

PUNCHING THE AIR

WRITTEN BY **IBI ZOBOI**
WITH **YUSEF SALAAM**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY OMAR T. PASHA



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1

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*For Joseph, and the many lives
you've touched with your art, including mine*
—I. Z.

For my mother, Sharonne Salaam, my super shero
—Y. S.

Praise for **PUNCHING THE AIR**

“*Punching the Air* is the profound sound of humanity in verse. About a boy who uses his creative mind to overcome the creativity of racism. About a boy who uses the freedom of art to overcome his incarceration. About you. About me. Utterly indispensable.”

—**IBRAM X. KENDI**, National Book Award–winning
and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“In this beautifully rendered book, we are reminded again of how brilliant and precarious our Black Lives are and how art can ultimately heal us.”

—**JACQUELINE WOODSON**,
award-winning, bestselling author of *Brown Girl Dreaming*

“Stories, at their best, will break something old in you or build something new. Remarkably, *Punching the Air* does both. Zobo and Salaam have created nothing short of a masterwork of humanity, with lyrical arms big enough to cradle the oppressed and metaphoric teeth sharp enough to chomp on the bitter bones of racism. This is more than a story. This is a necessary exploration of anger and a radical reflection of love, which ultimately makes for an honest depiction of what it means to be young and Black in America.”

—**JASON REYNOLDS**, award-winning,
bestselling author of *Long Way Down*





PART I

BIRTH

Umi gave birth to me

at home

She has a video
and every birthday
she makes me watch

When I was little
I would run away

Umi would laugh and say
Come here, boy
You gotta remember
where you came from!

She'd chase me around
that small apartment
and I'd cover my eyes and
pretend to be gagging
That's nasty, Mama, I'd say

That's life, Amal
You have to respect it
she'd say

Umi was in this inflatable pool
in the middle of our living room
with the midwife next to her
My father was holding the camera

She was taking deep fire breaths
eyes closed tight, not even screaming
almost praying
Then the midwife plunged
both her hands into the pool

And then
there I was rising out of water
Squirming little brown thing

barely crying
big eyes wide
as if I'd already done this before
as if I'd already been here before

Umi says
I was born with an
old, old soul

OLD SOUL

The thing about being born
with an old soul
is that

an old soul can't tell you
all the things you weren't supposed to do
all the things that went wrong
all the things that will make it right again

The thing about having an old soul
is that
no one can see that it's there
hunched over with wrinkly brown skin
thick gray hair, deep cloudy eyes
that have already seen the past, present, and future
all balled up into a small universe

right here, right now
in this courtroom

COURTROOM

I know the courtroom ain't
the set of a music video, ain't
Coachella or the BET Awards, ain't
MTV, VH1, or the Grammys

But still

there's an audience
of fans, experts, and judges

Eyes watching through filtered screens
seeing every lie, reading every made-up word
 like a black hoodie counts as a mask
 like some shit I do with my fingers
 counts as gang signs
 like a few fights counts as uncontrollable rage
 like failing three classes
 counts as being dumb as fuck
 like everything that I am, that I've ever been
 counts as being

guilty

CHARACTER WITNESS

We're in the courtroom
to hear the jury's verdict
after only a few hours of
deliberation

and Ms. Rinaldi, my art teacher
was a character witness
It was the first time
she saw me

in a suit and tie
like the one I was supposed to wear

to the art opening at the museum

Or the one I was supposed to wear
to my first solo show in the school's gym

The suit I was supposed to wear
to prom, to my cousin's graduation
to mosque with Umi

is the suit I wear to my first trial



It's as if this event in my life
was something that was
supposed to happen all along

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

Yusef Salaam was fifteen years old when he followed a few of his friends into Central Park on a warm April evening in 1989. He'd been doing what he'd always done as a teen growing up in New York City. We both remember what us kids used to call just hanging out and fooling around: "Wilin' out." It's not a phrase that's meant to be written. So it's easy to misconstrue. It was easy for the media to misinterpret what was part of our vernacular as "Wilding," and turn it into something sinister in association with the infamous "Central Park jogger" case.

When Yusef first started writing, it was because, like many young brothers, he wanted to be a hip-hop artist. He'd been writing rhymes since he was eleven or twelve years old. The "Central Park Five" case, as it was known, happened during an era in music when message-driven hip-hop songs were popular. *Self Destruction*, KRS-One's *Love's Gonna Get'cha*, and especially Public Enemy were some of the artists and songs that shaped both of us as budding writers and were essentially the soundtrack to our young lives. We gravitated toward Public Enemy, who

came out with a flow that sounded less like rap, and more like a truth-telling speech.

So when Yusef and four other teen boys were tried and convicted of a crime they did not commit, he and so many other young people, including myself, were awakened to the injustices of their country and of the world.

The “Central Park jogger” case was my earliest memory of bearing witness to injustice. All throughout my high school and college years, there were more violent acts committed against Black men and boys, including Yusef Hawkins, who at sixteen was fatally shot in a predominantly white neighborhood in Brooklyn; Michael Griffith, who was chased out of a white neighborhood by a group of white teens and as a result, was fatally hit by a car; and the unarmed West African immigrant Amadou Diallo, who was shot forty-one times by cops just as he was entering his Harlem apartment. All these stories were why I wanted to become a journalist. I was so angry with the world that I had to find a way to speak truth to power.

So when Yusef and I met at Hunter College in 1999, just two years after he’d been released from prison and had not yet been exonerated, and ten years after the fateful night that changed his life forever, I wanted to be one of the few college reporters to investigate the truth about the “Central Park jogger” case, because so many of us believed those five teens were innocent. By sharing this story, I had hoped to expose the ongoing disparities in the criminal

justice system and how the media continually portrays an imbalanced view of Black children.

When Yusef was convicted, it was the start of him realizing that he needed to speak his truth. He realized that this art form he'd been honing since childhood, hip-hop, was going to allow him to get his message across at this most critical point in his life.

While waiting for his sentence, Yusef was told that he should throw himself at the mercy of the court; that he should plead for the least amount of time possible. But he had been reading about Malcolm X and others who were in the struggle. He had been inspired by hip-hop artists who were using their platforms to spread powerful messages about our experiences, and he started writing instead. So when his sentence was handed down and Yusef was given the stage to speak his truth, he read a poem entitled, "I Stand Accused."

While *Punching the Air* is not Yusef's story, Amal's character is inspired by him as an artist and as an incarcerated teen who had the support of his family, read lots of books, and made art to keep his mind free. This book is infused with some of the poetry Yusef wrote while he was incarcerated. When we started to discuss what kind of story we wanted to tell, we started with a name—Amal, which means "hope" in Arabic. It was important that whatever this teen boy was going through, he should always have hope and we should write a story that instills hope for the reader. Yusef and I wanted people to know that

when you find yourself in dark places, there's always a light somewhere in that darkness, and even if that light is inside of you, you can illuminate your own darkness by shedding that light on the world.

After meeting Yusef in college, we were reunited while I was touring for my debut novel, *American Street*. Yusef expressed his interest in speaking to more teens because his tragedy happened to him as a teen boy. He'd been mostly addressing law students and social justice and community organizations. A few days later, I approached him with the idea of telling his story in the form of a young adult book. We knew that young people needed to hear this story.

At the center of Amal's story is the cycle of racial violence that continues to plague this country. But this is not just a story about a crime or race. *Punching the Air* is about the power of art, faith, and transcendence in the most debilitating circumstances. It's our hope that all readers will experience the journey of a boy who finds himself in a heated moment where one wrong move threatens his future, and how he uses his art to express his truth, the truth.

—Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam

PHOTO BY JOSEPH ZOBOI



IBI ZOBOI's novel *American Street* was a National Book Award finalist in the US and a *New York Times* Notable Book. She is also the author of *Pride and My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich*, a *New York Times* bestseller. She is the editor of the anthology *Black Enough*. Born in Haiti

and raised in New York City, she now lives in New Jersey with her husband and their three children. You can find her online at www.ibizoboi.net.

PHOTO BY STACI NURSE (STACI MARIE STUDIO)



DR. YUSEF SALAAM was just fifteen years old when his life was upended after being wrongly convicted with four other boys in the “Central Park jogger” case. In 2002, after the young men spent years of their lives behind bars, their sentences were overturned.

They are now known as the Exonerated Five. Their story has been documented in the award-winning film *The Central Park Five* by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon and in Ava DuVernay’s highly acclaimed series *When They See Us*, one of Netflix’s most-watched original series of all time. Yusef is now a poet, activist, and inspirational speaker. He is the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from President Barack Obama, among other honors. You can find him online at www.yusefspeaks.com.

Also available as an ebook and as a downloadable audio.