

Review of “The Weight of Our Sky” by Hanna Alkaf

Why I Chose It: Guy Shield’s cover illustration immediately plunges the reader into a setting rich with flames, gunfire, dangerous terrain, and teen protagonists. What young adult reader could resist this mixture of elements, making it a perfect choice for class discussion or independent reading. The back cover excerpt from the text further pulls the reader in, a stream of consciousness in which the protagonist wants to tell her friend about the fears she faces, but is afraid such revelation will bring rejection.

These fears involve djinn or spirits that can be good or bad, whom she keeps at bay by counting and tapping rituals, or in some cases, by employing diversionary tactics like looking at records. The excerpt cleverly connects to the rhythm of teens’ communication with friends in real life, being told confidences yet fearful this might cause the loss of friendships, so essential to them.

The flip jacket excerpt of “Melati Ahmad has imagined her mother’s death countless times” is one that sadly will resonate with many anxious readers of any age. While not every reader is haunted by djinn, the rituals Melati uses to cope with her fears are ones that teen readers may know already. They may have friends with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and/or had discussions about mental health in school.

What may not be familiar to readers are the events of May 13, 1969 during which the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur experienced race riots between its Malay and Chinese population. Despite what may be an unfamiliar time and place for this story, racial tensions, riots, looting, curfews, and the need to be with family during political strife are increasingly common even in America. Readers will also connect with author Hanna Alkaf who describes herself as “making things up as she goes along, both as fiction writer and as a mom.”

What I like about it: Using interior monologue and voicing the fears every vulnerable teen on the cusp of adulthood feels, this story opens the way for facilitated talk about the reality of such fears given the violence, natural disasters, infighting, riots, curfews, and ethnic tensions in the world today. The metaphoric weight of the sky presses down on children and young adults who have a level of insight into their reality that parents might lack. The chance to see how these fears are reasonable in some way plays out against the actuality of what teens can do to cope, an important part of this book.

Melati Ahmad, a 16-year-old student, has obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), a diagnosable mental health condition. Despite its recognition by mental health specialists who are familiar with coping mechanisms, peer prejudice and bullying responses to this condition can occur during school and social interaction. The initial response that even Melati’s mother had-fear that her beloved daughter needs a healer to eradicate the djinn-is sadly comprehensible for some OCD teens.

The author's use of a djinn figure allows her to personalize voices within a consciousness, creating a means to talk about family and community responses. Melati literally fights with her own djinn, but learns how through voluntarism, especially helping others to deal with violence and fear, she ironically helps herself. Readers thus can identify a straight and proactive path for getting beyond teen compulsions to community service.

Set in a divided capital city polarized by ethnic distrust, this book illustrates how the absence of actual interaction among Malay and Chinese youth fueled misconceptions about one another. After a terrorist attack at the Rex Movie theater, Melati, who is Malay, gets to interact on an interpersonal level with Vince, an ethnic Chinese college student. They find a shared love of music, helping others, and empathy for community that will dissolve the barriers created by racial division. The plot widens to involve their families connecting through experiences of survival, community support, and optimism, interactions so needed in our polarized society today.

Melati does survive the attack, while her best friend Safiyah dies. She blames herself and suffers with survivor guilt, something more prevalent among young adults today given Covid and mass shootings. Hanna Alkaf's ending shows Melati Ahmad coming to terms with this guilt, but also notes realistically that it will be a part of her life from now on. Finally, elements of 1969 counterculture including Beatles songs like "All you need is love" and others by Paul McCartney encourage teen readers to access to this work, one rich in mental health, survival, voluntarism, community strength, coping, and resilience skills.

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