



Book of the Month

Presented by ADL's Education Department

About the Book of the Month: This collection of featured books is from Books Matter: The Best Kid Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice. The books teach about bias and prejudice, promote respect for diversity, encourage social action and reinforce themes addressed in education programs of [A World of Difference® Institute](#), ADL's international anti-bias education and diversity training provider. For educators, adult family members and other caregivers of children, reading the books listed on this site with your children and incorporating them into instruction are excellent ways to talk about these important concepts at home and in the classroom.

The Boy at the Back of the Class

Onjali Q. Raúf (Author)

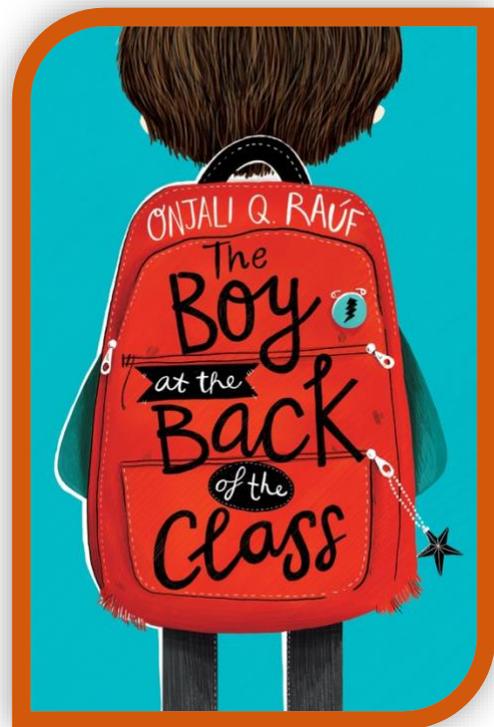
There used to be an empty chair at the back of Mrs. Khan's classroom, but on the third Tuesday of the school year a new student fills it: nine-year-old Ahmet, who is a refugee from Syria. The whole class is curious about this new boy; he doesn't seem to smile, and he doesn't talk much. But after learning that Ahmet fled a war and was separated from his family along the way, a determined group of his classmates bands together to concoct the "Greatest Idea in the World"—a magnificent plan to reunite Ahmet with his loved ones.

ISBN: 978-1984850782

Publisher: Delacorte Books for Young Readers

Year Published: 2018

Age Range: 8-12



Book Themes

Anti-Muslim Bias, Refugees, Bullying and Ally Behavior, Friendship

Key Words

Discuss and define these words with students prior to reading the book and remind them of the words' meanings as they come up in the book. See also ADL's [Education Glossary Terms](#).

Also, explain to students that because the book takes place in England, there are some words that have different meanings there than in the U.S. Examples in the book include: home-time (dismissal), telly

(television), rucksack (backpack), football (soccer) sherbert (powdered candy) and Mum (Mom).

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|--------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|
| ■ asylum | ■ detention | ■ ingenious | ■ protest |
| ■ atlas | ■ economy | ■ insightful | ■ queue |
| ■ bigotry | ■ embarrassed | ■ journalist | ■ racist |
| ■ border | ■ expelled | ■ kind-hearted | ■ refugee |
| ■ bullying | ■ expensive | ■ lifeboat | ■ reunification |
| ■ competing | ■ geography | ■ paramedic | ■ seclusion |
| ■ confiscate | ■ government | ■ passionate | ■ serious |
| ■ contagious | ■ greedy | ■ politicians | ■ teasing |
| ■ curious | ■ immigrants | ■ powerful | |

Discussion Questions

If the students read the book in small groups or as a whole class, ask discussion questions throughout their reading in order to check comprehension and engage them on a deeper level. Some of these questions can also be used as writing prompts. When students have finished the book, choose from these questions to guide a group discussion:

- What is the book about? What happened in the beginning, middle and end?
- When you initially meet the main character and narrator, Alexa, what do you learn about her? As the book progresses, how does your impression of her change?
- What do you learn about Alexa's friends—Michael, Josie, and Tom?
- When you first meet Ahmet, who do you think he is?
- Alexa describes Ahmet's eyes as "a bright ocean but on a half-sunny, half cloudy day." What do you think this symbolizes?
- Why do you think the other students make up stories and theories about who Ahmet is? Does that happen in our school when there is a new student?
- When the character of Brendan is introduced, he is called "Brendan-the-Bully-Brooker." What do you think about that name the other students give him? Is this name-calling fair? Why or why not?
- What kind of bullying behavior does Brendan engage in?
- When Alexa says, "I knew I wanted to be friends with Ahmet," how does she go about becoming friends with him? Have you ever met someone and instantly felt that way? What did you do to become friends?
- Alexa and her friends overhear someone talking about Ahmet and refer to him as the "refugee kid." What did you think when you first heard that? What do you know about people who are refugees?
- Why kind of information and misinformation do the characters have about refugees?
- What did you learn about Syria and refugees from Alexa's conversation with her Mum?
- When Alexa's Mum says, "the world has never been kind to refugees," what do you think she means by that?

- Alexa wonders what she would take with her and what she would leave behind if she suddenly had to leave her home. What do you think you would take and leave behind?
- When Alexa and her friends compare notes about their conversations with their parents, why does Josie seem uncomfortable?
- How do the students in the class, particularly Alexa and her friends, try to help Ahmet feel welcomed?
- What happens when they invite Ahmet to play football?
- When Alexa says, “Brendan-the-Bully hates anyone who’s different than him,” what does she mean by that? Can you relate to that?
- Why does Alexa try to find a pomegranate to give to Ahmet? What happens when she shares it with him?
- What led to the fight between Ahmet and Brendan? Why do you think they both felt so strongly?
- After the big fight, what other acts of bullying did Brendan direct toward Ahmet?
- When Ahmet tells his story about leaving Syria and his family’s journey, how did you feel? What did you learn that you didn’t know before?
- If you could ask Ahmet a question, what would you ask him?
- When Alexa talks with her Mum and Uncle Lenny, what does she learn about her grandmother? Why was that meaningful to her?
- After learning more about Ahmet and his family and overhearing that England’s borders are going to close to refugees, what do Alexa and her friends do?
- What are the different plans do the group of friends come up with? What are they trying to accomplish? As you were reading, what did you think about the “Top Secret Missions?”
- What was “The Greatest Idea in the World” and did you think it would work when you first read about it? Have you ever had an idea like that to help someone?
- What kind of risks did Alexa and Tom take in order to implement the “Top Secret Mission?” What happened with their plan to go to Buckingham Palace to get their letter about Ahmet to the Queen?
- How did other characters react to what happened at Buckingham Palace?
- After what happened at Buckingham Palace, what kind of reception did Alexa and Tom get, both positive and negative?
- What are some examples in the book about the bias against refugees and people who are from different countries?
- Alexa has what she calls a “Deep Thought” in which she thinks to herself, “Everyone in school looks different and likes different things—and has parents who come from all kinds of different places.” What makes Alexa think about this? How is our school similar to or different than this? What do you think are the advantages of going to a school like this?
- When their teacher, Mrs. Khan says, “Even if the Queen can’t do as much as she’d like to, there is a whole world of people who are whispering Ahmet’s name and trying to think of how to help instead.” In what ways does this make a difference?
- What happens in the end? Does Alexa and her friends’ actions make a difference? How so?
- How did you feel when the book ended? What do you think will happen next?

- What did you learn from the book?
- What are the overall themes and messages of the book?

Extension Activities

Below are activities in which you can engage students in order to extend the learning from the book.

1. Learn More about the Refugee Crisis

Have students use a KWL chart ("Know, Want to Know, Learn") before, during and after reading the book to learn more about the refugee crisis and engage in follow-up research, if time allows. Before reading the book, you can tell students a little bit about the refugee crisis:

The current refugee crisis has been named the largest refugee crisis since World War II. More than 65 million people have been forced from their homes. Around the world, one in every 122 people is currently a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum. There are refugees fleeing Syria, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Nigeria, and dozens of other countries. Roughly 11 million people from Syria have left their homes in search of safety and assistance since the country's civil war began in 2011. The refugees have been fleeing civil war, persecution and terror—traveling at great lengths and great risk to survive. Instead of being met with compassion and open arms, many of today's refugees have encountered closed doors and hateful language directed at them.

Before reading the book, ask students: *What do you know about refugees or the refugee crisis?* Have students record their responses in the "K" column, which represents what they already know. Next, have students record what more they want to know and additional questions they have about the refugee crisis in the "W" (Want to Know) column. As they read and discuss the book, they can continue to add to the "W" column and also record what they learned in the "L" column. When students finish reading the book, they can add final thoughts on what they learned ("L") and what they still want to know ("W"). If you have time for students to do a research project, they can use what they have recorded in the "W" column as the foundation for further research. This can be an investigation of the refugee crisis in general, information about one of the main countries where refugees are coming from, the refugee experience or something else. Depending on how much time you have, provide students in class and homework time to complete the research project, which can culminate in an essay, timeline, PowerPoint or piece of artwork that illustrates what they learned.

2. Reader's Response Writing Activities

- **Diary Entry of a Character:** Have students select a main or secondary character (Alexa, Ahmet, Tom, Josie, Michael, Brendan, Alexa's Mom, Mrs. Kham, Ms. Hems) from the book. Have students write imagined journal entries for their chosen character, writing 8–10 entries that the character might have written throughout the events in the book. Remind students that for the journal entries, the character's thoughts, feelings and reflections are very important, as well as their reaction to the day-to-day events that happen to them and other characters. You may choose to have students engage in pre-writing discussions with a partner about their character in order to expand some of their ideas. After they have completed the assignment, have them share their journal entries with the class and consider creating an online collection of all the journal entries.
- **Bravery:** The concept of bravery is explored throughout the book. Several characters experience bravery including Ahmet and his family, Alexa and her friends and the bravery displayed in standing up to bullying in different parts of the book. Start a discussion with students by asking: What does it mean to be brave? Elicit words and concepts of the word and come to a definition of

brave as to face or deal with something dangerous or unpleasant, either physically or emotionally. Have students share examples in the book where bravery was shown. Ask students to share examples of bravery from their own lives where they, or someone they know, showed bravery. Then have students turn their stories into an essay about bravery and allow them to illustrate the story. The stories can be based on real life events or can be fictional stories of bravery.

- **What It's Like to Be Welcoming or Welcomed:** Talk with students about how Ahmet, being a refugee from Syria, was new to the classroom, community and country. Ask questions such as: What do you think it was like for Ahmet to be totally new to the country, classroom and community? How do you think he felt? What were some positive and negative things he experienced when he came into the school and classroom? In what ways did he feel welcomed and included by others? In what ways did he feel not welcomed or excluded by others? Elicit examples of how Ahmet was welcomed and not welcomed by students, peers and staff at school. Then ask: Has anything similar happened to you? Have students turn and talk with someone sitting near them and talk about a time they either welcomed someone new or a time where they were welcomed—and share what that was like. Have students then write an essay or comic on that experience (what happened, what they did, what others did, how they felt, etc.).

3. What is Bullying and Ally Behavior?

Talk with students about bullying and how it is addressed in the book. Define **bullying** as when a person or a group behaves in ways—on purpose and over and over—that make someone feel hurt, afraid or embarrassed. (Note: This definition is for elementary students. For older students, use the definition in our [Glossary](#).)

Explain that in a bullying situation, there are several roles that people can play, as follows:

Aggressor: Someone who says or does hurtful things on purpose over and over.

Ally: Someone who helps or stands up for someone who is being bullied or the target of prejudice.

Bystander: Someone who sees bullying or prejudice happening and does not say or do anything.

Target: Someone who is bullied or treated in harmful ways by a person or group of people on purpose over and over.

Explain most people have played each of these roles at different points in their lives and in different situations. Point out that Brendan is referred to as “Brendan the Bully” in the book because he engages in bullying several characters in the book, including Ahmet. However, referring to Brendan as “the bully” is a problem. Because Brendan is labeled as “the bully,” it makes it sound as though Brendan is only a bully; there are no other aspects of his identity. It is better to label his behavior as bullying because he likely engages in other behavior as well, as well all do. For most people, we all play different roles at different times. It's important to be mindful not to label people, only behaviors.

Elicit from students when bullying and ally behavior takes place in the book. Then, have students talk in pairs or small groups about a time that they witnessed, heard about or personally experienced bullying. They should share (1) what happened, (2) how they felt and (3) what they or someone else did or what they wish they or someone else did about it (if anyone acted as an ally). When they are finished talking, ask a few students to share their reflections with the class.

ADL Resources

The following are curriculum and educational resources on immigration, identity, bullying and acting as an ally.

Curriculum Resources

Anti-Muslim Bigotry and Being an Ally, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/anti-muslim-bigotry-and-being-an-ally

We Were Strangers Too: Learning about Refugees through Art, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/we-were-strangers-too-learning-about-refugees-through-art

Who Am I? Identity Poems, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/who-am-i-identity-poems

Websites

Bullying and Cyberbullying Prevention Strategies and Resources

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/bullying-and-cyberbullying-prevention-strategies

Provides a collection of ADL resources on bullying and cyberbullying for educators, administrators, students and families and caregivers.

6 Ways to Be an Ally

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/6-ways-to-be-an-ally-en-espanol

Some simple things a student can do to be an ally to targets of name-calling and bullying. (Also in Spanish.)

Education Resources on Immigration, Immigrants and Anti-Immigrant Bias

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/education-resources-on-immigration-immigrants-and-anti

A collection of education resources for educators, parents and families on immigration, immigrants and anti-immigrant bias.

Education Resources on Refugees, Muslim People and Anti-Muslim Bigotry

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/refugees-muslim-people-and-anti-muslim-bigotry

Resources for educators and others to address the topics of Muslim people, anti-Muslim bigotry and refugees with young people.

Labeling Behavior, Not People

www.adl.org/blog/labeling-behavior-not-people

There is a disconnect between being labeled a “bully” and actually engaging in bullying behavior. This blog discusses how understanding this difference empowers and motivates young people to move from being a bystander to an ally.

Safe and Inclusive Schools for All

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/safe-and-inclusive-schools-for-all

This resource provides information about how to promote a safe, respectful and inclusive school community.

Children's Books

Below are links to lists of recommended anti-bias and multicultural books for the indicated category.

Bias, Discrimination & Hate: Anti-Immigrant, [www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid\[178\]=178](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid[178]=178)

People, Identity & Culture: Middle Eastern, [www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid\[211\]=211&tid\[226\]=226](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid[211]=211&tid[226]=226)

Religion & Religious Bigotry: Islamophobia, [www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid\[211\]=211&tid\[226\]=226](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid[211]=211&tid[226]=226)