



Opening Doors to Understanding:

A Resource to Help Educators Navigate Using Literature to
Teach about Muslims and Islam

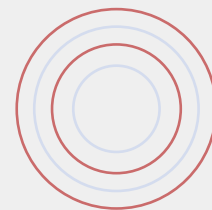
By Fariha Hossain

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Introduction

Windows, Glass Doors, and Mirrors into the Muslim Community

This resource aims to support educators in selecting and discussing literature about Muslims and Islam in their classrooms. Rudine Sims Bishop established an enduring metaphor of windows, glass doors, and mirrors that describes the importance of diversity in literature. She describes books as opportunities for readers to explore strange, new worlds and to see their own, familiar stories reflected back to them.

“Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created...a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience.”¹

Research that has since validated the mental, emotional, and social importance of representation in media for all students. However, Muslim students often do not have this mirror in literature, or if they do, it is frequently warped by harmful stereotypes rooted in fear and distrust.^{2,3} Combating Islamophobia is important to establishing anti-racist and anti-bias classroom environments that encourage students to be curious and accepting of the diverse world around them.⁴

Introduction

Supporting Muslim Students in Schools is Crucial

Muslim students are at high-risk of negative school experiences and positive representations of their identities may help in improving their experiences. Across the country, **48% of Muslim families report having a child that has been bullied for their religion** – a higher rate than any other faith group – and **20% of these families report that this bullying takes place each day**. Of these students, **64% of Muslim students report that they are bullied by peers for their religion** and **42% of Muslim students report being bullied by teachers or school staff**.⁵ Another report found that approximately **56% of Muslim students said they felt unsafe at school because they were Muslim**.⁶ Muslim students deserve school environments that are safe and empowering. Positive representation in literature is a tool to establish this.

Finally, the American Muslim community is the most diverse faith group in the United States of America, so Muslim American stories are diverse.⁷ **76% of American Muslims are immigrants or the children of immigrants from over 75 nationalities**. While the Muslim American predominantly made up of people who identify as Asian, Black or African American, and Middle Eastern or White, **there is no singular racial or ethnic group that composes the majority of the Muslim American community**.^{8,9} As a result, sharing the stories of Muslim Americans means that other stories are being told, as well.

This resource seeks to support educators in selecting and discussing literature about Muslims and Islam. Educators are encouraged to be intentional and use a critical lens when bringing these stories into their classrooms in order to present a positive image to all students and to protect Muslim students from harm. The following guidelines will help educators choose stories, facilitate learning, and support Muslim students in their classrooms.

Choosing Stories that Accurately Portray Muslims and Islam

When selecting and teaching different stories, educators must strive to choose and present materials in an objective and balanced fashion. Some research might be necessary to understand a particular practice, the accuracy of facts, and the author's background.¹⁰

It may be challenging for educators to teach students about cultures that educators themselves are unfamiliar with. Local Muslim or Islamic organizations that can help facilitate educators' learning.

When selecting literature, educators should avoid stories that contain common problematic, harmful and stereotypical themes and tropes about Islam and Muslims. The most prevalent motif is that Muslim characters are drawn with exaggerated differences to Western or American norms.

Ultimately, this teaches students that there is a binary of "Muslim" and "American" which may be harmful to Muslim students and is not true of Muslim Americans.

These exaggerated differences often extend to the depiction of Muslim societies and communities, which are often described to have rigid, uncompromising social contracts with severe gendered expectations.¹¹ These images are often not representative or accurate of Muslim communities. **Learning stereotypes as accurate examples is harmful to both Muslim and non-Muslim students.**



Red Flags in Literature about Muslims and Islam

Stereotypes and Tropes	In stories, this looks like...
<p>An “Us vs. Them” Dynamic that Sets Muslims Against the West or the United States of America</p>	<p>Generalizing all Muslims to have the same background, nationality, and cultural practices</p>
	<p>The only “good guys” in the story are American or non-Muslim characters, but all the antagonists are Muslim characters.</p>
	<p>A foil to the Muslim character(s) that is blond-haired, blue-eyed, Christian, and “All-American” to emphasize that Muslim traditions are backward.¹²</p>
	<p>Muslim characters are depicted as violent, aggressive, and close-minded people with “backwards” beliefs.</p>
	<p>Muslims are <i>only</i> refugees, immigrants, or struggling in war-laden contexts.</p>
<p>An exoticized Muslim culture</p>	<p>An Islamic society that is dominated by a rigid, uncompromising, and often violent “sharia” law¹⁴</p>
	<p>Most of the clothing worn by Muslim characters is gendered and unfamiliar¹⁵</p>
	<p>Wealthy “sheikhs” or evil “pirates” that are domineering, ruthless, and disregard cultural or political consequences; often presented with the foil of dignified, law-abiding, and “civilized” Westerners</p>
	<p>Societies where women are not allowed education, all their activities are highly monitored, and they must be hidden away</p>
	<p>An overuse of racial stereotypes based on the specific cultures being depicted in the story</p>

Red Flags in Literature about Muslims and Islam

Stereotypes and Tropes	In stories, this looks like...
Harmful, strongly gendered stereotypes about Muslim men	Muslim men are irrationally violent
	Muslim men are emotionally and physically abusive
	Muslim men are lustful, overly-sexual, and have multiple partners that they are dominant over
Harmful, strongly gendered stereotypes about Muslim women	An underlying or explicit belief that Muslim women should be controlled or subordinated in their dress and behavior ¹⁶
	Muslim women want to be and are expected to be submissive and quiet
	Muslim women are forced to wear hijab and/or are forced into marrying someone they don't want to marry ¹⁷
	Muslim women's roles in society only exist in relation to men (for example, their fathers, grandfathers, uncles, husbands, etc.)
Muslim women's self-worth and value lie in their virginity ¹⁸	

Learning stereotypes as accurate examples of real people and cultures is harmful to both students that are Muslim and students that are not Muslim.

Green Flags in Literature about Muslims and Islam

Muslim communities and families might practice traditions or customs that are unique to their specific context. However, it is possible for authors to positively and respectfully capture these nuances and stories without exoticizing them.

Accurate, positive representations	For Muslim stories, this looks like...
<p>Mutual respect between men and women, but not based in a sexual or misogynistic framework</p>	<p>Gender-separated events and spaces, including weddings, parties, and sports teams</p>
	<p>Limited physical contact between unmarried, unrelated men and women</p>
	<p>Adhering to modest attire and behavior when the opposite gender is present</p>
<p>Muslims are not limited to only one background or context</p>	<p>Diverse groups of Muslims, whether that be in terms of ethnicity, race, sect, nationality beliefs, and/or practices</p>
	<p>Diverse family stories, perspectives, and experiences</p>
	<p>Diversity in how Muslims practice Islam</p>
<p>Muslim men and women are both shown to have a variety of personalities, interests, roles, and hobbies</p>	<p>Muslim men and women both have autonomy, independence, and freedom of choice</p>
	<p>Muslim men and women have friends that are accepting of them and their beliefs</p>
	<p>Muslim men and women have careers and opportunities outside of their homes and families</p>

Facilitating Student Learning about Muslims and Islam

The following recommendations can help educators facilitate conversations and engagement about Muslim communities and practices. These recommendations are centered on the belief that students must be encouraged to wonder, draw connections, understand differences, and seek answers.

Collaborate with community partners

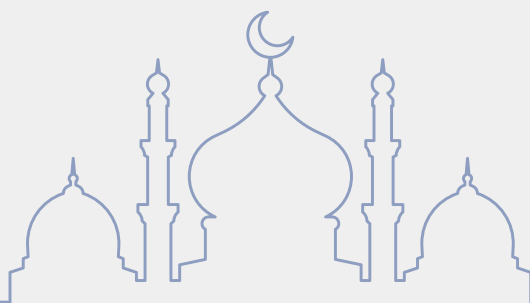
A local mosque, Islamic or Muslim organization could be an interesting field trip, guest speaker, or pen pal for students. If the story is based in a certain ethnic or cultural context, there is also an opportunity to collaborate with a local organization or association that represents that background.

Make information tangible and real

Certain questions about geography, demographics, or cultural and religious practices are opportunities for students to use additional sources, including books and the Internet, to explore concrete answers.¹⁹

Engage with literature collectively.

Read-alouds, open-ended and thought-provoking questions in large or small groups, and classroom debriefs are effective tools to help students ask questions and seek answers.²⁰



Facilitating Student Learning about Muslims and Islam

Provide opportunity for individual reflection

Individual reflection prompts can help students embrace learning about different cultures. For example, students can be asked to reflect on the family or cultural dynamics of certain stories. Students can be prompted to empathize by reflecting on what it might be like to step into a certain character's shoes.²¹

Allow students to take the lead in discussing their culture(s), if they express interest.

At times and based on the individual, students might be excited to share about their cultural heritage. Conversely, some students might not want pressure or attention drawn to them in that way. Following students' lead, rather than putting them on the spot, allows them to feel ownership over that conversation and how they express that part of their identities. This, inherently, is powerful for all students.



Conclusion

There is an opportunity to uplift positive Muslim stories in classrooms.

All students, but especially Muslim students, can benefit from learning with these stories. Muslim students are often bullied by peers and adults at schools and positive stories that represent their experiences and their community can help them find a mirror into their lives. Furthermore, the diversity in the stories of American Muslims may resonate with the experiences of many students, in addition to providing learning opportunities for students who are not Muslim.

Educators can use the guidelines provided in this resource to actively seek out stories that do not perpetuate harmful stereotypes and tropes of Muslim communities. They can partner with local Muslim organizations and community centers to help students understand various faith practices and traditions. Additionally, in their classrooms, teachers can encourage students to have open-minded, thought provoking, and empathetic conversations to better understand the world around them.

Positive representation, especially in books, is powerful for all students. These guidelines, and the book recommendations below, will ensure a positive and inclusive learning environment for all students.



Literature Recommendations

Although new books and resources are published each year, the QR code below links to a list of highly recommended books and novels from librarians, teachers, and readers in the Muslim community as of 2023. Each of the images is linked to a page with more information.

Most of these books have been written by Muslim authors and are authentic to real experiences in Muslim communities across North America and worldwide. Good books are not limited to just this list, but we hope it helps provide a baseline to start.

Additionally, while we tried our best to organize this list by recommended grade levels, but we recognize that does not always correlate with maturity and reading levels. We advise adults to also read these books to understand how to navigate them with students.

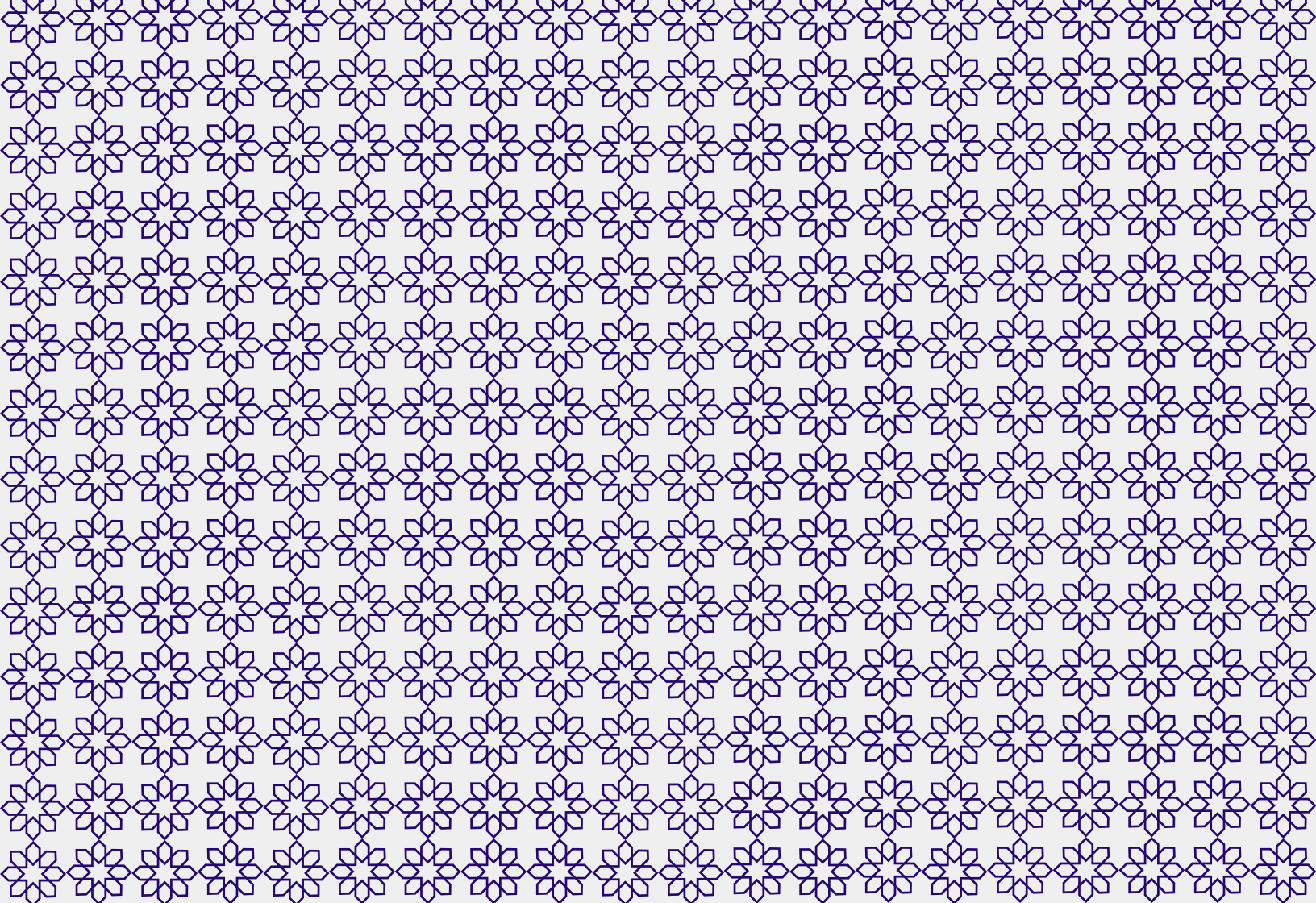
In addition to our list, here are other organizations who have curated book lists to help get books into the hands of youth.

- [Islamic School Librarian](#) compiled a list that ranges from picture books to young adult novels with their correlated AR reading levels.
- [Muslim Matters](#) publishes seasonal book picks, as well as Annual Muslim Bookstagram Awards.
- The Institute for Public Understanding's [Muslim American Experience Bibliography](#) has an extensive bibliography of non-fiction books.



Endnotes

- 1 Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3).
- 2 Farooqui, J.F., Kaushik, A. (2022) Growing up as a Muslim youth in an age of Islamophobia: A systematic review of literature. *Contemporary Islam*, 16, 66. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00482-w>.
- 3 Möller, K. J. (2014). Mirrors and Windows Through Literature Featuring Arabs, Arab Americans, and People of Islamic Faith. *The Journal of Children's Literature*, 40(2), pp. 65–72.2
- 4 Liou, D.D., Cutler, K.D. (2020). Disrupting the educational racial contract of Islamophobia: racialized curricular expectations of Muslims in children's literature. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 24(3), 3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1753680>
- 5 Mogahed, D., Ikramullah, E., and Chouhoud, Y. (2022). *American Muslim Poll 2022: A Politics and Pandemic Status Report*. Institute for Social Progress and Understanding. <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-poll-2022-1/>
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- 7 Mohamed, B., Smith, G.A., Cooperman, A., Schiller, A. (2017). U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream. Pew Research Center.
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- 10 Newstreet, C., Sarker, A., Shearer, R. (2018). Teaching Empathy: Exploring Multiple Perspectives to Address Islamophobia Through Children's Literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 72(5), 559-568. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1764>
- 11 Liou, D.D., Cutler, K.D. (2020). Disrupting the educational racial contract of Islamophobia: racialized curricular expectations of Muslims in children's literature. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 24(3), 12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1753680>
- 12 Liou, D.D., Cutler, K.D. (2020). Disrupting the educational racial contract of Islamophobia: racialized curricular expectations of Muslims in children's literature. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 24(3), 12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1753680>
- 13 Farooqui, J.F., Kaushik, A. (2022) Growing up as a Muslim youth in an age of Islamophobia: A systematic review of literature. *Contemporary Islam*, 16, 65–88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00482-w>
- 14 Liou, D.D., Cutler, K.D. (2020). Disrupting the educational racial contract of Islamophobia: racialized curricular expectations of Muslims in children's literature. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 24(3), 12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1753680>
- 15 Liou, D.D., Cutler, K.D. (2020). Disrupting the educational racial contract of Islamophobia: racialized curricular expectations of Muslims in children's literature. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 24(3), 12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1753680>
- 16 Farooqui, J.F., Kaushik, A. (2022) Growing up as a Muslim youth in an age of Islamophobia: A systematic review of literature. *Contemporary Islam*, 16, 65–88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00482-w>
- 17 Farooqui, J.F., Kaushik, A. (2022) Growing up as a Muslim youth in an age of Islamophobia: A systematic review of literature. *Contemporary Islam*, 16, 65–88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00482-w>
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The American Muslim Advisory Council is a 501c3 tax exempt organization. Our mission is to foster mutual trust and respect among all people through civic engagement, community building and media relations in order to protect all Tennesseans from prejudice and targeted violence. We envision a Tennessee where all people, regardless of their faith or spiritual beliefs are accepted, respected and valued as members of our diverse society.

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