How YA Literature is Rewriting the Muslim-American Experience

A growing movement in publishing — especially among female authors — aims to expand perspective and welcome a broader range of voices.

BY MADELEINE DELIEE PUBLISHED: MAR 18, 2020



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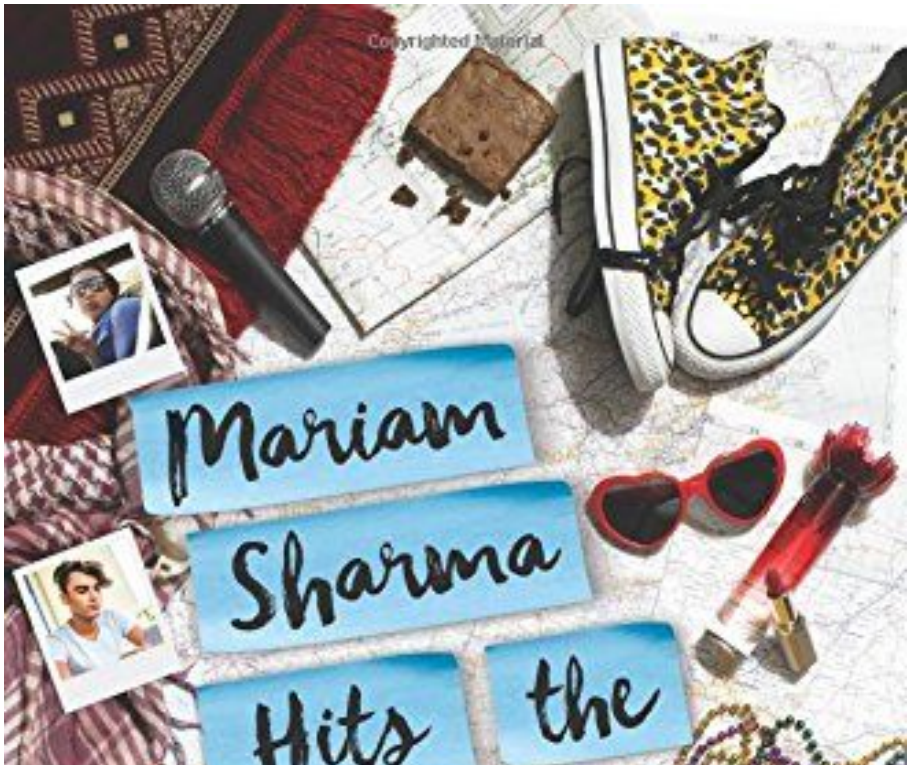
We all look for ourselves in books — sometimes it's as simple as looking for our names, but, more substantially, we often look for representations of who we are,

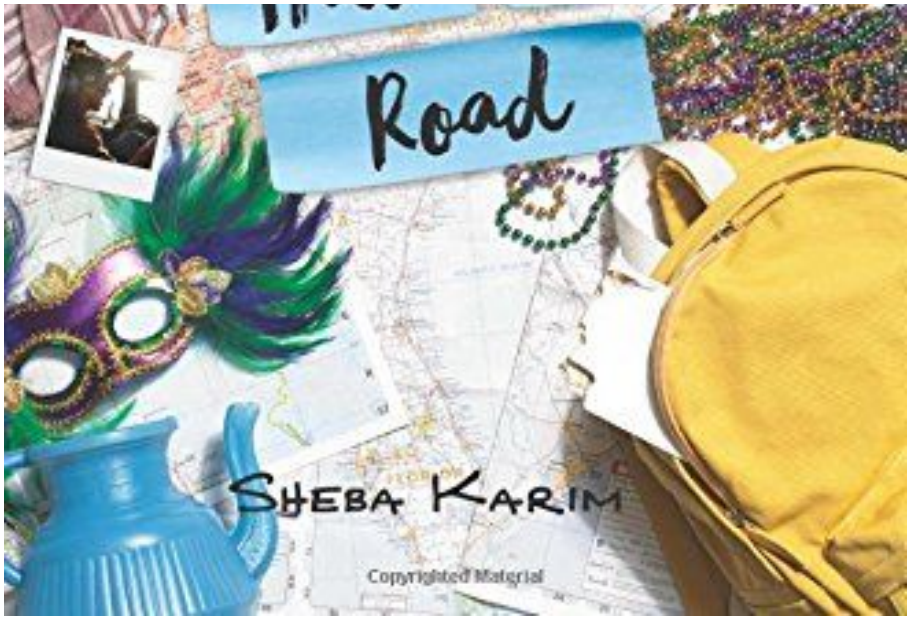
what we are like, where we live, and what our lives resemble. So, what happens when those stories don't exist?

Authors like Sheba Karim, Becky Albertalli, and Aisha Saeed, and Nadine Courtney know what it's like to look for those books and not find them. They're part of a growing movement in publishing to expand perspective and welcome a broader range of voices. Karim recalls wanting "to see anyone of color — a brown face" when she first began to read; later, in high school, she found Salman Rushdie and Amy Tan, but they didn't speak to her experience in the way she craved. "I remember reading *Born Confused* [Tanuja Desai Hidier's 2002 YA book about growing up Indian-American], but that still wasn't exactly it," Karim says.

Her book, 2009's *Skunk Girl*, grew out of that need to see herself represented. "We write the stories we wish we had growing up," Karim says of an impetus that lead to *Skunk Girl* being one of the first YA titles to feature a Muslim-American protagonist, a teenager whose family is Pakistani and who struggles with reconciling her home life with her school life. Karim has since published two more books, *The Thing We Call a Heart* and *Mariam Sharma Hits the Road*. She wrote *Mariam Sharma*, a road trip adventure that takes its main character from New Jersey to New Orleans, because, as she puts it, "the open road is about possibility. Who you can be to yourself and to others."

Mariam Sharma Hits the Road





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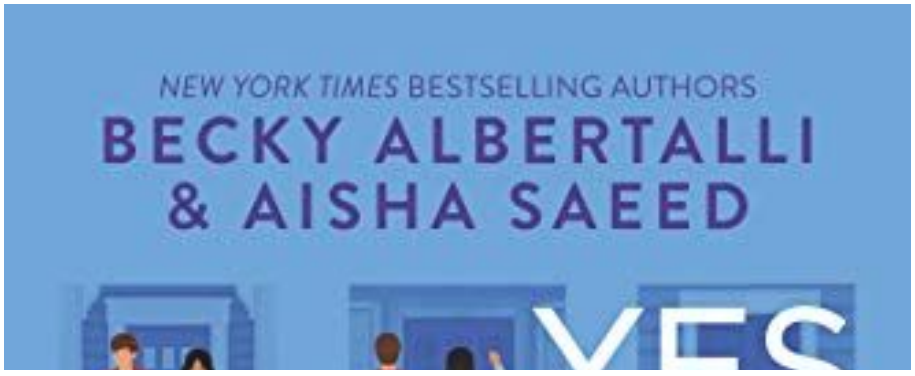
The twists and turns of friendship are typical subject matter for young adult literature, but those bonds may be even more vital for kids whose families are assimilating. “Children of

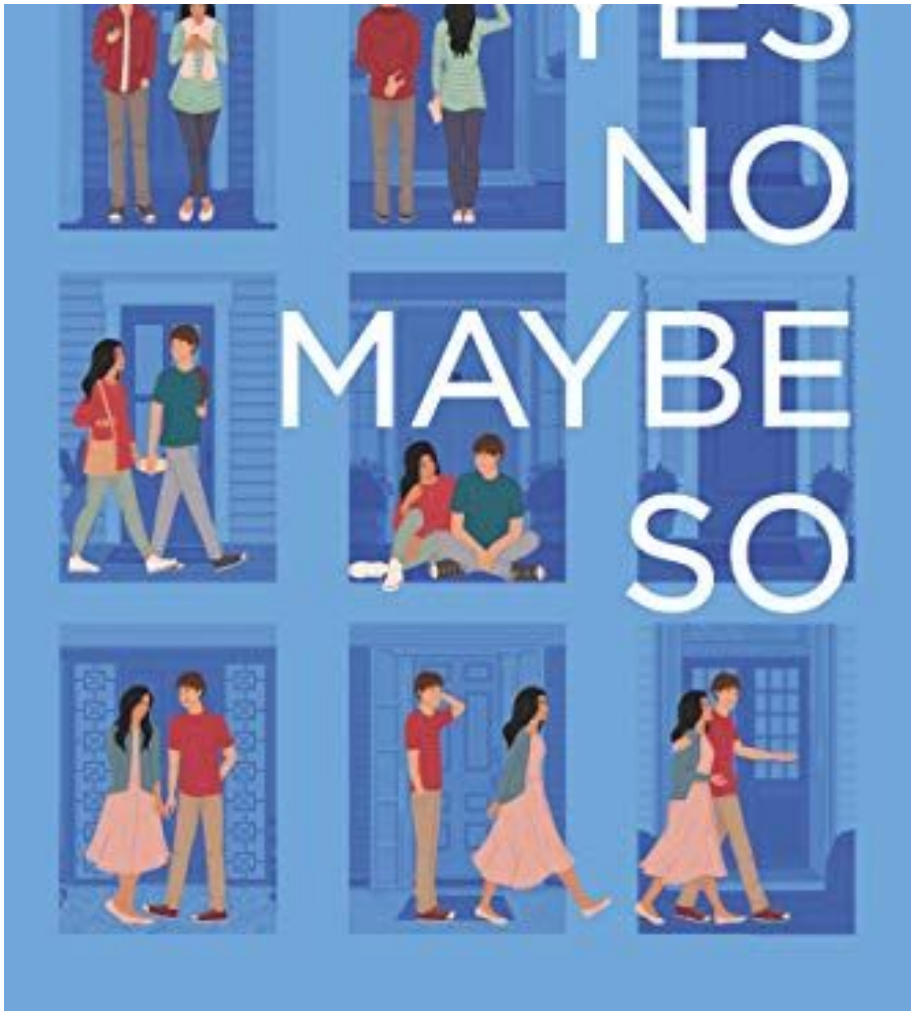
immigrants often have to rely on friends for support — security and stability that doesn't come from family," Karim states. She also addresses questions about sexuality and religious faith that can sometimes only be addressed with peers, who provide a space for exploration that may not be available at home.

Similarly, it was friendship that led Becky Albertalli and Aisha Saeed into their writing partnership. After long admiring each other's work, they met when a special election was scheduled to fill a vacant congressional seat in Georgia. "We canvassed and it was our first direct voter engagement," Saeed says. "The experience was intimidating at first, but then not so scary." Their candidate ultimately lost and the defeat, which immediately followed the 2016 election (an event they both refer to as "*that* election"), felt particularly harsh. "It was devastating," she recounts. "It wasn't just him losing — it meant Trump winning." Both women were compelled to convey their lasting feeling of optimism. "That it got close meant something," says Albertalli. "Even if you lose, things can come from it… Kids may feel frustrated about their inability to vote. Lots of people can't vote. But engagement is still possible." Saeed adds, "We wanted teens to see that there is a long game in social justice."

This experience led the co-authors to write about their shared political awakening while also telling their individual stories. Saeed, who is Muslim, and Albertalli, who is Jewish, say their book, *Yes No Maybe So*, released in February 2020, reflects identity and perspective at a time when we urgently need understanding and empathy. "We're very glad this is coming at a time when it seems like there's a desire to pit the Jewish and Muslim communities against each other," Albertalli says. "That's not our experience." Their book comments on how bigotry wears different faces and how not all racism is obvious. "We learned about each other's faith and we learned a bit about ourselves," Saeed observes. She also points out, however, that their book doesn't begin to encompass everyone. "There are as many ways to be Muslim as there are people who are Muslim," she says.

Yes No Maybe So





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In fact, all four authors interviewed talked about the heavy responsibility of authors of color. As Sheba Karim recalled from her own YA days, readers are eager to see themselves depicted in literature — but not all stories speak to all experiences and it's impossible to reach everyone. "It would be nice to see the day when Muslim authors aren't carrying the burden of representation," she comments. As these writers admit, they tell their stories, but can't give voice to all stories; what someone knows about growing up Muslim in a Somali-American community would be very different from someone recently returned to Pakistan.

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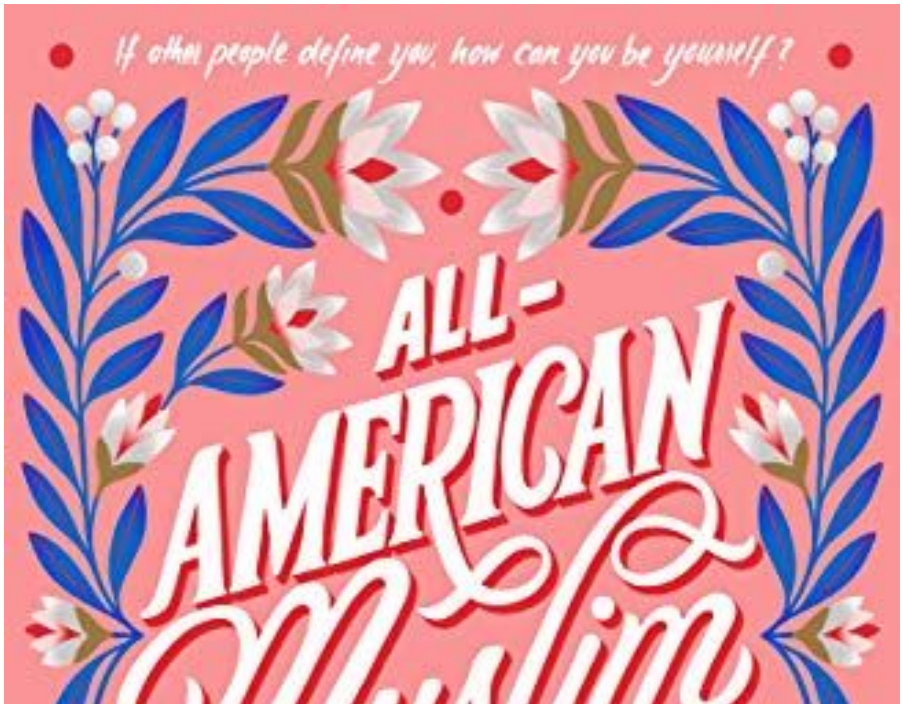
But the point is that the stories are out there, more and more of them. Saeed is an editor of *Once Upon an Eid*, an upcoming middle grade anthology; many of the authors included in the collection weren't published when movements like We Need Diverse Books and Own Voices started. Nadine Courtney, author of the upcoming *All-American Muslim Girl*, first considered writing her book years ago. "When I was in my twenties, I started kicking around the idea of a young white-passing, mixed-race Muslim protagonist — very similar to me — as a way to work through the identity issues I was experiencing," she says. "I ultimately shelved the book. I felt like nobody would be interested."

All-American Muslim Girl





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Social media, however, has created a driving force in opening the literary world to under-represented viewpoints. “I think Twitter has been the great leveler — people without giant platforms or with the big publicity machine behind them have been able to get their voices out there and find a willing audience,” Courtney says. “And the more that agents, editors, and publishers see excitement for diverse voices, the more willing they are to finally take a chance on a newbie writer who isn't somebody whose connected father passed an agent or editor a manuscript. Even better, those stories are selling and hitting the bestseller lists, which validates the idea that there is hunger in the marketplace for own-voices fiction from marginalized authors.”

Those authors are now telling stories that are historical and contemporary, political and romantic— as varied as the creators themselves. They raise up other minority authors, praising books by Meg Medina, Jacqueline Woodson, Samira Ahmed, and Sabina Khan; Brandy Colbert’s upcoming *The Voting Booth* was singled out by Albertalli and Saeed as one they’re eagerly awaiting this summer. These, and many others, mean that young readers won’t be stuck looking for themselves in books, only to close them in frustration. Books are often described as both mirrors to reflect and doors to open and invite; these writers clearly provide both.

Madeleine Deliee writes, teaches, and parents in the Washington, D.C. area. She's written for Playboy, CNN, The Washington Post, SyFy Wire, and many other unrelated outlets. She sometimes tweets about mostly geeky stuff at @MMDeliee.

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