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# WOW REVIEW

READING ACROSS CULTURES  
VOLUME XVII, ISSUE 1

Fall 2024  
Open Theme

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WOW Review: Volume XVII, Issue 1  
Fall 2024  
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## Introduction and Editor's Note

The U.S. public has just experienced a campaign characterized by name-calling, signaling that this behavior is acceptable if it wins elections. The books reviewed in this issue serve as a counter-narrative to this assumption, inviting readers to set aside labels and familiarize themselves with cultures that may differ from their own, but are rich in values and family traditions that have undergirded and guided people for generations.

In *The Spice Box*, several generations who have experienced moving to a new location use a traditional box of spices to cook, inviting others to share their meal as a means of feeling at home and making new friends. *A Crown for Corina* tells the story of a young girl collecting flowers for her birthday crown, choosing blooms that represent her history and that of each member of her extended family. In *These Olive Trees*, a grandmother and granddaughter collect seeds from their family orchard in Palestine, with the intention of planting a new orchard in their new country.

Kindness is critical to social and emotional well-being as we interact with each other, thoughtful kindness even more so as children learn to engage in discussions with people who may differ in cultures or abilities. *Say My Name* celebrates the cultures of various names, communicating pride in the origins of each name. The story of *When Charley Met Emma* gives readers a window into relationships where abilities may be quite different, but the desire to be friends and play together is the same. *Sister Friend* relates the ways in which one girl tries to connect with a new classmate at school, finally succeeding when they meet in a mosque.

These books also emphasize taking action and persevering in a way that benefits the entire community, not just serving a personal agenda. *The Undefeated* highlights the history of African American people who persevered in spite of circumstances and prejudice to make a mark in sports, arts, and politics, paving the way for others to contribute. *Sharice's Big Voice: A Native Kid Becomes a Congresswoman* is a picturebook biography of one of the first Indigenous women to be elected to the U.S. Congress. This issue concludes with two titles from Africa that highlight collective action. In *The Very Best Sukkah: A Story from Uganda*, a community comes together to repair a booth damaged before the Jewish celebration of Sukkot. Finally, *The Walking School Bus* tells the story of a brother and sister who desperately want to go to school and find a creative way to enable themselves and other children to walk safely to school.

We hope you read these titles with children to engage in discussions around thoughtful interactions and kindness.

**Volume 17, Issue 2 (Winter 2025 – submission deadline December 30, 2024)** – Sharing Space: Animal/Human Relationships, a themed issue on the relationships between humans and animals as they share spaces in the world (e.g., protection of endangered animals, relationships with pets, human/animal dynamics). The editors welcome reviews of fiction and nonfiction global or multicultural children's or young adult books published within the last three years that highlight intercultural understanding and global perspectives.

**Volume 17, Issue 3 (Spring 2025 – submission deadline February 15, 2025)** – Open theme. The editors welcome reviews of global or multicultural children’s or young adult books published within the last three years that highlight intercultural understanding and global perspectives.

**Volume 17, Issue 2 (Summer 2025 – submission deadline May 15, 2025)** – Community Collaboration, a themed issue on working together as a community to solve a problem. The editors welcome reviews of global or multicultural children’s or young adult books published within the last three years that highlight intercultural understanding and global perspectives.

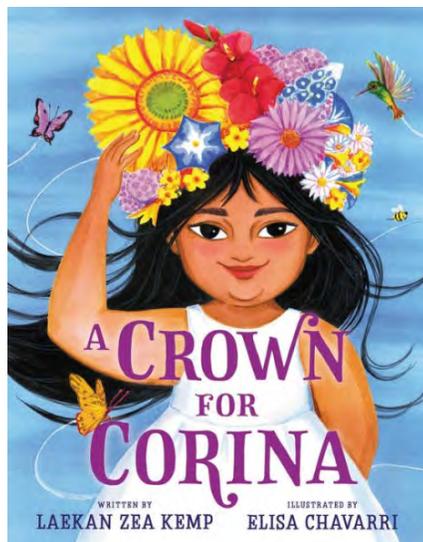
Susan Corapi, co-editor

María V. Acevedo-Aquino, co-editor

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***A Crown for Corina***

Written by Laekan Zea Kemp

Illustrated by Elisa Chavarri

Little, Brown and Company, 2023, 36 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-0759556843

A young girl named Corina ready for her birthday celebration by joining her Abuela in the garden to make a beautiful corona for her special day. She runs through the garden, taking in the beautiful colors and smells and picking flowers that connect to memories of her family. As Corina weaves her crown together with flowers representing her family, her Abuela reminds her that she must also select flowers to tell the story of who she wants to be. When she touches the completed crown on her head, she remembers her story,

her mother's story, and her Abuela's story. Corina is excited to share her story through the flowers on her crown as people arrive for the party. Throughout the night she is so excited that she does not want to take off her beautiful corona even when some of the flowers wilt and fall off. Abuela tells Corina the reason the flowers are falling and dying is because they cannot survive out of the soil, and neither can families that are far from home. Abuela reminds Corina that she will always have only one family and should stay close to them. She will always have more crowns, but just one family. As Corina removes the crown from her head, she is not sad, but excited to know she will have more chances for her dreams to bloom.

*A Crown for Corina* is a picturebook that celebrates family, tradition, and self-discovery through the lens of Corina, a young Latina girl. The narrative is centered around the family tradition of preparing a flower crown to celebrate Corina's birthday, with each flower representing a cherished memory. This journey through the pages is one of self-discovery where Corina learns about her family's culture and values. The story focuses on Corina and her immediate family and their experiences, though it does not dive deeply into the stories of her ancestors or other aspects of their lives. The symbolism of the flowers do touch on family history. The story is kept light and focuses on Corina's personal growth.

This picturebook does a marvelous job of using vibrant colors to bring Corina's story to life. The flowers are bright yellow, blue, red, orange, and purple, reflecting the joyous celebration in the narrative. The details of the flowers and crowns symbolize the richness of Corina's heritage. The design of the illustrations complements the text and helps draw readers into her story. The text brings to life the sensory experience of walking through a vibrant garden. Textures, smells and sounds are described as Corina selects and picks each flower for her crown.

*A Crown for Corina* represents diversity within Latinx culture. Their representation in the story shows various skin tones and hair styles that are part of Latinx community. The book also

intertwines Spanish words and celebrations that add to the authenticity of the narrative. Although other cultures are not represented, the story of family ties and connection is universal.

One possible book pair with *A Crown for Corina* is *Alma and How She Got Her Name* by Juana Martinez-Neal (2018). Both narratives explore themes of family history and self-identity. By the end of both stories, the main characters have a deeper connection to their ancestors and are ready for the next chapter in their lives. Titles that explore this theme in other cultures include *Auntie Luce's Talking Paintings* from Haiti (Francie Latour & Ken Daley, 2018) and *My Grandma's Photos* from Turkey (Ozge Bahar Sunar, Senta Urgan, & Amy Marie Spangler, 2022).

Laekan Zea Kemp is an award-winning author who has written several books, among them *Somewhere Between Bitter and Sweet* (2021) for which she won a Pura Belpré Honor. She was an ESL teacher before becoming a full-time writer exploring identity, mental health, and Mexican/Chicane culture. She currently lives in Austin, Texas. She states that she has three objectives when writing books: "to make people laugh, cry, and crave Mexican food." More information can be found on her website (<https://www.laekanzeakemp.com/>), which includes photos of her wearing flower coronas.

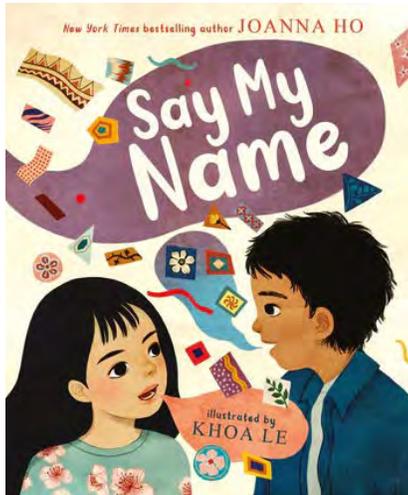
Elisa Chavarri is a talented illustrator known for her vibrant work in children's literature. Originally from Lima, Peru, she calls Michigan home. She has published over twenty books and is recognized with awards and honors including a Pura Belpré Illustrator Honor Book 2021 for *Sharuko* (Monica Brown, 2021) and an Américas Book Award Commended Title for *Rainbow Weaver* (Linda Elovitz Marshall, 2016). More information can be found on her website (<https://www.elisachavarri.com/>).

Tammy Owens, Texas Woman's University

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### **Say My Name**

Written by Joanna Ho

Illustrated by Khoa Le

HarperCollins, 2023, 36 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-0063205338

Joanna Ho has written a stunning book about the importance of speaking one's name and the power of identity, language, and culture behind each name. Told in lyrical prose, the book lists names from specific cultures and shares the meaning and the history behind each one. The children included in this picturebook come from Tonga, China, Persia (Iran), the Nahua (Mexico), Ghana, and the Navajo (United States), each character calling out the power of one's name and

correctly pronouncing each name.

The bright and detailed digital illustrations, many of which cover two pages, go perfectly with the engaging text. Each page is filled with meaningful patterns that highlight important cultural symbols, blending together past and present. The result is a joyful story that celebrates identities and the meaningful history behind each name.

Teaching children the importance of names is not only a way to better identify one another but also a means of respecting and honoring generational histories. The end of the book has name pronunciations and short overviews of each culture along with photographs of the real-life child whose name is featured, providing meaningful context. To ensure cultural accuracy, Joanna Ho carefully researched the details of each culture by consulting with individuals from each cultural group and drawing on various perspectives to represent each name authentically. In an interview (<https://www.hbook.com/story/joanna-ho-talks-with-roger-2023>) with Horn Book's Roger Sutton, Ho states that she prioritized deep cultural research to convey the meanings and histories behind each name with respect and accuracy. An audio companion with a full pronunciation guide including intonation and syllable stress would have been beneficial, especially with the focus on saying one's name correctly. A YouTube video interview (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFdq9Mbgsn0>) of Joanna Ho does include her read aloud of the book. Including a map to highlight the various locations and offering more geographical and cultural details would also enhance the reader's experience.

Based on the main theme of the book as an appreciation of each name, culture, and history, this book can be paired with others that explore similar themes. For instance, *My Name is Sangoel*, written by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed (2009), also centers on the importance of names in life and identity through the story of an eight-year-old Sudanese refugee named Sangoel, who resettles in the U.S. His unique name causes him to face teasing and mispronunciations. Because he carries the name of his father who was killed in the war in Sudan, Sangoel values his name as it embodies his family's history and heritage, connecting him to his father and ancestors. Determined to preserve this connection, Sangoel teaches others how to pronounce his name correctly rather than changing it.

*Alma and How She Got Her Name* by Juana Martinez-Neal (2018) depicts a girl who has a long name that at first she thinks does not fit. After talking to her father, she realizes that each part of her name honors a relative who is precious to him, leading her to appreciate and embrace her name. Another book is *Banana Dream* by Hasan Namir (2023), the story of how an Iraqi boy came to be named Mooz, an Arabic name meaning banana. At first, he does not like his name until he learns the story of his name from his parents. *René Has Two Last Names* by René Colato Laínez (2009) similarly explores the significance of names, focusing on a boy from El Salvador who teaches his classmates the importance of keeping both of his last names, honoring his family's heritage and traditions.

Joanna Ho is a highly accomplished author, recognized as a New York Times bestselling and award-winning writer of children's books. Her works have garnered several prestigious accolades, including the Asian/Pacific American Award for Children's Literature Honor, the Golden Kite Award, the Ezra Jack Keats Honor, and the Golden Poppy Award. In addition to her writing, Ho is a dedicated educator with a strong focus on anti-bias, anti-racism, and equity work. She earned her BA in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree from the Principal Leadership Institute at Berkeley. Throughout her career, Ho has worn many hats, serving as an English teacher, dean, designer of an alternative-to-prison program, creator of professional development for educators, and a high school vice principal. Born to immigrants from Taiwan and China in St. Paul, Minnesota, she has lived in various places, including Baltimore, Philadelphia, Accra (Ghana), Taipei (Taiwan), and the Bay Area. Her diverse experiences across these locations likely contribute to her deep understanding of the significance of names and the cultural histories they carry. More information can be found on her website (<https://www.joannahowrites.com/>).

Khoa Le is a talented illustrator, author, and painter based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Her diverse body of work spans personal paintings, picturebooks she has either written or illustrated, and various other illustration projects. Le draws inspiration from her own stories, dreams, and imagination, along with her passion for exploring the beauty and cultures of the world. More information can be found on her website (<https://www.khoaleartwork.com/>).

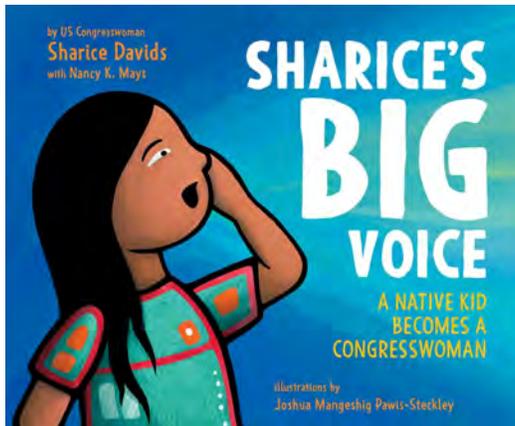
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***Sharice's Big Voice: A Native Kid Becomes a Congresswoman***

Written by Sharice Davids with Nancy K. Mays

Illustrated by Joshua Mangeshig Pawis-Steckley

HarperCollins, 2021, 40 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-0062979667

Everyone has dreams and passions—Sharice Davids is no different. This book is about her road to victory to become one of the first Indigenous women to be elected to Congress and the first LGBTQ person to represent Kansas. She learned early on that everyone encounters obstacles along their way

to achievements, but with hard work, anything is possible.

Sharice Davids is a member of the Ho-Chunk nation, an Indigenous tribe in Wisconsin. When she was a young girl, people would ask her at school, “What are you?” This question led her down a path of self-discovery. She became a proud, strong, brave Indigenous woman. She was raised by a single mom, a 20-year army veteran, and learned to value hard work and discipline. She also learned how to talk to others because she moved around a lot and had to make new friends often. This helped her develop the valuable skill of listening to others and discovering what was important to them.

Davids is a first-generation college graduate, and earned her law degree from Cornell Law School. From there she went on to practice law but didn't feel she was making a difference, so she moved on to work with Indigenous tribes living on reservations. She helped them create businesses and pursue other economic endeavors to improve their lives.

Bold blue visions open the book, representing vigilance, perseverance, and justice, all underlying themes in the text. The illustrations in the book were created on a digital platform by Joshua Mangeshig Pawis-Steckley, an award-winning Ojibwe Woodland artist. The Ojibwe are known for their artistic culture; their works of art are a way to honor their history and ancestors as well as to express themselves. This care is evident in his illustrations showing the history and culture of Sharice Davids.

At the end of the book there are letters from the author and the artist, and some information about the Ho-Chunk tribe. The thoughtful letter from Davids is empowering, uplifting and heartwarming. She tells her readers that “the most important thing is to be true to your own journey” (p. 32) and that our choices have power. Her choices led her to where she is today. There is also a picture of her with her biggest supporter, her mom, when she was little.

In the artist's note in the back, the illustrator speaks of finding himself through an illustration style that best honored his ancestors. He notes that both he and Sharice Davids come from many generations of being silenced and made to conform to a culture other than their own. The result of this silencing is the driving force behind Sharice Davids and her desire to represent her people.

This picturebook can be paired with other books with a theme of perseverance in the face of cultural challenges. In the fictional *Rosie Revere, Engineer* (Andrea Beaty & David Roberts, 2013), Rosie excels at inventing. *Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah* (Laurie Ann Thompson & Sean Qualls, 2015) relates how Emmanuel, who was born with a severely deformed leg, learned to ride a bike and in 2001 rode across Ghana to build awareness of disabilities. Finally, in *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909* (Michelle Markel & Melissa Sweet, 2013), Ukrainian immigrant Clara Lemlich tackles the unfair policies of the garment industry in the early 20th century.

When Sharice Davids is not in Washington, she lives in Roeland Park, Kansas, and travels all over the state to listen to her constituents. More information can be found on her Congressional website (<https://davids.house.gov/>).

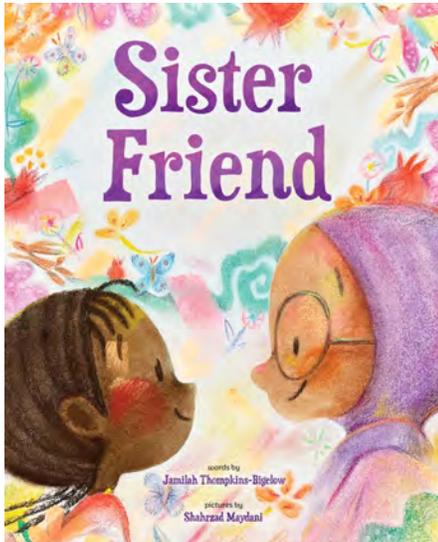
Mangeshig is from Ontario, but currently lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. Several of his books are bilingual and give readers a window into First Nations culture such as the harvest of grain in *Mnoomin Maan'gowing/The Gift of Mnoomin* (Brittany Luby, 2023). He received the Ruth and Sylvia Schwartz Children's Book Award for *Mii maanda ezhi-gkendmaanh/This is How I Know* (Brittany Luby, 2021) which was shortlisted for The Indigenous Voices Award for works in an Indigenous language and the Governor General's Literary Award. More information can be found on his website (<https://www.mangeshig.com/>).

Amy Laird, Texas Woman's University

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***Sister Friend***

Written by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow

Illustrated by Shahrzad Maydani

Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2024, 36 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-1419767210

Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow and Shahrzad Maydani weave a touching story of friendship and finding a space where you feel seen and understood. Ameena is used to being by herself and feeling invisible to other people at school, and she suspects that it is because of her brown skin and the twists in her hair. Then, one day, Sundus arrives at school, a brand-new student with a hijab like the one Ameena wears to masjid. Ameena tries a few ways to bond with Sundus, but Sundus erroneously assumes Ameena is

making fun of her. The girls see each other at masjid, and by then, Ameena is angry with Sundus for rejecting her. Sundus surprises Ameena and Ameena is able to empathize with Sundus. The two girls play together, no longer feeling rejected and alone.

Shahrzad Maydani's soft, colorful illustrations bring vivid detail to the words of Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow. The effervescent colors of Ameena's imagination and joy shine brightly in times of hope, bathing Sundus in golden light and flowers to represent the hope of a budding friendship, someone in whom Ameena sees a connection. Maydani gives readers shade and shadow to represent Ameena's feelings of isolation, rejection, and anger. The result is a story that is as compelling for the eyes as it is for the heart.

Although clear in her intent and drive to create stories that represent authentic experiences within the underrepresented Black Muslim community in the U.S. with which she identifies, Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow gives readers of all identities a relatable story of going from isolation to acceptance, of finding someone with whom you share a connection. The importance of sharing stories from underrepresented voices with authenticity in authorship is critical in reaching readers from all walks of life, but especially for children who do not have the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the protagonists of their books. This is, indeed, one of the very reasons Thompkins-Bigelow, once an English teacher, says she began writing children's books (DeOliveira, 2021, Thompkins-Bigelow, 2024). Through her authorship of identities that mirror hers, she disrupts the single-story narrative, placing power in the hands of the communities about which she writes. By giving readers an engaging and relatable view into Ameena's experiences at school, the author draws us into this child's world, one where the reader can imagine feeling ostracized, othered, and devalued, and later experience the joy of Ameena and Sundus finding a friend who shares in their identities.

Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's work has reminded us for decades that all readers need familiarity with books that act as both mirrors to their own lives and windows into the lives of others (Tschida, et. al., 2014). Thompkins-Bigelow uses key identifiable pieces from her own identities in the story, allowing

readers from all communities either a window or a mirror to learn more about experiences like those of Ameena and Sundus.

The beauty of Thompkins-Bigelow's words is matched by the beauty of Maydani's accompanying illustrations, sure to hook readers' attention as they enter into Ameena's reality. Thompkins-Bigelow (2024) has said that she prefers to work alongside illustrators who share one of her identities to elevate stories from similar underrepresented communities. Indeed, in Shahrzad Maydani, a celebrated illustrator raised in Africa by her Iranian mother and English father, she has achieved just that. *Sister Friend* would be a welcome addition to any classroom, library, or home bookshelf. Readers of a wide variety of ages can appreciate and empathize with Ameena's experience of wanting to feel seen, to have friends. Thompkins-Bigelow's words invite the making of human connections, both to the text and the beautifully diverse world around us.

Titles that could pair with *Sister Friend* include books that show developing friendships across linguistic challenges (*My Two Blankets* by Irena Kobald & Freya Blackwood, 2014), cultural barriers (*The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson & E. B. Lewis, 2001), or across challenges with neurodiversity (*A Friend for Henry* by Jenn Bailey & Mika Song, 2019).

Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow is a former educator who left the classroom to write books that support diversity. She has developed curricula for the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative and has won awards for her books that center Black Muslim protagonists. She shares her talent by mentoring aspiring authors through We Need Diverse Books and the Highlights Foundation. She lives in Philadelphia with her family. More information can be found on her website (<https://jamilahthewriter.com/about/>).

Shahrzad Maydani is an Iranian-English illustrator who has garnered starred reviews and awards for her work. She gravitates towards stories that involve deep connections between people so she can illustrate the intricate and sometimes heavy emotions that children experience. One example is her book *Always Sisters: A Story of Loss and Love* (Saira Mir, 2023) that deals with a little girl looking forward to a baby sister only to deal with the grief of a miscarriage. More information can be found in an interview with Let's Talk Picture Books (<https://www.letstalkpicturebooks.com/2023/08/lets-talk-illustrators-258-shahrzad.html>).

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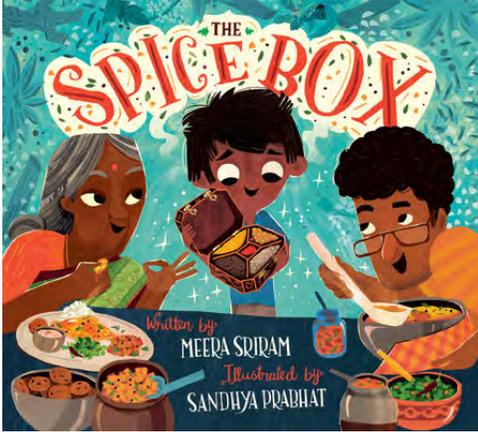
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Natalie Parks, Texas Woman's University

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***The Spice Box***

Written by Meera Sriram

Illustrated by Sandhya Prabhat

Alfred A. Knopf, 2024, 36 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-0593427132

Rishi, a young Indian boy, is awaiting the arrival of his grandmother from India. He wants to make her potato curry using the family spice box. As he opens the spice box, the fragrances of the spices elicit memories of his family, such as his grandmother's dream of becoming a chef at a time when women were discouraged to work outside the home, and his

grandmother's journey in search of her dream, carrying her beloved spice box. The memory ends with her being nicknamed "the wizard of spice," finally achieving her dream.

The next memory described is of Rishi's father moving away from India and his family to a new home where concerns of not fitting in plague his mind. The father soon realizes that his new home has many different types of people and languages, putting his concerns at ease. Rishi remembers when his father struggled getting the spice measurements to create traditional Indian dishes but eventually succeeded at creating the perfect Indian dish, which leads the grandmother to nickname her son "the master of spice" during her last visit from India. Rishi is excited to call this spice box his own but accidentally drops the treasured spice box on the floor. Distraught and sad over the now broken spice box, Rishi is quickly reassured when his father helps him fix the broken spice box. Together they cook potato curry for his grandmother's arrival. Rishi is given the nickname "the prince of spice", as well as the family spice box making his wish come true so he can continue dreaming and creating his mark in the world.

*The Spice Box* tells the story of an Indian family that has followed their dreams and raises awareness of traditional gender roles and women's rights, implying that the grandmother had to work hard to achieve her dream in a male-dominated field. Rishi's father had several concerns about moving away from his family and life in India, highlighting issues of fitting in, standing out, acceptance, and immigration. Fortunately, his apprehension was quickly alleviated when he discovered his new home is full of diverse people. He also struggles with using the correct measurements to make traditional Indian dishes. After several attempts, he succeeds and earns his beloved nickname, demonstrating perseverance and the importance of not giving up.

Rishi's excitement about his family's treasured spice box exemplifies the importance of honoring and continuing cultural traditions. Food plays a significant role in immersing oneself in various cultures and many lessons and traditions can be learned from cooking traditional dishes. At the end of the book, an explanation of the spices and their significance is provided, along with Paati's potato curry recipe, allowing readers to deepen their understanding of Indian culture. Sriram moves beyond creating a window to opening a door for readers to further experience and learn about Indian culture.

With vibrant colors, attention to detail, and a variety of lines, *The Spice Box* immerses readers in Rishi's world. The illustrations maintain engagement throughout the book, with vivid hues and

diverse lines evoking the fragrant spices of India. Symmetrical to the text, the illustrations add depth and highlight intricate details. The facial expressions are detailed, emphasizing the characters' range of emotions. Both single and double-page spreads are used without borders, allowing space for maximum detail.

Pairing *When the Stars Came Home* (Brittany Luby & Natasha Donovan, 2023) with *The Spice Box* helps exemplify and honor cultural traditions. Both books share family stories through treasured and potential heirlooms and address the complicated feelings that leaving home can provoke. Pairing these two books together will also help readers hear diverse perspectives about moving from your home, whether it's across town or across the ocean. Both titles pay tribute to family stories and emphasize their importance in shaping one's identity. An additional book pairing suggestion is *Boys Don't Fry* (Kimberly Lee & Charlene Chua, 2023). Both books play tribute to the value of traditional cultural dishes that allow the reader to be immersed in Indian or Malaysian cultures. Pairing these books together gives readers the opportunity to make connections, question traditional gender roles, and learn about the importance of cultural traditions.

Meera Sriram (<https://meerasriram.com/bio/>) is an award-winning author; recognized with honors such as the South Asia Book Award and School Library Journal Best Book of the Year. She has written several books, including *A Garden in My Hands* (also illustrated by Sandhya Prabhat, 2023) and *The Yellow Suitcase* (illustrated by Meera Sethi, 2019) and has published works in India. Originally from Chennai, India, Sriram moved to the United States to become an electrical engineer before transitioning to a career as a children's book author to promote diverse literature.

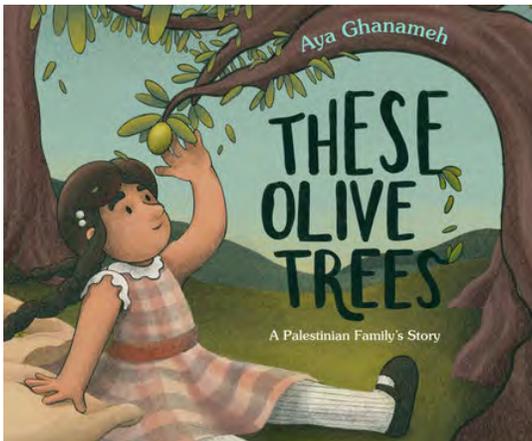
Sandhya Prabhat (<https://sandhyaprabhat.com/about>), also from Chennai, India, is an award-winning illustrator and animator who has illustrated books like *A Garden in My Hands* (Meera Sriram, 2023) and *Namaste is a Greeting* (Suma Subramaniam, 2022). Now based in the Bay Area, Prabhat has also created animations for social media companies.

Prisella Chinchilla, Texas Woman's University

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***These Olive Trees***

Written and illustrated by Aya Ghanameh  
Viking, 2023, 32 pp (unpaged)  
ISBN: 978-0593525180

How does one begin to speak about the unspeakable? *These Olive Trees*, written and illustrated by Aya Ghanameh, tells a deeply personal and emotional story based on Ghanameh’s grandmother’s life as a Palestinian refugee. Aya could not have known, when she began the process of retelling this portion of her grandmother’s life story, how it would take on new significance in light of

current events. Aya’s grandmother, Oraib, was born in a refugee camp after her parents fled from the village of Al-Tira, Haifa during the 1948 war. This story begins in 1967 as Oraib and her family must flee once again, leaving the refugee camp in Nablus, Palestine.

The title, *These Olive Trees*, is the metanarrative of this story. In the author’s notes, Aya explains that the olive tree symbolizes the resistance, longevity, and resilience of the Palestinian people. As the story begins, her grandmother, Oraib, contemplates the wonders of the fruit of the olive tree as she watches her mother prune the trees. She thinks of the bitterness of the olive when first harvested and how the process of growing and curing the fruit takes great patience. Oraib helps her mother gather the olives and wonders why they are harvesting the fruit so soon. This is when she learns that the family must leave before war comes again to them. Oraib is determined to plant the seed of an olive tree and return for its fruit one day.

The metaphor of the olive tree is seen throughout the visual images of the picturebook. Olive trees and olives appear on nearly every page. The olive trees surround the tent homes in the refugee camp. The resources provided by the fruit of the olive tree are showcased both through text and images. War is signified in the illustrations by transparent arms and hands reaching out from the distant horizon to remove the olive trees. However, even as the arms of war appear to remove the olive trees, the recognition of the seeds buried beneath the ground provides hope.

*These Olive Trees* is far more than a picturebook about a refugee experience. It provides a distinct look into the resilience and culture of the Palestinian people. The endpapers that frame the story are decorated with the distinctive tateez embroidery patterns of the Palestinian people, which provide a strong sense of connection to a living culture. The story does not focus on the devastating impact of the war, but rather on the strength of family and tradition that will not be denied. While there is a deep sense of sadness in the displacement of this family, the reader is left with a sense of their great strength and determination to maintain their culture and sense of identity. As Strekolova-Hughes and Peterman (2020) point out, “culturally authentic picturebooks invite multiple stories, highlight the complex humanity of their protagonists, and narratively center the protagonist’s power and agency” (p. 326).

The author’s note at the end of the picturebook provides photos of Aya’s grandmother and her family. The notes describe the exodus in 1948 referred to by the Palestinians as the Nakba which translates to the Catastrophe. Aya also provides information on the importance of olive trees to the Palestinians and ends with “Like these olive trees, we are still here.”

Other books would pair well with *These Olive Trees*, providing additional background and affirming the cultural identities of refugees. *What is a Refugee?* written and illustrated by Elise Gavel (2019) provides background information on why refugees must flee their homeland. This picturebook affirms that refugees are individuals just like each one of us. *The Map of Good Memories* written by Fran Nuño and illustrated by Zuzanna Celej (2016) provides perspective on the importance of place and the difficulty of leaving home as well as the hope of returning one day. *You Don’t Know What War Is: The Diary of a Young Girl from Ukraine* (2022) provides another account of great resilience and a strong sense of identity through the personal diary of Yeva Skalietska, a refugee from Ukraine.

Aya Ghanameh is a Palestinian illustrator, author, and designer from Amman Jordan. She currently resides in New York City. *These Olive Trees* is her debut picturebook. Her latest illustrated publication is the picturebook *Dear Muslim Child* written by Rahma Rodaah (2024).

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Streklova-Hughes, E. & Peterman, N. (2020). Countering dominant discourses and reaffirming cultural identities of learners from refugee backgrounds. *The Reading Teacher*. 74(3). 325-329. doi:10.1002/trtr.1944

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KWAME ALEXANDER ★ KADIR NELSON  
**THE UNDEFEATED**



*The Undefeated*

Written by Kwame Alexander  
Illustrated by Kadir Nelson  
Versify, 2019, 40 pp (unpaged)  
ISBN: 978-1328780966

*The Undefeated* by Kwame Alexander, illustrated by Kadir Nelson, is the perfect framework for unveiling known and unknown events and people in African American history. The stark white backdrop for the realistic portraits that permeate this beautiful picturebook create a vast, expansive feeling that reveals the profound magnitude of the emotions laid bare by the poetry. Kwame Alexander wrote this poem in 2008 as a tribute to his newborn daughter, Samayah,

and Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States. This award-winning book shares the victories of great athletes like Jesse Owens, Serena Williams, LeBron James, and Wilma Rudolph, as well as Reece Whitley, a competitive swimmer, and Sheryl Swoopes, an inductee to the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame. It showcases artists like trumpet player Louis Armstrong and jazz singer Billie Holiday, along with artists like Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughan, and Thelonious Monk. Every person featured in this book has a short biography included at the end.

As wonderful as these tributes are, the bare revelations of horror revealed in the modern realism-style paintings of those who died are even more powerful. The four young girls killed in the Baptist Church bombing, Sandra Bland who died in a jail cell, Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old who was shot by police while holding a toy gun, and Martin Luther King Jr., among others, are depicted by the artist Kadir Nelson.

Written in prose, the use of the preposition “un” adds a poetic element and a repeated emphasis that those profiled made an indelible mark on history through their perseverance or sacrifice: “for the unforgettable...the ones who survived, and the ones who didn’t,...the undeniable, the unflappable...the unafraid...the righteous...the unspeakable...the unlimited...unstoppable ones...the dreamers and doers...the unbelievable, the unbending...the underdogs and uncertain...the unspoken...undefeated...for you and you and you. This is for us.” As Kwame states in his afterword, this poem reminds everyone to “never, ever give up.”

Written and illustrated by two award-winning African American creators known for their authentic voices and meticulous research, *The Undefeated* has won multiple awards, including the Caldecott Medal, the Coretta Scott King Award, the Carter G. Woodson Award, and a Newbery Honor. It also appeared on multiple lists, including the Notable Books for a Global Society.

Although not a quick read-aloud, books that pair well with *The Undefeated* include other surveys of historical events and contributions of African American people, in particular, Kadir Nelson's *Heart and Soul: The Story of American and African Americans* (2011) and *We Are the Ship: The Story of the Negro League Baseball* (2008) that offer beautiful portraits and full-page biographies for in-depth

research. Another book pair considers the contributions to history by First Nations and Indigenous people. In *Go Show the World: A Celebration of Indigenous Heroes*, Wab Kinew and Joe Morse (2018) profile Indigenous people in the U.S. and Canada who contributed to many fields such as history, space exploration, literature, sports, medicine, and politics, and is written and illustrated in a style similar to *The Undefeated* as it poetically stirs the heart in a visually impacting and inspiring picturebook.

Kwame Alexander is a poet, educator, publisher, Emmy Award-winning producer, and New York Times bestselling author of more than 40 books. He is the director of the Literary Arts program at the Chautauqua Institution in New York and serves as their inaugural writer-in-residence. He hosts the podcast *Why Fathers Cry* about love, parenting, and loss, and has taken his passion for literacy and the craft of writing to Ghana where he opened the Barbara E. Alexander Memorial Library and Health Clinic. More information can be found on his website (<https://kwamealexander.com/>).

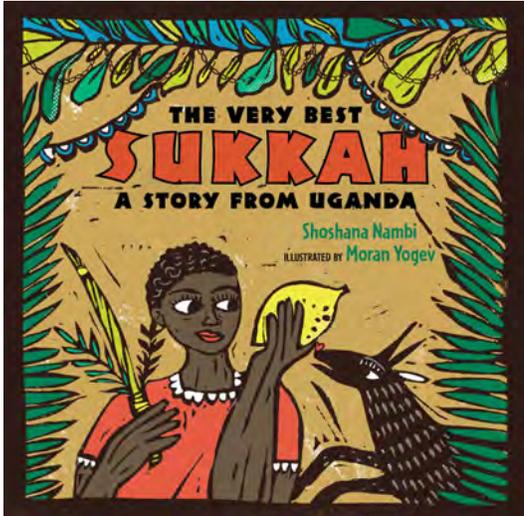
Kadir Nelson has his paintings exhibited in many prestigious museums and institutions, including the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery and the U.S. House of Representatives. He has also worked with several film studios and created artwork for *Amistad*, and *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*. He was commissioned for the cover of Michael Jackson's posthumous album and has illustrated over 30 books, receiving numerous awards for his illustrations including the Caldecott Medal, Coretta Scott King Award, and the New York Times Best Illustrated Book Award. More information can be found on his website (<https://www.kadirnelson.com/>).

Joy Brown, Texas Woman's University

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***The Very Best Sukkah: A Story from Uganda***

Written by Shoshana Nambi

Illustrated by Moran Yogev

Kalaniot Books, 2022, 32 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-1735087580

Readers are immersed in the Ugandan Jewish world of Shoshi, a young girl preparing for the Sukkot festival and hoping to win her community's annual decorating competition. Shoshi and her family gather Nsambya tree branches for their Sukkah's roof and collaborate with her art teacher to incorporate student artwork into the decorations. When a storm damages a neighboring family's Sukkah, Shoshi, her brother David, and other villagers

come together to repair it, discovering that Sukkot's true essence lies in community unity rather than winning contests. This message of unity resonates throughout the narrative, fostering a sense of connection and belonging among readers.

Shoshana Nambi's narrative includes universal themes of community and belonging with the unique cultural traditions of Ugandan Judaism. Set against Uganda's picturesque geographical backdrop, this story authentically portrays the Abayudaya community, challenging conventional perceptions of Jewish identity and emphasizing the diversity within global Judaism. The communal preparations for Sukkot highlight collective efforts and individual contributions, demonstrating how cultural practices unite people across diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The narrative subtly references the historical resilience of the Abayudaya, who have maintained their Jewish faith amidst historical and social challenges in Uganda, enriching the story with historical depth.

Moran Yogev's illustrations enrich the story by visually portraying the cultural heritage, communal spirit, and celebratory atmosphere of the Ugandan Jewish community. Using vibrant colors and a blend of realistic and stylized elements, Yogev captures the warmth and richness of Uganda's landscape and culture. The artwork features flowing lines and gentle curves resembling natural forms like the Sukkah's branches. At the same time, textures distinguish between elements such as tree branches, clothing fabrics, and the temporary Sukkah structure. Characters are depicted with diverse skin tones and traditional Ugandan attire, emphasizing the cultural specificity of the Abayudaya Jewish community. Scenes reflect Uganda's natural beauty, including landscapes, flora, and fauna, alongside depictions of community life and varying economic statuses among villagers participating in Sukkot celebrations.

*The Very Best Sukkah: A Story from Uganda* appeals to a broad audience, from children to young teens interested in exploring diverse cultures, traditions, and celebrations worldwide. Its engaging narrative and vivid illustrations facilitate discussions on universal values, encouraging reflection and dialogue among readers. This book explores cultural richness, community resilience, and the transformative power of unity within the Ugandan Jewish community. It is both a captivating story and an educational tool, inviting readers to appreciate diversity, celebrate tradition, and reflect on the universal values that bind communities together.

Educators can expand students' understanding by incorporating texts that explore cultural identity and intercultural exchanges, such as the board book *Hats of Faith* by Medeia Cohan and Sarah Walsh (2018) which illustrate the head coverings that Sikhs, Muslims, Rastafarians, Orthodox Jews, and Christians wear around the world. In *The Keeping Quilt*, author Patricia Polacco (1988) tells the story of how a quilt passed down for four generations, made from pieces of clothing from relatives back in Russia, helped each generation remember family.

Drawing from her upbringing in Uganda with her grandparents, Shoshana Nambi infuses personal experiences into this story. Her cultural pride is evident through the narrative's moral lessons and pride in community achievements. Inspired by practices observed in the United States, she aims to support added creativity within Jewish education and prayer while honoring longstanding customs within the Abayudaya community. More information about Shoshana Nambi is available online (<https://lilith.org/2022/10/shoshana-nambi-on-the-very-best-sukkah/>).

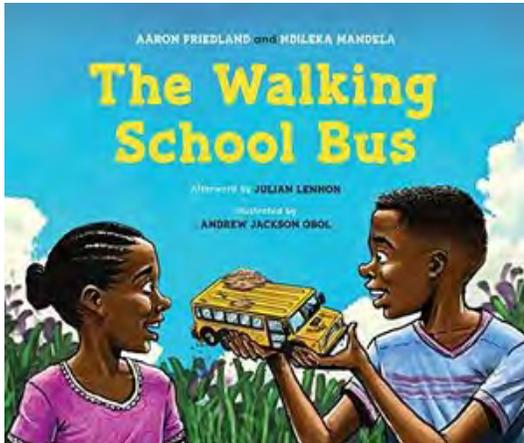
Moran Yogev, an esteemed illustrator based in northern Israel, enhances the narrative with her artistic prowess, showcasing her talent in print techniques through exhibitions and contributions to children's magazines. More information about Moran Yogev is available on her website (<https://www.jewishboston.com/read/moran-yogev/>).

Meghan Katzen, Texas Woman's University

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### ***The Walking School Bus***

Written by Aaron Friedland and Ndileka Mandela

Illustrated by Andrew Jackson Obol

Greystone Kids, 2023, 40 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-1771644693

This beautifully crafted and inspiring picturebook follows the journey of two siblings, Shaka and Nandi, who live in a remote village in South Africa. When their father takes a job far from home, making it impossible to walk them to school as usual, the siblings are left to navigate the perilous journey to school on their own. The once familiar path is now fraught with danger, from the lurking threat of thieves beneath a bridge to the loneliness of the road ahead. Despite their efforts to find comfort at home, they quickly realize that life without the warmth of their teacher and the companionship of their friends feels incomplete.

One day, while playing in the sand, Shaka and Nandi stumble upon a toy school bus. This small but significant discovery ignites their imagination, leading them to brainstorm various solutions for getting to school—buying a bus, building a makeshift one—but each attempt falls short. Undeterred by these setbacks, their mother’s comforting words, “Tomorrow is another day, and you’ll find another way,” instill in them a quiet resilience and renewed hope. With this encouragement, they conceive of the idea of a “walking school bus,” where they gather other children to walk together as a united group. This simple yet brilliant innovation not only ensures their safety but also sparks a movement, as children in neighboring villages follow their lead. Soon, more children are walking to school in their own “buses,” discovering that in unity, they are not only safer but also stronger.

The story powerfully illustrates the themes of community and imagination, showing young readers that even the most daunting obstacles can be overcome through collective effort and creative thinking. Beyond its immediate narrative, *The Walking School Bus* reflects on broader issues of educational access and stands as a tribute to the resilience and determination of children who strive to learn despite the barriers they face. The book fosters empathy and global awareness among young readers, encouraging them to value their education and recognize the varied challenges children around the world encounter. It conveys a profound message that when young minds are fueled by creativity, hope, and perseverance, they can overcome even the toughest obstacles.

The illustrations in *The Walking School Bus* play a crucial role in bringing the story to life by immersing readers in a rich cultural landscape and highlighting the resilience of its characters. The colorful, cartoonish art style captures the attention of young readers, while Afrocentric elements lend the narrative depth, offering both children and adults an authentic glimpse into the realities of education in rural communities like those in South Africa. These detailed visuals depict daily life, from traditional clothing to farming, making the story both educational and culturally enriching. The characters’ expressive faces, particularly the wide, curious eyes of the children when struck by new ideas, deepen the emotional connection with readers. Additionally, the clever contrast between light and dark underscores key themes, with the shadowy portrayal of

thieves under the bridge contrasting with the bright moments of unity, symbolizing how the children’s strength dispels fear.

Given the theme of community, *The Walking School Bus* can be paired with *Be a Hero: Being Back at School During Covid-19* by Katherine Hurewitz, Chantelle Thorne and Burgen Thorne (2021), which teaches young readers about the importance of keeping their community safe. Exploring the theme of social impact, *Making a Difference: An Inspirational Book About Kids Changing the World!* by Stacy C. Bauer and Emanuele Ntamack (2022) is an excellent companion. This book showcases inspiring stories of children worldwide who are positively impacting their communities, emphasizing the power of young minds to create meaningful change through creativity, hope, and perseverance. A particularly resonant pairing is *Malala’s Magic Pencil* by Malala Yousafzai & Kerascoët (2017) about Malala’s childhood dream of having a magic pencil to change the world. As she grew older, Malala realized that even without a magic pencil, hard work and determination could make her wishes come true. In the context of innovation and hard work in Africa, *The Walking School Bus* pairs well with *I Am Farmer: Growing an Environmental Movement in Cameroon* by Baptiste Paul, Miranda Paul and Elizabeth Zunon (2019). The book tells the story of environmentalist Tantoh Nforba, who works to bring clean water and sustainable farming practices to his community in Cameroon.

Aaron Friedland, the founder and executive director of the Simbi Foundation, brings a wealth of personal experience to *The Walking School Bus*, his first and only book. His inspiration for the story came from his time spent living and researching in rural Africa, where he observed firsthand the challenges children face in accessing education. Friedland’s work with the Simbi Foundation reflects his commitment to ensuring educational access for all children.

Ndileka Mandela, granddaughter of Nelson Mandela, is a social activist and head of the Thembekile Mandela Foundation. Her involvement in the book brings a powerful perspective on the importance of education and community support, drawing from her deep commitment to continuing her grandfather’s legacy. Mandela enriches the narrative by incorporating several words from her native Xhosa language—such as *umama* (mother), *ubaba* (father), and *watoto* (children)—along with the popular African song “*Shosholoz*.” These elements add an emotional depth to the story, allowing readers to connect more deeply with the culture and setting. Mandela’s own experiences color the book, adding authenticity and a profound sense of place and tradition.

Andrew Jackson Obol, known for his Afrocentric art, captures the essence of the story with his vibrant and expressive illustrations. His work, deeply rooted in his Ugandan heritage, adds a layer of cultural richness that enhances the narrative’s impact. Obol has illustrated several other books that vividly depict African culture, such as *Something Old, Something New* by Cathy Kreutter (2022), a retelling of the Jewish folktale about a boy and his grandfather who creatively repurpose an old school uniform. Another notable work is *The Rock and Roll Rolex*, also by Kreutter (2018), a humorous story that plays on the musical phrase “rock and roll” while celebrating the popular Ugandan snack, the rolex. Both books showcase Obol’s ability to bring African stories and traditions to life through his art.

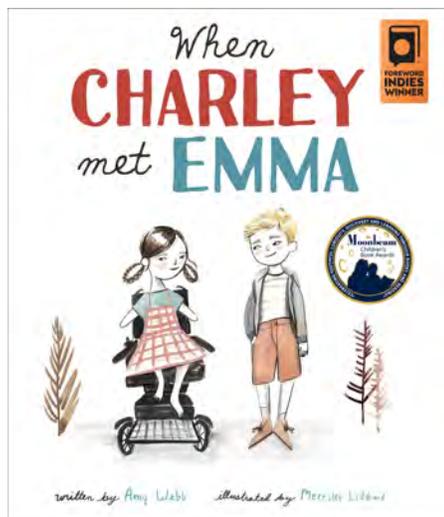
Rana Taheri, Montana State University

Narges Zandi, University of Arizona

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**When Charley Met Emma**

Written by Amy Webb

Illustrated by Merrilee Liddiard

Beaming Books, 2019, 32 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-1506448725

Beginning with the cover, this story demonstrates how some members of our community are often overlooked or marginalized, especially those with visible physical disabilities. Many stories depict someone in a wheelchair in the pictures or as a background character but rarely does a story engage with the topic of visible disabilities. This story begins with Charley who likes to do many things, both alone and with friends. Sometimes he is made fun of by his friends because he enjoys spending time

alone. A phrase that his mother taught him helps him handle those situations. “Different isn’t weird, sad, bad, or strange. Different is different. And different is OK!” He sees a girl at the playground who looks different and many thoughts go through his head that are unkind and show a lack of understanding. The words that come out of his mouth are not kind but his mother tries to teach him that his words are hurtful. He gets to know Emma and realizes they have a lot in common, including a love of drawing. Charley draws with his hands and Emma draws and writes with her feet because she does not have hands. When it is time to part ways, Charley tells his mom that he had a great time making a new friend. They have their differences but they also are the same.

Written by a mother whose daughter has a condition similar to that of Emma, the authentic experience of the author makes the book ring true, describing the ways children with and without disabilities interact. The story demonstrates practical ways of interacting with children with disabilities and treating them with kindness. This story introduces readers to situations where individuals might have the same initial thoughts as Charley, and say things that are hurtful because they don’t know better. People might not know what to say that would be appropriate or how to handle an initial interaction with someone with physical differences who does not want to be treated differently than anyone else. This story helps readers recognize that thoughts like Charley’s are normal and figure out how to move forward past those thoughts in a compassionate and inclusive way. When we can see past the physical differences, we realize that we are the same in so many ways. Differences aren’t sad, bad, or strange. Different is different and that is okay.

I was introduced to this story by the mother of an amazing child who was born with Apert Syndrome which causes deformities of the skull, hands, and feet. She is constantly concerned about how people will treat her child when they first see him. She has read this book at his school to help classmates understand how to interact with her son. Once they get to know him, they realize how thoughtful, vibrant, caring, and funny he is and how he loves to play and have fun just like other children. This book can help create acceptance and care for children with disabilities so they are loved as the wonderful people they are and supported in the positive impact they can have on their community and society.

The illustrations fit the clear message of the book. They are rendered with minimal muted colors which allow the reader to focus on the expressions on Charley and Emma’s faces. The sparse pen and ink drawings convey the emotional journey Charley goes through in meeting Emma, learning about her disability, and becoming her friend. At the end of the book, there is a guide included for parents and caregivers. It gives examples of how to foster friendships with children of all different abilities by educating and teaching, reinforcing kindness, finding common ground, and emphasizing different abilities.

Winner of the 2019 Forward INDIES bronze medal, this book also has several sequels. In *Awesomely Emma* (2020), Emma stands up for herself and helps to teach advocacy for others. In *Emma’s Awesome Summer Camp Adventure* (2024), Emma attends her first accessible camp where children of all abilities can thrive. Both books emphasize the need for understanding and inclusion for all.

Several titles are natural book pairs. In the same way that Emma is saddened by the initial misunderstandings and reactions of Charley, Auggie in *We’re All Wonders* (R. J. Palacio, 2017) is saddened by the reactions of others when they point or laugh or say mean things. As the story progresses, he shows that he likes and does the same things other children do, but sometimes people only see how he is different. Auggie imagines a world where people can change the way they see each other and look with kindness. In *It’s Okay to be Different* (Todd Parr, 2001) differences are shown in a colorful and abstract way, demonstrating that it is okay to be different from others in so many ways. Parr explains that each person is important and special because of who each is. A final book pair reflects the way Charley and Emma realize how they are alike and so differences move into the background of their friendship. *What Happened to You?* (James Catchpole and Karen George, 2023) demonstrates the same kind of emotional bonding when Joe, who is missing a leg, responds to the many questions of curious children with “Do you need to know?” They realize that playing together is more important than answering repeated questions about Joe’s missing limb. These books not only help children see that we need to treat everyone with love and kindness whatever their abilities or disabilities, but also help those who feel different to know that differences make them unique and special.

Amy Webb is a mother of three daughters, one of whom has special needs. Amy advocates for special needs children through her blogs, books, and interviews. In addition to being an author and mother, she is an artist and lives in Ohio. More information and links to her blogs can be found on her website (<https://thislittlemiggy.com/about/>).

Merrilee Liddiard draws the illustrations to beautifully demonstrate the simple and playful interactions among children. She was raised in a home filled with creativity and loves creating things with children in mind, especially dolls. She loves to travel, visit museums, read, and do things for her three children. More information about her creative projects can be found on her website (<https://www.merrileeliddiardshop.com/>).

Angela Carlile, Bellville, Texas

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