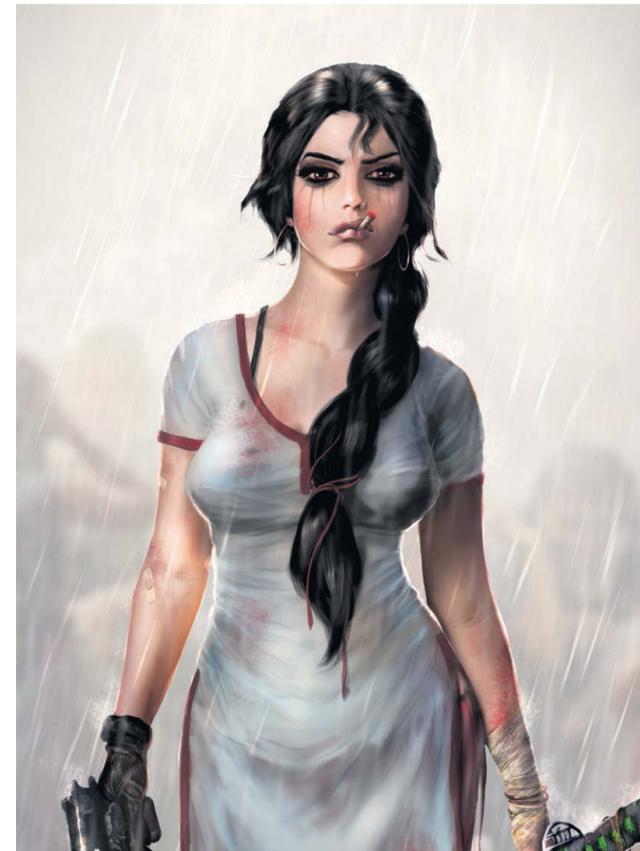
Zoe 'Zoella' Sugg, the fashion blogger and internet personality whose YouTube videos are watched by millions of people every month, is branching out into writing fiction. Penguin has bought two novels from the 24-year-old. The first, titled *Girl Online*, is a 'modern-day Notting Hill for teens' and will be published in November

# Street-fighting woman

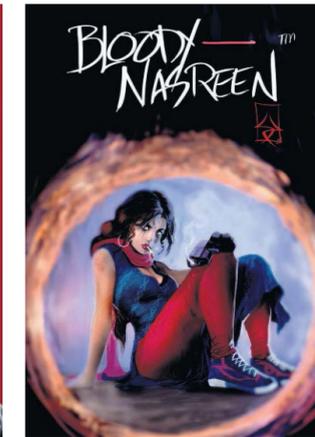
Priti Salian talks to Shahan Zaidi, the creator of the graphic novel *Bloody Nasreen*, whose central character is Pakistan's first unveiled heroine



Bloody Nasreen is a 27-year-old girl-next-door from Karachi who chases villains while tackling corruption and human trafficking. Courtesy Shahan Zaidi



Nasreen, Pakistan's first unveiled heroine, is the creation of Shahan Zaidi, right. Courtesy Shahan Zaidi



series, *Blizzard*, in a popular Pakistani weekly. Having found his calling, he educated himself in graphic art by signing up for online courses, as well as a stint with [www.itchyfingerz.com](http://www.itchyfingerz.com), a leading mobile applications and game company in Lahore.

#### A growing fan base

Nasreen has attracted enormous attention on social media and generated plenty of debate, especially over her outfit, which does not include a dupatta (scarf).

But Zaidi is unperturbed. "How can she keep a dupatta in place when she's running or jumping off high buildings?" he asks, saying he wanted his heroine to be as realistic as possible.

#### Nasreen on film

*Bloody Nasreen* has generated a great deal of interest among Pakistani filmmakers, and The Crew Films company of Karachi finally landed the deal. The writer and producer Faisal Rafi, who is likely to produce the film, says: "There are hardly any stories being made into films that are set in Karachi. In *Nasreen*, we see an opportunity to express the deeper truth and lies about our city. It is a brilliant character with a unique premise." Pre-production is underway, but the main cast and the director of the film have not yet been announced.

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Blazing eyes, flying hair, looks that could kill. The main character of Shahan Zaidi's English-language graphic novel *Bloody Nasreen* is 27, smokes cigarettes and kills without pity. Pakistan's first unveiled heroine wields a gun in her right hand and a sword in her left, but her attire – she wears a shalwar kameez and sneakers – is not the image you'd expect of a ruthless crime-fighter.

But there was a strong reason for the Lahore-based Zaidi, 31, to dress the heroine of his 100-page graphic novel this way.

"I wanted my heroine to portray a regular girl-next-door from Karachi, someone every Pakistani girl could

relate to," says Zaidi. He hasn't endowed Nasreen with any superpowers, explaining that she "picked up fighting skills along the way".

Zaidi also wanted to keep the character away from any religious activity or implications. So he chose to name her Nasreen because "it is a very common name in Pakistan, it could belong to a girl from any region or sect". The 100-page novel is likely to hit the stands late next month or August.

#### The idea

Nasreen was conceptualised long before *Burka Avenger*, Pakistan's first superheroine, who appears in her own animated television series.

But Nasreen languished in Zaidi's sketch book for four years, until 2009, when he shared his illustrations with friends and noticed the growing interest.

"Men fell for her looks and women loved her nerve," says Zaidi, who chose to set the story in the 2030s, where Nasreen fights issues such as human trafficking and corruption.

#### The inspiration

Zaidi grew up on a diet of Vertigo and *Constantine* comics and says he is inspired by female-focused movies such as Shekar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1995) and *Kill Bill* (2003), starring Uma Thurman. He was only 17 when he published his first comic

## ✦ Muslim superheroines

### Ms Marvel – Kamala Khan

A second generation Pakistani-American teenager from New Jersey who has shape-shifting superpowers and decides to put them to good use. Created by the writer G Willow Wilson, Khan is Marvel Comics's first Muslim character to have a comic series in her name.



### Dust

Much before Ms Marvel hit the stands, Marvel Comics had created a hijab-clad teenage superheroine from Afghanistan. Sooraya Qadir or Dust has mutant powers which help her turn into a storm of dust and vanquish her enemies.



### Jia

The main character of the award-winning Pakistani cartoon show *Burka Avenger* is a schoolteacher with an alter ego who wears an abaya to hide her identity and employs takht kabaddi, a special kind of martial art that involves fighting with pens and books. Rated as one of the most Influential Fictional Characters of 2013 by *Time* magazine, *Burka Avenger* is Pakistan's first animated superheroine and was created by the musician and social activist Aaron Haroon Rashid.



### Qahera

Egypt's first veiled superheroine in a webcomic, Qahera is a Cairo-based hijabi character who is the mainstay of a comic series by the same name. Created by Deena Mohamed, she not only fights bad guys but also deals with Islamophobia.



### Iron Butterfly

Kahina Eskandari is DC Comics's Palestinian superheroine. She wears medieval-style armour, has huge angel wings and leads the Shadow Cabinet. Her name comes from her superpower, ferrokinesis – she can move and shape metal and metallic objects. Created by Dwayne McDuffie, Robert L Washington III and Denys Cowan.



### Aisha al-Fadhil

Aisha – one of the protagonists of *The Losers*, a Vertigo series by DC Comics written by Andy Diggle – uses her combat skills to slay baddies. She's a cold-blooded killer who spent her childhood in Afghanistan and Pakistan fighting against Soviet soldiers.



### Rayann Lawsonia

The protagonist of *Drawn*, the 17-year-old Middle Eastern American student receives mystical powers through a henna design drawn on her hands. She is created by Mai El Shoush, a Sudan-born journalist based in Cleveland.



✦ Priti Salian