

WE ARE BIG TIME



Written by

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EDUCATORS' GUIDE



Themes: Girl Interest, Sports, Friendship

ABOUT THE BOOK

Aliya is new to Wisconsin, and everything feels different than Florida. The Islamic school is bigger, the city is colder, and her new basketball team is . . . well, they stink.

Aliya is still excited to have teammates (although the team's captain, Noura, isn't really Aliya's biggest fan), and their new coach really understands basketball (even if she doesn't know much about being Muslim). This season should be a blast . . . if they could just start to win. As they strengthen their skills on the court, Aliya and the Peace Academy team discover that it takes more than talent to be great—it's teamwork and self-confidence that defines true success.

For fans of *The Crossover* and *Roller Girl*, this graphic novel is full of humor and heart as it explores culture and perceptions, fitting in and standing out, and finding yourself, both on and off the court.



Photo © by Zozhio Minto

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

HENA KHAN is the acclaimed author of several middle-grade novels, including *Amina's Voice*, *Drawing Deena*, and the Zayd Saleem Chasing the Dream and Zara's Rules series. She writes picture books, including *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns* and *Under my Hijab*, and loves writing stories in a variety of formats that center her background and culture. This is her first graphic novel. Hena lives in her hometown of Rockville, Maryland, with her family. Visit Hena online at henakhan.com.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Safiya Zerrougui is a cartoonist, character designer, and illustrator based in Montreal, Quebec. She's worked with Netflix, Disney TVA, and Max as a character designer and visual development artist. Safiya's work pulls inspiration from her Kabyle heritage, fashion history, bold colors, and intricate patterns. Give her a sketchbook, a cup of coffee, and a museum archive website, and she'll be entertained for hours!



PRE-READING

Build Background Knowledge

In the book, Aliya attends an Islamic school. She and all her friends wear a head covering. Familiarize yourself with the hijab. You might make a K–W–L chart. In the first two columns, list what you know about the hijab and what want to know. After reading or listening to [this piece on the Learning for Justice Website](#), add what you learn.

Discuss

Why do women and girls wear the hijab? When do they begin wearing it? Where do they wear it?

Connect

What traditions or rituals, if any, do you have in your spiritual community? What assumptions have you debunked for others?

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think Aliya feels about moving to Wisconsin from Florida? How do you know? When have you felt apprehensive about changes in your family? (pp. 9–13)
2. Aliya's new basketball coach wants to learn more about her players. What questions does she initially ask the girls to get to know them better? (pp. 52–57)
3. What aggressions and stereotypes have the girls faced because of their traditions? When have you felt misunderstood because of the way you dressed, looked, or behaved? (p. 54)
4. The sibling relationship in this book is beautiful. How does Aliya's brother show her support? (pp. 64–69)
5. On page 81, the team convenes to discuss the why of their game. What are some of their reasons, and what does their motto, "more than the score," really mean?
6. One of the ways the girls practice basketball is by observing videos and attempting to replicate those moves. Think about how you learn best. Do you need to see examples? Do you need to try and practice tangibly, by building or touching or creating? Do you need to hear new information or write it down to remember it best? Share with a partner or write in your journal.
7. How do other teams treat the girls when they first notice they're Muslim? (p. 102 and 107)
8. How do the reporters treat the girls when they are being interviewed? (p. 123 and 135) How did the girls expect to be treated? How do the girls feel about the questions they are asked?
9. How do the girls demystify and debunk stereotypes about Muslim girls and women? How do they push back on reporters' assumptions? (pp. 175–177)
10. Coach Martinez changes up practice yet again when she meets the girls individually first. (p. 171) How does her approach support the girls' growth? How does this individual feedback work? Do you like it? Do you receive similar feedback from adults in your life?
11. Aliya's father talks about how mistakes breed learning. How does embracing a mistake-making culture support learning and growth in your life? When have you made mistakes that you learned from?
12. Though this book is about a basketball team, and themes of winning and losing do come up, that isn't the ultimate message of the story. Why does it feel hopeful and collaborative? What lessons do the players learn from their experiences?

Dream

Choose a character pair and create a text message dialogue between them based on what you've learned about them from the text. Be sure to include evidence from the text to elucidate the pair's relationship.

Aliya and Noura

Aliya and
Coach Martinez

ALIYAH

ALIYAH

ALIYAH

Aliya and one of her
brothers



Extend

Brainstorm or discuss with your peers a list of challenges you've faced recently, either with friends, family, at school, or elsewhere in your community. Take notes on one side of a page. On the other, brainstorm a web of your why, just like the girls on the team did. (p. 81) What motivates you? What are you excited about? What drives you to succeed? Knowing our *why* helps us determine our own personal mottos—words that hold us in times of discomfort; words that drive us forward. What is your personal motto?

Create

Recipes and cooking can teach us a lot about life, as Coach Martinez recognizes at the Milwaukee Culinary Institute. (pp. 95–97) At times, we need to be nimble and flexible in the kitchen, perhaps swapping ingredients or making substitutions to improve a traditional recipe. Coach teaches the girls about precision in baking and in basketball, and how controlling the environment ensures the best outcomes. Talk with a family member or someone in your collective about a special recipe and record its story. What ingredients are necessary? What might you substitute and why? Why is this particular recipe important, and what conditions need to exist for

it to come out successfully? Try making the recipe and reflect on the experience. How did it go? What might you do differently the next time, and why? Create a group cookbook of recipes!

Collaborate

Aliya has a strong and supportive family in this story. She has two brothers, and both of her parents, and they move from Florida to Milwaukee to live closer to extended family. Aliya's support network extends beyond her blood relatives. She has friends in Florida and classmates at her new school. She has a supportive coach as well. Think about the people in your life who shape you. Who are they? Who shows up for you? Who makes you feel like you can be most yourself? Represent this visually, perhaps by creating a garden with all the people who help you grow, or a constellation, for everyone in your constellation of care. *Teachers: encourage students to talk with their family and loved ones about being part of the community that supports them. They can create this project visually together, or you might extend the activity with gratitude letters to the people who support them.*

Note to Teachers: Should you need additional support around addressing Islamophobia and or handling prejudice, you might find this Learning for Justice tool kit useful: [Islamophobia tool kit](#).



Nawal Qarooni is an educator, a writer, and an adjunct professor who supports a holistic approach to literacy instruction and family experiences in schools. She serves on the Library of Congress Literacy Awards Advisory Board and is a member of the National Council for Teachers of English Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English. Nawal holds a bachelor's of English from the University of Michigan, a master's of teaching from Brooklyn College, and a master's of journalism from Syracuse University's Newhouse School.



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