The Wish Maker is a coming-of-age story set in 1990s Pakistan, a story about two children and the family they grow up in, the people and the places they come to know and love. Its a story about Lahore, the city, seen gradually through the decades; a story about Benazir Bhutto and the heady promise of democracy, and the recurring nightmare of military intervention; a story about Bollywood movie stars and American TV shows and the different kinds of forbidden love they inspire. But the novel is also intended to be a meditation on the individual consciousness, a journey into the souls capacity to know other souls, to recognize itself in others and to grant others the validity it grants itself, which is the validity of desire, of wanting more and better things all the time. This, the capacity for wish-making, for ascribing insatiability and incompleteness to other peoples ideas of themselves is the central concern of the book. --Ali Sethi

A Conversation with Ali Sethi
Who are Zaki and Samar Api, and why is their relationship central to your novel? They're two middle-class kids--cousins and almost siblings, but not quite--growing up around the same time, in the same place. But as they grow older their lives take them in different directions. That divergence between the story of a boy and the story of a girl who have different but similar journeys is at the heart of the book. Although your novel covers a span of three generations, from Pakistani independence to 2003, it focuses mainly on the 1990s. What was happening socially and politically in Pakistan during those years? Different things were happening in different parts of Pakistan. In Lahore it was a relatively peaceful time. It was also an exciting time: military rule had ended after eleven years and democracy had returned, and people were feeling optimistic. There were billboards in the city; multinational companies were advertising new and foreign-looking products; the dish antenna had brought strange new worlds into the lives of people like Samar and Zaki. It was also the decade in which we declared our nuclear capability, and the decade in which fundamentalist seminaries (often set up with foreign funding) spread across the poorer parts of the country. These other changes are reflected in the lives of some of the other
characters in the book. So it was a time of social and political change. And it did different things to different people. Aside from your narrator, Zaki, women are the most important characters in your book--especially Zaki’s mother, grandmother, and of course Samar Api. Why did you choose to write this novel primarily from the perspective of women? I majored in South Asian Studies at college and spent some time looking at colonial and postcolonial art. I found that representations of women dominated the paintings, the songs, the novels and poems and short stories of the time. I found that women were being made to embody all that was either good or bad about society. And then I saw that it was true of today as well: from the ethics of parenting and weight-loss to the Afghan woman with the green eyes on the cover of National Geographic magazine, women were being made to represent our most pressing concerns about the world. I wanted to write a story in which the perspective of a woman, certainly for a boy growing up in a male-dominated society, was revealed as an act of the imagination. And the act of imagining had to end in the granting of greater freedom, greater unknowability, to the woman subject. Conversely, adult male characters are largely absent. Was this absence of strong men a conscious decision, or was it simply dictated by the demands of your story? It was a conscious decision. The epigraph, which is from Middlemarch, is about the difficult task of knowing another soul. I wanted to have a narrator who couldn’t take his identity for granted, who had to learn to invent his missing father, and then learn to invent (in order to understand and finally accept) the women around him. The women in your story live within a wide range of circumstances, from independent professionals to women still living in feudal conditions, who are under the complete control of their male relatives. How is the state of women in Pakistan changing today? The status of Pakistani women as citizens was damaged greatly in the early eighties, when a set of discriminatory laws was introduced as part of the so-called Islamization process. The civilian governments of the nineties were largely unable (some say unwilling) to undo those laws. That discriminatory tone entered the textbooks (which Zaki reads in high school) and was heard on the radio and on TV. And it went unchallenged for more than a decade. But in the last few years there have been some positive developments. These include legal breakthroughs and greater visibility for women on the newly independent electronic media. In rural Pakistan, however, where most Pakistani women continue to live, the customs are older than the laws and are taking much longer to change. After college in the United States, you moved back to Pakistan and are living once again in Lahore, your hometown. How do you see it differently after living abroad for several years? I do see Lahore differently now: living away has made me appreciate the wonderful things about my city--the landscape, the sense of history, the cultural heritage of the city and the enduring sense of it as the cultural capital of Pakistan. And it has made me impatient with all that I think can change for the better--the room for improvement in education; old, crumbling institutions that need to be revived, especially literary institutions that need fresh input; and the prevailing security concerns that get in the way of everything. Americans have a greater interest in Pakistan today than ever before because of its
central role in the war against terrorism. Who is gaining the upper hand there--the people who are sympathetic to the Taliban and Al Qaeda, or those who are more oriented toward the West? I think by and large people in Pakistan are not oriented toward the West. But that doesn't mean they are oriented toward the Taliban instead. People may use Western technology and prefer to obtain Western degrees whenever they can, and they may even watch American TV and listen to American songs, but the social infrastructure of Pakistan is still the one that was set up by the military (with Saudi and American funding) in the 1980s, encouraging a socially conservative Muslim identity. We have more outlets now for expression (more radio and TV channels, for example) but the beliefs people have are still the ones they were given all those years ago. What is the biggest misconception that Americans have about Pakistan? That it's a Middle Eastern country. What would you most like Americans to know about Pakistan? It's a country of 170 million people, as geographically diverse as your own, with mountains and deserts and lush valleys and mighty rivers. Its oldest monuments are as old as human history.

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