



## Does My Head Look Big in This?

*Randa Abdel-Fattah*

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## **Does My Head Look Big in This? Randa Abdel-Fattah**

Don't panic - I'm Islamic! Amal is a 16-year-old Melbourne teen with all the usual obsessions about boys, chocolate and Cosmo magazine. She's also a Muslim, struggling to honour the Islamic faith in a society that doesn't understand it. The story of her decision to "shawl up" is funny, surprising and touching by turns.

## **Does My Head Look Big in This? Details**

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## From Reader Review Does My Head Look Big in This? for online ebook

### Emma Giordano says

I have some mixed feelings on certain aspects of this book, but overall, I enjoyed my time reading it!

I was really anticipating reading *Does My Head Look Big In This?* after being recommended to me as a great book with a Muslim protagonist. I have to say, hearing about Amal's faith was by far my favorite part of the novel! I get so happy watching others speak about things they are passionate about, and Amal's dedication to her religion was absolutely wonderful to read about! It's very rare we find YA protagonists that are open about practicing their faith so this book was unbelievably refreshing. Amal's response to prejudice and discrimination while never backing down from her beliefs was honestly inspiring and I feel so many teens would be impacted by her story! I think my favorite quote of the novel was near the end where Amal says, *"Putting on the hijab isn't the end of the journey. It's just the beginning of it."* (I literally got chills) Amal was the first Muslim protagonist I've read about and I was not disappointed. I would read so many more books about her if it meant experiencing her story!

Another great aspect of this book is that within Amal's group of close family friends who happen to also either be Muslim and/or Arab, there were so many different experiences to read about! Amal has Muslim friends that choose to wear the hijab full time, and others that don't. There are people who are deeply involved with their faith and others who reject their culture in favor of conforming to Australian norms. I thought the expression of different Muslim experiences was really well rounded and it made for a satisfying reading experience. I think I took away so much more because we had so many different individuals to learn about!

I also really loved how supportive virtually all the people in Amal's life are of her decision to wear the hijab! Are there bullies who are definitely Islamophobic? Yes (so be cautious of expressions of prejudice if you're interested in reading this novel) but there are SO MANY positive reactions to Amal's faith! Her principal is accepting, her friends and classmates are excited to learn about her religion and the practices of her faith. For the most part, they don't judge her like she is fearing but show true interest in broadening their horizons. Despite the fact that Amal does encounter some discrimination throughout the course of the story, I was so happy to see so much positivity for the majority of the novel.

Another minor piece of the story I enjoyed was learning about Amal's neighbor who is an elderly Greek woman. I really loved seeing their relationship grow, it was something special and unique. What I loved most though, was hearing her story of immigrating to Australia. It was very powerful and something I found to be very valuable! (TW for miscarriages in this particular scene) but overall, it was a surprise to enjoy a minor character so much. Definitely a fabulous character addition!

That being said, there were a few things I was not a huge fan of. Primarily, the writing was not the best. It's not "bad" per say, but I definitely found myself picking at the parts that irked me more than I like to while reading. I also felt the dialogue made the characters seem younger (13-14ish) compared to their actual ages (17). I want to be clear in saying I have considered the fact that "maturity" is a western concept and how I feel a 17 year old acts like may very well be different from what a 17 year old who has grown up in a Palestinian household is ACTUALLY like. I've definitely kept that in mind, but it was consistent with all the characters in the book, regardless of their background. They use phrases and react in ways I find more often in middle grade books (and in my personal experience in the junior high years) which made it hard to not be

a little exasperated at times. (Another factor could also be that the author is Palestinian/Egyptian herself which may account for differences as well!!) Then again, this also was not a book written for me, it was written for teens so take this critique as lightly as you'd like; I'm just stating my personal reading experience. The perceived immaturity & underdeveloped writing were two aspects of the book I really didn't enjoy, but it didn't impact my enjoyment that harshly.

The final thing I disliked about DMHLBIT is the portrayal of body image. One of Amal's best friends is extremely unhappy with her body which leads to a lot of problematic phrases and actions throughout the story. I don't think there is a scene she is in where she does not mention her issues with body image and weight loss which made it feel like this character had no development OTHER than her self image issues (which I find to be a problem). So often, phrases are thrown around so carelessly like "*I WISH I could be anorexic*" or "*I've tried the bulimia THING*" (hearing someone call a life-threatening eating disorder a "thing" as if it's a diet or choice boiled my blood, let me tell you). I found this to be horrendously insensitive and harmful to people who may struggle with their own body image or live with eating disorders; It really trivialized these issues in my opinion and made them seem so much less important than they are. When this character is fat-shamed by bullies, Amal and her friends respond by skinny shaming, making further derogatory comments that were equally as bad in my opinion. (Wouldn't it have been so much more productive to lift up your friend and standing against body-shaming than putting down another's body?) She also takes to unhealthy habits to propel her weight loss that could further put her in danger and they are never discussed as being unhealthy. It's a case of "it's my body I'll do what I want" and it's NEVER challenged. And at the end of the book, \*spoilers\* she's still unhappy with herself! The negative actions are never addressed, there is no story arc of accepting yourself, she's still trying diets in the last chapter, which makes it feel like all this harm was for nothing. I really really despised this portion of the book. If they had cut this character's really insensitive plot line, I probably would have given this book 4 or 4.5 stars but it was the detrimental to my reading experience.

The reason I picked up DMHLBIT was to experience the story of a Muslim teen, and that's what I got. I was really really satisfied with what I entered this book looking for and that's the most important thing to me!

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### **Shannon (Giraffe Days) says**

This was a random buy, picked up mostly because, flipping through it, the word *Tasmania* caught my eye - and then I read that the author is Australian. For purely nostalgic reasons I just had to read it.

Amal is a year 11 student in her third term at a posh private school in Melbourne. She's also Muslim. An only child, her parents are health-care professionals, she has a large extended family and friends from all backgrounds and religions. Before third term begins, she decides she's ready to wear the hijab "full-time". She doesn't come to this decision lightly - okay, so an episode of Friends helped - but she's sixteen and there are some serious repercussions to her decision. Like, the stereotyping and insults she'll get at school, and trouble finding a job. It's 2001, before the attack on the Twin Towers, but prejudice has been a part of her life for a long time already.

Her friends Eileen and Simone stick by her and don't see her any differently, and after a few days, the boy she has a crush on, Adam, starts talking to her again. Her friends from the Islamic school she used to go to, Leila and Yasmeen, are different kinds of Muslim again - Leila is incredibly smart and wants to be a lawyer, but her mother is uneducated and comes from a traditional background, and keeps bringing eligible men over for Leila to marry, while Yasmeen has no intention of wearing the hijab at all.

A great many stereotypes and misconceptions are confronted, questioned and explored in this humorous book. Amal's voice is natural and believable, and her story is an open window onto what many young Muslims deal with - and others. Her elderly neighbour, Mrs Vaselli, has estranged herself from her only child when he converted to Jehovah's Witness; Josh has certain Jewish traditions to contend with; Adam's mother left when he was young without so much as a word - all he gets are postcards on his birthday. Eileen's Japanese parents have their own expectations of her, and Simone's mum constantly tells her she has to lose weight if she ever wants boys to notice her. There's a whole gamut of what teens go through and put up with in this book, and it may sound like it would be crowded, but it's not. It may seem kinda pushy and too in-your-face, too, but it's handled with both delicacy and Amal's flair which gives things a very fresh look.

Aside from teen issues, the racial and religious prejudices are equally visible, appearing in many subtle and overt ways. I particularly loved the conversation between Amal and the school president, Lara, after 9/11 - Lara wants her to give a speech on the topic of Islam and terrorism, mistakenly making the connection, as many did/do, that since she's Muslim Amal must therefore understand why they did what they did. Her response was excellent:

*"You're Christian, right?"*

*"...Yeah... what's that got to do with anything?"*

*"OK, well I'll give the speech if you give a speech about the Ku Klux Klan."* (p256)

That Abdel-Fattah had an agenda in writing this book is obvious, and quite welcome too. It's a book that needed to be written. Some of it shocked me - the misconceptions and attitudes, I couldn't believe Australians - anyone - would think, say and do those things. But of course they do. It's a balanced approach, though - Leila's family shows that there are some who fulfill negative expectations, though the emphasis is made on the difference between Islamic teachings and cultural traditions, which are often confused by some Muslims themselves, like Leila's mother. Amal's parents are always encouraging her to see other people's perspectives and understand them better, where they are coming from and why they say and think as they do.

It's a quick read, and entertaining, and Amal is a great character. It's written well, over the space of a few months, and really engages you to think, question yourself, and react. A great book for teens and adults alike - and one Rosalind Wiseman should definitely add to her glossary of books to read at the back of *Queen Bees & Wannabes*.

I have only two issues: firstly, this edition. There's a reason why I don't like Scholastic books. Namely, they're cheaply put together, the pages are crinkled and they start to fall out. If you can get hold of a different edition, you should get it instead.

The second is the translation. You've heard me rant and rage about this before, but here's a prime example of Americanising a text until it's virtually unrecognisable. Even though there were familiar place names like Bridge Road and Luna Park (I used to live not far from St. Kilda, in Elwood - beautiful suburb!), so much had been changed I often forgot it was set in Melbourne at all. If something can be depersonalised, this book has been de-place-ised! It was so jarring I actually wrote the changes down - and the words that hadn't been changed, which was sometimes even stranger.

**Aussie word: --- Changed to:**

serviette --- napkin

primary school --- elementary school

tram --- streetcar

kilograms --- pounds  
ABC/SBS --- PBS (not available in Australia)  
biscuit --- cookie  
grade/year 11 --- eleventh grade  
rubbish bin --- trash can  
milk bar/corner shop --- convenience store  
mum --- mom  
maths --- math  
roundabout --- traffic circle  
university/uni --- college  
car park --- parking lot  
pedestrian crossing --- crosswalk  
000 --- 911  
fringe --- bangs  
plait --- braid  
take away --- take-out  
mobile (phone) --- cell phone  
nappy --- diaper  
4WD/four-wheel-drive --- SUV  
thongs --- flip-flops  
chilli --- chilli pepper  
rubbish --- garbage

I don't want to know what would happen if a tourist, needing urgent help, was to dial 911 in Australia, but changing it in books is not doing anyone any favours. I actually think it's irresponsible and dangerous - and who couldn't figure out, at least from context, what was meant by "000"?? Also, changing "ABC documentary" (or SBS) to PBS really jolted me - I'd never even heard of PBS before moving to Canada; we certainly don't get any US channels!

Also, they put in some brand names we don't have, like Chips Ahoy, Q-Tips (which are commonly called ear buds or cotton buds) - I'm sure they would have changed "Vegemite" if they could have! They put in "medical school" and "pre-law" instead of ... whatever they replaced - in Australia, both law and medicine are offered as undergrad degrees, medicine is an 8-year degree, law 4. In short, I don't think you'd actually learn anything much about Australia from this book.

Curiously enough, there were some words they didn't change, including:  
four-wheel-drive (they used this once, and in another place changed it to "SUV" - a slip?)  
doughnuts  
beanie  
mince  
wuss (maybe not as Aussie as I thought?)  
veggies  
lollipop lady  
fish and chips

Plus a couple of cultural references, such as Luna Park, *Women's Weekly* and *Home and Away*. Having been dislocated from the country itself by all the other changes, seeing these words made me even more confused. I wish they'd just leave well enough alone!!

## **Nawal Al-Qussyer says**

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I have mixed feelings about it but I would give it a rating of 2.5 out of 5.. The whole story is told from Amal's point of view. Amal, an Australian-Palestinian girl decides to go "full time" and wear her hijab inspired by an episode of Friends, where Rachel braves the crowd to perform Copacabana after an embarrassing moment. I like the idea of this book and I think that we need more of this kind of books. I think this book is about more than being a Muslim. It is about being a teen.

I had high hopes for this book. I hoped it would be so deep, but the characters are very one-dimensional. I think the book is too easy, and the characters could be more in depth and I find it boring. I also thought the book did over-exaggerated in some points. but I kind of like Amal's sarcasm and the way she stands up for herself at times. in general this book is somewhat childish and typical( a girl going for the popular guy, the parents' discussions, etc ).

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**Fahime says**

## Ahmed says

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## Summer says

I have a massive amount of respect for Randa Abdel-Fattah for at least *attempting* to show that Muslims aren't these extremists that the media portrays us as, but instead just normal people. So props to her for her bravery.

BUT, being a Muslim myself, I feel like the author did not do a very good job of representing Islam, and on top of that, provided unrealistic scenarios that are very *unlikely* to happen.

Amal is *very* annoying. She is one of those stereotypical teen girls authors think they understand, but in reality, do not know **ANYTHING** about. The author tried WAY too hard to sound like a teenager, but she really made Amal sound like a shallow, whining 12-year-old.

I appreciate the feminist ideals in this book, which I think were necessary, but the author did not do well in actually *integrating* these ideals into the novel. She provided unrealistic scenarios, as I mentioned before. For example, the main character's best friend has a daughter who wants to get her married at a young age, an arranged marriage. As much as I loathe arranged marriages, I for one find it hard to believe that these kind of people exist in Australia. I don't know, maybe they do, but I know TONS of Arab families who do not make their daughters marry who they want them to marry, or even at a young age. Who is going to marry a teenage girl who hasn't even finished high school yet?

The dialogue was **So. Annoying**. It was UNBEARABLE. No teenager repeatedly brings up religion in a normal conversation with her friends without being labeled as some preacher or overly-religious person.

I also found it very far-fetched that the main character would go through so much racist comments and discrimination in the course of one story, which I believe was about half a year. Come on, I wear a Hijab (scarf) too, and the most discrimination I face is the occasional rude comment (VERY rare) or just curious stares. It just was not believable that so much discrimination would be directed at one person.

The points that the author was trying to get across were so unsubtle and awkward. It felt like a teacher trying to shove everything in your mind all at once. In addition, she failed to explain what's the point in wearing a scarf. Duh, because of religion, but WHY do we have to wear it? What's the symbolism and what role does it play for a Muslim woman? Sadly, Abdel-Fattah doesn't answer any of these questions.

To tell you the truth, I recommend this book to people who are completely ignorant about Islam and know nothing about it, rather than people who actually know about Islam and are actually *interested* in learning about.

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### **Anna Staniszewski says**

I was hoping this book would be laugh-out-loud funny - it wasn't. But it had a light-hearted tone and I felt like I got a lot out of it. It was so interesting to read about an Australian-Palestinian girl who was just a regular teenager, not a victim or a religious fanatic. Her faith was an important part of her life, but it wasn't her entire life. But more importantly, I think this kind of book reminds you that "Islamic militants" are a very small part of the Muslim population, just like "radical Christians" don't represent all of Christianity. Since the main character in the book was the only Muslim girl in her school, to her classmates she was the token representative of her religion. This was sad but also very true to life. So often when I've been in a class with one male student, that student is inevitably called upon to speak for his entire gender. People tend to categorize and this book reminds us of that. Despite some clunky dialogue, I thought the story presented the often overlooked perspective of a strong, believable girl who is proud of her Muslim faith.

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### **Khalid says**

"Does My Head Look Big In This?" is the story of a Australian-Palestinian girl who decides to wear Hijab and the way her surroundings react to this decision.

I chose to read this book because the subject of Hijab is an interesting one to me; Hijab, in Saudi Arabia, extends beyond what's available in this story. Here, a woman is expected to cover her face completely, not just her hair. I am completely against that for more than one reason, the simplest of which are the fact that it's merely a cultural thing and not a religious thing, and the religious folk around here consider it a good habit that they do not wish to change (Which I really find bad, because who are they to decide what's "Good to have" and what's not; they should realize that the preferences of the top guys trickle down to become imperatives that have to be followed). The other goes into the human side of things; our faces are an important part of our identities, and who are we without our identities?

There is a lot to say about the subject, but I'm not here to go into a whole rant about the subject of Hijab.

Afterall, the form of Hijab used in this book is not the one I'm against. Still, though, it is interesting to read about it; the question I had opening the book was: Is Hijab going to change the girl's behavior, is it going to serve its desired purpose of not attracting men, is it going to make her a better Muslim?

The answer, on all three counts, is a big fat no. I'm not going to say that the author was even trying to say that Hijab is good, she may have wanted to demonstrate exactly the opposite, I am not sure (In fact, you may be very interested to learn that the author herself does not wear Hijab, apparently, I just realized that now by visiting her author page in Goodreads). For all we know, she may have wanted to demonstrate exactly that Hijab is not what a real Muslim is about; and if this was what she aimed for, I would say that she did a good job at that.

Why? Well, for one thing, she managed to dance in front of guys with her Hijab (And I'm sure you realize that dancing will attract far more attention than hair). She started putting more make up. And even though the act of putting the Hijab itself gave people around her the brief idea that she's "out of bounds", she managed, during the course of the story, to change that, and make people feel that her Hijab has no "I'm pure" effect at all. I'm not going to go further into that in order to not spoil the story for you.

But then again, let me go back and say, it's a novel. You do not have to have a point in the novel. It is there for entertainment purposes, and she did entertain us with very interesting stories. This author has the potential of being a very good novel writer, but her story was lacking a very important ingredient. It had the interesting small problems, the interactions, the complete theme, the good and the bad people. So what is missing?

I'd say that a real "story" is actually missing. Yes, she decided to wear Hijab two pages into the story, and then what? What are we looking for towards the end? There are important elements of fiction that are missing here. I would say that the way it is written right now, it's nothing more than a set of interesting glorified short stories that deal with the same people over and over.

Finally, I would have to commend the author for the cultural touch of the book; I believe the best thing about this book is that it leaves us with an idea about the lives of Muslims living in foreign countries, some of their struggle with keeping their culture intact, and the cultural pressure they undergo during unfortunate events.

In summary, read this book; expect some entertainment, and you may be left with something to think about, but do not expect a solid storyline.

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### C.G. Drews says

I have an odd relationship with this book because on *one hand* I think it tells an incredibly important story (!!), but on the other hand...**I can't honestly say I think the writing is good.** GAWSH. That sounds horrible to admit. This could just be my personal preference!! But the dialogue felt weird and unnatural. And the story didn't seem to have much *flow*. It was just the happenings of Amal's life and I can't even say it had a conclusion. It just...stopped. I HAVE PROBLEMS WITH THIS, OKAY?

But...like I said...**SUPER IMPORTANT STORY!!** Maybe I just don't see these kind of books out there, but seriously...where are the books on religious prejudice? It can only imagine how tough it'd be to be a Muslim, when so many people are utterly uneducated and think they're all crazy extremists. It's really interesting to see Islam from a 16-year-old Aussie's perspective too. The story is basically about **Amal choosing to wear**

**her hijab everywhere and be more committed to God.** It's VERY about religion, of course, but at the same time, I didn't feel smacked in the face or preached at about Islam. At all. Which was awesome. I really like to learn stuff, but I haaaate being preached at.

(Although, I kind of will contradict myself here and say the book WAS preachy...but about racism and sexism. Which are topics I'm passionate about, so I didn't mind them being REALLY highlighted in the book. I...just...wanted more *story* to go with it?!)

**Amal herself was super interesting.** I LIKED HER. I mean, she was soooo forthright and had such snappy and sassy comebacks and she was really vibrant. HUZZAH. I like a vibrant protagonist every now again in the sea of moody poetic morbid teen fossils. But she DID go off at people a lot, and was a little immature (but, c'mon, she's 16). And she does scream at her mother for. no. reason. **But Amal was still really admirable.** She was deciding to be public about being a Muslim and to be true to her religion even when she got so much flack for it. I AM IN AWE.

"You don't judge *people*. We're not a plural, or some big bloc, all acting and feeling and saying the same things. You judge individuals.

Also I felt like **I learned a lot!** About what it's like to be a Muslim. AND multicultural. Awk, do you know how diverse this book is?! IT'S SO SUPER DIVERSE IT'S AMAZING. For example:

- Amal is Muslim and Australian and Palestinian.
- She has a friend who's considered "fat" and is struggling with self-image (although I'm annoyed her story line didn't get any closure at all)
- Amal's neighbour is Greek and awesome
- There are Jewish characters

So a million points for actually being so multi-cultural (which I think Australia IS really diverse so I'm glad it represented this).

**But...gah, like I said. The writing? Noooope.** When Amal was just interior-monologuing it was fine, but as soon as they started talking, it was just HUGE lumps of dialogue text that didn't feel realistic at all. And everyone's voices were *the same*. Amal has like 4 friends, but they all felt the same to me. And there are a lot of "bully" cliches that felt plastic. And NO CONCLUSION TO THE STORY. I get it! It's kinda like real life...but I think books need more of a conclusion. And I'm not really sure Amal even changed throughout the book...

**I did like it though!!** Don't get me wrong! So it's a half-and-half sort of love/hate relationship here. It felt so educational but it was FUNNY at times and the witty comebacks were golden. I really loved taking a stroll in Amal's shoes and I LOVED that it's Australian. (Woot! Woot! For Aussie YA!)

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### **Nora says**

Ok. I see what the author was trying to do. She gets props for writing a novel with an Arab, Muslim main character that's not escaping an abusive husband or some other sort of oppression, as many books with Muslim women love to do. I appreciate that she added some much needed diversity to the YA market. Still,

as a Palestinian-American Muslim hijabi, I was thoroughly disappointed.

I went into this book so excited that the MC was so similar to me and thinking that I could really relate to her. That didn't happen, sadly. The problem with this book is that it is WAY too dramatic and unrealistic. Abdel-Fattah attempts to portray Amal and her friends as realistic and relatable, but what she ends up doing is showing two girls from two extremely different sides of the spectrum. Most Muslim girls' lives are not like Amal's or Leila's, but are somewhere in between.

Allow me to explain. Amal's family is very, very, very liberal, to the point where they let their daughter go to an unsupervised party at a boy's house, where there is bound to be alcohol and where she is bound to be put in an undesirable situation with a boy. Of course, both of these things occur. Most practicing Muslim girls, particularly ones that wear hijab, wouldn't put themselves in this situation.

On the other side of the spectrum, we have Leila's family. Her mother is extremely strict. She wants to marry Leila off as soon as possible and doesn't want her to pursue an education and a career because that's "improper" for a girl. My friends, I assure you, this is something that is so, so rare in modern times. Only in SOME remote, extremist, parts of the world do SOME ignorant families treat their daughters this way.

Another thing that bothered me was the sheer melodrama of this book. When Amal decides to don the hijab, WAY too many people give her a hard time about it. I mean, in America, I've rarely been bothered because of my hijab. Most people completely ignore it, and many ask me questions about the hijab and about my faith out of honest, respectful curiosity. Every once in a while, I meet a hateful ignoramus, but thankfully these sort of people are in the minority. I'm sure the situation is similar in Australia. This is why I find it hard to believe all the hate that Amal has to endure.

All in all, I appreciate Miss Abdel-Fattah's attempt to write about the life of a young, Muslim, hijabi girl in a non-Muslim country. However, I have to say that most of this book is grossly inaccurate and improbable.

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## **K. says**

Okay, so here's the thing. I've just gone through and read a lot of the popular reviews for this book. And the vast majority of them mention the amount of judginess that Amal gets for wearing the hijab, the amount of weird looks and snide comments and generally not-okay stuff. Many of them mention that the reviewer also wears a hijab and doesn't experience any of that. Which is awesome and I'm thrilled.

However, I feel like all of these reviews missed one key thing: this book is set a) in 2002, less than a year after 9/11 and at the same time as the Bali Bombing, which is mentioned in the story, and b) at a snooty private high school in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. I attended a snooty private high school in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, graduating in 2000. And lemme tell you, friends, we had a year level of 70. There were maybe 15-20 Asian students in our class. And one Sri Lankan girl. That was it. The rest of us were the whitest skips you'll ever come across (although admittedly, one was of Greek descent and...two??...were of Italian descent).

Anyway. If a girl in our year level had started wearing a hijab, we would have gone along with it. But there would have been a LOT of "OMG, do you think her parents made her do it??" and "Wait, so do you wear it at home or just in public?" and "Does this mean you can't buy food from the canteen now?". Because by and

large, snooty private high schools in Melbourne's eastern suburbs are populated by sheltered white kids from privileged backgrounds who've always attended school with sheltered white kids from privileged backgrounds.

I can remember a friend telling me that her family (who came by boat from Vietnam during the war) were Buddhist but that her older sister was Catholic, and my head basically exploded because it had never occurred to me that people would change religions.

So yeah, in 2012-6, people passing comment on a girl wearing a hijab may have dropped dramatically, which **ABOUT BLOODY TIME, IT'S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS IF SOMEONE WANTS TO WEAR A HIJAB OKAY.** But in 2002 in the snobby eastern suburbs of Melbourne? Seeing someone wearing a hijab was basically unheard of.

ANYWAY.

Let's talk about this book. I liked the characters. I liked the story. But it feels INCREDIBLY dated now. It was published in 2005 and is set, as I said, in 2002. The characters watch Friends and Seinfeld. They send text messages like twice a day because those suckers cost 25c each. They hang out in chat rooms because social media didn't exist. They go to Timezone and Sanity after school. They shop on Bridge Road because that's where all the outlet stores were at the time.

So it spoke very strongly to MY teen experiences, and all of that stuff was a complete "Oh my God, I remember when we used to do that!!" trip. But I have no idea whether teenagers in 2017 would relate to it, even if they go to snooty private schools in Melbourne's eastern suburbs...

I'll also add that while I loved both of their characters and I really liked Amal's parents, it felt like Amal and Leila's experiences were meant to represent the two opposite ends of the Muslim spectrum. Amal's parents are incredibly liberal and let her attend a party at a boy's house where there's likely to be alcohol. Leila's parents are incredibly conservative and her mother is desperate to marry her off to a good Turkish Muslim man who'll support her before Leila gets any more ideas in her head about becoming a lawyer and having a career. So yeah. It would have been nice to see more stuff that was somewhere in the middle.

Nostalgia factor? 10/10. But it was occasionally sliiightly preachy and I have no idea if teenagers would relate to a lot of it...

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### **April (Aprilius Maximus) says**

Brace yourselves because I'll probably be talking about this book for the next 20000 years.

Around the Year in 52 Books Challenge Notes:

- 36. An identity book - a book about a different culture, religion or sexual orientation

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### **Youstra Serry says**

Let me start out by saying that this book is a book that NEEDED to be written, and one that, definitely,

should be read.

This follows the life of a Muslim teen struggling to live her life according to her own beliefs, religion, and culture while surrounded by the never ending prejudice and ignorance. It's written in an easy, funny way so it doesn't get too depressing or boring.

It shows how awfully scared Amal is to wear the hijab, something *She* chose and wants to do, because of how it changes the way people look at her. Instead of seeing the same person, a teenager, they automatically start seeing a sign that reads "**I am Muslim**" and judge her right away.

What I loved most, though, was how eye-opening it is to how differently each Muslim understood their religion and approached their children's demonstration of it. it teaches you to never Stereotype people, and to never let politics tell you how to treat someone. A bad Muslim/christian/Jewish doesn't mean all Muslims/Christians/Jews are the same, and certainly, doesn't mean that neither Islam nor Christianity, or Judaism are bad.

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## Kricket says

update, june 2017:

i read and reviewed this book ten years ago. please keep that in mind if you choose to comment. i'm not interested in discussing it now because i don't really remember it. thanks!

original review, september 2007:

Amal decides, completely on her own and without pressure from her (also Muslim) parents, to wear a headscarf (hijab) "full-time." Why? She wants to make a statement of her faith, and it makes her feel close to God as well as brave, especially at her prep school where she is the only Muslim. She also points out what a relief it is not to have to worry about people judging her body and worrying about her hair (but she encounters frequent judging of the hijab itself, and frequently spends as much time arranging it as she did her hair.)

My biggest problem was the preachiness. Instead of letting the story unfold naturally, the author adds numerous fake-feeling situations in which Amal defends her faith. I could list many, but the absolute cheesiest is when Amal is on a bus and the bus driver clearly hates her and her hijab. He turns up a radio show conveniently discussing "violent, terrible Muslims" until a kindly old woman next to Amal makes him turn it down. She then tells Amal about how she used to work with Muslim women and how she loved their hijabs and food. The scene was sappy and contrived, with crap dialogue to boot, and unfortunately the book is full of these.

Second biggest problem? Although the author clearly wrote this book partially for those who don't know a lot about Islam (has Amal explaining some basics of prayer and holidays to her non-Muslim friends, etc) she never gets into the meat of the hijab issue. Namely, WHY the headscarf is the chosen symbol of faith. Where does it come from? What's the history here? Or why, for example, Muslim women wear their symbol of faith on their heads, and not Muslim men. The narrator does make a reference to "hard-core feminists who don't get that this is me exercising my right to choose" but she never really explains WHY she made her decision, except that she just felt ready.

In summary, (in case you want to skip all of my above ranting) Abdel-Fattah spends too much time defending Islam to the obviously ignorant characters in the book, and not enough time explaining the faith of Muslims to her very intelligent readers who want to know.

Oh, if you have any recommendations for quality teen lit about Islam, PLEASE let me know!!

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## Nat says

With Sana Bakkoush - played by the effervescent Iman Meskini - recently announced as the main for **Skam** season four, as I'd so fervently hoped for back when I created my original Skam book tag, I wanted to immerse myself in some much-needed fiction told from the point of view of a Muslim hijabi girl as the main character. **Does My Head Look Big in This?** seemed to be the perfect starting point.

Set in Melbourne, Amal is a 16-year-old Australian-Muslim-Palestinian teen with all the usual obsessions about boys, chocolate and Cosmo magazine. She's also struggling to honour the Islamic faith in a society that doesn't understand it. The story of her decision to "shawl up" is funny, surprising and touching by turns.

(Fun fact: I started reading this right after having rewatched the above iconic episode in **Skam** season two, where the girls go to a remote cabin and Sana defies all their exceptions.)

• **Does My Head Look Big in This?** started out incredible with following Amal's decision to wear a hijab "as a full-timer." I particularly loved getting to read her thought process leading up to that moment:

*"I'm terrified. But at the same time I feel like my passion and conviction in Islam are bursting inside me and I want to prove to myself that I'm strong enough to wear a badge of my faith. I believe it will make me feel so close to God. Because it's damn hard to walk around with people staring at your "nappy head" and not feel kind of pleased with yourself – if you manage to get through the stares and comments with your head held high. That's when this warm feeling buzzes through you and you smile to yourself, knowing God's watching you, knowing that He knows you're trying to be strong to please Him. Like you're both in on a private joke and something special and warm and extraordinary is happening and nobody in the world knows about it because it's your own experience, your own personal friendship with your Creator. I guess when I'm not wearing the hijab I feel like I'm missing out. I feel cheated out of that special bond."*

• However, I quickly came to notice a number of problematic phrases thrown in here that rubbed me the wrong way, like describing someone angry as "psychotic" and the like. And I especially detested how this next conversation was handled:

*"Anyway, back to your attempt to wear the hijab without the assistance of Revlon. I hate to disappoint you, but there are only a few women in this world who can get away with the natural look. Don't you read New Weekly? "Stars without their make-up", etc.? Hello? Do you have a big modelling contract you haven't told me about? Are you co-starring in Brad Pitt's next movie? If your answer to either of these questions is no, then go out and buy some cosmetic products this instant."*

I feel like Lilly Singh said it best when she talked about said topic:

• Plus, I couldn't for the life of me why understand why Amal was so infatuated with Adam Keane. To borrow Scaachi Koul's superb phrasing, this boy was the epitome of "forgettable, something that even now makes me think of warm, soggy bread, or crackers with the salt brushed off." So when the book focused on

those vapid white boys more than I liked, I was gone.

- Another thing I want to mention is that I feel like the author had this great opportunity of discussing body-image and taking care of oneself with Simone's character, who's described as: "*incredibly self-conscious about her body. She doesn't understand that it's all in her mind. OK, so she's not a size eight, can't feel her ribcage and doesn't have toothpicks for legs. She's about a size fourteen and really voluptuous and curvy and gorgeous with big blue eyes, creamy, radiant skin and lips that look like she has permanent red lipstick on.*" But that lesson of accepting yourself never really came... The only thing that came out of it was a lot of harmful and triggering sayings spewed, such as this next paragraph that made my head spin:

*"Or I see all these model shoots of gorgeous beach babes with their bones poking into my hand when I turn the pages and I think, what's the point? Even if I lost ten kilos and was in my weight-height ratio, people would still consider me fat. I wish I could become anorexic. How sick is that, huh? But I don't have the self-control to live off a lettuce leaf a day. And I've tried the whole bulimia thing but I can't even throw up. I'm just pathetic! Abnormal!"*

... How is this in the final version of the book??? This ignorance and insensitivity consequently led to a lot of girl-on-girl hate while comparing herself to others. Speaking of which, those "mean girls" were never really given any characterization, so that blew off as well for me.

After all that I really tried giving this book multiple tries to impress me again, but I just kept getting disappointed time and again. So in the end I decided to give myself a break, in particular after reading this next horrible thing spit out of Amal's mouth about her friend's mom, who wouldn't let her daughter leave the house to go shopping:

*"I'm just about ready to report Leila's mum to immigration.  
Grounds for deportation: stupidity.  
Alternative country: none. No nationality deserves her. Send her to Mars."*

I just... how do you rollback from that???

So unfortunately **Does My Head Look Big in This?** was a DNF around the half-way point for me. In the meantime, however, you can catch me rewatching these two recently released **Skam** clips until season four is out there in the world.  
(I'm still amazed by the usage of the song.)

#### **no rating**

*Note: I'm an Amazon Affiliate. If you're interested in buying **Does My Head Look Big in This?**, just click on the image below to go through my link. I'll make a small commission!*

This review and more can be found on my blog.

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