

YUSUF AZEEM IS NOT A HERO

by Saadia Faruqi



Yusuf is just an ordinary boy . . . or so he thinks. A newly minted middle schooler, he loves his family, friends, and robotics. From the small town of Frey, Texas, Yusuf has always felt at home and that he belonged to the community. Then he begins to wonder about the “Never Forget” banners around town. Why does his Muslim American community, including his own family, bristle at the mention of them? Yusuf soon learns that it will be the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. He discovers how previous events in history unfairly affect and define his identity as a Muslim American boy and his community at large. *Yusuf Azeem Is Not A Hero* is a timely story of navigating against prejudice in the face of bullying, dismantling Muslim stereotypes through friendships, and claiming identity through family and community.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

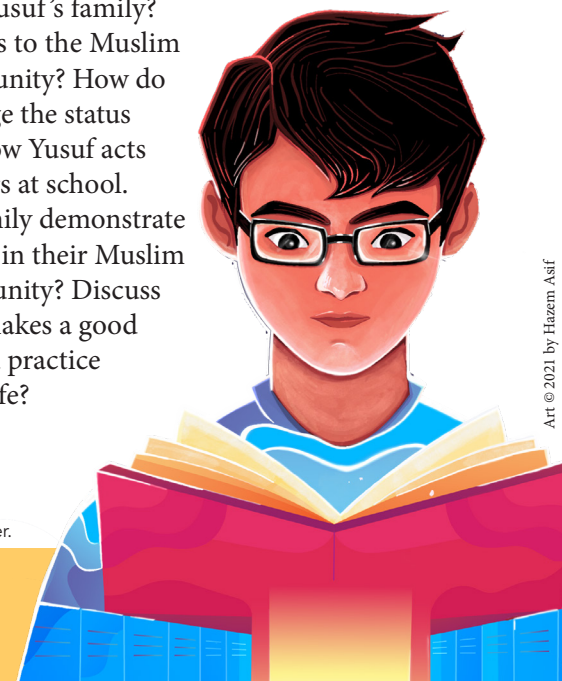
HOME AND BELONGING: For Yusuf and his family, Frey, Texas, is their beloved home. This was where Yusuf was born and raised, where he has friends, and where his community’s mosque is being built. In fact, Amma, his mother, was also born and raised in Texas. In what ways have Yusuf and his family been a part of the fabric of community in Frey? Alternatively, how are Yusuf and his family challenged about the meaning of “home” in Frey, Texas? Why does Mr. Khan feel pressure to “participate in all the town’s activities” (p. 97)?

“NEVER FORGET”: As the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks approaches, Yusuf begins seeing banners of this common phrase he heard while growing up. “Never forget” appears frequently in the book as a reference to the 9/11 attacks as an unforgettable event in history, but also as a double-edged reminder in his own life and family. When Yusuf faces the stress of daily insidious notes found in his middle school locker, what is the “message” (p. 85) he is told not to forget? What are some themes that Yusuf’s family and his Muslim American community must “never forget”?

STEREOTYPING: Throughout the book, *stereotyping* occurs frequently in Frey. What is the definition of stereotyping? What do you see as evidence of stereotyping toward Yusuf, but also to the Muslim American community at large? How can stereotypes be hurtful and dangerous? What happens to Yusuf at school that leaves him bewildered, while others look “at him with . . . fear and anger” (p. 287)? How have stereotypes impacted your life? How can we work to combat these harmful views?

HISTORY MATTERS: According to Yusuf’s Uncle Rahman, “History informs our present and affects our future” (p. 81). Yusuf understands what this means firsthand by reading his uncle’s journal. Uncle Rahman’s journal chronicles the raw events, emotions, and consequences experienced by Muslim Americans during the time of the 9/11 attacks. When Yusuf feels the same effects twenty years later, how does Uncle Rahman’s journal help him process what is taking place around him? Similarly, what “violence” does Yusuf witness at school that causes him to breathe uneasily? Why can he not stop thinking about the “painful, hurtful violence” he witnessed (p. 241)?

COMMUNITY ALLIES: Yusuf discovers many are against him, his family, and his Muslim American community because of prejudice. However, there are also many allies around Yusuf. First, what is an ally? Who are Yusuf’s allies? Who are the allies to Yusuf’s family? Who are the allies to the Muslim American community? How do the allies challenge the status quo? Consider how Yusuf acts as an ally to others at school. How does his family demonstrate allyship to others in their Muslim American community? Discuss what you think makes a good ally. How can you practice allyship in your life?



Art © 2021 by Hazem Asif