

Evaluating Muslims in KidLit: A Guide for Librarians, Educators, & Reviewers

by Mahasin and Ariana

In 2019, [the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin](#) received 3,717 children's and young adult books from publishers. Of those books 45 (1.2%) were "tagged" with a Muslim diversity subject, but were not evaluated for quality or accuracy of representation.

When looking at Muslim representation in media, children's literature is often the first exposure that children have to Muslims and Islam. In creating this understanding, it is important to be deliberate in combating tropes and stereotypes that deal in disinformation, fear-mongering, and histories rooted in [orientalism](#) (as coined by scholar [Edward Said](#)), colonialism and white supremacy.

Part I of this guide identifies resources for learning more about Muslim Americans while providing context for media representation, while Part II offers guiding questions for reflection and analysis of collections and individual works.

Part I: Recommended Resources

Muslims in Story: Expanding Multicultural Understanding Through Children's and Young Adult Literature

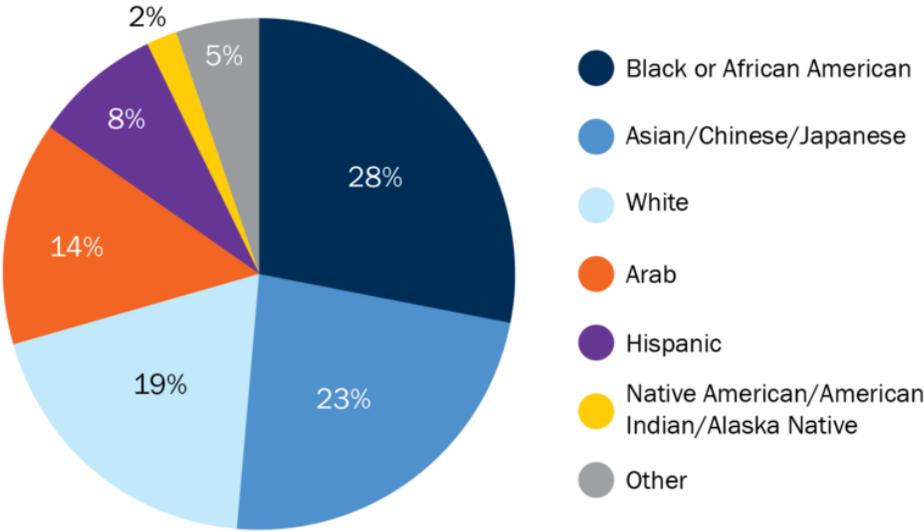
When considering collection development of books featuring Muslim characters, Gauri Manglik and Sadaf Siddique's (of [Kitaab World](#)) [Muslims in Story: Expanding Multicultural Understanding Through Children's and Young Adult Literature](#) (2018) is a comprehensive guide to selecting books, essential for libraries.

Muslims in Story provides an overview of Muslims in America, Islamophobia and its impact, and how literature can be used to promote long-term systemic change. The second part provides book lists and programming ideas, with books categorized by theme. The appendices include frequently asked questions, suggested guidelines for book evaluation, a timeline of Muslims in America, a glossary of terms, and additional resources.

Institute for Social Policy and Understanding's [American Muslims 101](#)

Understanding who Muslims and Muslim Americans are, how they practice Islam, and what challenges their communities face, are important components to knowing and serving Muslim populations, and in bringing a critical lens to evaluating books featuring Muslim characters. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is a valuable tool. It provides current statistics and infographics about Muslim Americans and issues affecting them.

Muslims Most Ethnically Diverse Faith Community



Are you of Hispanic origin or background? Do you consider yourself White, Black or African American, Asian, Arab, Native American, Pacific Islander, mixed race or some other race? Base: Total Muslim respondents, 2019

Half of American Muslims Are Native Born

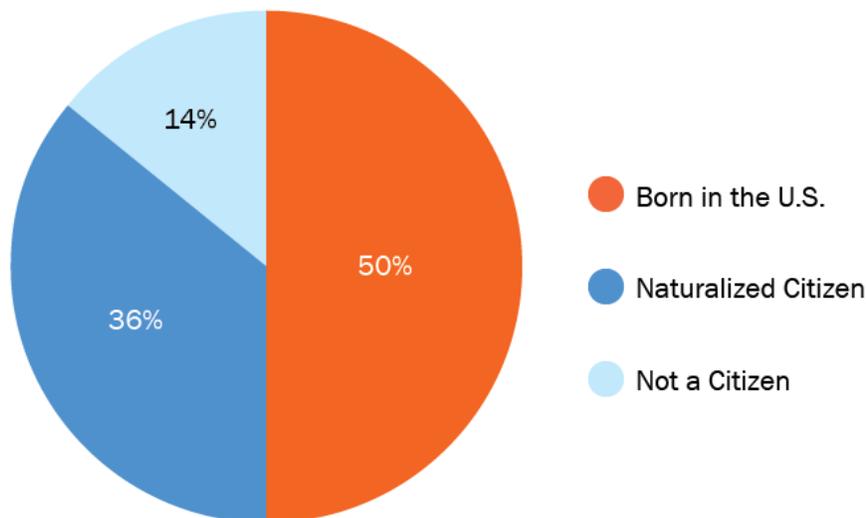


FIGURE 12 (PART 2): *Were you born in the United States, or not?* Base: Total Muslim respondents, 2017; *Are you a citizen of the United States, or not?* Base: Total Muslim respondents who were not born in the U.S. or don't know/refused to say if they were born in the U.S., 2017

The Riz Test

Like the [Bechdel–Wallace test](#) on women in movies and media, the [Riz Test](#) identifies problems in representation, bias, and lazy storytelling that depicts Muslims as simplistic, and lacking dimension and humanity. Named for actor Riz Ahmed's 2017 speech to the House of Commons in the United Kingdom, which addressed diversity on screen, and identified stereotypes and tropes associated with Muslims in the media.

The Test:

If the film/show stars at least one character who is identifiably Muslim (by ethnicity, language or clothing) - is the character...

1. *Talking about, the victim of, or the perpetrator of terrorism?*
2. *Presented as irrationally angry?*
3. *Presented as superstitious, culturally backwards or anti-modern?*
4. *Presented as a threat to a Western way of life?*

5. *If the character is male, is he presented as misogynistic? or if female, is she presented as oppressed by her male counterparts?*

If the answer for any of the above is Yes, then the film/ TV show fails the test.

When credence is given to Muslims consulting on media as part of the creative process, from sensitivity readers, bloggers, #ownvoice reviews, and organizations such as the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) [Hollywood Bureau](#), stories become more nuanced and a better reflection of the diversity that exists within the Muslim community. MPAC Hollywood also has their own [Obeidi-Alsultany](#) test looking at Muslim representation in media with guidance towards building complexity in Muslim representation in characters and storylines.

The Obeidi-Alsultany Test:

1. *The project that includes a Muslim character(s) does not reproduce or reinvent old tropes but rather explores new stories and contexts.*
2. *The project that includes Muslim character(s) has a Muslim-identifying writer on staff to ensure that Muslim cultures, religion, characters and storylines are being portrayed accurately and authentically.*
3. *The Muslim character(s) is not solely defined by their religion. Religion can be part of the character's backstory but should not be their entire story. Muslim culture and faith should be accurately delineated.*
4. *The Muslim character(s) has a strong presence and the character(s) is essential to the story arc and has a rich and clearly defined backstory.*
5. *The Muslim character(s) is portrayed with diverse backgrounds and identities.*

Additional Framework to Consider

Naming stereotypes allows for the deconstruction of bigotry and actively combating harm. Tools like [Jewel Davis' guide to fantasy worlds](#) establish a framework for evaluating "elements of racial and ethnic diversity in speculative fiction and media." The Teaching for Change: Social Justice Books' [Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books by Louise Derman-Sparks](#), prompts viewers to look for stereotypes, question normalized biases, commonly used language, and power dynamics between groups of people in illustrations, storylines and relationships. [HarperCollins: Shake Up Your Shelves](#) has additional guiding questions, written by educator and scholar of children's literature, [Autumn Allen](#), and tools for collection evaluation, audit, and retiring problematic books. Matthew Salesses', Korean American fiction writer, essayist, and Assistant Professor of Creative Writing in the MFA/PhD program at Oklahoma State University, book [Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping](#), interrogates how the structure of the writing workshop and literary canon is informed by the "white gaze," specifically that of white male writers, and how these structures affect what is considered valid

literary progression and storytelling. His article 25 Essential Notes on Craft can be found on [Lithub](#).

Similarly, Part II of our toolkit lists guiding questions that disrupts common tropes by looking at collections holistically and at individual works.

Part II: Guiding Questions for Individual Works and Overall Collections

Librarians and educators must take a holistic look at their collections to determine what trends of representation exist therein, and in consideration of publishing trends, collections should not perpetuate a single narrative or experience. Yet, it is simplistic to view books as simply “good” or “bad”, much like the characters that are depicted within them. When doing reader’s advisory and recommending books, librarians must be mindful that just because Muslims are present in a work, does not mean that the work will speak to every Muslim’s experience.

It is important that all Muslims, particularly those whose voices are less often heard, are able to write their own stories, and that publishers expand the number of books and voices being published. Authentic, intersectional stories, even those stories that might be considered controversial, or don’t present Muslims in the best light, represent the complexity of the Muslim experience. Still, the power of stories to affect the lives of Muslims necessitates thoughtful reflection. As one individual cannot speak for an entire community, one book cannot and will not represent one group of Muslims. We hope that this toolkit will be used to further thoughtful conversations about representation of Muslims and Islam in children's and young adult literature.

Question for Overall Collection Development:

- **How many books about Muslims in your collection are written by Muslim authors?**
- **Visually, is there only one type of identity marker for Muslims?** *Is this identity marker the headscarf? Is it only referred to as “hijab”?*
- **Is there gender diversity?** *Are Muslim boys and men visible or erased?*
- **Do Muslims only show up in one type of narrative?** *Is there a dominant narrative?*
- **Is the diversity of the Muslim community demonstrated?** *Does one group dominate? Are any Muslims from multiple heritage backgrounds? Does your collection have books [by and about Black Muslims](#)? Who are the Muslims in your biography section?*
- **Are stories intersectional?** *Are there Muslims from different heritage backgrounds interacting? How are different aspects of a character’s identity (i.e. ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender identity, ability) explored?*
- **Are all of your books published by mainstream publishers?** *Many Muslim voices have little or no representation in mainstream publishing.*
- **Are all of your books told from a Sunni perspective or erase non-Sunni practices and communities?** *Are Shi’a communities and other Muslim minority communities represented and named?*
- **How many of your books feature Muslims as background or side characters as opposed to protagonists?** *Do they have any speaking lines or agency in action? Are racial and/or ethnic identities specified or ambiguous?*

- **Who are the love interests?** *Are love interests only white and/or non-Muslim? Are love interests only from racial or ethnic in-groups? Are character features/points of attraction Eurocentric?*

Questions to ask when evaluating Muslim representation in an individual book:

- **Does the work reflect an understanding of Islam’s own intellectual tradition?** *Are topics viewed from a Christian gaze of spirituality, cultural, or faith practices or vis-a-vis secular humanist norms? What sources are centered and how does this affect the reader’s understanding of Islam and Muslims?*
- **How is the “West” represented? Is the U.S. the savior nation?** *Does the book triumph an unquestioned American exceptionalism narrative?*
- **Do characters and depicted communities have agency, or are they portrayed as victims of forces beyond their control?**
- **Does the work reflect an understanding of the complex history of predominately Muslim countries?** *Example: Are Muslim countries depicted as being impoverished, juxtaposed with Western nations being modern and functional?*
- **How is religiosity portrayed?** *Is there nuance when it comes to the practice of Islam? Does the narrative set up a false moral binary between religious and less practicing or secular characters? Is religious practice used to indicate negative and/or archaic views?*
- **Are Muslim characters multi-dimensional?**
- **Does the work conflate culture with Islam or universalize a particular Muslim experience or heritage?** *For example, are Arab and/or South Asian cultural practices presented as universal norms for all Muslims? Does the text imply that Muslim cultures are all the same?*
- **Beyond sharing Muslim identity or heritage, does the author’s own lived experience speak to other parts of a character’s identity?** *Is the author’s religious identity being conflated with cultural and/or ethnic heritage?*
- **Where appropriate, is there backmatter that explains and differentiates religious practices, especially where they are unique to particular cultures?** *Are cultural and religious concepts presented and explained in a way that is developmentally appropriate?*

What are further questions that you would consider or wonder about?