Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

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Is it Ramadan, Curious George? International Muslims Read Children's Books Depicting Islam

Scott Beck
Georgia Southern University

Yasar Bodur
Georgia Southern University

Youssef Salhi
Georgia Southern University

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What happens when Muslim educators from around the world read children's books, popular in the United States, which depict Islam and Muslim communities and cultures? This study presents mixed methods data from thirty-five Muslim teachers from twenty countries regarding ten such children's picture books. We argue that such "cultural insider readers" (Sung) or "authentic insider readers" (Beck and Stevenson, "From Onion") can open new positive and critical perspectives about books largely intended for non-Muslim North American readers. Our reader-participants approached the books with 'cautious gratitude,' glad for their existence but skeptical about their content. Reader responses highlighted ignorant and negative stereotypes, praised stories opposing prejudices, and reiterated the value of cultural insiders as authors and illustrators. Finally, the participants' often incongruous commentaries about the books emphasize the massive diversity amongst the world's 1.8 billion Muslims and the necessity for educators to seek out, read, and instructionally use a wide variety of representations of Islam and its adherents.

Nearly half a century ago, Edward Said traced the Western cultural heritage and political economy of scornful stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in his landmark book, *Orientalism.* Said argued that people from the West justified imperialism in the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East, by othering Arabs, Muslims, and the East in general as dangerous and ignorant and, therefore, in need of paternalistic control and 'civilizing' by the West. Jack Shaheen's analysis of over nine hundred films mapped out how the US film industry helped reinforce the dehumanization of Arabs, with 95% of the films studied presenting "insidious," defamatory, and "slanderous" stereotypes. Shaheen asks, "What is an Arab? In countless films, Hollywood alleges the answer: Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women" (172). Similarly, Said states that for Westerners, Arabs "are thought of as

camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers" (Said 1). Compounding this injustice, "research shows that [North] Americans often conflate Muslims with Arabs, despite the fact that most Arab Americans are not Muslim and most Muslim Americans are not Arab" (Casey 522). Thus, these slanders are often projected onto the entire Muslim world. Finally, during the past generation, September 11th and the rise of White Christian ethnonationalism have amplified US Islamophobia (Patel and Levinson-Waldman 7).

Thoughtful and caring educators recognize that these attitudes must be countered (Manglik and Siddique 22; Newstreet et al. 559). Moreover, teaching about religious diversity is required by state standards ("Teaching about Islam"). However, very few US teachers know much about the religion and its adherents beyond usually negative stereotypes from the media and a few over-simplified generalizations required in their curriculum (Ezzani and Brooks 252). As Liz Jackson asks, "How can teachers teach about Islam when they have not learned about it themselves…?" (11). Thus, as suggested by Margaret Wilson Gillikin, Koti L. Hubbard, and Joy N. Stapleton, many teachers turn to children's books depicting Muslims and their cultures to help scaffold their lessons (267), but what basis do they have for choosing those books? Muhammed Masud asserts that since

> readers with no knowledge of [Muslim] cultures in question specifically seek out these books in order to get some kind of education [and] since many children's and YA [Young Adult] literary texts about the modern Arab world are consumed in an educational setting, a more critical look at their content becomes necessary. (613)

Since 2001, the number of children's books regarding Islam and Muslim communities has increased, but academic scholarship regarding these books has been slower to emerge (Gilani-Willams 114). There have been several scholarly critiques and reviews of these books

and examinations of how to use them in the classroom (e.g., Möller). However, only a few have been written by Muslim scholars (Abas et al., Gultekin, Gultekin and May, Haque, Manglik and Siddique, Nor et al., Raina, Siddiqui), and only one study by Amal Aldaej documented how Muslim readers view these books.

We strongly believe and have shown (Beck and Stevenson, "Migrant Students," Stevenson and Beck) that authentic insider readers who have lived the experiences in a book can bring new and vital insights into books. They can see interpretations that outsiders may often miss. These perspectives can help educators see various books' problematic aspects and authentic strengths. We collected and analyzed data from Muslim teachers from twenty countries regarding their responses to popular children's books depicting Islam and Muslim cultures and communities. Their perspectives can help US educators make better-informed choices about which books to bring to their classroom and how to use them in their teaching about Islam and Muslims.

Methodology

Researchers

The lead researcher on this project, Scott Beck, is a white Catholic raised in rural upstate New York. He lived in Mauritania as a Peace Corps volunteer and has worked as a teacher-trainer in Malaysia, Morocco, and Mexico. He teaches and researches cultural diversity and children's literature. Yasar Bodur is a Muslim Turkish American raised and educated in North Central Türkiye before completing his doctorate in the United States. His teaching and research focus on preparing pre-service elementary teachers to work with cultural diversity in the classroom. Thirdly, Youssef Salhi is a Muslim Moroccan American who was educated in his home country before completing his master's degree in the United States. His teaching and

research focus on the Arabic language, comparative literature, code-switching, and language and gender.

Selection of the books

Since Amazon controls approximately half of the US book market (Evans), the Amazon "Best Sellers in Children's Islam Books" webpage was used to identify books that were popular in 2015 and 2020 (Amazon). From those lists, the ten books studied here were chosen as a representative subset (regarding authorship, protagonists, genre, theme, and setting) of popular children's books regarding Islam and Muslim cultures and communities. Most are contemporary realistic fiction. The settings of the books are equally split between traditionally Muslim nations versus locations in Europe and North America. The creators of the books are a mix of cultural outsiders and authentic insider creators representing their identities.

Sampling

Gathering a substantial number of Muslim reader-participants fluent in English for this study was challenging. We used our personal and professional connections with Muslim educators worldwide to begin recruitment via snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint 1). Online snowball sampling is a validated research methodology that facilitates engagement with difficult-to-reach populations (Etikan et al. 56). English-proficient Muslim educator friends and colleagues of the researchers from across the globe were invited to participate and reach out to others in their community who also met the criteria for participation. Potential reader-participants were invited online to join via e-mail and/or Facebook messenger and encouraged to pass along the invitation. We recognize that our method of gathering participants yields a particular type of perspective: that of people who are Muslim, English-language readers, educated, and themselves educators.

Participants

Data from n=35 reader-participants representing 20 countries were included in this study, with multiple representatives from Algeria, Egypt, the Maldives, Morocco, Palestine, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Most (n=27) of our reader-participants grew up in traditionally Muslim nations, and more than half (n=18) still reside in such countries. Despite this diversity, our sample cannot begin to represent the world's Muslim population.

Our reader-participants were predominantly urban (n=28) females (n=23) between 30 and 50 years of age (n=24). About a third (n=12) had been teaching for less than five years, while more than half (n=18) had ten or more years of experience. Most (n=19) seek international news daily, while about a quarter (n=8) do so at least weekly. Most (n=25) have traveled outside their country at least four times. Regarding their faith, almost half (n=15) self-identified as "very devout" Muslims, while the same number stated that they were "somewhat devout."

Data Collection and Analysis

When a reader-participant accepted the invitation and consented, they were directed to a Qualtrics online demographic survey. Upon completing that survey, each received an e-mail with a hot-linked menu of book titles and covers. The participants were encouraged to choose whichever title interested them, read it, and respond. After they read a book, they would write one open-ended comment response and reply to four Likert prompts regarding the reader's general opinion of the book, its educational usefulness, respect to Islam, and culturally accuracy. After completing one book, if they chose, reader-participants could return to the menu to read other books. On average, ten different reader-participants read and responded to each book.

The sample size of the quantitative data from the four Likert scale questions was not large

enough to allow for any statistical examination beyond simple descriptive statistics, which will be mentioned alongside the first mention of each book. The qualitative data was rich, as individual reader-participants weighed the books' strengths and weaknesses. Bodur and Beck examined this data separately without comparing notes along the way. Following Robert Thornberg and Kathy Charmaz's recommendations, we analyzed our data using grounded theory coding, minimizing our preconceptions, and inviting multiple interpretations (156). We each sought meaningful emergent themes and then compared our findings for reliability.

Findings

Although the quantitative data from the Likert scales are limited, some clear favorites and disliked books emerged from that data. The qualitative comments regarding these books reinforced these assessments. The average ratings for six of the ten books were all clustered within 1 point of each other (average score = 7.3 to 8.3 out of 10). There were two outliers above and two below this range. The preferred outliers were two books based upon historical events, *The Grand Mosque of Paris* [Likert avg. = 9.5 / 10] and *Drummer Girl* [avg. = 9.3] (see fig. 1). The least liked books were *The Hundredth Name* [avg. = 6.9] and *Snow for Everyone* [avg. = 6.1]. The participants' reasoning for these scores will be explored below.

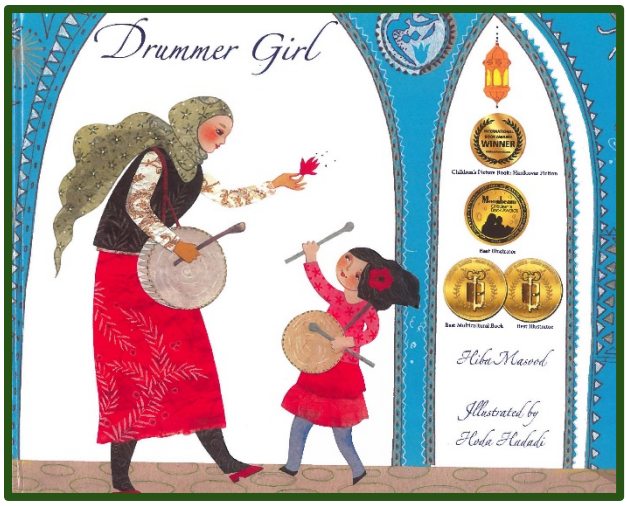

Figure 1: Cover of *Drummer Girl* reproduced with the permission of Rabata Daybreak Press.

Many of our reader-participants stated up front that they appreciated the simple existence of these books as potential counterweights to the erasure and stereotyping of Muslims and Muslim cultures in other media. Thus, our reader-participants had a keen eye for problematic representations of cultures and faith but praised books presenting counter-narratives to stereotypes. Thus, we characterize their approach to the books as 'cautious gratitude.' Books depicting positive interpersonal relationships and/or judged as having instructional value regarding Islam and predominantly Muslim societies and communities were perceived especially positively.

Favorite Historical Counter-Narratives

The participant-readers' two favorite books, *The Grand Mosque of Paris* and *Drummer Girl* are rich, historical, positive portrayals of Islam and predominantly Muslim communities that challenge common negative stereotypes.[1] The well-researched *The Grand Mosque of Paris* by

[1] Nithya Sivashankar discusses historical children's books depicting of the Hindu-Muslim partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

North Americans Karen Gray Ruelle and Deborah Durland Desaix details how, during World War II, the leader of Paris' largest mosque helped protect Jews from death at the hands of the occupying Nazis and their Vichy government. Hope Morrison states, "The narrative is clearly written, and though the material is denser than the picture book format might suggest, it is approachable despite its weight" (Review: *The Grand Mosque,* 126).[2]

The rich and emotionally evocative illustrations combine blues and ample negative space to capture the fearful beauty of one community protected by another. Multiple participant readers lauded the artwork, but the strongest complements focused on the historical and religious content. A Moroccan reader-participant stated, "This book is a valuable source of information for teaching elementary classes, as it provides factual information about the relationship between North African Muslims and Jews." Another said, "I really liked this book and the themes and message it conveys. It gives detailed historical accounts of how Muslims helped Jews, a little-known fact that needs to be more well known." The positive framing of Muslims as having agency and acting heroically despite the risks was roundly affirmed. As an Indonesian reader-participant stated, despite what some may think, "Helping other people in danger is a must in Islam." This message contrasts sharply with the stereotypes cultivated by media and demagogues in the United States today. Thus, the book could serve as a counter-narrative to contemporary efforts to silence discussions of events in the Middle East, especially those in Palestine and Israel.

The award-winning *Drummer Girl* by Pakistani Canadian author Hiba Masood and

[2] Like many war-time tales, according to Ruelle and DeSaix, this story is "shrouded in mystery" (34), according to the authors. However, Jewish historian Ethan Katz explores the evidence for this complex and nuanced story and confirms that at least some, possibly many, Jews were saved from the Holocaust by the rector of the Grand Mosque (283).

Iranian illustrator Hoda Hadadi is based on a historical Egyptian woman.[3] The book depicts a young girl taking on an otherwise exclusively male role during Ramadan, the *musaharati* drummer who wakes the town to ensure everyone eats their *suhoor* meal before sunrise. Various reader-participants described the book as "beautiful," "well-written," "a visual treat," and "wonderful and soulful." A Palestinian Emirati stated,

> The book would be very engaging for the children and would give many opportunities for the children to learn and ask about the culture and about Islam. The story flows really nicely and introduces … the culture and the religion [so it] can be used to enrich the children's knowledge of Ramadan and of cultural and Islamic traditions.

An Indian American woman commented that the protagonist, Najma, "was encouraged by a loving and proud father. The illustration of Najma playing the drums and her father walking beside her with his head held high beautifully captured their relationship." However, a Palestinian American woman presented a more complicated analysis based on her experience of Arab cultural misogyny,

> It is not in the culture to have a woman as a *musaharati*. The book goes against this culture, but what I think is weird is that it requires having a male walking with the girl throughout her *musaharati* journey!!! A father, brother, husband, sons, grandchildren, as if it says it is ok for a girl to be whatever she wants (even a *musaharati*), but a male should accompany her through this. It is liberation but within limits!!!

The Roles of Women

This is not a trivial criticism. Women's bodies and roles vis-à-vis the male gaze are a crucial point of heated discussions within Islam and from outside the faith, discussions that often

[3] See Massih Zekavat for a discussion of Hadidi.

exclude the voices of Muslim women (Macdonald 15). For many Muslim women, even those in Western diasporic communities, liberation often comes within confines defined by men's legal and religious restrictions upon women's freedom of movement, employment, finances, and life choices–all supposedly justified by Islam (Shaikh 148). However, many other Muslim women choose and construct a "veiled Muslim femininity" (Abbas 139) to express both their faith and identity.

Unfortunately, these serious questions are often reduced to women's attire and head coverings. A glance at popular Muslim-themed children's books in the United States today[4] could lead to the mistaken conclusion that women's head coverings are the essential aspect of Islam. As a British Muslim woman noted, such books frequently "fall into typical reductionist tropes [about] women wearing hijabs. I am a Muslim woman, and I don't wear a hijab. People often don't think you can be a Muslim woman if you don't wear a hijab."

In the West, the hijab and other Muslim women's head coverings have become a symbol of 'otherness' and a site for conflict. For example, France has outlawed the wearing of head coverings and other Muslim attire in their schools (Chemam). Meanwhile, in the United States, Muslim school girls who wear head coverings are often targeted for verbal harassment and physical assault (McCollum). Simultaneously, in Iran and Afghanistan, the choice of women to resist theocratic governments by appearing publicly unveiled and uncovered has led to violent attacks by the religious police and even the death of some women (Ahmani and Kakar).

In this context, multiple reader-participants praised *Under My Hijab* [avg. = 8.2] (see fig. 2) by award-winning Pakistani American author Hena Khan and US Muslim illustrator Aaliya

[4] e.g., *The Proudest Blue* (Muhammad, Aly, and Ali), *Hana's Hundreds of Hijabs* (Gutta and Mizra), *My Name is Bilal* (Mobin-Uddin and Kiwak), *What Color is My Hijab* (Ibrahim and Patel), *Mommy's Khimar* (Thompkins-Bigelow and Glenn), and *Deep in the Sahara* (Cunnane and Hadadi).

Jaleel. The book demonstrates diverse head-covering practices within a Muslim American (United States) family. Each woman is covered and active in public, uncovered and at ease in private. In the end, our girl narrator dons her hijab. A Muslim American woman summarized the responses of multiple others:

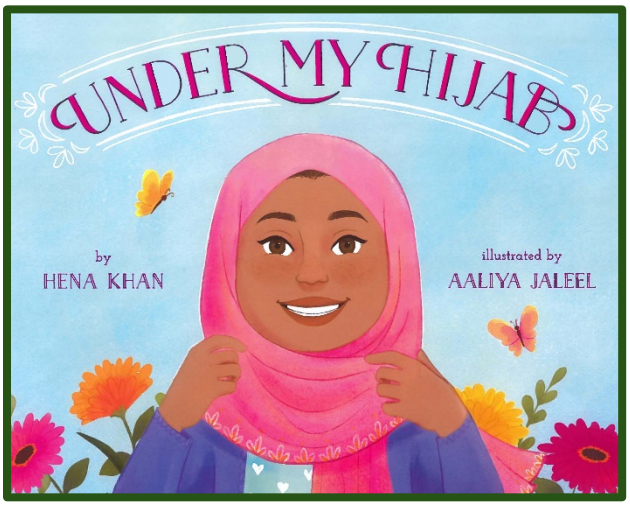

Figure 2: Cover of *Under My Hijab* reproduced with the permission of Lee & Low Books.

> I personally like this book, and I like that it could help young non-Muslim audiences (or old) dispel misconceptions about the *hijab*. It is a common and annoying question for *hijabis*. What is your hair like? Do you shower or sleep with it on? Etc. Showing *hijabi* women as having hair and being happy, stylish, that is all great.

As a Maldivian woman stated, this presentation of "how normal Muslim lives are in general" is to be celebrated. Paula Wittmann and Nancy Fisher-Allison (44) have demonstrated both the appeal and efficacy of this book in countering stereotypes among school children.

Another book with an independent girl protagonist was the award-winning *The Best Eid Ever* [avg. = 8.3] (see fig. 3) by Pakistani American Asma Mobin-Uddin and White American Laura Jacobsen. This "culturally conscious" (Raina 159) book portrays Ramadan's culmination in the Eid al-Fitr festival. Our reader-participants appreciated that the book does not linger on

superficialities and even includes a depiction of the protagonist praying in a mosque. As an Egyptian Italian stated, "I loved how it tackles details of Eid day. It makes it easy to explain charity and the wholesome idea of rejoicing in giving to others." It prompted a positive response grounded in another reader-participant's experiences within Muslim American culture.

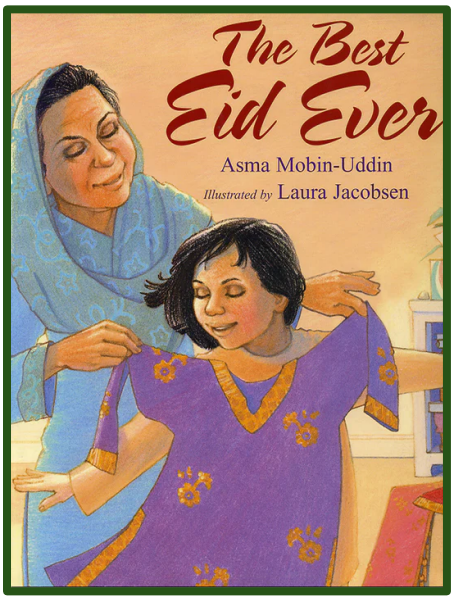

Figure 3: Cover of *The Best Eid Ever* reproduced with the permission of Astra Books.

> This is my favorite of the books. It feels true to my experience of mosques in the US, down to the styrofoam cups and women shushing their kids in the back of the prayer room. … it feels right, and I love that it feels just like reading a "best Christmas ever" story. It doesn't try to teach about Islam; it just happens to tell a story based on an Islamic holiday. I love that the Muslim characters are American [United States] and not othered. I love that it does not feature non-Muslims having some kind of eye-opening experience of interaction with Muslims. I like the representation of the refugee family as having agency and standing on their own two feet. Well done.

As Torres stated, this book allows "Muslim children to see their lives and beliefs portrayed in positive ways that they can identify with, and [it helps] non-Muslim children to see Islam

normalized within another child's experiences" (198). Mehmet Gultekin has examined how best to use this book in a classroom to support cultural understanding (266).

However, another reader-participant was not as enthused regarding the depiction of the charity during the holiday. In the tale, an impoverished refugee family refuses assistance. What the Muslim American reader-participant characterized as the refugees "having agency and standing on their own two feet" was criticized by a Moroccan reader-participant:

> I don't like the idea of the father refusing to accept the gift. "We don't take charity;" this phrase is [from] American [US] culture. We, as Muslims, accept charity from each other and even from anyone. And we are always familiar with helping people financially and being helped. There's no shame about that.

As noted later, such gaps and contradictions in reader-participant responses reflect the diversity of Islam worldwide and Muslims as individuals.

Stereotypes, Inauthenticity, and the Camels of Orientalism

Of course, not all the texts presented well-received counter-narratives, especially those created by cultural outsiders. Spanish author Susana Gómez Redondo's and noted German illustrator Sonja Wimmer's *The Day Saida Arrived* [avg. = 7.3] tells a tale of a two-way language-learning friendship between a Spanish girl and a newly arrived Moroccan immigrant. A Muslim American enthused, "What an eloquent book! I am blown away. The illustrations are equally beautiful. When I was reading this book, I wanted to be a child again and enter the world of Saida and the [Spanish] narrator." María Tomé-Fernández, Juan Senís-Fernández, and Diego Ruiz-Martín document how this National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Notable Children's Book has value in building intercultural understanding among children (208).

However, for multiple other reader-participants, the centering of a European perspective

was the cause of the book's weaknesses. An Egyptian American notes that although Saida is the title character, she is denied any voice: the story "paints her [Saida] as sad and crying a lot but does not touch on why." A Palestinian Emirati woman stated,

> In my opinion, this story would have been told best from the point of view of Saida rather than the other girl, as she would be best able to share her own personal experiences and feelings regarding starting in a new environment. …We weren't given much background information about Saida, except that she is from Morocco and speaks Arabic. It did not mention anything about Saida's religion or much about her culture. … I feel like it did not adequately present Saida's identities.

The inclusion of camels in *The Day Saida Arrived* reinforces the book's Orientalist European gaze upon the Arab world. A Muslim American woman participant called out the book's "vague stereotypes of the Arab world." Similarly, other books, *Deep in the Sahara, The Hundredth Name,* and *Snow for Everyone*, also received the same criticism from our readers for using camels to mark an 'exotic' Muslim setting. All were created, at least in part, by cultural outsiders. Masud documents the nexus of author inauthenticity and the presentation of stereotypical tropes about Arabs in children's books, identifying *Deep in the Sahara* as one of many such problematic texts (615).

Set in Mauritania, *Deep in the Sahara* [avg. = 7.8] (see fig. 4) by White American Kelly Cunnane, with illustrations again by Hoda Hadadi, depicts a rural desert-dwelling girl asking to wear the *malahfa* or traditional gown and head covering of adult women. Morrison (2013) praised this NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People, summarizing the premise,

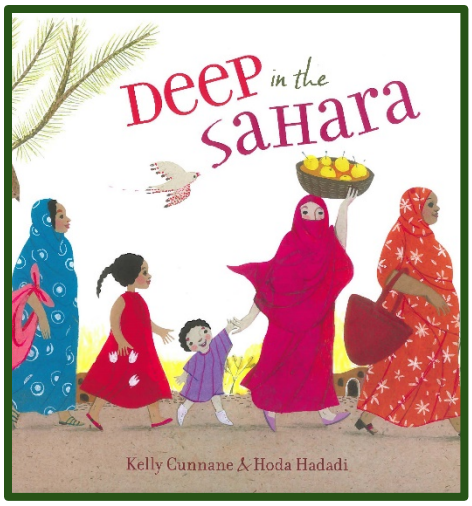

Figure 4: Cover of *Deep in the Sahara* reproduced with the permission of Penguin Random House.

> Young Lalla longs to wear a *malafa*, the head covering and drape worn by Muslim women in Mauritania. The closely patterned narrative, hovering between poetry and lyrical prose, showcases the reasons for Lalla's desire: she wishes to be beautiful like her mother, mysterious like her older sister, and grown up like her cousin (p. 146).

In addition to the inclusion of a requisite and stereotypical camel,[5] the book was criticized by a cultural insider, a Mauritanian Moroccan woman, for the basic premise,

> I was born in Mauritania [and lived there] until the age of seven, and I spent 70% of my childhood in the desert. … I think [*Deep in the Sahara*] is more about what Americans imagine about the deep Sahara than what it is. The book talks about the girl who wants badly to wear [a] malahfa... [but] it is always the mother who begs her daughter to wear malahfa, not the opposite.

[5] As noted by Sivashankar et al., the camels are also in the peritextual author's biography, "The photograph in the biography [shows] us an image of Cunnane with a camel, which connects her visually to the Sahara Desert, where the story is set. This image, though, could be viewed as evoking a stereotype by linking her to a vision of Africa that is consistent with that in the cultural imagination of the Western reader" (491).

Most reader-participants were torn about the book, complimenting the writing and the solid mother-daughter bond but feeling that it was "pretty remote from the average Muslim." An urban Egyptian asserted, "Muslims in general do not look like that, neither men nor women." Although desert nomads still exist in northwest Africa, a Moroccan American explained,

> I find the content to be outdated, with a focus on traditional and stereotypical depictions of the culture and religion. I also found the representation of the mud houses and the portrayal of men wearing turbans and riding [camels] and women being covered and whispering to each other to be unimpressive.

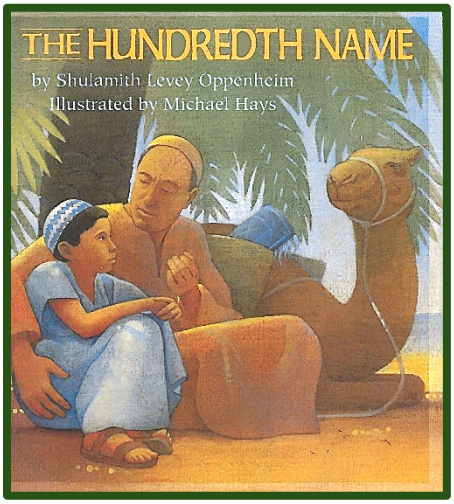

Figure 5: Cover of *The Hundredth Name* reproduced with the permission of Astra Books.

A camel plays a leading role in *The Hundredth Name* (see fig. 5) by Jewish American author Shulamith Levey Oppenheim and award-winning White American illustrator Michael Hays. The story's plot conflict is solved when the camel learns "Allah's hundredth, his most important, name," thereby raising his head high with pride. As Mary Joe Aman suggests, this is a problematic premise (96). Although our reader-participants had different beliefs about the actual

number of Allah's names,[6] multiple reader-participants called the story's premise "offensive." A Muslim American stated they were "uncomfortable with the mixing of something as sacred as the names of Allah and animals. … I have never seen any story from the Arab world where an animal had such access to the religion." A devout Palestinian further noted, "The story presents wrong information about the way Muslims pray; they don't rock back and forth. Also, they don't stretch their whole body on the rug or kiss the edge of the rug."

Oversimplifying Peace and Islam for Popular Culture

As noted earlier, the Likert averages for *The Hundredth Name* and the next book, *Snow for Everyone,* were the lowest in our sample. After its introductory camel, the even more unpopular *Snow for Everyone!* by German author Antonie Schneider and Chinese-German illustrator Pei-Yu Chang (see fig. 6) attempts to teach the importance of sharing. It depicts three children, a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim, arguing over ownership of snow in Jerusalem. In the end, the conflict is resolved through joyful sharing. The tale seeks to teach that "we should all be tolerant, as all of us have same rational thought. Nothing truly belongs to us, and we should enjoy God's wonders equally!" according to a female Muslim American. However, the book's oversimplification of the Israeli occupation of Palestine was highly problematic for multiple reader-participants. A Palestinian Jordanian woman argued,

> I think this is a political story; it is not about culture or religion. It aims to normalize the occupation, while we, as Muslims and Palestinians, [know] what is in the story is incorrect. I refuse [to let] this story be taught to my kids, as it [shows] distorted facts about life there in Jerusalem.

[6] This disagreement among the participants existed despite the Hadith "Allah has ninety-nine names, i.e. one-hundred minus one, and whoever knows them will go to Paradise" (*The Hadith*).

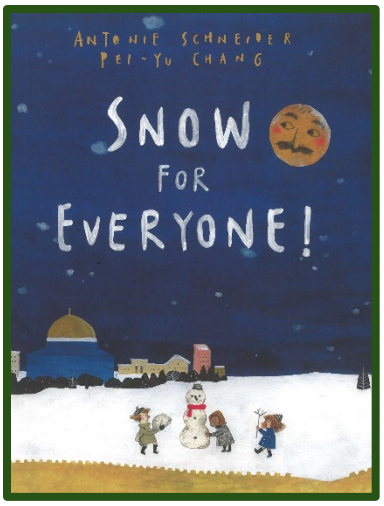

Figure 6: Cover of *Snow for Everyone!* reproduced with the permission of NordSüd Verlag.

A Muslim American concurred,

> This book was not written by a Palestinian, and it would offend most people sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle. It presents the conflict over Jerusalem as if all parties are on equal footing rather than subject to ethnic and religious apartheid. It is an idealized version of Jerusalem that naively and insensitively reduces the struggles of generations of Palestinians to a simple childish struggle over snow, implicitly blaming the parties for not seeing the simple solution of just sharing. I am not Palestinian, but I am indignant.[7]

As other books in this collection, notably *Drummer Girl, The Grand Mosque of Paris,* and *Under My Hijab*, have demonstrated, storybooks can successfully address conflict-ridden situations. However, as a British participant stated, "This book is quite simplistic and idealistic in its message of peace," These critiques echo those of *Kirkus Reviews*, "The people appear to live in peaceful coexistence, but this is not an everyday reality in divided Jerusalem. The book does not supply [the] context necessary for readers unfamiliar with the conflict to understand." *Snow for*

[7] Note that these participant-reader responses were collected before October 2023 and the explosion of violence in the Gaza Strip. One can only assume that these responses would be even more negative now.

Everyone! presents a narrative that justifies and normalizes the long-standing, systemic imbalances and injustices faced by the Palestinian people.

Harris J's 2015 hit song *Salam Alaikum* established him as a British Muslim echo of young Justin Bieber. Thus, unsurprisingly, his subsequent book, *Salam Alaikum: A Message of Peace* [avg. = 8.3] was also criticized for oversimplification (see fig. 7). The book stars a cartoonish version of the singer illustrated by White American Ward Jenkins. As with many feel-good songs endorsing world peace, "it carries a nice message… but doesn't provide much practical information," according to an Egyptian English woman. An Egyptian Italian suggested, "Perhaps some dimension could have been given to the storyline to make it more meaningful." However, it was a Muslim American who leveled the harshest words and questioned the book's respect for a religious greeting, *Salam Alakum*, used by Muslims in every language.

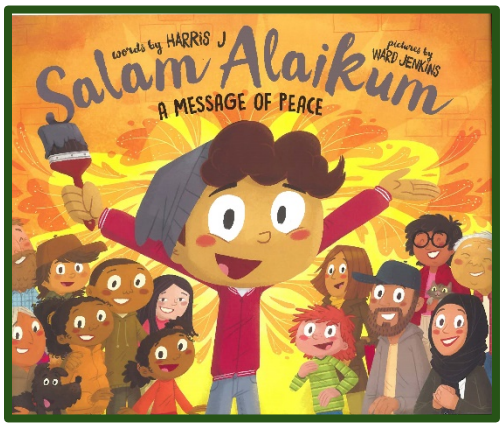

Figure 7: Cover of *Salam Alaikum* reproduced with the permission of Simon & Schuster.

> This book is just weird. It is not clear what the point is. *Assalamu Alaykom* is used as an Islamic greeting, but it is not obvious from the book that the characters are using it in that way. It is almost totally divorced from the religious context and whitewashed. If I wanted to teach my own students or children about how *Assalamu Alaykom* is used and to have reverence for the term, I would not use this book.

However, one Moroccan American directly contradicted this assessment, saying the book was

> an excellent read. The book used a very easy-to-understand way of conveying the most important pillars of Islam, like community bonding, cultural tolerance, and respecting others. It's definitely inviting to those who want to learn more about the religion or introduce their children or students to basic Islamic teachings.

Like Harris J's pop song and book, *It's Ramadan, Curious George* [avg. = 7.6], by Hena Khan and White American Mary O'Keefe Young, emerges from Western popular culture. The rascal monkey Curious George has sold millions of books across nearly one hundred titles. As Rae Lynn Schwartz-DuPre notes, "While debates about Muslims occupied the political scene, *It's Ramadan, Curious George* … topped the Amazon bestseller list on its May 2016 release" (17).[8] Notably, for multiple reader-participants, this was the only book in the set that they mentioned owning or seeing before.

However, the monkey title character brought objections from some international Muslims. Three times in the Qur'an (Al-A'raf 7:166, Al-Baqarah 2:65; Al-Ma'idah 5:60), Allah warns of the punishment he imposed on people who schemed to hide their violation of the sabbath–they were turned into monkeys and pigs (Gurmani; Haveli; Rubin 25). Thus, likely

[8] This book, an intentionally multicultural spin-off (Taxel 106), has sold over 100,000 copies in the United States alone, according to an e-mail from John Sellers of HarperCollins.

based in part on this negative association with monkeys, two Moroccans stated, “I’d rather not have the illustration of a monkey” and “I am not sure why the author chose the monkey as a character. In Muslim households, you usually see a cat as a pet but never a monkey.”

Equally unbelievable to readers were illustrations depicting the wearing of shoes inside a mosque and the proximity of shoes to food. An Egyptian British reader-participant noted, “I thought the shoes part in the mosque was out of context;’ while a Muslim American was less discrete. “The shoes are gross. They are putting together food baskets, and they are near the shoes? With a monkey? No mosque would have that scenario occur. Ew.”

Multiple reader-participants acknowledged that the book is “a good attempt to display a positive portrayal of fasting in Islam” during Ramadan. Like other books in this collection directly addressing Islamic practice aspects, some participant readers called for more explicit instructional and didactic content, such as “a simple definition of Ramadan and the purpose of fasting” and “calling the meal *Iftar*.” The opinion of multiple reader-participants can be summarized as “It would’ve been better to include a part on special prayers and Qur’an recitals that take place in Ramadan, as it’s not only about fasting.”

That said, differences within the practice of Islam were again brought to the fore by this book. A Muslim from the UK stated, “I liked that the book showed what Ramadan means to a small child beginning to fast and portrayed Kareem’s hunger in a good way.” However, an Egyptian British reader-participant asserted, “I do not like the portrayal of a child fasting again. It perpetuates harmful ideas. Children are not required to fast and certainly not full days.” This contradiction accentuates that these variances within Islam are not just geographic, especially within national communities, including Muslims from around the globe.

The Diversity of Islam and the Cultures of Muslim Communities

As we have seen, although there were many points of explicit agreement among our reader-participants, a book would frequently provoke variant responses. One reader-participant might praise a detail, while another might call out that precise element in the same book. This left many questions unanswered. Some examples include: In *Salam Alaikum,* should this standard greeting be treated with spiritual reverence, or can it have a role in popular culture? In *The Best Eid Ever*, is it the norm for Muslims to accept charity freely, or might a gift be refused out of pride? In *The Hundredth Name,* does Allah have only ninety-nine names? In *It's Ramadan, Curious George, Under My Hijab,* and *Deep in the Sahara*, at what age should children be encouraged to fast or wear a hijab? In *Drummer Girl*, is it plausible for a woman to serve as a *musaharati,* the drummer who wakes the faithful during Ramadan? In *Under My Hijab*, is it okay for readers to see illustrations of Muslim women dancing privately with their hair uncovered?

These questions fall in contested spaces of Islam that vary from community to community, nation to nation. Practices seen as religiously *haram* in one place and time can be culturally commonplace elsewhere. Critically, Islam is not a unified whole across centuries and continents. Educators seeking to use children's books to teach about Islam must first acknowledge that there is no unitary Muslim culture nor a single way to be Muslim.

Given the 1989 fatwa, the 1998 $2.5 million bounty, and the 2022 near-fatal attack on Booker Prize-winning Salman Rushdie, author of *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* (Booker Prize Foundation), some authors, illustrators, and editors might feel that they must force their publications to conform to the most conservative contemporary interpretations of Islam. However, this would be unfair to the people depicted and the books' readers. As a Muslim American participant-reader noted, "A by-the-book conservative version of Islam is not

necessarily what needs to be in all media."

Discussion

This study has shown that selecting children's books regarding Islam and Muslim cultures and communities can be challenging. Primary among these is that there is no single Islam, but many. Intertextuality is essential here. Teachers should not expect to be able to quickly pick out one or two children's books from the library, present them to their students, and do an accurate job of explaining Islam and the diverse traditions of dozens of predominantly Muslim nations, especially given the problematic representations described here. Frequently, such books can serve a valuable purpose in providing students and teachers with instructional examples of problematic representations to learn how to identify and counter them in other media. Thus, we strongly reject calls to remove books from library shelves or classroom collections. However, we recommend closely scrutinizing older books and those with inauthentic authorship. This critical reading and thinking activity can be adapted and pursued with classroom students at nearly all levels. Such activities can help reveal unrecognized biases within students and shine a light on dark prejudices that would likely otherwise go unchallenged.

As with all children's books, these books need to be read in complementary pairs and groups with attention to explaining to students the weaknesses of each and using other texts to fill in the gaps. Some fruitful pairings could include *The Grand Mosque of Paris* and *Snow for Everyone!* followed by a discussion of examples of genocide and its justifications during the past century and today. Another would be a conversation about largely anachronistic stereotypes about Muslims living in the desert among camels (*Deep in the Sahara* or *The Hundredth Name*, for example) as compared to the urban, cosmopolitan reality of most contemporary Muslims (*Salam Alaikum*, *Under My Hijab*, and/or *The Best Eid Ever*).

Additionally, these results show that seeking multiple Muslim opinions about a book is essential. Asking a single Muslim to vet such books provides just one opinion from a confessional community of 1.8 billion people living in every nation and practicing their faith within widely different contexts.

Despite this diversity, Orientalist myths are deeply embedded in the Western imaginary. Educators need to identify these misconceptions in their schema by, for example, reviewing the work of Said, Shaheen, Jhally, Manglik and Siddique, and others who debunk these stereotypes. Torres noted that culturally authentic creators are especially valuable when dealing with a topic as fraught as teaching about Islam (203). However, the favorite book in this set was created by cultural outsiders, showing that authenticity is not a necessity if the author and illustrator engage in careful research. Nonetheless, it is significant that the most highly criticized books, those trading in cultural stereotypes, whitewashing, and silencing, were written and/or illustrated by non-Muslims.

Finally, one of the most crucial turning points in the representation of a marginalized group is when their identities become incidental to the story rather than the primary theme. Everyday stories of Muslims as "just folk" have substantial power to normalize Islam and de-other its adherents. Examples of this type of book include *Big Red Lollipop* (Khan), *Like the Moon Loves the Sky* (Khan), and *Our Favorite Day of the Year* (Ali). With time and effort from inclusive educators, it can be hoped that depictions of *hijabi* girls and boys named Hassan will become mundane in US children's literature.

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