

Rise up – find your voice, your light, your liberty

The book cover features a large, stylized phoenix in the center. The phoenix is depicted with a white body and a large, bright orange-red circular head. Its wings are spread wide, with white feathers that have orange-red tips. The background is a deep blue with horizontal wavy lines. At the bottom right, two small black silhouettes of people are walking on a path, leaving long, dark shadows behind them.

# PHOENIX BROTHERS

SITA BRAHMACHARI

Waterstones Children's Book Prize winning author

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*For young people and adults, displaced  
from homelands, seeking friendship and  
community, to rebuild lives.*

*Phoenix Brothers* is the prequel novella to 'Amir and George', edited by Ruth Bennett and first published by Little Tiger in an anthology called *I'll Be Home For Christmas*. The short story was re-published in *A Country To Call Home*, edited by Lucy Propescu and *The Power of Voice* by English and Media Centre. A version of 'Amir and George' is contained within the final chapter of *Phoenix Brothers*.

I have spoken to many young people around Europe about this short story and time and time again, readers have asked to know more about Amir's story and how he finds the courage to raise his voice. *Phoenix Brothers* tells that story.

## Chapter 1

# Earthquake Classroom

It's the end of term, the last day before the winter holidays.

"You're in for an end-of-year treat, Year 8!"

Mr Shaw announces, all animated about sharing his favourite Christmas film.

Some teachers hand out chocolates, others run quizzes.

"No, man! All other classes are bunking!" Mo protests.

"No, *sir*! All *the* other classes are bunking *off*!"

Mr Shaw corrects Mo's English, matter-of-factly.

"Tsssk!"

Here Mo goes with his teeth kissing sound! Half spit, half explosion in his mouth, guaranteed to rattle most teachers. But not Mr Shaw.

Mo's spent hours at his hostel perfecting it – a trick he'd managed to learn within days of arriving in

school. There are mutterings around the classroom, but no one makes their disappointment heard like Mo. I sit quietly by his side, knowing what's coming. Sure enough, his juddering leg starts up ... another warning sign that this is just a warm-up.

"This film's based on a story by the author your class is named after ..." Mr Shaw switches on the screen and turns, eyebrows raised in expectation, only to face an awkward pause. Nila shifts in her seat.

"Dickens," she finally mutters, under her breath.

"Much obliged, Nila."

"Creep!" Mo rolls his eyes at Nila. I don't see why he's always got it in for her; the only one who's ever really tried to be our friend. At least she's not afraid of what anyone else thinks of her. Not like Mo, who's always checking his back to make sure no one dares 'diss' him. It's weird how he's learning a whole different English to me. I don't understand half the words he 'drops' these days.

I learned 'diss' yesterday when Mo was spoiling for a fight in the corridor, and I got there just in time to talk him down.

"Nah, nah, he dissed me, man."

“What is this ‘diss?’”

“Come on, Amir, man. ‘Diss’ – *dis*-respect, innit.”

Here we are now, sitting shoulder to shoulder at the front of the class, under Mr Shaw’s ‘close supervision’.

Mo’s on my left, with Nila a chair’s space away to my right. Every time she’s close, I think of Mikha. She could have been with me now if, if, if ... Mo’s shaking knee is turning our desk into an earthquake tremor zone that’s slowly edging towards Mr Shaw. I can’t focus much beyond the opening credits of the film: *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

I lean forward and place my elbow on Mo’s knee. Mo turns to me. His eyes are wide as the moon above the boat where we once held each other close to keep from freezing. My nudge stills him a little, brings him back.

“Dead! This is ancient, man! Why not *Elf*? We’re not all Christian, innit?” At least Mo’s commentary is just for my ears now.

Nila smiles at me, or maybe past me, to Mo. For a minute or so there is peace at our desk.

In the film there is an old man called Scrooge haunted by ghost-memories and regrets about his meanness and greed.

Mo's knee starts up again. At the sight of a huge feast on the screen his stomach growls. This time I have no energy to still him, because now I too feel the ache of hunger. The thought comes to me again that we are brothers formed by need. Mo and I may have survived together, but we are different kinds of ghosts. I am hardly here at all, a presence slipping in and out of school, silently. Mo is the kind of ghost who will make sure everyone is haunted by his hunger, his anger. I do not know which ghost is taking the better path. Sometimes I wonder if either of us will ever be capable of moving beyond the moment where we surfaced from the bombed-out rubble of our past lives. I pull my mind back to the film, forcing myself to try to remember a time when school was school, home was home, and family was family.

But now Mo's knee is drilling up and down so hard it feels like his foot could make a hole in the floor. Nila pulls back from the table.

"What's your problem?" Mo snaps, shooting her his iceberg stare, then adds under his breath, "No one tells you to sit here." Nila gazes steadily at the screen, ignoring Mo's outburst, as usual.



I wonder how much more of this old film Mo can take before he explodes. I see clearly in the glassy windows of his eyes; he needs to run.

Through the window I can see the light on the athletics field is fading over ice-hardened ground.

"You promised to train tonight," Mo reminds me. The urgency in his voice jolts me back to times when we ran to survive.

*Burning lungs.*

*Saltwater freezing clothes on to skin.*

*Mo's arm around my shoulder, searchlights at our back.*

*"Go ahead, Mo! Save yourself."*

*"We live together or die together. Run, Amir, run ... once we cross that bridge, we will find shelter, inshallah."*