



Wanting Mor

Rukhsana Khan

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Jameela and her family live in a poor, war-torn village in Afghanistan. Even with her cleft lip and lack of educational opportunities, Jameela feels relatively secure, sustained by her Muslim faith and the love of her mother, Mor. But when Mor dies, Jameela's father impulsively decides to start a new life in Kabul. Jameela is appalled as he succumbs to alcohol and drugs, then suddenly remarries, a situation that soon has her a virtual slave to a demanding stepmother. After she's discovered trying to learn to read, Jameela is abandoned in a busy market, eventually landing in an orphanage run by the same army that killed so many members of her family. Throughout it all, the memory of her mother sustains her, giving Jameela the strength to face her father and stepmother when fate brings them together again. Inspired by a true story, and set in a world far removed from that of Western readers, this powerful novel reveals that the desire for identity and self-understanding is universal.

Wanting Mor Details

Date : Published April 28th 2009 by Groundwood Books (first published 2009)

ISBN : 9780888998583

Author : Rukhsana Khan

Format : Hardcover 192 pages

Genre : Fiction, Young Adult, Historical, Historical Fiction, Family, Childrens, Chapter Books, Cultural, Realistic Fiction, International, War, Contemporary

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From Reader Review Wanting Mor for online ebook

Meaghan says

I don't believe there are many books about Afghanistan for children, and this one manages to be 9-to-12 appropriate while at the same time showing the incredible difficulties of life (especially as a female) in that most unfortunate of nations. Probably the author's background as a Muslim (albeit a Pakistani one) contributed to the authenticity of the narrative.

That said, it was kind of predictable, most of the characters were two-dimensional, and (without trying to spoil the book) it had a sort of *Lifetime* movie quality about it, especially in the ending. Still, I suppose this is as good a book as any for a kid who's a little too young to be reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Al_norahughes says

I had a difficult time getting into and staying with this book. I think it would be appropriate for teenagers who are well read and up for a challenge. In addition, I think the teenager would have to have a knowledge of Islamic culture and a desire to know more. Just couldn't get into this one.

Katy Vance says

Overall, I liked this book. It reminds me of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* but for a younger audience. I appreciated that the author took the time at the end of the book to explain the background for her story, which stemmed from a "report issued by Afghanistan's department of orphanages". Additionally, she acknowledged the women who helped her vet the story for accuracy and cultural authenticity, who are from Kabul and Khandahar. There is an excellent glossary at the end, which I wish I had thought to look for early on.

This book also strikes me as enabling text in accordance with Dr. Alfred Tatum's work. While it is not a book tailored towards lives of African American teenage males, his population of interest, this story is an excellent example of a book which shows a marginalized main character in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation able to pull through as the result of self-reliance, dogged perseverance, good decision making and education.

The main character Jameela is not without fault and is not always completely likeable, which endeared me to her all the more. I believe she is a character with whom American children could connect because while she is living a life completely different from the experiences of most American children, she deals with loss, love, and difficult friendships, common human experiences. For example, upon arriving in the orphanage, she struggles with the power structure which exists in the friendships amongst the other orphans. While she eventually earns her place among the other orphans through her actions, she is not perfect. Some books would make her automatically the nicest girl who is kind to everyone, but Jameela is actually still unkind to a young orphan girl named Arwa. I found this to be a more realistic portrayal of adolescent relationships.

This book is heavy, touching on drug abuse, war, adult drinking, religion, personal identity and more. None

of it is glorified, and I believe for an interested upper middle school age student or lower high school student, this would be an excellent selection. I also see it working as part of a reading ladder related to either contemporary Afghanistan, Muslim related fiction, or women around the world. Since it is such a thick text with many layers for discussion, I also see its potential for a literature circle book.

Added

After some additional thought, another thing I like about this book is how it dealt with femininity in the Arab world. Sometimes when I read books about cultures different than my own, I feel that authors (particularly American authors writing about global cultures) are treating these cultures and communities with respect until there is something about that culture which offends or displeases them. I enjoyed the passages where Jameela discussed her wearing of the Chadri (or Burka) because the author treated the issue with a deep respect for the character's culture, rather than treating it as a negative or backward characteristic of a culture which is in need of remedy. Of course, as Ms. Khan is Pakistani (not Afghan as is her main character), her cultural background may have made it easier for her to portray this cultural component with this sort of deep respect rather than respect "to a point". I am not an expert on books with Muslim themes, but my limited experience as well as my knowledge related to multicultural and global literature made me feel that Ms. Khan did an excellent job of writing clearly about an issue which can spark heated conversations in the Western World.

Poem Fanatic says

This book has been written in a really beautiful way. The book starts off with the death of Jameela's mother, making the reader want to find out more. The plunge Jameela's life takes is really interesting, and I'm looking forward to more books from Duckbill's Not Our War series[NOW].

Addie says

Wanting Mor by Rukhsana Khan

Groundwood Books, House of Anansi Press, Toronto & Berkeley, 2009

Interest level: YA (grades 7-10)

The main character, Jameela, is a young girl from Afghanistan. Her mother, Mor, dies from disease at the beginning of the book and now Jameela is left behind to deal with her irresponsible father and take over all the household duties. They live in poverty in a hut with no plumbing and a dirt floor, and they cook over a fire. They never have enough food, and their remote village has no doctor and no school. Her father is cruel to her and smokes opium and drinks, even though their religion forbids it. Her father was originally from Kabul, so after his wife Mor dies, he decides to return to the city where he thinks things will be better and he can find work. He sells all their belongings and Jameela only has a few minutes to say goodbye at her mother's gravesite. When they arrive in Kabul, they stay with some of her father's friends and Jameela is put to work cooking and cleaning. When that living situation didn't work out, Jameela's father decides to get married to a woman he barely knows, who he introduces to Jameela as her new mother. The arrangements are made very quickly and Jameela and her father move in to this woman's house. Again, Jameela is forced to cook and clean, but she cannot please her new mother, who is extremely cruel to her. Her new stepmother

tells Jameela's father to get rid of her and so her father abandons her in a market. A kind butcher takes her to an orphanage, where Jameela actually has the opportunity to learn to read and make friends. Some American soldiers who help out at the orphanage take her to their military hospital, where she has surgery to fix her cleft lip. Life improves greatly for Jameela and she eventually wants to become a school teacher at the orphanage. She finds her father again and when he discovers her lip has been fixed and she can read, he tries to convince her to move away with him. She refuses though because she is quite happy with her new life at the orphanage.

The book is set in Afghanistan in 2001, right after the American invasion. The author tries to provide a culturally accurate depiction of what life is like in Afghanistan and I think she does a great job. The author, who was born in Lahore, Pakistan, is an expert on books with Muslim themes and her books are often set in or feature characters from Pakistan and the Middle East. In the author's note, we find out that this story is based on a true event. Khan read a news report about orphanages and it told about a young girl whose father remarried and his new wife didn't want the girl, so they left her in the marketplace, just like Jameela is abandoned in *Waiting for Mor*. Khan's sister-in-law, who is from Kabul, provided information about culture and life in Afghanistan for this book. Khan also had two other people from Kandahar read the book to review it for accuracy. Although I am not very familiar with life and the culture of Afghanistan, the details in the story seem very authentic.

As an American reader, reading about the life of a Muslim girl in Afghanistan, some of the major cultural differences were surprising and difficult to understand. Because of the reading level, content, and the age of the main character, I'd say the target audience is middle school. If I had any of my middle school students read this book, I would want to prepare them for these differences and make sure they had a little background knowledge about the cultural differences, the War in Afghanistan and Muslim beliefs and practices. A young student who no background knowledge of these things might have difficulty comprehending the book. There were many unfamiliar words (some in the Pushto language, some dealing with Islam and cultural details) that aren't defined in context. There is a glossary in the back of the book, but some readers might not find it – there is no indication within the text or at the beginning of the book. The languages and groups of people mentioned in the book (Pushto, Farsi, Punjabi) may be unfamiliar to any reader who does not keep up with the news and has not read anything about people in Afghanistan. Prayer customs are also not explained (how many times per day, when, washing rituals, etc.), so if a reader has no prior knowledge about Islam, they may be confused.

For a female American reader, it is also shocking how women are treated in the book – especially Jameela because she is a poor, young, uneducated girl with a cleft lip. As a young girl, she is expected to do all the housework after her mother dies – and it's very labor intensive because they live in a hut with no plumbing. She keeps reminding herself of what her mother had told her before she died – if she can't be beautiful, she can at least be good and people will appreciate that. She has never been educated and cannot read, so her opportunities in life are dismal. She is also required to wear a head scarf (porani), but she seems very comfortable with this and even says negative things about women who don't wear a head covering or women who dress suggestively and wear makeup (like Westerners). When her and her father first move to Kabul, Jameela is shocked by the women there who wear short skirts, makeup, and no head covering, and have parties where they dance and drink – all of these things are forbidden by their religion and Jameela thinks they are immodest and shameful. Jameela is very religious and doesn't like it when others don't take their prayers and their faith seriously.

One of the most shocking episodes in the book was when one of Jameela's friends wears a tight, low-cut dress with no head covering and when men bump into her on purpose and a boy grabs her breast, Jameela thinks it's funny. She thinks it's the girl's fault for wearing those clothes and inviting harassment – it's not

the men who are at fault. This is very different from our Western view, where women have equal rights and sexual harassment is taken very seriously. Jameela seems very judgmental and even mean at times, because of her religious beliefs and social customs – it is very unsettling to an American reader who is not used to that type of thought.

It's also very disturbing that her father leaves immediately after his wife dies and soon makes the hasty decision to marry another woman who he didn't know very well and Jameela had never even met before. It seems incredible to an American reader that her father just announces that this strange woman would be Jameela's new mother. This is definitely something that would not happen in the United States. One of Jameela's friends at the orphanage (who is a teenage girl), also meets a boy and is married to him within a few weeks, without really knowing him very well. Apparently this is not something that is shocking and strange to the people there, as it would be in the United States, where our beliefs and customs surrounding marriage are much different.

The book also deals with the American invasion of Afghanistan, but doesn't go into great detail, so some prior knowledge is assumed. There are mentions of foreigners bombing them, American military machines (and before the Americans, it was the Russians), and Taliban rule. Jameela's mother's entire family had been killed by a bomb dropped on a family wedding celebration. Jameela had to help pick up body parts and bury them all. Death is a part of life there – there are lots of funerals, many people had been killed by mines, drought, disease, war, and other causes. She has a lot of resentment and anger about the American soldiers killing her innocent family members, so she has very mixed feelings about the soldiers who help out at the orphanage. Jameela says "they are powerful and we are not" and her friend tells her, "first the soldiers break our country, now they want to fix it." Because of the general distrust of the American soldiers, the other girls at the orphanage tell Jameela not to get the surgery to correct her cleft lip (although she ultimately decides to go ahead with it).

Overall, I enjoyed the book and thought it was a cultural authentic and compelling story. I also think it's an important book because our students should to read and learn more about life in other countries and cultures that are very different from their own. But because there are so many cultural differences and issues dealt with in the story (without much explanation), the subject matter would make it a complicated and difficult read for younger kids with no background knowledge. Amazon lists the book for age 10 and up (grades 4 and up), but I would only suggest this book for students in grades 7 and up. Even though the reading level is not difficult, the subject matter makes it harder to comprehend if the student doesn't have enough background knowledge.

Lesley says

This book is inspired by true events. This is a powerful tale of what it is like for a young girl in Afghanistan. So hard to believe the choices people make for their own gain. I hope this story does show other young readers, the difficulties that children in another part of the world must face. I recommend this book!

Sandy says

A sad story about a young girl growing in Afghanistan after the wars and during American occupation of that

country. It is very sad.

I read this book at the same time that I read *Esperanza Rising*. Both stories touched me and both had a strong female as the main character, though Jameela in *Wanting Mor* seemed a little stronger mostly because of the ending of the story. I would like to hope that reading these kinds of books would help girls to know that they are stronger than they think and that life's hardships can be faced head on.

I think the part in the story where Jameela witnesses her drunken father going up the stairs to the bedroom of the family they are staying with and then both her and her father getting kicked out into the streets because of his actions would be a huge shock to a young girl. She had already sort of knew her father was a jerk, but that really put things into perspective for her as to what kind of person her father really was.

Casey Strauss says

Jameela, a young Afghani girl, lives in a poor village with her mother and father. The rest of Jameela's family has perished in a bombing at a family wedding. Jameela's father is left broken and angry from this event; he withdraws from his wife and daughter to deal with his grief. Jameela then relies on her mother as her support system, going to her for advice and companionship. When Jameela's mother suddenly dies, her world, as she knows it ends. Further emotionally devastated, her father turns to alcohol and drugs in response to his wife's death. Much to Jameela surprise, her father then moves with her to the larger city of Kabul where he marries a wealthy widow. Jameela is then forced to accept a new mother into her life, when she is still mourning the death of her Mor (Pushto word for mother). Her father's new wife is threatened by Jameela's presence, especially after seeing the young girl attempt to learn to read. Her stepmother then persuades her father to abandon Jameela in a busy market place to fend for herself. Jameela eventually settles in an orphanage run by the army. Throughout the story, she draws upon the memories of her Mor, giving her the strength and perseverance she needs to survive.

Jameela's story is fictional, but based on a true incident that Rukhsana Khan came across while reading a report on children in crisis that was issued by Afghanistan's department of orphanages. She was so moved by the story that she was inspired to write *Wanting Mor*. Jameela's life provides the reader with a window into another culture, one that may be unfamiliar and new. Her struggle is told in first person narrative, making the emotions honest and real. There are many Pushto words used authentically in the dialogue between characters and in Jameela's narration. In the back of the book is a helpful glossary of words and definitions. Students in sixth grade through eighth would benefit from reading this book and engaging in discussion of life in Afghanistan. This book could be used in literature unit, paired with other books based in the Middle East, such as the *Breadwinner*, which also has a female protagonist set in Afghanistan.

Canadian Children's Book Centre says

Jameela keenly misses her beloved dead mother (Mor). Mor's teaching had encouraged her on the path to becoming a gracious Muslim woman. However, Afghanistan life after the American invasion of 2001 is treacherous for vulnerable youth. Jameela's father, ruined by drugs, alcohol and other Western- or war-spawned problems, cannot guide her. He moves them to the city, but at his new wife's urging he abandons his daughter at the market and Jameela ends up in an orphanage. Readers track Jameela's journey from a

scared girl with a misshapen face in an orphanage to an educated, strong young woman. She refuses to forsake her religious principles, and her triumphant moment comes partly through her choice to wear a chadri (burka). Shedding her timidity, Jameela's approach to unopened doors is to knock and bang – even if it's the door to her stepmother and father's home! The plot's twists and turns resemble the streets of Kabul where Jameela encounters both kindness and heart-wrenching cruelty. Author Rukhsana Khan, born in Pakistan, based *Wanting Mor* on a report from an orphanage she sponsors. She desired to present a Muslim view point, rather than the Western-flavoured one available elsewhere. A rich cultural landscape is conveyed through Khan's religious perspectives and cultural background, her sensual descriptions and generous use of Afghani lingual terms (supported with a five-page "Glossary"). *Wanting Mor* will satisfy librarians looking to add Muslim or children-in-war stories to their shelves, but young patrons will repeatedly check the book out because the unique hero sees open roads, where others might only squint at dead ends.

Reviewed by Iain Gooddall in *Canadian Children's Book News*
Spring 2009 VOL.32 NO.2

Marcie says

For several months, as I would shelve books in my school library, I often hesitated and pulled out *Wanting Mor* from its location, deciding that I would make time to read it later. Well, later came last week, and I was able to finish the book yesterday at a UPJ/Gannon men's basketball game.

Although a work of fiction, *Wanting Mor* is based on a true incident that the author, Rukhsana Khan, read about in an Afghanistan Department of Orphanages report. The book's main character, Jameela, is an orphan. Her mother died shortly after the fall of the Taliban and her vice-possessed father moves her to Kabul and marries a widow. The widow is quite cruel towards Jameela. She works Jameela incessantly and feeds her little.

A kind butcher witnesses what turns out to be her father's abandonment in an unfamiliar and intricate marketplace that she cannot navigate. The butcher takes her to his home so she will be safe overnight, and although, both the butcher and his wife are pained by Jameela's circumstances, their family is taxed to its financial limits, and they cannot keep her. The next day, the butcher, Akram, takes Jameela to a local orphanage.

Here, over time, Jameela finds comfort and purpose, despite having to learn how to maneuver the orphanage's daily complexities. In the end, Jameela's heart-wrenching experiences have molded her into a wise and competent young lady capable of making decisions that are best for her and her well-being.

Note: I appreciated the included glossary. I often found myself referencing it to better understand story's content and the Arabic and Pushto phrases.

Catherine says

I read this book as an ebook.

Rukhsana Khan is a Pakistani-Canadian children's author whose stories offer children connections to the

cultures of the Middle East. I came across the novel, *Wanting Mor*, when I was looking at the Middle East Book Awards. *Wanting Mor* won this award for youth literature in 2009.

The story takes place in Afghanistan shortly after the 2001 invasion by Americans. It is about a girl named Jameela. She grew up in a small, poor village in Afghanistan that is torn apart from the war. Jameela was born with a cleft lip and lacks education, but looks to her Muslim faith to bring her spirits up. After her mother, or mother, dies, Jameela's father remarries and her new stepmother is very demanding. Eventually, Jameela is abandoned in a busy street market where she finds her way to an orphanage that is ran by the American army that killed many of her family members. However, Jameela remembers her faith and her mother's words, "If you can't be beautiful you should at least be good." These words and her faith stay with her forever and help her overcome the fears she has and helps her find herself throughout her deepest struggles. When fate brings her father and stepmother back to her, will she finally have the strength to stand up to them?

Inspired by a true story, *Wanting Mor*, would be great in a middle school classroom. Themes that are evident to the story that would be great to talk about in a classroom are the traditional Muslim culture, issues about women and beauty in Afghanistan, finding one's self-worth and identity, and perseverance. Rukhsana Khan does a wonderful job describing and making the reader really feel what the characters are going through. I not only felt what Jameela felt, but felt empathy towards her throughout.

Maureenm says

YA

Kristina says

4.5 stars. A quick, one sitting read. Good story, recommend for Gr 5 and up. Had the potential to be longer and more developed, for which I would've given it the 5 stars.

Gabrielle says

Wanting Mor, a novel by Rukhsana Khan, tells the story of Jameela, a young Afghan girl whose mother dies in the beginning of the book. After that, her life becomes a series of tragedies and mishaps, and yet Jameela's goodness and honesty make this story ultimately a happy one.

After her mother dies, Jameela's father takes them from their small rural village to Kabul. He marries a woman who doesn't like Jameela, so he takes Jameela to the market and abandons her there. It's a heartbreaking part of the story when she is left alone, waiting for her father to return. He never does. She is then taken in by a nice man who already has four children, so he can't keep her and she ends up at a local orphanage. Here her life improves. She makes a few friends, learns to read, and has her cleft lip repaired by an American army doctor. In a strange twist of fate, Jameela's friend Soraya ends up marrying Jameela's stepbrother, so Jameela finally has the chance to confront her father. She decides to stay at the orphanage instead of go back to live with her deadbeat father. The orphanage is her home, and she even becomes a teacher of the smaller children there. By the end of the story, Jameela is happily settled into life at the

orphanage with a newfound sense of confidence.

There were many things I loved about this book, but I especially loved how the author tackles really serious issues with honesty. Jameela's father, for example, uses opium and drinks alcohol, and this is not sugarcoated at all. Also, Jameela is a tragic character in many ways, but she's also a real adolescent. She herself is the victim of ridicule because of her lip, yet she makes fun of another younger girl because she smells and is dirty. Jameela is not a martyr the way some tragic young characters can be. The author is also very direct in her portrayal of Muslim men, particularly Jameela's father, and how controlling they can be of women and girls. There is some anti-American sentiment in the book, but this is an accurate depiction of how many Afghan citizens might feel about the American military.

This book is very authentic in its portrayal of the ways that religion and gender roles are so important in Muslim culture. The author is from Pakistan, and the book seems very much like an insiders view of life in a Muslim country. Religion is very important to Jameela, and there are translations in the back of the book of the various arabic phrases she uses throughout the story.

I also thought the fact that Jameela had a cleft lip was very interesting. My father is a pediatric surgeon and has spent many years performing surgeries in poor countries where children have never had their cleft lips fixed. This can be devastating for children, especially girls whose "marriageability" is very important for ensuring a good quality of life. My dad often operated on girls as old as 13 or 14 who had never had their cleft lips repaired, so that part of Jameela's story really resonated with me.

Wanting Mor is a great book with lots of rich, interesting cultural issues. It provides an insider perspective on Afghanistan and the issues facing young women post-Taliban. I would recommend this book for students grades 7-10. Some of the issues such as drug abuse and parental abandonment are a bit heavy for younger students.

Marija says

This was one of the most heart-wrenching books I have read this year. The story centers around Jameela, a young Afghani girl who loses her mother Mor. Her father has many of his own personal issues and decides to uproot Jameela from their home and head off to Kabul, seeking a better life. Once in Kabul, the pair move around from place to place, and when her father re-marries, Jameela finds herself abandoned in the middle of this strange city. She ends up in an orphanage where she has to fall back on her islamic faith to get her through all of the emotions she experiences.

I was very humbled in what I thought I knew about Afghani life and Islam after reading this book. I couldn't believe the injustices and the fear which dominates the lives of the people on a daily basis. There was one quote in the book that made me feel so sad for the Afghani people, "The road barely exists. What isn't churned up by the tracks of military machines is pock-marked with bomb craters. These days the machines belong to the Americans, but before they belonged to the Russians and in between those two invaders, we had the Taliban." These people have never experienced true freedom from oppresion, and this is evident with all of the cultural references throughout the book. Khan's extensive research is very evident throughout the book, and I was surprised to see that the book was based on a true story. My hope is that our children will read this book and try to figure out ways to help their peers in Afghanistan. I also hope that they will realize how truly blessed we are to have the freedoms we do. This book would be a great read for 7th&8th graders.

