

### **“The boy at the back of the class” by Onjali Q. Rauf. A children’s book review.**

In March 2022 I found myself wandering around Waterstone’s with my two boys, looking for books to buy with their World Book Day tokens. Russia had not long invaded Ukraine, and like many people, I had watched too much news and read too much on the internet; I was starting to have recurring, disturbing dreams about being stuck in a basement with nothing to feed to my children. It was in this context that “The boy at the back of the class” caught my eye in the bookshop’s children’s section. After reading the blurb on the back, I decided to buy it (with all my own money) to read to the boys.

My thinking of course, was that the subject of refugees and asylum seekers, could hardly be more relevant at that point, and clearly not just because of the war in Ukraine. (Little did I know that by the time I actually got round to reading the book, “Stop the boats” would be the mantra coming out of the Home Office). I thought that this could be a helpful read in terms of encouraging my kids to ask questions, and to begin to sort out their thoughts on the subject of war, and its ramifications. Perhaps we could discuss why some fleeing war or persecution have to risk getting into small boats, and others don’t. All in a safe space with their somewhat frazzled mother. Excellent plan.

And then, of course, I didn’t quite find the time to read it, (I know, parent fail), and the book sat in a pile, waiting for its moment. That moment did come though, during the 2023 Easter holidays.

Suitable for children of approximately eight to eleven years old, and told through the eyes of a nine-year-old, about whom we only slowly discover details as the book unfolds\*, “The boy at the back of the class” is the story of a Syrian refugee boy, Ahmet, who arrives at an urban UK primary school one day, and who initially seems very mysterious to his classmates, particularly as he doesn’t speak, or come out into the playground at break or lunchtime. The narrator is, of course, curious, and along with their three best friends, is determined to get to know him, and all about him.

Alongside the routine of going to school every day, the story includes, amongst other things, a weekend search for a pomegranate to give as a gift, a plan to reunite Ahmet with his family, a big playground fight, an even bigger adventure that involves the Queen (the now late Queen Elizabeth II, of course), a ride in a police car, and some success in putting the school bully finally in his place – yay!

There are some very emotional moments in the book, be warned, which caused both my boys to look at me simultaneously, as they could hear the change in my voice as I read. “I know cats don’t like water because Josie has a cat and she says it screams whenever it rains and always wants to stay inside. So maybe Ahmet’s cat didn’t want to get into the boat. And maybe his sister didn’t want to leave it behind, so she stayed behind to look after it”. My boys, now twelve and fourteen knew what this implied straight away; younger children, of course, wouldn’t. It is dealt with carefully later.

There are some beautiful, funny, heart-warming moments too though, and some very cute illustrations. Though my boys are a bit too old for the book really, (another reason why I should have read it a year earlier than I did), they both still loved the cringe moments such as when the class greets Ms Hemsî, the new classroom assistant, with “Good moor-ning Miss Hemseeeeeeee!” (We’ve all been there). They both asked questions as we went along, so my mission, set out in paragraph two, was at least partly accomplished, and they both wanted to hear how the story ended.

The author certainly has skill in writing in a simple, descriptive way, reminiscent of how children explain situations, and articulate their thoughts. “We’re not supposed to disturb teachers in the staff

room at break-time, because that's where they go to drink lots of tea and find answers to questions that they can't find in their answer-books". I found the style of writing to be very convincing.

However, there was a sprinkling of typos in the book, and some occasional dubious grammar, which annoyed me a bit as the responsible grown up in the room, and made me wonder, briefly, what on earth proof-readers do these days, but it didn't spoil my overall enjoyment of the story.

I would certainly recommend this book to younger readers, and their grown-ups, either to read alone or out loud. There is lots in here that primary school-aged children can relate to. It is fast paced, yet at the same time filled with lots of lovely description. There's plenty of talk about lemon sherberts, dinosaur stickers, and stationery sets, and a scene which acknowledges how big a big, heavy world atlas can seem to a nine-year-old, and there is a proper and nerve-wracking (if you're nine) adventure at the core of the story.

It's not immediately obvious that the Queen will play such a significant (though largely passive) role in steering the course of the second part of the story. "Michael was right: the Greatest Idea in the World would only work if the Queen was at home". Staunch republicans might decide to give the book a miss on this basis, I guess, but then they would miss out on lots of learning points, like who exactly the Coldstream Guards are, and how to deal with the world's media if you ever found them camped outside your gates.

The TES review says "The book begs the reader to keep reading, but is also one that opens up a dialogue that we need to be having with our young people." And in a startling break with tradition, the Mail on Sunday declares "Utterly delightful, Rauf's book centres on the importance of friendship and encourages children not to fear those who are different."

At the end of the book there are some useful, easily digestible pieces of information about refugees, and some points for children to reflect on.

The author, [Onjali Q. Rauf](#), seems well equipped to write such a story. She is the founder of Making Herstory, an organisation mobilising men, women and children from all walks of life to tackle the abuse and trafficking of women and girls in the UK and beyond. She is also the founder of O's Refugee Aid Team, which provides support for refugee families surviving in Calais and Dunkirk. She has written other children's books that also tackle current day issues, one of which is a sequel to "The boy at the back of the class".

My boys did suggest that our next book should be aimed at slightly older readers, "please", so I have since scoured our local library's Young Adult (YA) section. I discovered that there's lots of angst to be found on the YA shelves – maybe some further book review material of the future, if I'm feeling brave. We're now reading [The Asparagus Bunch](#) "A funny, nourishing novel about three neurodiverse friends navigating life's challenges" which is going down well so far.

\*One point to mention is that the narrator's father is dead, and this is referred to periodically throughout the book.

**Kirsten Gill**