



The Boy at the Back of the Class

by Onjali Q. Rauf

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(296 pages)

NOVEL STUDY

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SUMMARY

This story is about the arrival of Ahmet, a nine-year old refugee child from Syria who joins an ordinary primary school in London. The narrator and her friends are curious about the new boy at the back of the class and make it their mission to become friends with him. This mission, however, encounters many twists and turns as the four friends learn more about Ahmet's past and tackle bullies and bigotry. Before long, all five children are caught up in a very public adventure as they follow the 'Greatest Idea in the World' in order to fight for justice for Ahmet.

The themes within this book are complex and sensitive therefore it is more suited to children in the upper end of KS2 who will enjoy discussing the issues at depth. It is a useful tool to stimulate discussion, especially within schools or communities who regularly welcome children and families who have either chosen or have been forced to leave their country of birth.

The book has 26 short chapters.

CHARACTER REVIEW

Alexa (*remains nameless through much of the story causing the reader to question gender stereotypes – the study questions below reflect this*)

Ahmet

Tom

Michael

Josie

Alexa's mum

Various adults: teachers, parents, extended family, neighbours

SEL THEMES IN THE BOOK

- Prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination
- Celebrating difference and uniqueness
- Justice and fairness
- Relationships – family and friends
- Transitions – changes in life
- Problem solving
- The Golden Rule
- Feelings



STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter 1

- **How does the author portray friendship in this chapter? Find evidence to support your answer.** *Close bond between the friends – playing, sharing, helping. Each friend is celebrated for their unique qualities. Josie shows loyalty to the main character.*

Chapter 2

- **What influence does gossip have in the school? Focus on the character of Jennie and effect of rumours on children in school.**
- **Have you experienced the effects of gossip? Take children's responses. You may want to share an experience of your own.**

Chapter 3

- **How is Ahmet feeling throughout this chapter? Find evidence to support your answer.** *Nervous, worried, curious, interested, confused, lonely, sad, scared. Discuss experiences of travelling to a new place, starting a new school etc.*

Chapter 4

- **How do Mr Brown's and Mrs Grimsby's views on refugees differ? Children to look at dialogue for evidence of different views. Ask children what they think about these different views. Have they heard similar views elsewhere? How would a refugee feel if they heard each adult discussing their view?**

Chapter 5

- **How does the author show that there is a close relationship between the main character and their mum? Trusts mum, admires mum, we realise that main character and mum are only ones living in flat because dad has died, they have special 'Adventure Days' together, mum tucks main character into bed – this makes them feel very safe and loved.**
- **Mum says, 'The world has never been kind to refugees' (p.45). What does she mean by this? Take children's responses.**

Activity

- **Research** - Carry out research into different refugee crises throughout history. Children could do this in pairs or groups of four using the cooperative learning roles.

Chapter 6

- **Even though Ahmet does not speak English, he communicates with the main character. How does he do this? Staring, nodding, smiling eyes even when mouth is not smiling. Discuss importance of reading non-verbal clues when communicating with someone, especially someone who does not speak the same language as you.**

Chapter 7

- **Why do you think Brendan chooses to bully the group playing football?** *Perhaps he is feeling jealous – Ahmet and Josie are very good at football and the group look like they're having fun.*

Brendan is perhaps threatened by Ahmet as a new boy in school. Discuss how these sometimes-uncomfortable feelings can lead to not ok aggressive behaviours.

Chapter 8

- **The main character's mum says, 'You should never be horrible to someone who's being horrible to you... otherwise they win by making you just as bad as them'. Do you agree/disagree? Why?** *Take children's responses. Discuss how hard it is to remain polite, respectful and kind to someone who has been mean to you. What SEL strategies can help with this?*

Chapter 9

- **Why do you think Ahmet reacts to Brendan in this way (p.95)?** *Take children's responses. Discuss Ahmet's past – he may have seen more violence than other children. He may also have a lot of pent up emotions; he cannot easily talk about his feelings to let them out as he cannot speak the same language as most other people in the school and has also been through a lot of struggles. Sometimes pent up emotions can lead to aggression.*

Chapter 10

- **How do you think the class feel as they listen to Ahmet's story? How does it make you feel as the reader?** *Take children's responses. Discuss the fact that the events must have been very traumatic for Ahmet.*

Chapter 11

- **Describe the main character's Uncle Lenny.** *Kind, funny, loyal, generous. Discuss the impact that Uncle Lenny has had on the main character's life since losing their dad. Compare his response to the other people described as being at the funeral.*

Chapter 12

- **What has happened to Ahmet's family? How does finding this out make the main character feel?** *Ahmet does not know where his mum and dad are and his younger sister died during the boat crossing to Greece. This makes the main character feel shocked, worried, sad, frightened, sympathetic, determined to help.*

Chapter 13

- **Why was Ms Hemsî pleased when she knew Ahmet had told the main character about his family?** *She was pleased because Ahmet is opening up and talking about his past. He has found a friend he trusts enough to do this with. Talking to other children about what happened might let some of his uncomfortable feelings out.*

Chapter 14

- **How might they solve Ahmet's problem?** *Take children's ideas*



Activity

Problem-solving - Use the 11-step problem-solving chart to create a plan the children could use to help Ahmet.. You may want to split class into pairs or small groups for planning.

Chapter 15

- **Do you think the main character's idea will work? Why/why not? Take children's responses.** Discuss possible consequences of plan.

Chapter 16

- **The narrator says, 'Sometimes a thought is so big that it can't squeeze all of itself into my head no matter how hard I try, and the more I try, the more it makes my head ache' (p. 171). Have you ever felt like this? Why do you think the main character is feeling like this at this point in the story? Take children's responses.** At this point, the main character is feeling a mix of comfortable and uncomfortable feelings – excited, determined to help, confident in the plan but also worried about Ahmet, nervous about carrying out the plan and scared in case it doesn't work. This mix of feelings might be a bit overwhelming and may be causing the headache. How could the main character calm down?

Chapter 17

- **How do the group's feelings change over this chapter? Plot them on a feelings graph.** Excited – worried – determined – excited/nervous. Could also freeze frame characters at different points.

Chapter 18

- **Do you think the group's plan will have a positive outcome? Why/why not? Take children's responses.** Discuss possible consequences of plan.

Chapter 19

- **P.209 – How is the main character feeling? Have you ever felt like this? What SEL strategies could be used? Extremely frightened.** Take children's responses. You may want to share an experience of your own. The character could take a deep breath.

Chapter 20

- **What clues are there towards the end of the chapter that the children's adventure might be well-known?**
 - 'In the distance I could hear people cheering'.
 - Special police escort home.
 - 'Oh, I think she'll know you came alright'.
 - 'You might even be a little bit famous!'

Chapter 21

- **'Despicable man!' muttered Mum, clicking the extra bolt on the door shut. 'With his dinner jackets and silly neckerchiefs trying to cover up his bigotry'. (p.227). What does 'bigotry' mean? How does Mr Greggs show this? What is the opposite of this? Class discussion.** Perhaps use a dictionary and thesaurus – link to similar concepts such as discrimination, bias, injustice. Explore opposite concepts such as tolerance, open-mindedness, respect for all.



Activity

- List the qualities that make you unique and therefore special.

Chapter 22

- How does the main character describe being scared? Do you agree? Can you think of any other types of feeling scared? Main character describes only two types of scared. Take children's responses – e.g. excited/nervous and scared at the same time?

Chapter 23

- What were the consequences for all the children involved in the fight? Taken to the headteacher's office, told off and given a week of detention. Brendan, Liam and Chris given two weeks of detention and a phone call home.
- Do you think these consequences are fair? Why/why not? Class discussion.

Chapter 24

- The friends and their parents bring attention to their story to make sure the right voices are being heard. What issues would you like to shine a light on? How would you do this? Class discussion.

Chapter 25

- The Queen says, 'Lots of people from all over the world are working together to try and locate his family'. Who are these people working to help refugees? What do they do? Take children's responses. Discuss roles of charities, volunteers, UN, politicians etc.

Activity

- **Research** - Carry out research into these charities/organisations in groups.

Chapter 26

- How have the lives of the five friends changed since the beginning of the story? Class discussion.

Activity

- **Literacy Activity** - Choose three characters from the story. Write down a question you would like to ask each of them.

Additional Study Question (p.301)

- If you had to flee from a war and leave your house and school behind forever, what three things would you take with you?
- If you had to go to another country where no-one could speak your language, what would you like people to do to help you understand them better?
- Have you ever read any newspaper stories about refugees or heard people talking about them? What words did they use to describe refugees, and how did they make you feel?
- What do you think should be done to help stop the refugee crisis – and who would you ask to help?
- If you could be famous and on the news for a single day, what action would it be for?