

In preparation for reading Farhana Zia's *The Garden of My Imaan*, a lovely young adult novel about an American Muslim girl named Aliya, my students and I wrote down what we knew about Muslims. I teach in a public middle school where the majority of students are white and Christian, so I expected a steep learning curve. I encouraged all the students to write down their thoughts and ideas and to be open and honest about their thinking. Sometimes I would chime in and contradict incorrect ideas, but mostly I would just record student thoughts on the whiteboard as they recorded their thoughts on our worksheet.

“I think I learned last year that they pray to Allah,” a student said.

“They all live in the Middle East,” another student chimed in.

“Well, they don’t speak English,” said another student.

I said, “Well, let’s dive into *The Garden of My Imaan* and see what we uncover. We’ll come back to this later, look at our ideas and talk about our before-reading thinking. We have some facts here and some stereotypes. So we have to read carefully to figure out what those stereotypes are.”

The Garden of My Imaan portrays how Aliya is working to find her own unique identity. She is comfortable in her school until a Moroccan girl named Marwa begins there. Marwa wears a hijab, fasts for Ramadan and isn’t afraid to stand up for others. Aliya fears that hanging out with Marwa will call attention to herself.

As a Muslim herself, Zia adds authenticity to *The Garden of My Imaan* and captures a voice that is often missing in young adult literature. And what’s great about the novel is that it breaks down common stereotypes. Through Aliya’s story, Zia captures diversity within Islam, tells readers that Muslims are from all over the world, teaches words and phrases in Arabic and Urdu and describes life in a multi-generational family.

As we were reading scenes from *The Garden of my Imaan*, I would stop and tell students, “Now, how does this information change our before-reading thoughts?” We would then go back and add new facts that we learned and identify and discuss any initial stereotypes. I’d often remind students that the novel isn’t representative of all Muslims or Muslim Americans and that it would take many more readings to gain a strong understanding of Islam.

Intrusion of Fears

These conversations, I thought, would help prepare my students for a guest visit from Zia. She was in our area to receive the 2014 South Asia Book Award. I thought things were moving along great and felt pretty successful as an anti-bias educator. Then two days prior to Zia's visit, one of my students who had really been pushing against the text said, "You mean a Muslim is coming here?! They chop people's heads off. If she's coming here, I'm not coming to school."

I looked around and saw that another student was nodding his head in agreement. The students who weren't nodding their heads were looking to me for answers. These were my veteran students who had been involved in nearly a year and a half of my reading class, a class that focused on anti-bias themes in nearly every reading and activity. These students had that look on their faces, as if saying with their eyes, "We know prejudice is wrong, but we don't know what to say about this one."

I felt tremendous pressure and a bit of anger at the statement. I wanted to try to "fix it," right then and there. I wanted to shout, "But we just learned so much about Marwa and Aliya! How can you say this?" But I looked into my students' eyes and saw fear. I took a long, deep breath and asked, "Where does this thinking come from?"

"Some students are choosing articles about ISIS for current events," the boy said.

"How do those articles make you or your peers feel?" I asked.

"Really afraid," whispered one girl. "I just keep thinking that they are going to come here and do that to us."

I wanted to take their fear away, but I recalled media events that made me totally afraid when I was a child. I channeled that fear for a moment so that I could meet my students where they were. We were sitting at a small table, so I was able to whisper, "The media focuses on the scary, right? That's how papers sell. That pulls viewers in. But ISIS is NOT our author. It's not our main characters, right?" Students nodded. I then looked at the boy who was the most afraid and said, "I'll honor where you are. I would never force anyone to attend, but meeting Ms. Zia may help reduce some fear."

A Teachable Moment

I reached out to some parents that night, just to explain the fear I'd witnessed, share aspects of our class discussion, reiterate information about our upcoming author visit and invite any of them to attend with their child. I know that helped, as some students told me, "My mom says I should attend just to get that fear out."

The day of the event, all my students decided to attend. Zia's presentation was amazing and taught all of us so much. Because I'm not Muslim, because I haven't faced the challenges of post-9/11 prejudice, her voice and her stories filled the spaces my voice could not.

In our post-unit reflections, each of my students recorded how much their thinking had changed. "I knew it was wrong to feel prejudice and Islamophobia," one student wrote, "but the ISIS stuff had made me so scared. I now know that I've got to really look more deeply at what's presented about anybody out there. Whenever we chunk anybody together, we're probably wrong."

How do you address Islamophobia in your classroom? What do you do when you see that prejudice and stereotypes are linked to in-the-moment fears?

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