

HUDA AND ME

By H. Hayek

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 9-13 years old

Middle Grade Fiction, suited for Years 4-7, UPPER PRIMARY and LOWER SECONDARY

THEMES: Adventure, humour, identity, Lebanese culture, religion vs culture, what it means to be Australian, being Muslim in Australia, media bias and stereotypes, racism, siblings, travel, babysitters

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- **ENGLISH:** Literacy, literature and language
- **HASS:** Geography and History
- **HEALTH and WELLBEING**

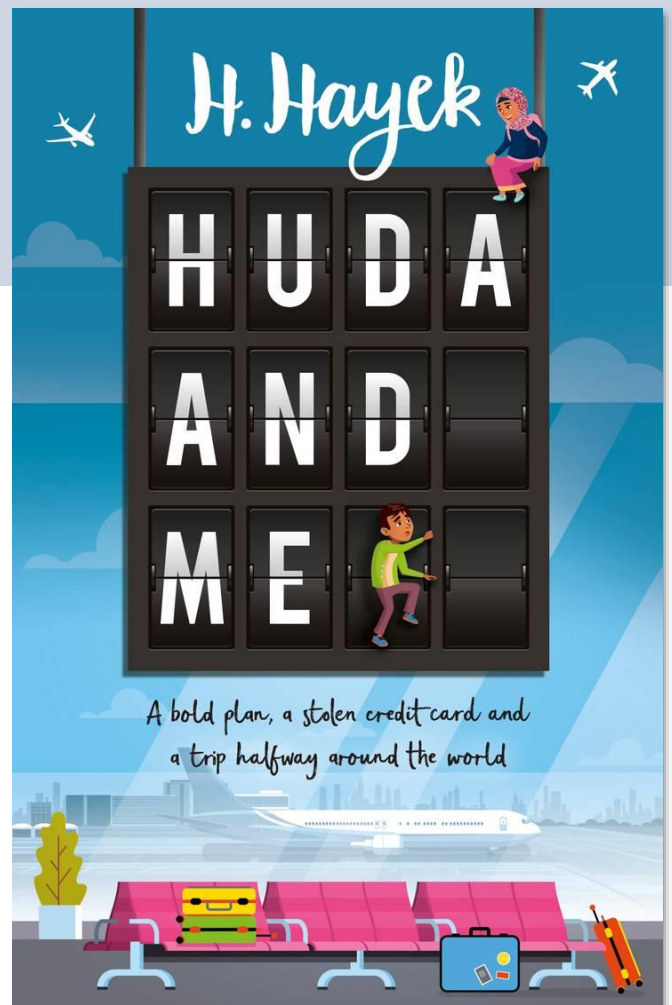
NOTES WRITTEN BY: H. Hayek

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INTRODUCTION

The triumph of *Huda and Me* is that there is no ‘othering’. The two main characters are totally relatable Aussies who just happen to be practising Muslims, and just happen to be wreaking revenge on a mean babysitter, albeit by taking a drastic but hilarious course of action. The aspects of the story that will be unfamiliar to some readers – for instance Akeal performing his wudu (ritual washing) in an airport bathroom – are often used as important components of well-constructed comic scenes. In this way, they enlighten as well as amuse – and do the work of any good piece of fiction: they take you into a new world and help you walk in the shoes of others.

Stories about ‘everyday’ Australian Muslim kids are rare, and there is much to learn in this text, though never in a heavy-handed – or worse still, preachy – way. Likewise, the text deals with racism in a gentle but effective way, when Huda is bullied on the plane for wearing a hijab. This bullying is done by the very same boy who, not an hour earlier, met Akeal separately and was very friendly towards him – not having realised Akeal is Muslim. The harm the boy’s action causes to both Huda and Akeal is gently but firmly communicated, as is the ignorance behind it. Akeal confronts the boy, whose initial ‘sorry not sorry’ apology is clearly inappropriate. The story follows through beyond this, with the boy turning up again later in the story to support Huda and Akeal, in a smart and satisfying twist executed with a beautifully light touch. It is clear the boy has learned from his mistake, and that this does not erase his earlier behaviour or its effects, but that it is, at least, a start. These scenes were shaped with the perspective and well-being of young readers who may find themselves in Huda’s or Akeal’s position front and centre.

STORY SUMMARY

When their parents travel to Beirut unexpectedly, twelve-year-old Akeal and his six siblings are horrified to be left behind in Melbourne with the dreaded Aunt Amel as their babysitter. Things do not go well, and Akeal’s naughty little sister, Huda, hatches a bold plan to escape. After stealing Aunt Amel’s credit card to buy plane tickets to Lebanon, Huda persuades her reluctant favourite brother to come with her. So begins Huda and Akeal’s hair-raising and action-packed journey to reunite with their parents half a world away, in a city they’ve grown up dreaming about but have never seen.

A fresh and funny story of sibling love, adventure and courage, *Huda and Me* is one of a kind.

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR, H. HAYEK

1. What themes do you think capture the essence of *Huda and Me*?

The major essence of this book is the strong bond between the two siblings – warts and all. It also explores a variety of other themes including what it means to be Australian and Australian-Muslim, ideas of belonging, family, and overcoming challenges like racism and responding to racism.

2. What do you see as the outstanding features of the book?

The characters in this book, their backgrounds, their family, their ‘everyday’ are different to many other children’s book characters. Huda and Akeal are normal Aussie kids, but they have the added layers of religion, culture and a massive family.

In addition to this, the wild plane adventure they embark upon – which is crazy in itself – where they

end up in Lebanon, while attempting to solve their own problem, is both daring and adventurous.

3. What was your inspiration for writing this story?

The main inspiration behind the book is my own family. As one of the younger siblings, growing up I was often told about the funny, naughty and annoying things I did when I was little. My siblings still laugh at the things I got myself into. A lot of the time, I thought I was being helpful or ‘good’, when really all I was doing was causing a disaster.

I loved the idea of having characters who have the same background as me. It isn’t something I’ve seen before, and I know there are kids out there who would love to read about kids just like them. Being different can sometimes make a person feel that ‘difference’ is a bad thing. I wanted this book to embrace difference and show how it can actually be amazing and lead to incredible things.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

ENGLISH: LITERACY, LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

Comprehension Questions

Chapter One

- Who is the narrator of this story?
- Why are he and his sister, Huda, at the airport?
- What has Huda packed in her bag?
- What has Huda done to get them to this point?
- Why does Akeal think he and his sister are 'dead' at the end of the first chapter?

Chapter Two

- How do Akeal and Huda know Mr Kostiki?
- How many brothers and sisters do they have?
- Why are Akeal and his brothers and sisters happy when their parents first say they are going to Lebanon?
- Why are they even happier when they realise only their parents are going to Lebanon?
- Who is coming to look after them while their parents are away, and how do the kids feel about this?

Literary Exercise – Verb Tense

Define the term 'verb tense'. What verb tense does the author use in the first chapter, which is set in the departure lounge at Melbourne Airport? Does the verb tense change in the next chapter, set one week earlier? Why do you think the author chose to alternate verb tenses throughout the story? [Hint: present tense creates a sense of immediacy and drama, because we learn what is happening at the same time as the characters in the story.]

Characterisation

- Who do you think is the braver and more confident character leading up to the chapter 'Turbulence' – Akeal or Huda? Support your answer with specific incidents from the story.
- Did your opinion change after reading the 'Turbulence' chapter? Explain what happened in this chapter that might have changed your view about each of them.
- Read the quote below and explain in your own words what you think their mum meant when she said this about Huda and Akeal, and which events in the story later prove she was correct:

...you mark my words, Huda and Akeal have a bond like no one else in the family. One day we're all going to see how, together, they are unstoppable. Page 9

- Read the first three chapters, 'The Airport', 'Party's Over' and 'The Aeroplane'. As a class, briefly discuss the notable differences between Huda and Akeal.

Use Worksheet 1 to compare Huda's main characteristics with Akeal's. Include evidence from the text, e.g. Akeal is fearful – *'I want to spew. My back is sweaty and my singlet clings to my skin.'*

Students can then share their lists and the main differences between Huda and Akeal with the rest of the class.

- Consider the strategies the author used to develop these characters: Did the author use humour to show Huda's poor reading skills? How do we know Akeal is less confident than his sister? Does Akeal like to break the rules? How do we know this? Huda jumps between emotions when Red Tooth (Miss Rosetta) takes the passports/tickets and leaves to call the parents. Why has the author done this? What does it show?
- Write a paragraph about a time you felt brave and confident, like Huda, and a time you felt anxious and worried, like Akeal.

Humour

Did you find *Huda and Me* a humorous book to read? What, in particular, did you find funny in the story? Can you find examples of things people said or did that made you laugh? Can you name any types of humour you found in the book? [Hint: the humour is quite slapstick when Akeal is performing wudu in the sink in the airport bathroom, and Aunt Amel is such an exaggerated character that what she says and does is farcical.] How might using humour help when writing a story that features stereotyping and racism?

Religion

Write a short definition for each of the following, having read Akeal describing each throughout the story:

- Hijab
- Wudu
- Mosque
- Call to prayer
- Kaaba
- Eid
- Jannah

HASS: GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Being Australian

- In a whole-class discussion, talk about what makes someone an Australian. Prompt students with questions such as:
 - Does your family need to come from a particular country to be Australian?
 - Whose families have always been in Australia, since the beginning of time?
 - Do you need to eat one particular food or wear a particular type of clothing?
 - Do you need to practise a particular religion?
- So, if it isn't heritage, food, clothes or religion, what sort of things do all Australians share?
- Break the class up into pairs. Remind students that aside from First Nations Australians, who are the first Australians, all other Australians came to this land from all around the world to make this country their home. Students can then interview each other to find out more about their classmate's backgrounds and cultures. Question students can ask:
 - Where were you born?
 - Where were your parents born?
 - Where were your grandparents born?
 - If your family has an immigrant history, do you know who in your family was first to come to Australia?
 - Which culture(s) do you resonate with the most?
 - What cultural celebrations and events do you take part in?

- Which cultures or parts of culture other than your own have you experienced? (This could be anything from Lunar New Year celebrations to having a friend who fasts in Ramadan.) What interests you most about these experiences?
- Once the interviews are complete, ask pairs of students to review *Huda and Me*, noting down their responses to share with the class. Which parts of the story resonated most for you? Could it have been phrases the characters use, descriptions in the book, or actions of the characters? Were there any parts of the novel that felt unfamiliar or new? Who would you likely be friends with, Huda or Akeal? Why?
- Would you say that Akeal and Huda are Australian? Why?
- Do you think you share more similarities or more differences with Akeal and Huda?

Lebanon

Conduct research into Lebanese migration in Australia and answer the following questions. Present your findings in pairs (either through a project poster, oral presentation, essay or PowerPoint presentation).

- Where is Lebanon situated on the map? Locate Lebanon using Google Earth. Using the map, locate the town where Huda and Akeal escaped to (Bare Elias, Beqaa Valley).
- What is Lebanon's capital?
- Which countries border Lebanon?
- What are its latitude and longitude coordinates?
- What are the major religions in Lebanon?
- What is Lebanon's population size, population density, life expectancy, and per-capita income compared to other countries in the Middle East/Asia and Australia?
- How do people live in Lebanon (considering their income) compared to Australia?
- Describe some of the social and/or cultural traits of Lebanon and the Lebanese people.

Useful websites:

<https://kids.kiddle.co/Lebanon>

<https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Lebanon/345725>

<https://kidskonnnect.com/places/lebanon/>

<https://wiki.kidzsearch.com/wiki/Lebanon>

Lebanese People in Australia

- Have you seen any Lebanese social and/or cultural traits here in Australia? If so, where and how?
- Why did so many people decide to leave Lebanon during the civil war?
- How many Lebanese people have settled in Australia since 1975?
- What contributions have Lebanese people made to Australia and Australian culture?

Consider how Lebanese–Australians may have been positively impacted by Lebanese culture. (This could be through food, music, friends, cafes, and people in popular culture or politics). In groups, ask students to present their findings to the class (or present the information in a short essay).

- Consider what Akeal says on page 36: *I wonder why I feel like it's where I belong, when I know Melbourne is home.* Why do you think Akeal feels this way about Lebanon? Once he and Huda arrive in Beirut, do you think they feel completely at home? What are some of the things they enjoy about Lebanon? What are some of the things they find challenging about it?

Muslims in Australia – Religion vs Culture

- Open a discussion on the difference between culture and religion. Huda and Akeal are Lebanese, but also Muslim – what does this mean? Ask students what they know about Islam (essentially, guide students to the understanding that Muslims live across the globe and can be from any culture or country, e.g. a person can be Lebanese–Muslim, Somali–Muslim, Indian–Muslim, American–Muslim, Turkish–Muslim etc).
- Conduct some online research into the first Muslims in Australia: the cameleers:
<http://naa.gov.au/collection/snapshots/uncommon-lives/muslim-journeys/index.aspx>
 - Who were the cameleers?
 - When did the first cameleers arrive in Australia?
 - Why did they settle in Australia?
 - What influence on or changes to Australia did the cameleers make at the time?

Note for teachers: The early cameleers and hawkers were practising Muslims, in spite of living in a Christian society not attuned to the rhythms, customs and religious traditions of their homelands. For most of the year they were solitary travellers, lacking the camaraderie and powerful sense of community or ummah that Islam bestows on its followers. There were no grand mosques for them to pray in shoulder-to-shoulder; no special Friday prayers or jumma with an imam to lead the prayer and deliver a sermon. Usually the camel men and hawkers performed their prayers five times daily out in the desert, the empty bushland, or the countryside.

Taken from: <http://naa.gov.au/collection/snapshots/uncommon-lives/muslim-journeys/stories.aspx>

- Put yourself in the shoes of a cameleer in 1900. Write a letter ‘back home’ detailing your experiences, trials and accomplishments as a cameleer.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

What Would You Do If You Were a Bystander?

Open the lesson with a discussion on racism. What does racism look like, sound like, and feel like? Why is it a problem?

- Reflect on the incident where Michael tries to grab Huda’s hijab and calls her a ‘little terrorist’. Michael has stereotyped Huda – that is to say, he has assumed that because she is wearing a hijab she is Muslim, and that all Muslims must be terrorists.
 - Is he correct? Did he do the same thing to Akeal when he met him in the airport bathroom? Why do you think he treated Huda one way and Akeal another? Would you like to be judged by others according to what you are wearing?
 - What other things do non-Muslims sometimes believe about Muslims that might be listed as stereotypes? Do Akeal and Huda (and indeed, their brothers and sisters) fit these stereotypes? Why might it be wrong to say all people who are Muslim (or from any other religion or culture) behave in one way only?
- Ask students to imagine that they are a bystander, waiting for the toilet at the front of the plane, and see this act of racism unfold.
 - Ask students to write a journal entry on what they would do as a bystander, when witnessing Michael mistreat Huda. Request that they write the journal entry in past tense, as if the incident took place earlier that day.

Stereotypes and Racism

- Consider this extract from the text:

'You hurt her. You judged her. You called her names that she isn't. We're not bad people, we're just getting on with stuff like everyone else. Next time you want to pick a fight with a little kid – think twice.'

...

'I said I was sorry.' Page 109

Do you think Akeal did the right thing confronting Michael on the plane? What might have happened if he hadn't done this? Is it fair that he was faced with this choice?

- Split students into pairs to consider these questions:
 - What are racial stereotypes?
 - How have you seen Arab and Muslim people represented in movies and on the news?
 - What role does the media have in influencing our opinions?
 - Share a range of general media reports and ask if there might be anything missing from the story, e.g. could there have been an earlier incident that caused the event but that is not mentioned in the news report?
 - Review the chapter 'Turbulence' (page 107). Ask students to imagine that they are a journalist on the same flight as the characters. The journalist witnesses Akeal (an Arab, Muslim boy) approach Michael (a white Australian boy, sitting on his own) on the plane. The journalist can't hear what is said but can see Akeal approach Michael, with Akeal's fists clenched and hostile body language throughout the pair's verbal exchange. The journalist then witnesses Michael hold one hand out in front of him and call out, 'I'm sorry.'
- Write a newspaper article about what you, the journalist, just saw. Make sure you write it based only on what you viewed in this exchange – remember you have no idea about what took place in the chapter called 'The Incident'.
- Once complete, discuss why stereotypes and bias may be present in media reporting.
 - What incident later in the story shows that Michael may have learned something from his encounter with Akeal and Huda on the plane? Since he's now apologised, do you think this makes what Michael did earlier okay – or not? How do you think you would react if someone judged you wrongly because of where you came from or the religion you practise?

Note to teachers: if time allows, consider introducing the 'Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes' exercise first developed by Jane Elliot in 1968. See <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/introduction-2/> for more information.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H. Hayek is the second-youngest of seven children, born to Lebanese–Australian parents. She was born in Adelaide, grew up in Perth and now lives in Melbourne. She struggled with reading and writing through her earliest years at school but knew from the time she was a little girl that she wanted to work with words. After completing a degree in Mass Communication she went on to graduate with a degree in Teaching. She has worked as a primary school teacher in Melbourne’s west and as a journalist. But above all, writing stories involving unique kids, with unique backgrounds, has been her passion. H. Hayek enjoys exploring themes of identity – what it means to be Australian, Muslim, and Lebanese. She also enjoys being a little bit mischievous.



IN THE WORDS OF THE AUTHOR

The idea for Akeal and Huda to run away to Lebanon came out of nowhere, but the horrible babysitter was based on a real person. When I was about five or six years old we had a family come stay with us for a little while: three bratty kids and their mum, who seemed to hate us. She wanted us to clean up after ourselves all the time (completely unfair, right?). All my siblings hated her. When she called out for us to clean, we would all scatter and hide – in the chicken coop, behind the rubbish bins, under the bed, anywhere to get away from her.

H. Hayek

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

The Dog Runner by Bren MacDibble

The January Stars by Kate Constable

Secrets of a Schoolyard Millionaire by Nat Amooore

The Good Thieves by Katherine Rundell

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A selection of blackline master profiling templates:

<https://www.literacyleader.com/sites/default/files/Character%20Graphic%20Organizers.pdf>

School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) Book review prompts, writing tips and assessment sample sheets:

<https://www.shelftalkers.slav.vic.edu.au/resources/>

WORKSHEET I: TRAIT COMPARISON

HUDA

AKEAL

Trait 1:

Trait 1:

Evidence	page	Evidence	page

Trait 2:

Trait 2:

Evidence	page	Evidence	page

Trait 3:

Trait 3:

Evidence	page	Evidence	page