

Curating an Inclusive Bookshelf: Children’s Books that Celebrate Diversity and Inspire Compassion



reviewed by Kate Bustillos



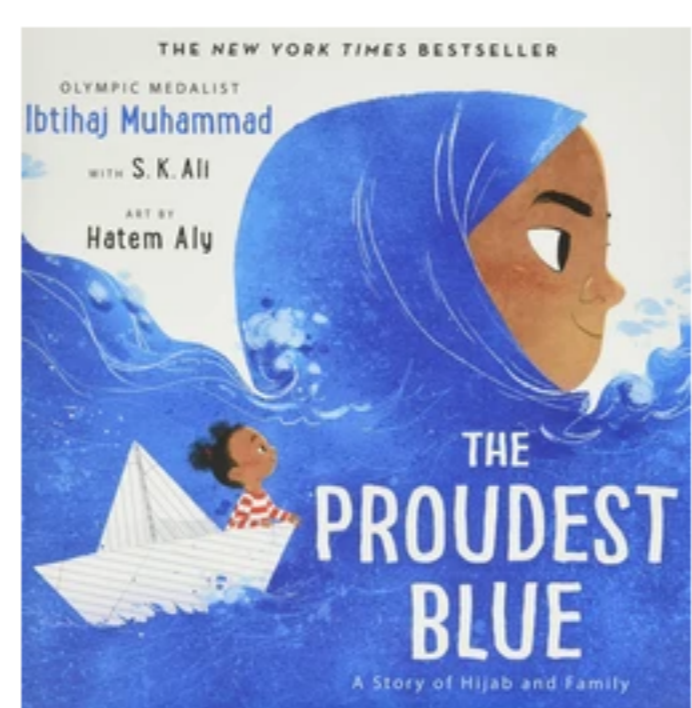
Jasmine Warga
Other Words for Home
Balzer + Bray/2019/332 pp/16.99 hardback

I read Jasmine Warga’s *Other Words for Home* in one sitting. Not because I was rushing through it, but because I could not bring myself to put it down. If you enjoy being swept away by a story and losing all track of time, you are going to love this book. It’s a middle grade novel written in verse and the lyrical pacing, paired with Warga’s engaging voice, creates an immersive and evocative reading experience.

Readers experience life through the eyes of Jude, a twelve-year-old from Syria, whose life and home are uprooted when she is sent to live with her uncle in Cincinnati. Leaving her father, brother, and best friend behind, Jude and her mother make the arduous trip to America, where Jude enrolls in a new school with kids who don’t look or dress or speak like her or her friends back home.

There is much to praise about this book, but one aspect that I found especially brilliant was Warga’s ability to address diverse—and conflicting—perspectives through Jude’s relationship with her family—her revolutionary brother, pacifist father, ignorant American cousin, and well-meaning American aunt.

Other Words for Home offers an honest, humorous, and eye-opening experience of a young Syrian refugee determined to discover and embrace her own identity, despite others trying to define it for her. Through empathy with Jude, readers are invited to enjoy an empowering coming-of-age story and the immigrant experience.



Ibtihaj Muhammad with S.K. Ali
The Proudest Blue
Little, Brown and Company/2019/17.99 hardback

Younger readers can engage with similar themes, including a female Muslim protagonist, in *The Proudest Blue*, a picture book by Ibtihaj Muhammad with S.K. Ali, and illustrations by Hatem Aly.

The story is a celebration of diversity that showcases the beauty and meaning behind the hijab as an expression of faith, family tradition, and cultural pride. As the first female Muslim-American athlete to win an Olympic medal and the first to wear a hijab during competition, Muhammad’s intent for writing *The Proudest Blue* was to give children who look like her the opportunity to see themselves in a picture book. But this story is also important for adults and children, especially those who may feel uncomfortable with, or have questions about, wearing hijab. Written from the perspective of Faizah, a young American Muslim girl, *The Proudest Blue* gently educates, while subtly challenging harmful stereotypes and false narratives that might misrepresent the hijab as a symbol of oppression or fear.

Little Faizah is proud of her older sister, Asiya, and enamored by the bright blue hijab that she picks out for school—her “first-day hijab.” At school, Faizah keeps a close watch on her sister and classmates’ reaction to her new hijab. Some kids tease her, but Asiya stands tall.

Hatem Aly’s illustrations are soft, with pops of vibrant color, like Asiya’s cerulean hijab. Aly portrays Asiya’s bullies as faceless, raceless, shadowy silhouettes. Prejudice here is personified amorphously, so that young readers can see themselves instead in the faces of Asiya’s friends and supporters.



Cathy Camper
Ten Ways to Hear Snow
KOKILA/2020/17.99 hardback

Cathy Camper’s *Ten Ways to Hear Snow* is a heartwarming example of inclusion through common ground. Camper’s words, paired with Kenard Pak’s illustrations, create a cozy, comforting read, brimming with delicious alliteration and sensory imagery.

This humble and intimate story about a day in the life of a family living in contemporary America follows a young girl named Lina as she takes a snowy walk through a Midwestern, suburban neighborhood to visit her Sitti (grandmother) on “grape leaf day,” a day on which her family would make the grape leaf recipe, warak enab. Lina’s father calls her habibti, an Arabic term of endearment.

As suggested in the title, on her way to visit Sitti, Lina reflects on the number of ways there are to hear snow, creating delightful onomatopoeia like the *Snyak, snyek, snyuk* of Lina’s boots and the *Ploomp!* of a blue jay landing on a snowy branch.

After reaching eight ways, Lina arrives in time to prepare traditional stuffed grape leaves with her grandmother. While spending a playful afternoon cooking together, Lina and Sitti discover two more ways to hear the snow, including the silence of snowfall.

Kenard Pak enhances the story’s atmosphere with minimalist illustrations that capture the narrative’s intimacy and perfectly contrast the neighborhood’s wintry landscape with the grandmother’s warm kitchen. Much like Pak’s textured art style, *Ten Ways to Hear Snow* is a multi-layered story exploring themes of winter, culture, family, and mindfulness. Lina and her grandmother’s observation of the many ways that snow can sound could also be taken as a metaphor for the many ways that families can look.

A former educator and performing arts director, Kate’s love of storytelling for young audiences has spanned a ten-year career in children’s entertainment. She now works planning adventures and encouraging sustainable tourism as a content writer for leisure travel. When she’s not wandering bookshops, she enjoys practicing yoga and gaming with her husband. Kate is a proud MFA student of Writing for Children and Young Adults at Spalding University’s School of Creative and Professional Writing where she writes stories about ghosts, magic, and loud-mouthed mermaids.