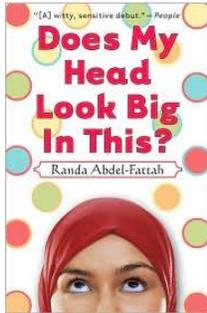


Children's Book Review

Abdel-Fattah, R. (2007). *Does My Head Look Big in This?* New York: Scholastic. 360 pp., ISBN: 978-0439922333 (pbk). \$8.99.

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One of the greatest charms of Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* is how utterly ordinary it is in so many ways; it has all of the required hallmarks of a young adult contemporary realistic novel. The plucky female protagonist leads us through a school year full of insecurities and rivalries, teen angst, budding romance, and questions about the future. What makes this novel unique is that its heroine, Amal Mohamed Nasrullah Abdel-Hakim, is Muslim and has just made the monumental decision to wear a hijab at all times, what she and her friends call being a "full timer." This choice influences most of the events that unfold for Amal over the course of the story as she struggles to make sense of the anticipated and unanticipated ways her decision impacts her life and those closest to her.

Australian-born Amal lives with her Palestinian-born parents in an affluent suburb just outside of Melbourne. She and her parents, like so many immigrant families, have carved out distinct identities for themselves, blending their Middle Eastern roots and their Islamic faith with mainstream Australian culture. She is, in every way, a typical 16-year-old girl. She has Muslim and non-Muslim friends, the former being her classmates from her Islamic school, which she attended until the tenth grade, and the latter from her current school, an exclusive private institution in which she is the only Muslim student.

It is in this context that, with the conviction and certainty characteristic of a teenager, Amal decides to commit more completely to her faith and start wearing the hijab full time. Abdel-Fattah represents the decision with great care, describing Amal's desire to feel closer to Allah by making such a public sacrifice for him. Thankfully, Abdel-Fattah's keen wit infuses all aspects of this novel, including this serious decision; hence, Amal's inspiration to finally wear the hijab comes in part from her watching an episode of *Friends*. The irony of such a secular program inspiring her decision is not lost on Amal, who is keenly aware of the interplay between her secular and religious sides. For example, once Amal decides to wear the hijab her next impulse is to shop for new clothes and scarves because she still wants to look cute, even in her modesty. Throughout the novel, Amal's sarcastic and self-deprecating sense of humor infuses levity into the emotional challenges she faces as she negotiates the complex terrain of being an Australian-Muslim-Palestinian teenager, or as she puts it: "... an Aussie...whacked with some seriously confusing identity hyphens" (p. 6).

We follow Amal through the rest of her school year as she manages her parents' initial concerns about the prejudice their daughter will encounter due to this choice and the challenges presented by her school principal who stereotypically assumes that Amal's parents are forcing her to cover herself. She deals with taunting from classmates, stares from strangers, and outright racism when she is refused a job in a fast food restaurant because of the hijab. She occasionally displays doubts about her decision and sometimes secretly fears that wearing the hijab will cut her off from career opportunities, once she has finished university. These unique challenges are set off by Amal's more mundane teenage concerns, such as the perils of acne being quite visible when wearing a hijab and being embarrassed by her parents' tendency to wear matching sweat suits and power-walk through her neighborhood. By balancing the exceptional and the mundane, Abdel-Fattah maintains an authentic voice and realistic tone for this novel's audience.

As in many other young adult novels, there is also a romantic subplot. Amal struggles with romantic feelings for her first high school crush, a non-Muslim boy named Adam. Amal is allowed to be friends with boys and her parents trust her judgment, so she grows close with him, talking on the phone for hours and hanging out with him and a larger group of friends. Unlike Amal's college-aged cousin Samantha, who has a boyfriend and keeps him a secret, she is unwilling to deceive her parents and date Adam, secretly or otherwise. Abdel-Fattah deftly portrays the tumult of the conflicting emotions Amal experiences as she falls for Adam while knowing that dating him is not an option for her. Here Amal attempts to explain this to Adam after he tries to kiss her: "I don't want physical intimacy with a list of people in my life. I want it with one person. And I want to know it's the same with him too" (p. 242). Thankfully, the author represents Amal's commitment to modesty as challenging for her but ultimately too important for her to impulsively abandon, even though it may cost her Adam's friendship.

In addition to Amal and her parents, Abdel-Fattah presents her readers with a range of different Muslim characters in this novel, such as Amal's aunt and uncle, who live secular lives and have worked very hard to assimilate into Australian culture; her friend, Yasmeen, whose White British mother converted to Islam after meeting her Pakistani future husband; and Amal's friend, Leila, whose mother worries that her daughter is being corrupted by Australian culture but who turns a blind eye to her son's drinking and drug use. These minor characters help to paint an even broader portrait of diversity within the Muslim Diaspora, an objective that is important to Abdel-Fattah.

It is in this ambassador role that Abdel-Fattah flirts with didacticism as she attempts to explain the complex notion that there are differences between the tenets of Islam and the cultural or political interpretations of it. She explicitly condemns the men who bombed a nightclub in Bali, having Amal describe them as "aliens to our faith" (p. 250). But even when being didactic, Abdel-Fattah focuses on her heroine Amal and the way that current events impact her and the ways she makes sense of the world.

Amal is a sympathetic and complex character whose personal and spiritual journeys help paint a human and relatable portrait of a Muslim young adult. The author succeeds in showing her heroine as a unique individual; she does not shy away from or attempt to simplify Amal's religious faith, nor does she allow it define Amal's character

entirely. Hers is a perspective rarely heard in popular fiction and her presence is surely illuminating for non-Muslim readers and validating for Muslim ones. Abdel-Fattah offers her readers an engaging Muslim voice that manages the delicate balance of being informative enough for a cultural outsider to understand and enjoy, while refusing to pander to non-Muslim sensibilities.