

# MUSLIMS IN STORY

*Expanding multicultural understanding  
through children's and young adult literature*

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*and* **SADAF SIDDIQUE**

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Stories are a communal currency of humanity.

—Tahir Shah, *In Arabian Nights: A Caravan of Moroccan Dreams*

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## FOREWORD

### *Let's Counter Islamophobia through Stories*

I OFTEN GIVE TALKS IN SCHOOLS AROUND THE COUNTRY, DRAWING ON MY own books to talk about the experiences and points of view of Muslim and immigrant teenagers, especially in a post-9/11 world. Recently, when visiting a rural community in upstate New York, I asked students to give a few responses to the terms *teenage*, *watched*, and *Muslim/Islam*. For *teenage*, they wrote the usual—*bored*, *drama*, *pressured*. For *Muslim/Islam*, most wrote: *Discriminated against. Terrorism. Middle East*.

Such narrow terms! Yes, Muslim Americans clearly face discrimination and bear the stigma of terrorism. But surely we can find a way to widen young readers' associations to attain a greater breadth of experience and history. Surely we can find a way to take their sense of what it means to be a teenager and make them realize that a Muslim teenager experiences this too. Surely they can learn that Islam stretches deeper and further than the war-torn images of the Middle East.

In the mid-1990s, while researching a nonfiction book on immigrant teenagers, I quickly realized that Muslim teenagers, and especially girls, were completely invisible in young adult literature. This was after Gulf War (1990–91), and girls would tell me of the taunts they'd get just walking home from school, or the difficulty they had finding an in-between cultural space. Their experience was both similar and different from the other teenagers I interviewed. Since then, we can see that the field of books on Islam and the Muslim and Muslim American experiences has been steadily growing.

That's why *Muslims in Story* is so crucial, so vital to our libraries, and so important for the soul of our country. It widens the path of knowledge, imagination, and curiosity. It is a resource that will help to illuminate the past, our history of Islam and Muslims in America, and our present, with all its complexities and pressures. It will help to deepen what our readers know about the Muslim American experience, and to understand the larger scope of Muslims in the world. And it will give young Muslim readers a chance to see themselves and their own culture and history reflected in the pages of books. Most of all, it will counter the dreadful, dehumanizing images of Muslims that haunt our media.

What is a book? Books are bridges, an opportunity to use our fundamental human traits of curiosity and empathy. Books are places where we stretch ourselves, but where we also find some common contours of human experience. Since 9/11 this has become ever more urgent for our young readers. Muslims, once invisible, have suddenly become hyper-visible, flattened under the glare of demonizing headlines. Rumor becomes fact, and groups of people become scapegoats. Our country, and our children, need this stretching in order to find their common experiences and stretch into the unknown, and explore that which we do not know. Too often, as I saw with the students I speak to, their images of Muslims are drawn from sensational news headlines, misinformation, a sense of otherness, and perhaps fear.

Librarians and educators stand at the entrance to the book-bridge, getting young readers to cross over and stretch to see what might be right in front of them, and what lies beyond the borders of their lives. Librarians are also the ones to put a book into the hands of a young person who may never have seen herself depicted in the pages of a book. They quietly whisper to them: You are here. I see you.

This book is extraordinarily researched. In the course of reading it, I found that there was much I knew, but there was also much that I did not know. For instance, I didn't know that Thomas Jefferson owned a Quran and even hosted an *iftar* (the evening meal eaten by Muslims during Ramadan) at the White House in 1805.

This book's curated list of titles, with its excellent suggestions for activities, will allow our readers to pause and look around them with different eyes. Some will see themselves in the titles we recommend. Others will see what was not

even visible before. We are given such a variety of books, from a simple tale about sharing scant resources in a refugee camp, to the gorgeous gold-leaf illustrations in picture books on Rumi and Muhammad. There are gentle lessons about fitting in; there are others about the span of holidays within Islam and across cultures; and there are many serious and funny coming-of-age novels about whether to wear a hijab (headscarf), identity, bullying, and even Urdu poetry. Or I think too of nonfiction books that would appeal to my own son, who is more of a factoid reader: *1001 Inventions and Awesome Facts from Muslim Civilization*, or the story of the *Grand Mosque of Paris: How Muslims Helped Jews during the Holocaust*. For older teenagers, there are sophisticated, edgy graphic novels taking on the here-and-now of politics, such as *The Arab of the Future* and *Persepolis*. A favorite part of this guide for me comes at the very end, with the appendix “Frequently Asked Questions on Islam” by Sumbul Ali-Karamali. What I like about this part of the book is its tone: so commonsensical, so down-to-earth and accessible in its treatment of all the misconceptions that surround Islam and Muslims.

As I finished this volume, I was reminded of two images from where I grew up, in Queens, New York. In a corner of the cemetery where my parents are buried is the Tatar section—turn-of-the century tombstones bearing Cyrillic and Arabic inscriptions, crescent moons, and stars. This is an area reserved for the American Mohammedan Society, Muslim immigrants from Russia and Poland who came to the United States and built the first mosque in North America—a lost, forgotten history. Just a few miles away, in an area that has become known as Little Bangladesh, stands a relatively new mosque; during Ramadan hundreds of Muslims pour on to a nearby high school lawn to pray. These two images are the invisible past and the teeming, transforming present, all in one borough of New York City. And this is the America we are living in right now. This is what we can begin to see and learn about.

Next time those answers about Muslims and Islam come back from the students, I think of the many books we can put in their hands. I think of how much farther and wider their imaginations, their curiosity, and their hearts can go.

*Marina Budhos*

## INTRODUCTION

**ON THE EVENING OF NOVEMBER 8, 2016, WE STARED IN DISBELIEF WHILE** watching the results of the U.S. presidential election. We had already felt troubled by the Republican campaign and its candidate, who used his platform to incite fear of anyone who appeared different. We had spent the last few months doing just the opposite. We had started a company to focus on South Asian children's books, and we had built an online resource of diverse books. We then introduced these multicultural stories to parents, librarians, and educators in the community in order to help build bridges of cultural understanding.

As reports poured in of increased hate crimes in the months that followed, we saw young children dreading going to school, fearful for their parents, and troubled by comments from their peers and others at school. We could not sit back and do nothing. Our work had led us to find ways to help children make connections with one another, so we researched ways that we could help Muslim children feel safe and understood. In January 2017, we launched our campaign named "Counter Islamophobia through Stories" in order to flip the narrative and feature positive stories of Muslims.

We sought to address misinformation on Islam and Muslims by seeking out books featuring Muslim children, we curated book lists to facilitate their discovery, and we interviewed authors whose books we featured. In addition to the online campaign, we reached out to various communities of parents, teachers, and librarians in order to expand our reach. We led diverse storytimes, teacher



workshops, and presentations in the course of our campaign. Rather serendipitously, we submitted a proposal to present our work at the American Library Association's 2017 Annual Conference. Shortly thereafter, we began work on writing this book for ALA Editions in order to expand our campaign's sphere of influence to educators and librarians all over the world.

This book is divided into two parts. Part I creates a broader context around the issue of Islamophobia. We provide a brief history of Muslims in America, and we connect it to the present with a detailed chapter on understanding Islamophobia and its impact on children. This background outlines the problems, the pressing need for creating long-term change, and the reasoning behind our possible solution.

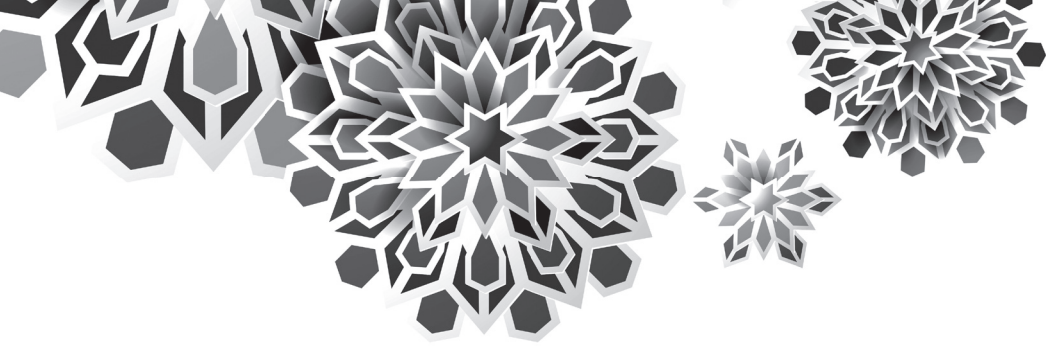
In Part II of this book, we present a solution. We feature curated book lists around four different themes, with ideas for educators and librarians to share these books with children for year-round engagement. Author interviews interspersed throughout this part offer their personal insights and motivations to tell their own stories.

Through the titles reviewed in this book, our hope is that we can all work together to build bridges of cultural understanding book by book, and story by story.

PART I

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# ***Why Counter Islamophobia through Stories?***



## An Overview of Muslims in America

**T**HE UNITED STATES IS OFTEN HAILED AS THE LAND OF FREEDOM and opportunity. The sights, sounds, and feel of America—imposing city skylines, the birthplace of jazz, a hotbed of commerce, medical and technological innovation, and a multicultural meeting ground of immigrants—all make up an idea of a country and its people that are leading the world in all aspects of progress and modernity.

People from all over the world have chosen to migrate to America and make it their home. Some such as the Irish, Jews, or more recently the Syrians, were fleeing persecution in their home countries. Others came to pursue educational or professional opportunities. This microcosm of diversity and multiculturalism is reflected in many American cities. For example, Queens, one of the most diverse boroughs of New York, is home to more than 138 languages.<sup>1</sup>

Many different communities, often built around languages, countries of origin, and religious preferences, have become part of the American fabric. One such community that has recently garnered a lot of attention is Muslims. Muslims in America are a diverse group of people from all over the world. African Americans, South Asians, and Arabs comprise more than three-quarters of all the Muslims in the United States.<sup>2</sup> This diversity is reflected in the different ethnic groups, ideologies, sects, and traditions of Islam, and also in the social, racial, and economic makeup of Muslim Americans. While some Muslims integrate Islam into their daily lives, others are nonpracticing and see being Mus-

lim as just part of their culture. Irrespective of their adherence to their faith, all Muslims in America—from refugees forced to flee their home countries, to people who came here looking for better jobs and lives—feel a sense of belonging here. This drives them to actively participate in the social, cultural, intellectual, and civic spheres of American life.

Muslims in America have impacted all aspects of American life, from commerce and business to the sciences, civil society, and the arts and popular culture. Sports heroes such as Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, and Ibtihaj Muhammad have trailblazed new paths for American athletes. The architect Fazlur Rahman Khan changed the landscape of American cities by designing structural systems for towering skyscrapers. Dr. Ayub Ommaya invented neurological methods to treat brain tumors, while Ernest Hamwi rolled up his waffle-like *zalabia* into the first edible ice-cream cone. The hip-hop artist Rakim and classic rap albums have influenced other Muslim artists such as Mos Def, Ice Cube, and Busta Rhymes. Dave Chappelle, Aziz Ansari, and Hasan Minaj have entertained audiences through various forms of media and stand-up comedy. Most recently, Mahershala Ali was the first Muslim American to win an Academy Award in 2017. From serving in the military to serving their constituents in the U.S. Senate, Muslim Americans' contributions are interwoven into the fabric of the nation.

Muslims make up one percent of the U.S. population and comprise an estimated 3.45 million people of all ages in America today.<sup>3</sup> Of these, some arrived as immigrants or refugees, and others are converts, but most of them are American-born Muslims descended from the many Muslims who have been a part of the American story for decades and even centuries, and even back to the formation of the republic.

## Muslims as Part of the American Story

Historical mentions of Muslims in America predate Columbus and some are known to have been aboard his 1492 expedition as well. In the 1530s, the African explorer Estevanico, also known as “The Moor,” referencing his North African Muslim origins, “is said to have explored Arizona and New Mexico in search of gold and treasure.”<sup>4</sup> Muslim sounding names are also recorded in Spanish colonial documents.

The transatlantic slave trade that began in the seventeenth century led to the forced migrations of many Muslims from Africa to America. Some of these Muslim slaves were well-educated and literate in Arabic, which helped them rise to leadership positions within plantations. Enslaved Muslims often made attempts to return to their homelands, and their writings help us trace their history.

Job Ben Solomon Jallo, sold as a slave to a Maryland planter, continued to practice his faith and made multiple attempts to escape. He managed to reach England as a free man in 1733, and returned to Africa in 1773. Abd Al-Rahman Ibrahima, a well-educated prince, was sold into slavery in Mississippi. Though he married and started a family, he wrote letters in the hopes of securing his freedom. His letter eventually reached the king of Morocco, who secured his release in 1828. Ibrahima embarked on a wide tour of the United States to raise money for his family's freedom. He returned to Africa in 1829 but died of illness soon after. Omar ibn Said worked as a house slave in South Carolina. Despite having converted to Christianity, he remained loyal to his Islamic heritage, as recounted in his autobiography.

While most of these accounts are of individuals retaining their Muslim religious identity, there is also evidence of Islam being practiced in communal settings. In the communities around the Georgia and South Carolina coasts, "African American Muslim slaves and free men and women of color practiced Islam in the nineteenth century and perhaps into the early twentieth century as well."<sup>5</sup>

On Sapelo Island off the coast of Georgia, a Muslim slave called Bilali served as an overseer and even prepared the slaves to fight off the British in the War of 1812. Records from the Revolutionary War indicate that Muslim soldiers fought on the American side. This legacy continued with 292 Muslim soldiers fighting in the Civil War.<sup>6</sup>

As America began to take shape as a nation, the Founding Fathers too were cognizant of Islam and sought to include it within the ambit of religious freedom. John Adams praised the Prophet Muhammed in his writings; Benjamin Franklin was open to the preaching of Islam<sup>7</sup> in the United States; and Thomas Jefferson owned a copy of the Quran and hosted the first *iftar* (breaking of the Ramadan fast) at the White House for the Tunisian ambassador in 1805.

By practicing Islam, enslaved Muslim black men and women were reclaiming their lost religious and spiritual heritage. Though some practiced their faith in secret, many had to abandon their religion and undergo forced conversions.<sup>8</sup> As these slaves died off, Islam eventually petered out among second-generation African Americans. The loss of identity and culture as a result of the slave trade continues to impact the African American consciousness. Even after the abolition of slavery and the Great Migration of blacks from the South to the North in the twentieth century, they continued to face prejudice and discrimination. African Americans felt a pressing need to regain their dignity, and they found a way to rediscover their African roots in Islam.

Within the African American community, two homegrown movements were inspired by Islam in the twentieth century. The Moorish Science Temple established in 1925 preached a doctrine of shedding slave identities, and adopting new names and appearances with a focus on black unity and social and economic independence. The Nation of Islam founded in 1930 gave each of its followers an X in lieu of their last name to “represent an identity that has been stolen from them during slavery.”<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X were the most prominent members of the Nation of Islam. Though inspired by Islam, the core principles of both these movements were contrary to the teachings of orthodox Islam. In the 1960s, Malcolm X adopted mainstream Islam, and eventually the Nation of Islam merged with the Sunni tradition of Islam. Since then, there has been a resurgence of Islam in African American communities. Conversion is a way for many African Americans to connect to their Muslim past and honor their ancestors. Today, African Americans form 60 percent of native-born U.S. Muslims.

Many scholars have argued that it is problematic to view Muslims as “foreign” or as “threats to the United States.” On the contrary, they argue that African American Muslims are well integrated into American society. Through their style, music, and activism in hip-hop, sports, and the recent Black Lives Matter movement, they have played a key role in shaping the American history of resistance and popular culture.<sup>10</sup>

## Growth of Muslim Communities in the United States

Over the years, Muslim immigrants have come to the United States for better educational and economic prospects, while others have come as refugees escaping war and conflict. Some of these refugees eventually returned to their home countries, but many others have settled permanently in the United States. These first-generation immigrants had families and formed large communities of Muslims, all of whom call America their home.

The first wave of immigrants came between 1890 and 1920 mostly from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, territories that were under the rule of the Ottoman Turks. They settled in working-class neighborhoods of Detroit, Chicago, and the Midwest and earned a living as peddlers and factory workers. The United States then passed the National Origins Act in 1924, which limited immigrants to Christians from northern and western European countries. However, global events such as World War II, the achievement of Indian and Pakistani independence from Great Britain in 1947, the Arab-Israeli War in 1948, and the attainment of independence by many former British and French colonies in Africa and the Middle East in the 1950s and early 1960s, resulted in continued immigration of many displaced people, including another wave of Muslim immigrants to the United States. Muslims came from India, Pakistan, Palestine, and Yugoslavia.

In 1965 President Lyndon Johnson signed the Hart-Celler Act (also known as the Immigration and Nationality Act), which “banned discriminatory quotas based on national origins.”<sup>11</sup> This led to many more Muslim immigrants from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East entering the country. Although the act stated that all immigrants would be given equal opportunity, only people with a certain level of education could apply. Many of these newer immigrants were well-educated professionals who settled in the suburbs.

Numerous overseas conflicts that began in the 1960s and have continued to the present day have led Muslims to flee their homelands and come to the United States. Among these conflicts have been the Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors in 1967, the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, civil wars in Lebanon, Somalia, and Sudan, the 1991 Gulf War, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Additionally, the U.S. invasions and occupations of

Afghanistan and Iraq that began in 2002 and 2003, and, more recently, civil wars in Libya and Syria, have created unprecedented numbers of Muslim refugees. Many of these refugees came to the United States in search of safety and security. The U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics states that between 2000 and 2013 approximately one million Muslim immigrants came to the United States.<sup>12</sup>

Muslims in America today are one of the most diverse and vibrant communities of Muslims anywhere in the world. From the Muslims descended from those who fought in the American Civil War, to the influential all-Muslim jazz band, to sports heroes, hip-hop pioneers, architects, and even the creator of the humble ice-cream cone, American Muslims—known and unknown—fully participate in the American dream.

When viewed through this prism of historical continuity and contributions to American society, the singular idea of Muslims as outsiders is refracted into the colorful spectrum of the diversity of people and experiences that make up being an American Muslim.

## Notes

1. While there is no precise count, some experts believe that New York City is home to as many as 800 languages—far more than the 176 spoken by students in the city’s public schools, or the 138 that residents of Queens, New York’s most diverse borough, listed on their 2000 census forms. Sam Roberts, *New York Times*, 2010, [www.nytimes.com/2010/04/29/nyregion/2910st.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/29/nyregion/2910st.html).
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