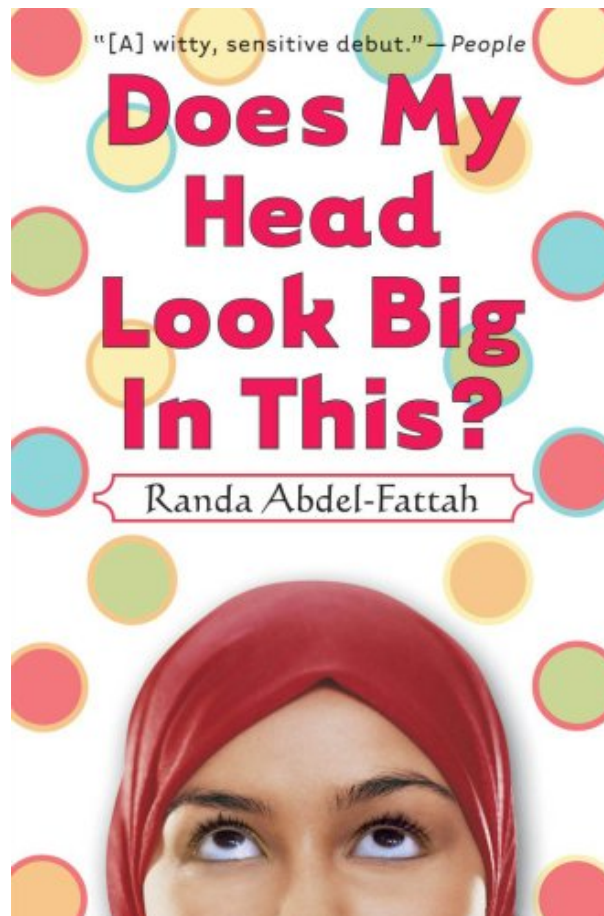


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"[A] witty, sensitive debut." — *People*

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From School Library Journal

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When sixteen-year-old Amal decides to wear the hijab full-time, her entire world changes, all because of a piece of cloth...

Sixteen-year-old Amal makes the decision to start wearing the hijab full-time and everyone has a reaction. Her parents, her teachers, her friends, people on the street. But she stands by her decision to embrace her faith and all that it is, even if it does make her a little different from everyone else.

Can she handle the taunts of "towel head," the prejudice of her classmates, and still attract the cutest boy in school? Brilliantly funny and poignant, Randa Abdel-Fattah's debut novel will strike a chord in all teenage readers, no matter what their beliefs.

- Sales Rank: #52055 in Books
- Brand: Scholastic Paperbacks
- Published on: 2008-08-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.75" h x 5.25" w x 1.00" l, .74 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 368 pages

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A oblique look at religion and adolescence

By James R. Gilligan

Contemporary Young Adult fiction has developed a greater sense of sophistication and maturity in its approach to a wide range of issues that concern adolescents in meaningful ways—race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, violence, domestic abuse, and sexual abuse (among other themes) are examined sensitively and plausibly in any number of well written works of Young Adult literature. The topic of religion, however, consistently challenges writers of YA fiction. I've yet to come across a novel that features religion and faith as integral narrative elements and issues that profoundly affect characters in ways that compel them to develop and think independently. **Does My Head Look Big in This?** comes pretty close but falls somewhat short.

The novel focuses on Amal, a high school junior living in Australia. At the start of the final term of the school year, Amal decides to begin wearing the hijab full-time as an expression of her Islamic faith. The novel follows her through some quite typical high school experiences—she and her friends develop crushes on boys, contend with bullying “mean girls,” deal with body image issues, worry about upcoming exams, and cope with overbearing/controlling/unsympathetic/embarrassing parents. Amal has a fairly diverse group of friends—some are Islamic, some are Jewish, some are Palestinian-Australians (like Amal), others hail from other parts of the world, including Mrs. Vaselli, Amal's elderly Greek-Australian neighbor who reluctantly befriends Amal. Throughout all of these encounters and the rest of the minor conflicts that arise throughout the course of the plot, Amal's decision to wear the hijab—which seems to be the driving force behind the novel's primary conflict—increasingly fades into the background. Until the latter portion of the novel, when Amal's friend Leila runs away from home because of her mother's strict opposition to her desire for education and independence.

Ultimately, Amal's assertion of her faith creates few problems for her. It does, however, provide her with an enlightened perspective on the actions of others. It seems as though once Amal has resolved her feelings about her own faith and becomes comfortable with her decision (she even rejects a mere kiss from Adam, her crush, and explains that any form of intimacy is forbidden before marriage)—only then can she develop insight and understand the beliefs and action of others, particularly Mrs. Vaselli and Leila.

Although the novel is rather lighthearted and avoids serious drama, it sends a powerful albeit tangential message about faith in oneself and the value of empathy.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Great Book

By Amazon Customer

This book is very entertaining, yet still very meaningful and has an important message behind it. I would definitely recommend this to teenagers, especially girls, for something that will really make them think how they treat others and as an enjoyable story.

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

An important book but not quite perfect

By Marisa Russello

I am not in a "young adult" in the sense of what age group this book was written for, but I am still a young person. I read this book because I thought it would shed some light on what it's like to be a Muslim growing up in western culture. Randa Abel-Fattah did illuminate my view a bit but not enough and not in an interesting way.

Each of the characters in the book fit the profile exactly of a distinct personality type, and their stories were generally cliché. Everything had a happy ending. I also found the characters of Amal and her friends to be incredibly idealistic and overly dramatic for teenagers, and the way they expressed themselves many times seemed too forced or childish. They said things like, "Sheesh," "Hunk of a guy," and "Boy, you have got guts!" Real kids or real people for that matter do not talk like that unless they're acting in an educational video. Amal was very immature and rude at times, and I really didn't find myself connecting with her as a character. She would have been more believable as a middle school student than one almost ready to go to college.

This book taught the key lesson that it's important to do what you want no matter what others think of you. On the other hand, this book failed to discuss WHY Muslim women wear the hijab (or why orthodox Jewish women wear the sheital, also mentioned) and instead left me with the explanation that it's just a "piece of material" to symbolize someone's faith. Amal seemed overly concerned with what people thought of her, going so far as to make a list of "OK people" and "Not so OK people" to wear the hijab in front of. She and her friends were obsessed with making themselves look beautiful through their clothes, makeup and type of hijab they wore, which didn't seem accurate to me since the Koran says women should "not display their beauty except what is apparent of it."

In addition, Amal had a huge crush on Adam and was constantly checking him out, swooning over his every move, flirting and even thinking about what it would be like to kiss him. Her actions did not make sense to me at all given that she was wearing the hijab. I am not a Muslim, but I do not think Allah would have wanted her to look at Adam that way nor hint about what was hidden beneath what she covered. She completely led Adam on, and when he makes a move on her, she immediately jumps back and explains that she can't do anything even though her actions say completely the opposite. Examining the way Amal thought, I think she was the type of person who would have kissed Adam in that situation. Amal was proudly wearing her faith on her head, but she didn't display the actions to prove to me she believed in it.

I was desperate to know why Amal had so much trust in Allah and her faith. She went through the motions of her religion, doing certain things Allah said, but she didn't explain to me why it was important to her that she did. I also wish she had discussed some of the passages she was so immersed in reading in the Koran every day. There aren't many religious teenagers, and the author kept depicting Amal as just a typical teenager when she was, in fact, very different because of her decision to be religious.

What I did like was how the book shows how vividly scared Amal is to wear the hijab because of how it changes the way people look at her. Instead of seeing a person, people at first seem to see just a sign that reads, "I am Muslim," and I think this is very true in society. She faced harassment and discrimination and was even rejected by some family and friends. I believe it's important that we recognize the struggle she goes through. I also thought it was quite eye-opening how differently each set of Muslim parents approached their daughter's demonstration of her faith.

This book discusses important lessons, but I'm not sure it goes about them in the right way. I'd recommend this book as a good read for kids (maybe around the sixth grade?) because of the many adolescent issues it discusses like pressure to fit in, racism, eating disorders, tolerance, etc. For students at an older age, I think they would too easily recognize how many different issues were forced into the book and feel as if they're being preached to.

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