

# **Shooting Kabul Study Guide**

**Shooting Kabul by N. H. Senzai**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Shooting Kabul Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1 – 5.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 6 – 10.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 11 – 15.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 16 – 20.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 21 – Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">43</a>



## Plot Summary

Twelve-year-old Fadi, his parents Habib and Zafuona, and his sisters Noor and Mariam wanted to escape from their home country of Afghanistan and build a better life together in the United States of America. Whilst making the dangerous journey from their hometown of Kabul to the city of Jalalabad and across the border into Pakistan, tragedy struck when 6-year-old Mariam is accidentally left behind. The rest of the family made it safely to America but were unable to properly move on with their lives until they found out what became of Mariam.

Once in America, Fadi had to adjust to a life in a new country. Initially he struggled to make friends and was embarrassed by the free lunch pass he had to use in the cafeteria because his family was too poor to pay for his meals. Soon, Fadi was befriended by another student called Anh who tried to convince Fadi to join the school's photography club with her. Everyone in the club would be entering a photography competition run in San Francisco. Unfortunately for Fadi, his family could not afford the fifty dollar entry fee which he would need to join the club. Fadi always loved taking photographs in Kabul with his father who taught Fadi the basics of photography but when the Taliban rose to power in the country photography was banned and Fadi was no longer able to pursue his passion.

Slowly, the family began to adjust to life in their new home. Fadi's father Habib got a job as a taxi driver and his elder sister Noor started work at McDonalds. However none of them could forget that Mariam was still lost and each family member believed it was their own fault that she was left behind. No one can return to look for Mariam because the family can't afford the cost of the flight. Racked by guilt, Fadi came up with a farfetched plan to sneak onto an airplane and return to Pakistan alone, to find Mariam and restore his sense of honor. He was caught by his father before he made it to the airport. Rather than be angry, both his father and Noor sympathized with Fadi's desire to find Mariam. Fadi told Noor that the first prize in the photography competition includes plane tickets to India, which is right next to Pakistan, and she agreed to give him the fifty dollars he needed to join the club.

The family's life took a turn for the worse after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Fadi and his family were horrified by the senseless act of murder, but many people believed that all Muslims are terrorists who supported the men who hijacked the planes. Bullies at Fadi's school started to target him because of his Muslim faith.

Fadi invested all of his time and energy into winning the photography competition believing it was the only chance he had to find Mariam. When he didn't win the prize, Fadi was crushed. However he did receive an honorable mention for his entry which attracted the attention of one of the judges who specialized in photographing warzones. The judge offered to show Fadi some of his most recent work which was taken along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Whilst looking through the photographs, Fadi noticed a picture of Mariam playing with some other children at a refugee camp. The judge helped the family track her down and Mariam joined the others in San Francisco.



# Chapters 1 – 5

## Summary

At the start of the novel, 12-year-old Fadi, his parents Habib and Zafoona, and his older sister Noor and his younger sister Mariam, were trying to escape from their home country of Afghanistan in order to pursue a new and safer life in the United States of America. In Chapter 1 the family travelled by taxi from their home in Kabul to the city of Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. During the journey, Fadi remembered the night his father Habib told the family that they were leaving the country. Habib explained to the family that, although the Taliban had initially done good things for their country, they were now destroying it by oppressing the Afghani people, which is why the family had to leave. The family arrived in Jalalabad late at night and waited for the next stage of their journey.

In Chapter 2, an army truck arrived in Jalalabad to help people escape from Afghanistan over the border into Pakistan. As Fadi and his family approached the truck, lots of other people appeared suddenly from the shadows who were also trying to get on board the truck. Things became confusing and crowded as the family tried to stick together and get onto the truck. Fadi's mother, Zafoona, was very unwell and his older sister Noor had to help her get onto the truck. Fadi was left in charge of his little sister Mariam, who was only six years old. As they approached the truck, Mariam became worried that she would lose her Barbie doll, called Gulmina, and asked Fadi if he would stop and put the doll in his backpack. Fadi refused and continued to drag Mariam towards the truck. Fadi's father Habib urged Fadi and Mariam to hurry up and join him, Noor, and Zafoona who were already on board. Suddenly, the Taliban arrived and everyone started to panic. Habib tried to pull Fadi and Mariam on board but Mariam dropped her doll, Gulmina, and tried to go back for it. Fadi let go of Mariam's hand as Habib pulled him on to the truck. The truck driver drove away and Mariam was left behind.

In Chapter 3 Fadi, his parents, and his older sister Noor were travelling by plane from Pakistan on their way to the United States. As they flew, Fadi remembered the night that they lost Mariam. His mother started screaming and crying in the back of the truck as it sped away from where Mariam had been left behind. Fadi could tell that his father felt responsible for what had happened, but Fadi believed that it was really his fault, not his father's. On the airplane, Fadi thought about the night members of the Taliban had come to visit his father to ask him to work for them. Habib told the family that lots of foreign governments were angry with the Taliban because they were providing refuge to a man called Osama Bin Laden. Habib looked back on his decision to leave the United States after he finished his PhD and wondered whether he had done the right thing by bringing his family back to Afghanistan. He decided he couldn't work for the Taliban and that the family must leave. On the airplane, Zafoona criticized Habib for losing Mariam and said they shouldn't have left Pakistan without finding her. Fadi remembered the night he had helped Mariam dig up a honey tin full of keepsakes which she had buried in their back yard.



In Chapter 4, the family arrived at San Francisco airport. They presented their papers to an immigration officer and explained that they were seeking asylum, which means that they wanted to live in America because they were in danger when they lived in Afghanistan. The immigration officer looked at Mariam's passport and asked why she wasn't there, so Habib explained that she had been lost. They were met at the airport by Fadi's uncle Amin, who drove the family into the city and Fadi saw the ocean for the first time. It made him sad because he knew Mariam would have loved it.

In Chapter 5 Uncle Amin took them to a region of San Francisco called Little Kabul where many refugees and immigrants from Afghanistan lived. There were lots of shops, cafes, and restaurants selling Afghani food. Fadi was introduced to his cousins and their grandparents and the whole family shared a meal together. Fadi hid in the pantry and overheard a conversation between his mother Zafoona and her sister Nilufer. Zafoona said that it was her fault that Mariam had been lost, because she is her mother and she should have taken better care of her. Zafoona believes that if she hadn't have been so sick, she could have been a better mother to Mariam and she wouldn't have been left behind in Jalalabad.

## Analysis

In Chapter 1, during the taxi journey from Kabul to Jalalabad, Fadi was reading a copy of "From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler". Fadi refers to this book throughout the story, comparing his own life to the adventures depicted in the novel. However, the problems Fadi and his family face are much more dangerous than anything that happens to the characters in the book he is reading.

When Fadi remembers the night his father told the family they were going to leave Afghanistan, he also recalls a discussion between Noor and Mariam about Mariam's Barbie doll, Gulmina. Noor offered to make some new clothes for the doll because she knew how important it is to Mariam. Noor made a bright pink burka for the doll. This is a significant detail as it is this pink burka that Fadi sees in a photograph in the final chapter which allows the family to finally be reunited with Mariam. At the end of the chapter, as the family waited for the next stage of the journey, Mariam was clutching the doll, which is an important detail in the following chapter.

The moment Mariam is lost Chapter 2 is a major turning point in the novel. This event will haunt the rest of the characters as they try to start their new lives in America. The chapter is written from Fadi's perspective, giving the reader the impression that he is responsible for losing Mariam because he refused to stop and put her doll in his backpack and because he let go of her hand when his father tried to pull them both into the truck. However, as the story goes on, the reader realizes that all of the family members blame themselves for what happened to Mariam.

The author builds suspense in the chapter by having Fadi stay with Mariam as the family try to make it to the truck before it leaves. At this stage, the reader doesn't know what will become of the family and fears that Fadi might be separated from his family.



The author creates empathy in the reader by choosing Mariam as the character who is left behind because she is so small and innocent. Unlike Fadi's older sister Noor, who is presented as bossy and bad tempered, Mariam is presented as sweet and kind, making it especially upsetting for the reader when she is left alone. Unlike Noor and Fadi, who are old enough to be able to take care of themselves and find a practical way to reunite with their family if they were separated, Mariam is too young to be able to take care of herself.

Chapter 3 explains some background about the family and why they were living in Afghanistan. Although they had lived in the United States, Habib wanted to go back to Afghanistan because he believed his training in agriculture could help to make the country a better place. But when the Taliban started limiting the freedom of the people, by doing things like banning girls from going to school and getting an education, Habib realized that there was nothing he could do to help his country while the Taliban were still in charge. Because of this, he made the difficult decision to leave the country and move to America. The author includes these details to help the reader sympathize with Habib and the difficult decisions he had to make. Once Mariam is lost, lots of the characters think that it was a mistake for Habib to bring the family back to Afghanistan in the first place. This chapter explains that Habib had good intentions and that he wanted to help his country, making it easier for the reader to sympathize with his character.

The honey tin that Mariam uses to collect sentimental items is an important symbol in the book. Fadi carried the tin for Mariam as they tried to escape the country, meaning that he still has it even after they lose Mariam. The tin becomes a reminder to Fadi that Mariam is lost and every time he looks at the tin, he thinks of his little sister. The contents of the tin symbolize the unity of the family because Mariam has collected items relating to all of the other family members: Mariam's baby teeth, Zafoona's broken pearl earring, a buckle from Noor's belt, the tassel from her father's graduation cap, and a photograph of Fadi holding Mariam when she was a baby.

Chapter 4 is an important turning point in the novel because it marks the moment that Fadi arrives in America and starts his new life. Although he was sad to leave his home in Kabul, now that he is in America Fadi and his family are finally safe. Unfortunately, none of the family can be truly happy about starting their new lives because they are all still so upset about what happened to Mariam.

When the family met the U.S. customs official, his serious tone and the amount of time he took to look through their documents raised the tension in the chapter, making the reader concerned that Fadi and his family might not be allowed into the country. However, when the officer heard about what happened to Mariam he was very sympathetic and kind. This shows the contrast between the way the family were treated in Afghanistan, and the way they will be treated in their new life in America.

In Chapter 5, Fadi discovers that his mother thinks it's her fault that Mariam was lost. This makes Fadi feel guilty because he believes that it is really his fault that Mariam was lost. Fadi continues to feel intense guilt over what happened to Mariam for the rest of the novel. Instead of taking comfort from the discovery that his mother also feels



responsible for what happens, Fadi only feels worse. He doesn't see that it was no one's fault. He thinks that his mother is mistaken to blame herself but continues to believe that he is right to blame himself.

The district of Little Kabul shows that Fadi and his family are not so far removed from home as they thought they would be. Much of the foods, traditions, and culture of Afghanistan are present even somewhere as far away from Kabul as San Francisco. This represents the melting pot of American culture, where many different people who immigrated from all over the world now live together in the same country.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why do Fadi's family want to leave Afghanistan?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Fadi think that it was his fault that Mariam was left behind? Do you agree with him?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Do you think the family should have stayed in Pakistan until they found Mariam?

## **Vocabulary**

brooding, swerved, pockmarked, parched, renowned, compilations, idling, traffickers, expanse, ember, reverberated, whimper, cavernous, asylum, fraying, carousel, billowing, opium, whiff, kebobs



# Chapters 6 – 10

## Summary

In Chapter 6, Fadi and his family began to adjust to their new life in America. Fadi finished reading “From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler”. They moved out of Uncle Amin’s house and into their own apartment. There were only two bedrooms in the apartment, so Fadi had to sleep in the living room. Noor got a job at McDonalds. One night, Fadi overheard Noor giving her wages to Habib because she knew that the family had very little money. Noor told Habib that it was her fault Mariam was lost.

In Chapter 7, Fadi felt guilty because Noor believed she was responsible for losing Mariam. He wanted to tell her that it was really his fault, but he couldn’t find the courage to tell her. Fadi started at his new school. Because his family is poor, the school provided Fadi with a card to use in the cafeteria so that he could have a free lunch. Fadi managed to find the right classrooms for his first lessons but he didn’t feel brave enough to start a conversation with any of the other students in his classes. He realized that lots of the students had known each other for a really long time and it made him feel isolated. When Fadi used his card to pay for lunch in the cafeteria, he noticed that a boy called Felix was laughing at him. Fadi ate his lunch on his own, but he had a friendly conversation with a girl called Anh when she dropped her wallet and Fadi returned it.

In Chapter 8, the family finally heard some good news about Mariam when Uncle Amin informed them that a woman had seen Mariam the night she was lost. The woman saw Mariam leave with another family, but no one knew where they went. Fadi’s mother Zafoona became very upset and criticized Habib for leaving Pakistan before they could find Mariam. Zafoona wanted Habib to go back to Pakistan, but Habib explained that they didn’t have enough money for him to go. Fadi took his old camera to the park where he used it to imagine the photographs he would take. He couldn’t really take any because the camera didn’t have any film in it.

In Chapter 9, Fadi had his first art class at school. He was pleased when Anh, the girl he met in the cafeteria in Chapter 7, came to sit next to him and asked him to be in her group for their classwork. The art teacher, Ms. Bethune, told the class that she would be running a photography club after school. Fadi was really excited until he found out that he would need fifty dollars to join the club, which was more than his family would be able to afford. On his way home from school Fadi went to the McDonalds where Noor works, but when he went inside she wasn’t there. He went around the side of the building and saw Noor talking and laughing with a boy with lots of tattoos. When Noor saw Fadi, he ran away.

Fadi told his parents about the photography club over dinner, but his mother said it was too expensive. Later that night, Fadi saw a story on the news about a little girl who had gotten on the wrong flight at an airport and had been separated from her family.





In Chapter 10, Anh told Fadi about a competition that all of the members of the photography club were going to enter. First prize was a trip to India. Later, Fadi hid in the trunk of his father's taxi. He planned to get out at the airport and sneak onto a flight to London.

## Analysis

In Chapter 6, Fadi can't bring himself to give away his copy of "From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler" because the book has become so special to him. Even though the book is set in New York, it reminds Fadi of Kabul, where he was when he first started to read it. Fadi admires the lead character from the book, Claudia, because she solves mysteries with her brother. This foreshadows events later in the novel, when Fadi will be inspired by Claudia's bravery and inventiveness to come up with his own plan to go to Pakistan and find Mariam. However, Fadi's problems are much more serious and dangerous than Claudia's, making the reader fear that Fadi may not be able to find his happy ending the way that Claudia does.

The conversation between Noor and Habib in Chapter 6 establishes lots of important information about the family's situation. It makes it clear to the reader that the family is struggling to make enough money, otherwise Habib would never agree to accept the money that Noor offers him. This will become significant in a later chapter when Noor offers Fadi some money to join the school photography club. Because of this chapter, the reader understands how generous this gift is, even if fifty dollars doesn't seem like very much money to them.

In Chapter 7, the author uses the story of Fadi's first day at school to build sympathy in the reader. Although not many of the book's readers will have had the experience of leaving a dangerous country as a refugee and starting a new life as an asylum seeker in a different country, many more readers will have had the experience of starting at a new school where they don't know anyone. By showing Fadi in this situation, the reader demonstrates that kids are the same all over the world and they worry about similar things even when they are from very different backgrounds. The reader sympathizes with Fadi when he is too shy to introduce himself to any of the other students.

When Felix laughs at Fadi for having to use the card to pay for his lunch, it foreshadows the bullying that Fadi is about to face which will get worse after the 9/11 attacks which make characters like Felix behave in an aggressive way towards Muslims like Fadi.

Anh is the first character to show kindness to Fadi on his first day of school, which shows her to be a friendly and kind character. Her friendship will become increasingly important to Fadi later in the novel.

Chapter 8 is an important turning point for Fadi. When his mother criticized his father for leaving Mariam behind it made Fadi feel ashamed of himself, because he believed it was his fault that Mariam was lost, not his father's. This feeling of shame will motivate



Fadi in later chapters to come up with a way to get back to Pakistan, despite the fact the family cannot afford the money they would need to go back to look for Mariam.

Fadi's camera is symbolic of his relationship with his father and of what their lives were like when they still lived in Afghanistan. Habib used to take Fadi out in Kabul to show him how to take photographs but they had to stop going when the Taliban banned photography. In Afghanistan, Fadi was unable to pursue his love of photography because of the oppressive regime in charge of the country. Sadly, he is still unable to take photographs once he is in America because his family is too poor and can't afford the film that Fadi would need to pursue his interests.

In Chapter 9, Fadi's friendship with Anh starts to develop when she is friendly towards him in their art class. Her encouragement and kindness will help Fadi improve as a photographer later in the novel. Ms. Bethune is the mentor figure in the novel because she is the one who encourages Fadi to develop his talent for photography.

When Fadi sees Noor talking to a boy outside McDonalds, it symbolizes how different Noor's life is in America to how it was in Afghanistan where girls had much less freedom to go to school, work, and talk to boys.

The news report in Chapter 9 about the little girl who got on the wrong flight is an important moment for Fadi, as it inspires him to come up with a plan to find Mariam.

Chapter 10 builds suspense while Fadi hides in the trunk of his father's taxi, because the reader is worried that he will be caught and get into trouble. On the other hand, Fadi's plan is so farfetched that the reader almost hopes that his plan will not succeed. Although his goal to find Mariam is sympathetic, it is hard to see how Fadi would manage to make it all the way to Pakistan without being caught. Fadi's plan was inspired by the news story he saw in Chapter 9 about a little girl who managed to get onto the wrong flight. The plan makes it clear to the reader how desperate Fadi is to come up with a plan to find Mariam.

Although Fadi's plan to sneak on to an airplane will ultimately fail, this Chapter contains the seeds of another plan when Anh told Fadi about the photography competition that could provide a plane ticket to India.

## Discussion Question 1

Why did Fadi's family move out of Uncle Amin's house?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways does Noor's character change once she lives in America?



## Discussion Question 3

What makes Anh and Fadi want to be friends with each other?

## Vocabulary

teetered, enforcement, resolution, sanctions, aloof, adjacent, morose, bifocal, stubborn, insistence, descended, formulated, anticipation, myriad, jingled, magnified, minimizing, earnest, rifling, fixture



# Chapters 11 – 15

## Summary

In Chapter 11, Habib discovered Fadi in the trunk of his taxi. Fadi rode in the front seat of the taxi and accompanied Habib for the rest of his shift. Habib took Fadi to a diner and bought him some apple pie. Fadi explained his plan to go to Pakistan and find Mariam and Habib commended him for his desire to help but pointed out all of the reasons that the plan could not have worked.

In Chapter 12, Noor asked Fadi to come to meet her at McDonalds after her shift ended. When Fadi met with her, he explained that he had planned to go to Pakistan so he could find Mariam. Noor revealed that she was worried Fadi had told their parents about the tattooed boy he had seen her talking with. Fadi promised he wouldn't tell them. Fadi told Noor about the photography competition and Noor gave him enough money to join the photography club. Fadi was excited to go to school the next day and join the club but when he got to school he realized something was wrong and that everyone was upset. Ms. Bethune explained that photography club was cancelled that day because there had been a terrorist attack.

In Chapter 13, Fadi discovered what everyone at school had been talking about earlier in the day. Terrorists had flown planes into the buildings of the World Trade Center in New York, killing many people. Fadi's family all agreed that the attacks were horrifying and that the people who committed them had no value for human life. The next day, Fadi joined his father in a grocery store in the Little Kabul district of San Francisco, where many of the adults discussed the terrorist attacks that had occurred the previous day.

In Chapter 14, Fadi was cornered by two bullies, Felix and Ike, who called Fadi "Osama" and criticized him for being a Muslim. Later, in photography club, Anh showed Fadi some research she'd done about the judges for the photography competition. They agreed to work together as a team to help each other take the best photograph that they could.

In Chapter 15, Fadi attended a Mosque with his family and the imam spoke about how terrible the terrorist attacks had been. Later, Fadi went to a toy store with his father, cousin, and uncle. While he was there, Fadi saw an aisle full of Barbie dolls which reminded him of Mariam. He was so upset that he attacked the dolls, damaging some of them so badly that his father had to pay for them. Later, Fadi learned that an ice cream truck driver called Mr. Singh had been attacked.

## Analysis

In Chapter 11 the author builds suspense when Fadi is caught by his father when he is trying to sneak out of the taxi and into the airport. Fadi fears that his father will be very



angry and that he's going to be in a lot of trouble. However, Habib is not angry at all. Instead, he is proud of Fadi for wanting to help find his sister even though he picked a plan which was dangerous and illegal. Fadi is relieved that his father isn't angry and is comforted to discover that his father will still love him even when he's made a mistake.

When sitting next to his father in the taxi, Fadi gets to see the San Francisco skyline at night and he is blown away with how beautiful it looks. This experience will inspire Fadi in later chapters to try to take photographs of San Francisco which communicate why Fadi loves the city.

The apple pie which Habib buys for Fadi at the diner is symbolic of their new nationality. Although they cannot fully leave Afghanistan behind them until they have found Mariam, when they partake in traditional American food it is a symbol of their future in their new country.

In both Chapter 11 and Chapter 12, the reader discovers that Fadi's expectations and interpretations of events are not always accurate. He expected his father to be very angry about Fadi's attempt to sneak onto a plane, but really Habib was proud of his son for caring so much about his little sister and was only concerned about Fadi's safety. In Chapter 12, Fadi is expecting that Noor will be very angry with him and even regrets agreeing to meet her after work, but Noor is not angry and instead offers to give Fadi enough money to join the photography club.

Two life-changing events happen to Fadi in Chapter 12. His sister gives him the money to join the club, finally allowing him to pursue his love of photography. However, this coincides with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 which will change Fadi's life in a much darker and more upsetting way.

Although Fadi's plan to sneak onto a plane and make his own way to Pakistan has failed, the photography competition provided him with new hope that he would be able to find Mariam. Fadi's two main goals in life – to take photographs and to find Mariam – have now turned into a single goal: take a photograph that is so great it wins the competition, giving Fadi the opportunity to travel to India and find Mariam.

The author uses Chapter 13 to demonstrate that most ordinary Muslims did not agree with the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Fadi and his family are depicted as being just as shocked, angry, and upset as any other Americans were after witnessing such a tragic event.

In the grocery store, the adults discussed the situation in Afghanistan. They were worried that ordinary people in Afghanistan will suffer because of the actions of Osama bin Laden and the terrorist group al-Qaeda. Habib quietened an argument between two men in the line at the store who disagree about whether the Taliban has been a good thing for Afghanistan. Habib said that the Taliban once did great things for their country, but now they are working with Osama bin Laden and allowing him to use the country for his own benefit. The discussions in the grocery store foreshadow the war in Afghanistan



which began in direct response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Fadi is frightened that bad things will happen to his home country.

When Felix and Ike bully Fadi because he is a Muslim, it is symbolic of a wider problem in American culture and throughout the rest of the world in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Because the men who crashed the planes into the World Trade Center were Muslims, many people incorrectly believed that all Muslims hated America and were happy that the attacks took place. In reality, many Muslims were shocked and upset by what had happened and would never condone violence against innocent people. Fadi is being victimized because of his religion, even though he was disgusted by the actions of the terrorists.

Anh's research for the photography competition is used to highlight the differences between her character and Fadi. Although Fadi has a lot of artistic flair, he isn't very organized. Anh is organized, so together they can use their strengths to give both of them the best possible chance of winning the competition. This is the kind of cross-cultural friendship and understanding which is missing from Fadi's interactions with Felix and Ike.

Chapter 15 explores an unfortunate side effect of the 9/11 attacks in which people from all sorts of different cultures, races, and religions were all lumped together and thought of as Muslims and terrorists. Although Mr. Singh the ice cream truck driver was a Sikh, he was attacked by people who believed he was a Muslim because of his turban and beard. The author once again highlights the fact that most ordinary Muslims were not in favor of the terrorist attacks when the imam at the Mosque speaks out against the actions of the terrorists.

When Fadi attacks the Barbie dolls at the toy store, it shows that he is still thinking about Mariam and that he can't be truly happy until she is found. Mariam was carrying a Barbie doll when she was lost and Fadi believes that it is his fault she was left behind because he refused to put the doll in his backpack when Mariam asked him to. The dolls in the store remind Fadi of his guilt.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you think Fadi's plan to sneak onto an airplane was a good idea?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Habib feel about his job as a taxi driver?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Noor give Fadi the money he needs to join the photography club?



## Vocabulary

quavered, crotchety, merged, filtered, trepidation, rumpled, preoccupied, escapade, horrific, faltered, humanity, retribution, interior, swaggered, contemplative, scurried, facade, mosque, rotund, jowls



# Chapters 16 – 20

## Summary

In Chapter 16, Fadi and Anh developed their photographs for the competition in the school's dark room. Fadi took a picture of the San Francisco skyline, showing a street full of restaurant signs from many different cultures in the foreground and San Francisco Bay in the background. Anh's photograph showed a couple dancing the tango. Fadi decided his photograph wasn't good enough and that he would have to take another one to be in with a chance of winning the competition. Anh asked Fadi why winning was so important to him. Fadi explained he wanted to win the plane tickets to India so that his family could look for Mariam. Anh promised that if she won the competition, she would give her tickets to Fadi.

In Chapter 17, Noor warned Fadi not to be disappointed if he didn't win the competition. Fadi realized that he had forgotten to bring the roll of film he needed to take his next photograph home with him, so he returned to school to collect it. Once at the school, Fadi was cornered by Felix and Ike. They called Fadi a terrorist and started to beat him up. They accused him of carrying manuals for how to build a bomb and how to fly an airplane and smashed his camera, before the janitor appeared and broke up the fight.

In Chapter 18, Noor, Habib, and Zafoona found Fadi hiding in the bathroom at home, bleeding and bruised from the attack at school. Habib asked Fadi if he knew the names of the boys who attacked him, but Fadi lied and said he didn't know them. The family went out for a meal in Little Kabul to celebrate Habib and Zafoona's wedding anniversary. While they were there, an announcement was made on the news that the U.S. and British military had begun to bomb Afghanistan, with the intention of stopping terrorist activity in the country. Fadi and the rest of the family feared that they would bomb Jalalabad and that Mariam might be hurt or killed.

In Chapter 19, Fadi had to go to the Principal's office because the janitor had reported him and Ike for fighting on school grounds. The janitor had recognized Ike but not Felix, so Felix wasn't there. When the Principal asked who the third boy in the fight was, both Ike and Fadi refused to tell him his name. Ms. Bethune lent Fadi another camera so that he could still take a new photograph for the competition. Fadi confessed to his father that he knew the name of the other boy but that he didn't want to tell the Principal who he was, and his father accepted his decision.

In Chapter 20, Fadi took another photograph to enter in the competition. This time, he took a photograph of his Uncle Amin's parents, Dada and Abay. Anh helped Fadi set-up the photo shoot. Fadi wasn't happy with the formal portraits he took to begin with, but after he gave up and told Dada and Abay that the photo shoot was over they relaxed and started speaking to each other more naturally. Fadi took another photograph of them without their knowledge. He knew this was the right shot to enter into the competition.





At school, Fadi spoke to some other Afghani students about how to take revenge against Ike and Felix.

## Analysis

Fadi's first attempt at winning the photography competition, described in Chapter 15, shows a multicultural vision of San Francisco in which all races, nationalities, and religions exist side-by-side in harmony: Chinese, German, Mexican, middle-eastern, Japanese, and French restaurants are shown together, representing the melting pot of American culture. This reflects the theme of tolerance and multiculturalism in the novel. Although Muslims suffered from discrimination in the aftermath of 9/11, Fadi wanted to take a photograph that captured the tolerance and multiculturalism of America rather than the racism and discrimination.

However, unlike Anh's shot of the couple dancing the tango, Fadi's photograph doesn't include any people, meaning it is lacking an emotional connection. Fadi must come up with a way of inspiring an emotional connection through his photographs in order to have the best chance at winning the competition.

Chapter 17 showed how Fadi's life was negatively impacted by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Because Fadi is a Muslim, and the terrorists were also Muslims, Fadi is targeted by bullies at his school who blame all Muslims for the attacks. Although Ike and Felix were unpleasant bullies before 9/11, the aftermath of the attacks has given them an excuse to target Fadi in particular. Fadi's experience at school is a microcosm of the experiences of Muslims all over the world after the 9/11 attacks, in which many people tried to argue that all Muslims were violent terrorists rather than just a small minority of them.

When Fadi's camera is broken, it symbolizes a loss of hope. Winning the competition is his only chance of finding Mariam and the racist behavior of the boys at his school has taken away his opportunity to help his family.

Chapter 18 gives the reader a different perspective on the American/British war with Afghanistan which began in 2001. The war began in direct response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and many at the time believed it was an appropriate response to begin military action against Afghanistan, where many known terrorists, including Osama Bin Laden, were believed to be hiding. By depicting the bombing of Afghanistan from the perspective of an ordinary Afghani family, the author gives the reader a different angle on the story. Because the readers care about Fadi and his family and hope for the safe return of Mariam, they feel worried about how the war will affect ordinary Afghani people, even if they agree that military action against the country was a necessary part of the War on Terror. This chapter humanizes the victims of the War on Terror by giving the reader someone to sympathize with.

In Chapter 19, Fadi made the difficult decision not to tell the Principal which of the boys from school had attacked him. Fadi also chose not to explain to the Principal that he



was not at fault for the attack and that the boys had made racist remarks when they beat him up. Although Habib is frustrated with Fadi for not clearing his name and protesting his innocence, he understands that for Fadi this is a question of honor. Fadi does not want to be known as a tattletale at school and would rather be held responsible for a crime he didn't commit than tell the Principal the truth and lose his honor in the eyes of the other boys. Ironically, the attack from Ike and Felix was also a case of Fadi being held responsible for a crime he didn't commit as they attacked him in revenge for the 9/11 attacks. This is an important turning point in the novel. When Fadi decides not to take the avenues for justice that are available to him – such as telling the Principal the truth about the attack – he paves the way for the decision made by Fadi and other students in later chapters to take revenge for themselves without the assistance of any of the adult characters in the novel.

In Chapter 20, Anh helped Fadi take another photograph for the competition even though they were both competing against each other. Anh's attitude towards Fadi is in contrast to the attitudes of Felix and Ike. Anh is happy to help Fadi and be friendly and helpful towards him even though he might beat her in the competition. Anh is confident that the best photographer will win and that they will both benefit by being kind and generous towards each other. Felix and Ike on the other hand are intolerant of Fadi and believe the things that make him different – that he is a Muslim from Afghanistan – mean that he is a threat to the country and potentially dangerous.

It is symbolic that Fadi chose to take a photograph of family members for the photography competition because, for Fadi, the whole competition is about family. He is entering the competition as a way of finding his little sister Mariam, so it is fitting that his entry also features other family members.

When Fadi and the other Afghani students discuss how to get revenge against Ike and Felix, they say that the boys have been oppressing them. This echoes the language used when the adults talk about how the Taliban treated ordinary Afghani people. The problems Fadi faces at school are a small-scale version of the problems facing the world at large.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why do Felix and Ike bully Fadi?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why won't Fadi tell the Principal the name of the other boy who beat him up? Do you think Fadi did the right thing?



## Discussion Question 3

What are the differences between the first photograph Fadi takes for the competition and the second one? Which do you think sounds like the best?

## Vocabulary

exasperated, exposing, negatives, contented, peered, shaggy, concept, lurked, cradling, blotches, terrorist, peroxide, paramecium, vinyl, intertwined, bristled, sleek, illumination, muted, portrait



# Chapters 21 – Epilogue

## Summary

In Chapter 21, the family received a phone call informing them that the family who rescued Mariam in Jalalabad had been found. Unfortunately, the family had lost Mariam and didn't know where she was. Later, at a restaurant, Habib and Uncle Amin discussed the recent elections in Afghanistan while Fadi and his cousin Zalmay discussed the plan to take revenge against Ike and Felix.

In Chapter 22, the results of the photography competition were delivered to Ms. Bethune at school. She read out the results to the class: Anh came in second place and Fadi received an honorable mention, but neither of them won the plane tickets. Fadi ran out of the classroom in despair.

In Chapter 23, Fadi and the other Afghani students decided to take revenge against Ike and Felix by luring them into the woods. The plan was to beat them up, but when the time came the boys all had second thoughts and decided not to harm the bullies. Instead of hurting them, they warned them to stop bullying other students and threw them in the lake.

In Chapter 24, all of the students from the photography club went to the awards ceremony for the competition, held at the Exploratorium Museum in San Francisco. As they waited at the train station to travel to the museum, Fadi remembered what happened when he saw Ms. Bethune after he had heard that he hadn't won the competition. He explained to her that he wanted to win so badly because he wanted the plane tickets so his family could search for Mariam. He told Ms. Bethune it was his fault Mariam had been lost, but she said that it was no one's fault. She told Fadi the school would have a fundraiser so that Habib could buy a plane ticket to go and look for Mariam. Fadi was nervous about telling his family that he didn't win and thought Noor would think that he had wasted her money, but his family was just proud of him for trying his best. He resolved that he would tell his family the truth: that it was his fault Mariam was lost.

In Chapter 25, Fadi explored the exhibition of winning photographs. He saw his own displayed in the Honorable Mention category and was proud of his work. One of the judges, a photographer called Clive Murray, told Fadi that his photo had been one of his favorites. Clive took Fadi to look at some of his own photographs which he had taken along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Whilst flicking through the album, Fadi saw a picture of a little girl carrying a Barbie doll in a bright pink dress.

In the Epilogue, Mariam arrived in San Francisco airport where she was greeted by the whole family, thanks to Clive Murray who helped the family track down Mariam to the refugee camp where he had taken her photo. The family all had dinner together at Uncle Amin's house.



## Analysis

In Chapter 21, the author compares the concerns of the adult characters in the book with the concerns of the children. Although the children's concerns are much less serious and important than the adult's concerns, they nevertheless echo the concerns of the adults. Regarding the Afghanistan elections, the adults praise the decision to elect someone despite his ethnicity and previous involvement with the Taliban. The men argue that Hamid Karzai, the new president of Afghanistan, is a good man and that, although he used to support the Taliban, he has now changed his mind and should be respected for that. Regarding Ike and Felix, Zamay warned Fadi that the bullies are too powerful (like the Taliban) because their parents are rich lawyers and that they may be putting themselves in danger by crossing them.

The revelation of the results of the photography competition in Chapter 22 is a moment of anticlimax in the novel. So much of the narrative has focused on the competition and on Fadi's attempts to win it that the moment when he receives nothing is unexpected and surprising. Fadi has faced so many obstacles on his path towards entering the competition: first the fee for joining the club which Noor paid for him, then the difficulty of coming up with a good enough photograph, and finally when Ike and Felix broke his camera. He has suffered so much in his attempts to win it makes the moment when he fails heartbreaking. Because the plane tickets were Fadi's only hope for finding Mariam, the reader is left to wonder if she will ever be found and whether the book will have a happy ending.

In Chapter 23, the Muslim students who had been bullied by Ike and Felix decided to take revenge against their oppressors. The reader sympathizes with the boys for wanting to take revenge, because Ike and Felix have been so mean and unfair to Fadi ever since he started at their school. However, once the bullies are outnumbered it starts to feel as if the boys are being unfair to Ike and Felix. Although the bullies were in the wrong, hurting them with violence as an act of revenge will only make things worse. By forgiving the people who hurt them, the boys are able to move past their differences in a way which will make it easier for them all to get along together in the future. This echoes the adult's story in the novel, in which the people of Afghanistan need to get over their differences in the past in order to move towards a peaceful future.

Chapter 24 marks an important emotional moment for Fadi, because it is the first time he ever confesses out loud his belief that it was his fault that Mariam was lost. Fadi has always been too scared to tell anyone it was his fault because he is worried people will be angry with him. But when he tells Ms. Bethune, she tells him it wasn't his fault at all and that if he'd stopped to put Mariam's doll in his backpack then both of them might have been left behind. Although this doesn't convince Fadi that it wasn't his fault, it does at least console him that it's ok to talk about his feelings. Because of this, he resolves to tell his family that it was his fault.



Chapter 24 offers the reader some hope that Mariam might be found after all, after it appeared in Chapter 23 that the family's last chance of finding her had been a failure. Perhaps the school will raise enough money to send Habib to Pakistan.

Although the author doesn't mention Mariam by name when Fadi sees her photograph in Chapter 25, she is identified by her doll Gulmina who she refuses to part with. This is an emotional moment for the readers who know that Mariam is safe as soon as they read the description of the doll.

Although Fadi didn't win the photography competition, by working hard at his photography and placing in the top 50, his involvement still led to the family finding Mariam, in a much more unexpected way. Fadi's talent attracted the attention of Clive Murray because he is interested in displaced families like Fadi's. If Fadi hadn't chosen to photograph his own family, perhaps Clive Murray would not have taken a special interest in Fadi's photograph and the coincidental discovery of Mariam would not have occurred. By being true to his family and having respect for his own culture and background, Fadi did something which led to the eventual discovery of his missing little sister. Fadi spent the whole of the novel doing everything he could to find Mariam and his efforts paid off in a very unexpected way. He saved his little sister and never needed to confess to his family that it was down to him that she was lost, because it was also down to him that she was found.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you think Fadi and his friends were right to plan revenge against Ike and Felix?

## Discussion Question 2

Was Fadi's family disappointed that he didn't win the competition?

## Discussion Question 3

Why did Clive Murray take a special interest in Fadi's photograph?

## Vocabulary

jagged, gurgled, refugee, scenarios, manila, eager, consent, bewildered, kaleidoscope, sloths, mingled, clump, volts, sagged, pursed, stammered, additional, sloshing, bickered, amicably



# Characters

## Fadi

Fadi is the central character / protagonist. He is a 12-year-old Muslim boy from Afghanistan with a passion for photography whose parents move his family to San Francisco in order to build a safer and happier life for their children. However, Fadi is unable to properly appreciate and enjoy his new life in America because of the intense guilt he feels over the fate of his little sister Mariam, who was accidentally left behind when the family escaped from Afghanistan. The novel tells the story of Fadi's struggle to overcome his feelings of guilt for letting go of Mariam's hand moments before she was lost and the various plans and schemes Fadi concocts in order to get back to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to look for her.

Fadi's life changed dramatically when his father, Habib, made the difficult decision to make his family leave their home country of Afghanistan to seek asylum in the United States of America. When the novel opens, the family is still in Afghanistan in the process of making the difficult and dangerous journey from their home in Kabul to the city of Jalalabad and over the border into Pakistan. Fadi is initially excited by their escape because it reminds him of the adventures of Claudia, the main character from the book he read in the taxi on the way to Jalalabad: "From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler". But when his younger sister Mariam is accidentally left behind, the problems Fadi faces become considerably more serious and dangerous than anything faced by Claudia.

Once the family is living in America, Fadi has two main goals in his new life: the first is to pursue his love of photography and the second is to come up with a way of finding Mariam, which will allow him to overcome the feelings of guilt he has about what happened to her. These goals merge into one goal when Fadi hears about a photography competition in which the winner of the grand prize will be given plane tickets to India, which borders Pakistan. Fadi invests all of his time and hope (as well as some of his older sister's money) into winning the competition. Although Fadi's plan fails and he doesn't win the plane tickets to India, his passion for photography indirectly leads to Mariam's rescue when Fadi sees an image of her in a Pakistani refugee camp in a collection of photographs taken by one of the competition judges. Many of Fadi's rescue attempts are far-fetched and implausible, but by following his talents and his passions and being true to himself he manages to save his little sister.

Fadi blames himself for what happened to Mariam, although the reader knows that it was not really his fault. During the course of the novel, Fadi discovers that his sister Noor, his father Habib, and his mother Zafoona all blame themselves for leaving Mariam behind. However, rather than take comfort from this, this only makes Fadi feel even guiltier. His conscience cannot rest until Mariam is safely returned to them in the final chapter.





## Habib

Habib is Fadi's father and serves as a mentor figure for Fadi in the novel. Habib, like Fadi, also struggles with guilt over what has happened to his family. But unlike Fadi, Habib feels responsible for the whole family's welfare, not just Mariam's. Habib completed a PhD in the United States, but decided to move the whole family back to Afghanistan rather than stay in America. Habib had noble and admirable reasons for wanting to return to Afghanistan: he believed that he could use the qualifications and knowledge he had gained in America to help the people of his home country and make it a better place for everyone there. He came to bitterly regret this decision when the Taliban, the group in charge of Afghanistan when the family returned, became violent and started to oppress the Afghani people. When the Taliban told Habib that they wanted him to work for them, Habib knew that it was time to get his family out of the country. Habib feels guilty for taking his family back to Afghanistan in the first place and his sense of guilt is intensified when Mariam is left behind.

Habib's sense of honor is damaged by his inability to keep his family safe. Because of this, he sympathizes with Fadi's feelings of guilt and dishonor. When Fadi hides in Habib's taxi during his ill-fated attempt to smuggle himself onto an airplane, Fadi expects that his father will be very angry when he gets caught. Instead, Habib praises Fadi for his commitment to his sister and his desire to help her, and is only worried that Fadi attempted to do something dangerous. Habib and Fadi understand each other, which is a source of comfort for Fadi in a foreign country in which other students at school sometimes treat him as an outsider. When Fadi is attacked by the bullies Ike and Felix, he would rather be punished himself than be a tattletale and tell the Principal who was responsible for the fight. Habib is upset that Fadi won't clear his name with the Principal, but he understands his reasons and supports him even though he disagrees with his decision.

## Noor

Noor is Fadi's older sister. Noor blames herself for what happened to Mariam: she believes that because she is the oldest sibling, it was her job to look after the younger children and she failed.

At the start of the novel, Noor is depicted as moody and mean. She criticizes Fadi and complains about his behavior when they are trying to escape from Afghanistan. Life was difficult in Afghanistan, especially for women and girls who were forbidden from going to school or having a job. Noor's prospects improve in America where she can attend school and get a job at McDonalds. Fadi is surprised by the change in Noor's personality once they arrive in America. She is much more relaxed and kind to Fadi, even offering him the money for his photography club out of her own wages. Fadi sees Noor talking to a boy outside of McDonalds and Noor makes him promise not to tell her parents about it. Although it is never stated in the novel, it is implied that this boy is





Noor's boyfriend. Noor's relationship with the tattooed boy and her job at McDonalds is symbolic of her becoming integrated into American society.

## **Zafoona**

Zafoona is Fadi's mother. At the start of the novel she is very sick and this is one of the reasons that Habib decides to take the family to America where Zafoona can get better medical care. Zafoona blames herself for what happened to Mariam because she believes that if she hadn't been sick she would have been able to take better care of her children. Zafoona is highly critical of Habib's actions during the novel and believes the family should not have come to America from Pakistan before finding Mariam. Once they are in America, Zafoona's physical health improves but her mental health gets worse and worse because of the strain of not knowing what happened to Mariam. Zafoona goes many days without getting out of bed and responds to any news of Mariam by getting angry with Habib. When the family first returned to Afghanistan, Zafoona wanted to open her own school but she wasn't able to because the Taliban wouldn't allow women to have jobs.

## **Mariam**

Mariam is Fadi's younger sister. She is just six years old at the start of the novel when she is accidentally left behind at Jalalabad when the family are trying to escape from Afghanistan. Although her character is not present for most of the novel, she continues to influence events because the other characters are so focused on finding her. Mariam carries a Barbie doll, who she named Gulmina, with her everywhere she goes and it is because of the doll that she gets left behind. Mariam dropped the doll just as she and Fadi were trying to board the truck that would take them across the border to Pakistan. When Mariam went back to get her doll, she was lost in the confusion and left behind. Mariam collected souvenirs that reminded her of all of her family members and put them in a honey tin which she gave to Fadi to keep safe. Whenever Fadi looks at the tin, it reminds him of his missing sister and increases his desperation to bring his family back together again.

## **Anh**

Anh is another student at Fadi's school. Although he is bullied by some of the students and too shy to talk to others, Anh shows Fadi that there are also friendly and kind people at his school who will make his life easier and happier. Anh said that if she won the competition, she would give the plane tickets to Fadi to help him find Mariam. Anh is very well organized and does research into all of the judges for the photography competition. Anh and Fadi use her research to decide what kind of photographs will have a chance of winning the competition. Fadi's photograph attracts the admiration of Clive Murray, proving that Anh's friendship helped him in his quest to find his little sister.



## Ms. Bethune

Ms. Bethune is an art teacher at Fadi's school and she serves the role of mentor in the novel. She sees Fadi playing with his camera in a park and reminds him of it at school, encouraging him to join the photography club. When Fadi's camera is broken by the bullies Ike and Felix, Ms. Bethune lets him use another one so that he can still enter the competition. When Fadi doesn't win the plane tickets to India, Ms. Bethune tells him that the school will have a fundraiser so that the family can afford a plane ticket to Pakistan. As an authority figure, Ms. Bethune is in contrast to the main authority figures in Afghanistan: the Taliban. In Afghanistan, photography was banned so Fadi was unable to get any film for his camera. At his new school, the authority figures encourage Fadi and give him the equipment he needs to pursue his talents and express himself artistically. This contrast shows the difference between Fadi's life in Afghanistan and his new life in America.

## Felix and Ike

Felix and Ike are racist bullies at Fadi's school. Felix's parents are very rich, in contrast to Fadi's parents who are very poor. Because of this difference, Felix makes fun of Fadi's card which he uses to get a free lunch at school. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11 Felix and Ike target Fadi because he is a Muslim. They beat him up and break his camera, which the reader fears will ruin Fadi's chances of winning the photography competition. The reader sympathizes with Fadi and the other Muslim students when they decide to take revenge against Felix and Ike. But instead, the boys decide not to do any harm and let the bullies off with a warning, showing the power of forgiveness.

## Clive Murray

Clive Murray is a professional photographer and one of the judges of the photography competition that Fadi and Anh enter. Clive is interested in photographing ordinary people who have been displaced by war and, because of this, he has taken photographs in refugee camps along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Fadi takes a photograph of Dada and Abay which attracts Clive's attention and he tells Fadi that it was one his favorite photographs in the whole competition. By impressing Clive with his talent, Fadi is able to find Mariam. When Clive praises Fadi, he offers to show him some of his own photographs where Fadi notices Mariam clutching her Barbie doll Gulmina.

## Dada and Abay

Dada and Abay are the parents of Fadi's Uncle Amin. Fadi decides that his photograph of restaurant signs in San Francisco is lacking in emotion so instead he decides to photograph Dada and Abay. Initially the old couple are uncomfortable and the photographs look forced and staged. Once they believe the photoshoot is over, Fadi is able to capture them looking natural and joking with each other. Fadi captures the love



they feel for each other and this emotional connection makes Clive Murray take an interest in Fadi's photography. The strong relationships between Fadi's extended family therefore indirectly lead to Mariam's rescue.

## **Amin, Nilufer, and Zamay**

Amin is married to Zafoona's sister – Fadi's aunt - Nilufer. Zamay is Fadi's cousin. The family have been in America a long time and they are the ones who introduce Fadi and his family to the region of San Francisco known as Little Kabul. Amin, Nilufer, and Zamay prove that it is possible to continue your own culture and family connections whilst also becoming a part of the culture and society of a new country. Zamay plays lots of video games, which is something Fadi never had access to before he moved to America.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Gulmina the Barbie Doll

Gulmina the Barbie Doll is symbolic of Fadi's guilt over the loss of Mariam. Gulmina is Mariam's doll and prized possession. Fadi was in charge of Mariam when the family was supposed to get onto the truck at Jalalabad. Mariam asked Fadi if he would put Gulmina in his backpack because she was worried she was going to get lost, but Fadi refused to do it. Later, Mariam dropped the doll and was left behind when she let go of Fadi's hand and went back to get the doll. Fadi believes that his refusal to take better care of the doll by putting it into his backpack is the reason that Mariam was lost. He compares his lack of care for Gulmina to his failure to take proper care of Mariam. Once the family are in America, Fadi sees an aisle full of Barbie dolls at Toys "R" Us which remind him of Gulmina and his guilt over not taking better care of Mariam. Fadi attacks and destroys a number of the dolls in the store, taking out his rage on the toys. Mariam asked Noor to help her make new clothes for Gulmina, so that when the family leave Kabul for Jalalabad Gulmina is dressed in a hot pink burka. When Fadi sees the pink burka in Clive Murray's photograph, he knows that Mariam is still alive.

## Honey Tin

Mariam kept a number of souvenirs which reminded her of her family - Mariam's baby teeth, Zafoona's broken pearl earring, a buckle from Noor's belt, the tassel from her father's graduation cap, and a photograph of Fadi holding Mariam when she was a baby – and collected them in an old honey tin which she buried in the family's yard in Kabul. Before the family attempted their dangerous escape, Mariam begged Fadi to help her dig up the honey tin because she didn't want to leave it behind. Unlike Gulmina the Barbie doll, Fadi agreed to carry the tin in his backpack for Mariam. Because of this, it is the only possession of Mariam's that makes it to America with the rest of the family. It becomes a symbol of their broken family, forever reminding Fadi that they cannot be whole again until Mariam is found.

## Fadi's Camera

Fadi's Camera is symbolic of the differences between the kind of life that his family was living in Afghanistan and the opportunities and freedom that are available to them once they start their new lives in America. In Afghanistan, before the Taliban started oppressing the people, Habib would take Fadi into Kabul to take photographs of the city. But when the Taliban banned photography Fadi was restricted from expressing himself through this art form. Once the family live in America, it is once again legal for Fadi to take photographs but now he faces a different kind of obstacle. Because his family is poor, they can't afford the resources to let Fadi pursue his love of photography so Fadi is left to frame imaginary pictures with a camera with no film. When Fadi's camera is



broken by the bullies Ike and Felix it is symbolic of the intolerance endured by Muslims in America after the 9/11 attacks. Fadi and his camera are victimized simply because of Fadi's religion.

## **The Photography Competition**

The Photography Competition is a symbol of hope. Fadi believes that if he can win the competition then he will be able to go back to Pakistan and find Mariam. Fadi's invests all of his hopes and dreams in this competition which means that he is devastated when he doesn't win. Ms. Bethune can't understand why he has taken it so badly when he loses and tries to convince Fadi that he should be proud of his achievements even though he didn't win a prize. Ms. Bethune does not realize that, for Fadi, the Photography Competition is about much more than being a good photographer and being a winner: it is the only way he can imagine ever seeing his little sister again. Although it appears that hope has been lost when Fadi fails to win the competition, his efforts indirectly lead to Mariam being found after all, proving that the hope Fadi invested into the Photography Competition did not go to waste.

## **Fadi's Photograph of the San Francisco Skyline**

Fadi's Photograph of the San Francisco Skyline is symbolic of multiculturalism and tolerance. It depicts a street full of restaurant signs representing many different countries, races, and religions: Chinese, German, Mexican, middle-eastern, Japanese, and French restaurants are shown coexisting on the same street in San Francisco, depicting the city as a vibrant melting pot where different cultures mix together and get along. Although this is a positive theme, Fadi concluded that taking pictures of restaurant signs didn't convey enough emotion so he decided not to enter this photograph into the competition.

## **Fadi's Photograph of Dada and Abay**

Fadi's Photograph of Dada and Abay is symbolic of the strength of family relationships, which is a central theme of the novel. When Fadi's family arrives in America, they are taken in by Uncle Amin and his family who include Dada and Abay. The extended family supports each other during the harrowing ordeal of waiting for Mariam to be found. When Fadi realizes that his photograph will need to contain more emotion if he is going to have a chance of winning the competition, he decides to turn to his extended family by taking a picture of Dada and Abay. By turning to his family for support, Fadi enables his family to be made whole again because the photograph attracts the attention of Clive Murray who leads the family to finding Mariam.

## Lunch Card

The Lunch Card that Fadi is given by the school administrator on his first day of school is symbolic of the poverty Fadi's family faces in America. Fadi is embarrassed by the card and hopes that no one sees him using it because they will realize that Fadi is poor. When Felix notices the card he makes fun of Fadi because his parents can't afford to pay for his school meals. The card makes Fadi feel like an outsider, which is ironic because it has been provided to him as a gesture of community and charity. Lunches are provided for children like Fadi because the school district in San Francisco wants to help children living in poverty, but Fadi grows to hate the card because it makes him feel like an outsider around the other students.

## The Color Pink

The Color Pink is associated with Mariam because it is her favorite color. Mariam asked Noor to make a hot pink dress for her Barbie doll Gulmina. When the family visited the Great Mall in San Francisco, Fadi found his mother Zafoona wandering around a row of pink party dresses he knew it meant that Zafoona was thinking about Mariam. Later, in Toys "R" Us Fadi saw a little girl in a pink dress and it made him think about Mariam and wish that she was there too. Once he got to the Barbie aisle, Fadi was overwhelmed by how much pink there was and it sent him into a rage. When Fadi notices the pink burka on the Barbie doll in one of Clive Murray's photographs that is the moment when he, and the reader, knows that Mariam is safe.

## McDonalds

McDonalds is a symbol of the opportunities that are available to Noor in America which were denied to her in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, Noor was not allowed to attend school or have a job because the Taliban believed that only men should be involved in the world of work and supporting their families. In America, Noor is free to get a job at McDonalds which allows her to contribute money to the family household and help to ease the burden of poverty that her family faces. Because of Noor's job at McDonalds, she is able to give Fadi the money he needs to join the photography club which will eventually lead to the whole family being reunited with Mariam.

## Apple Pie

Apple Pie is a symbol of the American way of life and the new life that Fadi's family is trying to build for themselves in America. Fadi plans to leave America by sneaking on an airplane in an attempt to make it back to Pakistan so that he can look for Mariam. When his father catches him and stops him from going into the airport, he takes Fadi to a diner and buys him some Apple Pie. This moment symbolizes Habib's commitment to the United States. Although he understands Fadi's desire to return to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to look for Mariam, he wants Fadi to understand that America is their

home now and demonstrates this to his son by buying him some traditional American food.

# Settings

## Kabul

Kabul is the capital city of Afghanistan. This is where Fadi and his family live before Habib makes the decision that they must leave the country. Fadi was happy here before the Taliban started to oppress the Afghani people so it holds mixed memories for him. Kabul is symbolic of Habib's failed hopes and aspirations: when they returned here, Habib believed he could make a difference and improve the lives of his fellow Afghani citizens, but when they arrived things just got worse and worse.

## Jalalabad

Jalalabad is a city in Eastern Afghanistan. Fadi's family travel from Kabul to Jalalabad while trying to escape the country, by crossing over the Pakistan border. This location is significant because it was in Jalalabad that Mariam was left behind. When the British/American war with Afghanistan begins in 2001, the family fear that Jalalabad will be bombed and that Mariam may still be there and will be killed.

## San Francisco

San Francisco is the city Fadi's family relocate to when they leave Afghanistan and start a new life in the United States of America. The Fremont district of San Francisco has the largest population of Afghans in the United States and several of Fadi's extended family already call the city home. As a city famed for its multiculturalism and progressive values, it is the ideal place for the family to start again as members of the American melting pot culture.

## Little Kabul

Little Kabul is an area of Fremont in San Francisco where the city's significant Afghani population have opened numerous restaurants, stores, and cafes which sell Afghani food, drink, and goods. Little Kabul provides Fadi's family with a "home away from home". Although they are in a new country and adapting to a new culture, they still have access to all of the traditions and foods that they enjoyed when they were still in Afghanistan.

## Ms. Bethune's Classroom

Ms. Bethune's Classroom is an art classroom and it provides an area of sanctuary for Fadi at school. When Fadi starts at his new school he is shy and nervous and feels overwhelmed by how many students there are. He is too anxious to make conversation





with them, especially in the busy and bustling cafeteria. In Ms. Bethune's Classroom, however, Fadi can talk to other students with similar interests to him who all enjoy art, such as Anh and Ravi.

## Cafeteria

The cafeteria at Fadi's school makes him nervous and unsure of himself. On his first day he doesn't know anyone and is too shy to introduce himself, so he eats his lunch alone. This is also a location that reminds Fadi of his family's poverty, because every time he comes here he has to use a special card to pay for his lunch. Fadi fears that this card will indicate to other students that he is poor.

## Uncle Amin's House

Uncle Amin's House is the first place Fadi's family live when they come to America. It is symbolic of the power of family. Even though the house is overcrowded and Amin himself is struggling for money he still wants to look after Fadi's family by offering them shelter when they first arrive in America. Fadi's photograph which earns him an honorable mention in the competition and which eventually leads to the rescue of Mariam was taken at Uncle Amin's House.

## Paradise Apartment Complex

When Habib and Zafoona begin to worry that they are relying too much on Amin's hospitality and that their presence in his house is becoming a burden, they move with Fadi and Noor to the Paradise Apartment Complex. The name is ironic because the apartments are small and cramped, far from the paradise promised by their name.

## Mosque

The Mosque is where Fadi and his family go to pray and to observe their Muslim religion. This location is used to remind readers that not all Muslims agreed with terrorists and that many were very upset by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. When Fadi goes to the Mosque the Muslim preacher, known as an Imam, reminds the people there that what the terrorists did was wrong.

## Exploratorium

The Exploratorium is a museum in San Francisco where the prize giving ceremony for the photography competition was held. It is the location where Fadi sees Mariam in one of Clive Murray's photographs. Fadi is initially disappointed when he arrives at this location because he is still upset that he didn't win, but his feelings about the location change dramatically due to the coincidental discovery of the whereabouts of Mariam.

## McDonalds

Noor works at McDonalds and this location symbolizes the new freedoms that she has living in America which were denied to her in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan she couldn't work or make her own money but in America she is given the opportunity to find employment and contribute to her family's finances. This is the location where Noor gives Fadi the money for the photography club, showing that she has the independence and finances to look after her little brother.



# Themes and Motifs

## Guilt

The central theme of the novel is Guilt. The events of the novel are driven by an inciting incident in Chapter 2 in which Mariam, the youngest member of the family, is accidentally left behind in the confusion as the family tried to escape from Afghanistan. The guilt that each family member feels about what happened to Mariam is central to the novel and central to the reader's understanding of each character. The most prominent depiction of guilt comes through Fadi as the novel's protagonist. Fadi was holding on to Mariam's hand right before she was lost. Mariam let go of Fadi's hand because she dropped her doll. Fadi blames himself for what happened because Mariam had asked him to put the doll in his backpack and he refused. When Mariam lets go of his hand in order to go back for her doll, it makes Fadi believe that it was his fault she was lost. The guilt continues to haunt Fadi for the entire novel and does not leave him until the family is reunited with Mariam in the Epilogue.

Fadi's guilt motivates all of his actions in the novel. Although he is interested in joining the photography club because of his passion for photography, it isn't until he finds out about the competition and the chance to win plane tickets to India that he makes the commitment to join. His sole purpose in entering the competition and taking the best photograph is to win the tickets and find Mariam so that he can escape his guilty conscience. Fadi's guilt also motivates him to do dangerous and poorly thought-out things like his scheme to sneak onto an airplane.

Fadi agonizes over whether or not to tell the rest of his family that it was his fault that Mariam was lost. Every time he attempts to confess his guilt he gets too scared and can't do it because he fears the others will be angry with him. When he finally does confess his guilt to another character, Ms. Bethune, she does not respond the way Fadi expected. Instead of agreeing that Fadi was to blame, Ms. Bethune insists that he has no reason feel guilty and that it wasn't his fault.

Fadi is not the only character who is haunted by guilt in the novel. Habib, Zafoona, and Noor all blame themselves for what happened to Mariam and all feel guilty about what happened. Habib feels guilty because he was the one who brought the family back to Afghanistan and put them in danger in the first place. Zafoona feels guilty because her illness meant that she was unable to take care of her children. Zafoona thinks that if she hadn't been so sick, Habib and Noor would not have been distracted by trying to take care of her and Mariam would not have been lost. As the oldest sibling, Noor feels guilty because she believes it was her responsibility to look after her little brother and sister. She feels that she let her father down because he asked her to look out for them and she failed.

Another perspective on guilt is offered in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Although the attacks were perpetrated by a small group of men, some people decided



that all Muslims were guilty for the attacks and treated ordinary Muslims as if they were guilty of terrorism.

## Tolerance and Racial Understanding

Tolerance and Racial Understanding is an important theme in the novel especially after the events of 9/11. In the novel, other characters start to target the Muslim characters because they think that all Muslims are terrorists. The author tries to show that grouping terrorists and Muslims together isn't acceptable and makes the argument that people should be more tolerant towards people of different faiths rather than believing harmful stereotypes about a group of people. By depicting the events of 9/11 from the perspective of an ordinary Muslim family, the author tries to educate the reader to understand that ordinary Muslims are not terrorists and don't approve of the acts of violence which have been committed in the name of their religion.

The theme of Tolerance is explored in Fadi's first photograph which he took for the photography competition, which he did not end up entering. The photograph showed a row of restaurant signs representing lots of different cultures, races, and nationalities: "a Chinese restaurant, a German hofbrau, a Mexican taqueria, a falafel joint, a sushi bar, and a French bakery." Ms. Bethune is impressed by Fadi's photograph because she thinks it captures the multicultural and tolerant spirit of the city of San Francisco. Ms. Bethune says she likes the photograph because the restaurant signs depict the "idea of San Francisco being a cultural mosaic – literally a collage of different cuisines".

The theme of Tolerance and Racial Understanding is symbolized by Fadi's friendship with Anh, who is of Vietnamese descent. Like Fadi, Anh's family were also immigrants and her parents escaped a war in their home country of Vietnam before starting a new life in America. Instead of fighting or arguing over their different cultural backgrounds, Fadi and Anh become close friends who support each other and make up for each other's weaknesses even though they are competing against each other for the prize in the photography competition. Anh is very organized and helps Fadi by doing research about the interests of all of the judges for the photography competition, whereas Fadi is the more gifted photographer and helps Anh learn how to take better, more artistic photographs.

Felix and Ike are the characters in the novel who represent opposition to Tolerance and Racial Understanding and who show the downsides of life when people decide to be intolerant and prejudiced towards people who are from different backgrounds or religions. Because Fadi is a Muslim, Felix and Ike call him a terrorist and accuse him of carrying manuals for how to build bombs and how to fly airplanes. They also called another student a "towel head" because of his turban. Felix and Ike's intolerance make life very difficult and unhappy for the students that they bully. Luckily for Felix and Ike, when the students band together to take revenge against the bullies, they decide to be tolerant and don't harm them after all. Fadi has learned through his own experiences of intolerance that the world would be a better place if everyone could be tolerant instead.



In Afghanistan the Taliban were intolerant of people who didn't agree with their way of doing things and they oppressed the people of Afghanistan who disagreed with their way of thinking. Fadi and his family are grateful to move to America where they are free to practice their own religion without interference from the government.

## Family

Family is a very important theme in the novel. All of the characters are motivated by their desire to look out for their family, whether it is a close family member or members of their extended family. Habib makes the difficult decision to take the family from their home country Afghanistan to the United States of America because he believes it is worth the risk to seek out better health care for his wife Zafoona and a better life full of more opportunities for his children. Once in America, Fadi's family continue to be motivated by a desire to look after each other. Despite being a well-respected scholar with a PhD, Habib takes a job as a taxi driver so that he can support his family. Noor gets a job at McDonalds and gives some of her wages to Habib because she knows how little money the family have and gives Fadi the money he needs to join the photography club when Zafoona tells him that it is too expensive. Fadi comes up with numerous schemes in order to try to reunite the family by finding Mariam, including his unlikely attempt to sneak onto an airplane.

When Fadi's family arrive in America they are immediately welcomed by their extended family, including Zafoona's sister Nilufer, her husband Amin, and their children. Amin welcomes Fadi's family and allows them to stay with him in his home even though his family is struggling for money. Fadi's family move to the Paradise Apartment Complex when they begin to feel that they have relied too much on Amin's hospitality, but he insists they are welcome to continue to stay with him: "My house is your house; my food is your food." Uncle Amin didn't just provide shelter for Fadi's family, he also had his own parents Dada and Abay in the house, as well as his brother with his wife and three children.

The love and support of the extended family that Fadi meets and bonds with under Uncle Amin's roof indirectly result in Mariam being found. Fadi knows that in order to attract the attention of the photography competition judges, he must come up with a photograph which has a lot of emotional meaning. His strong emotional ties with his extended family inspire him to take a photograph of Dada and Amay, and Fadi captures a moment of kindness and tenderness between the two of them which goes on to win him an honorable mention in the photography competition as well as the attention of Clive Murray, who will reveal the whereabouts of Mariam. When Mariam finally joins everyone in San Francisco the whole extended family show up at the airport to welcome her and her return is celebrated with a big family meal at Uncle Amin's house.

The theme of family is symbolized by the honey tin which Mariam used to collect keepsakes which remind her of each of her family members: Mariam's baby teeth, Zafoona's broken pearl earring, a buckle from Noor's belt, the tassel from her father's graduation cap, and a photograph of Fadi holding Mariam when she was a baby. When



Fadi looks at the tin it reminds him that his family is not whole without Mariam and increases his motivation to come up with a plan to get her back.

## Revenge

Revenge is a controversial theme in the novel which is explored in relation to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. After the attacks, some Americans blamed all Muslims for what happened and sought to take revenge against innocent people who had nothing to do with the terrorists. Mr. Singh is attacked because of his race, his beard, and his turban which made some people assume he was a Muslim when in fact he was a Sikh. Fadi is attacked at school by the bullies Felix and Ike who want to take their own revenge for the 9/11 attacks by attacking an ordinary Muslim.

Because of the behavior of the bullies Ike and Felix, a group of students from numerous different ethnic backgrounds decided to take revenge. When the time came for the gang to beat up Ike and Felix, Fadi had second thoughts and started to question whether revenge was the answer. Although Fadi had been the underdog when Felix and Ike attacked him, now Fadi was in a powerful position over the bullies in a group that far outnumbered them. Ike and Felix were frightened and had become the underdogs instead of the bullies. Fadi recognized this and decided to stop the vicious cycle. He realized that whatever act of revenge he decided to take in this situation wouldn't reverse what had happened before. He could beat up Ike and Felix but his camera would still be broken. Rather than become a bully himself by taking revenge against Felix and Ike, he encouraged the other boys to let the bullies off with a warning by throwing them into the lake. If Fadi hadn't done this, he would have felt bad for causing harm to other people and treating people unfairly in a situation where they were outnumbered, which would mean that Fadi was as bad as Felix and Ike. Perhaps if the boys had gone through with their plan for revenge then Ike and Felix would also have decided to take their own revenge, which would have continued a cycle of violence and retribution which would be difficult to bring to an end.

On a global scale, the American/British war against Afghanistan was interpreted by many to be an act of revenge in response to the 9/11 attacks. Although the British and American governments were attempting to stop the terrorist organization al-Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin Laden from harming any more innocent people, the war also led to the deaths of many innocent people in Afghanistan and the destruction of ordinary people's homes. When the American and British military began to bomb Afghanistan, Fadi's family were frightened that they might bomb Jalalabad and that Mariam could be injured by the bombs. This helps the reader to sympathize with the perspective of ordinary families who are caught up in warzones through no fault of their own. The novel suggests that although the urge for Revenge is understandable, it can often lead to more suffering without solving anything.



## Artistic Expression

The importance of Artistic Expression and the positive effects it can have on society is a recurring motif in the novel. In Afghanistan, one of the ways the Taliban oppressed the people was by limiting their access to and enjoyment of Artistic Expression. The Taliban banned books, which forced Fadi and his family to buy books in secret on the black market. One of these books became one of Fadi's favorites: "From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler". By having access to this work of fiction, Fadi gains greater understanding about his life and the world around him. He identifies with the main character, Claudia, and relates her troubles to his own in a way which helps him better understand his own life. This demonstrates the power of fiction to help people to better understand the world and the other people around them. By limiting the people of Afghanistan's chance to read books, the Taliban were limiting their chance to gain greater knowledge and understanding of different people and different cultures.

During Fadi's first few days at school he feels nervous and isolated and the prospect of going to art class cheers him up. The opportunities for Artistic Expression in Ms. Bethune's classroom make the space a sanctuary for Fadi where he can explore his creativity and forget about the troubles in the rest of the world. Fadi and Anh bond over their shared attempts at Artistic Expression and help each other to take photographs for the competition and to choose and develop the best shots in the darkroom at school. Their shared love of photography allows Fadi and Anh to form a close friendship, which Fadi feared wouldn't be possible when he found out that the other students at his school had known each other since kindergarten. This shows how shared Artistic Expression can contribute to better relationships and friendships.

Artistic Expression is an important part of Fadi's life. Fadi loves taking photographs and when he was growing up in Afghanistan his father Habib used to take him around the city of Kabul so that they could take photographs together. Noor tells Fadi that she can remember the photographs he used to take with their father and that they were really good. But when the Taliban rose to power in Afghanistan they banned photography which meant that Fadi was no longer able to express himself artistically. One of the best things about life in America for Fadi is that he is allowed to pursue Artistic Expression without the government trying to stop him. Further to this, Fadi's pursuit of his creativity and the development of his Artistic Expression led to Mariam being reunited with her family. By pursuing his passion in a country which does not try to limit the Artistic Expression of its people, Fadi earned an honorable mention in the photography competition and praise from Clive Murray, one of the judges. Clive Murray travelled the world as a photographer in order to use his own Artistic Expression as a way of raising awareness of the plight of people living in warzones and refugee camps. When Clive takes an interest in Fadi's creative work, it leads to Fadi being reunited with his little sister.





# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is told in the third person with an omniscient narrator, but the events depicted are shown from Fadi's perspective. There are no events depicted in the novel which Fadi wasn't present for, including an argument between his parents when Fadi was only six years old. The argument about whether or not the family should return to Afghanistan when Habib finished his PhD and his student visa ran out is included in the narrative in a level of detail which Fadi could not possibly have recalled himself, as it was so long ago and he was so young, but it continues the novel's use of Point of View by ensuring that Fadi is present for everything that is depicted in the novel.

Often Fadi hears about important events but is not present for them himself, meaning that the reader finds out about it at the same time as Fadi: two important examples of this are the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the later assault of Mr. Singh the ice cream truck driver. The reader can guess that the terrorist attacks will soon be depicted in the novel because it is pointed out that Fadi was starting school during August 2001, just one month before the attacks. Because of this, it is clear to the reader what has happened when Fadi arrives at school on 9/11, although Fadi himself can't understand what's going on until he returns home and watches the news on TV with his family. Later, Mr. Singh is beaten up by some people who mistook him for a Muslim because of his beard and turban, even though Mr. Singh was actually a Sikh. Rather than include a description of this attack, the author continues to depict everything from Fadi's Point of View and describes the incident by having Fadi's cousin Sahar and Uncle Amin explain to Fadi what happened. The reader's knowledge of events is always filtered through Fadi even when other characters have access to more information. Subplots, such as Noor's new job and her growing relationship with a boy at work, are never further developed. Fadi doesn't find out any other information about Noor's life, so the reader doesn't either.

## Language and Meaning

One distinctive element of the language in the novel is the frequent use of Arabic words as well as words from the Pukhto and Persian languages, which are explained to the reader in a glossary at the end of the novel. Although explanations are available if the reader becomes confused by any of the Arabic terms, it is also possible to understand the meaning of these words by analyzing the context and repetition of the terms. For example, in Chapter 1 during one of the earliest conversations between the family about their decision to escape Afghanistan Habib addresses multiple characters with the word "jaan", which is a Pukhto and Persian word meaning "love" or "dearest". Because Habib uses it first to address his young daughter and then to address his wife, the reader can guess that the word is the equivalent of "darling" or "sweetheart" without having to use the glossary. Likewise, although the first time two characters exchange the greetings





“Salaam Alaikum”(Peace be upon you) and “Walaikum A’Salaam” (and upon you be peace) the reader may be confused or unsure about the meaning, as the novel progresses it becomes clear that these phrases are the way Muslims greet each other.

The events of the novel are filtered through Fadi’s experiences and the language therefore reflects his reading level and vocabulary, which also reflects the likely vocabulary and reading level of the novel’s intended readership. One side effect of this is the tendency for the adult characters to speak in overly simplistic terms and to explain their opinions on world politics in a superficial way which often comes across as unrealistic. For example, after the 9/11 attacks Habib gets into an argument about politics in a grocery store in Little Kabul. One man in the store states: “This spells big trouble... It is not good that outside elements, like al-Qaeda, are ruining Afghanistan.” This statement makes it clear to the reader that although al-Qaeda members were being sheltered in Afghanistan, they were not an Afghani organization and highlights the fact that most ordinary Muslims did not support the terrorists. Habib responds by saying: “Before the Taliban came, the Tajiks, Uzbeks and others were destroying the country. But now the Taliban are doing the same. They are working with Osama bin Laden, who is using Afghanistan for his own agenda.” This statement from Habib offers a useful summary of why the Taliban were once popular and why many had since turned against them. It is helpful for the intended age group of the readership to have complicated international politics explained in straightforward and easy to understand terms, but it also detracts from the realism of the novel to suggest that adults would discuss complicated international events using such simplistic language. In earlier chapters Habib used simple terms to explain events to six year old Mariam, which is more realistic than when he uses the same language to speak with other adults.

## Structure

The book is mainly told in chronological order in the past tense, especially once the family arrive in America in Chapter 4. In the opening 3 chapters events progress chronologically as the family drive towards Jalalabad, get into the truck which will take them across the Pakistan border, travel by plane to London and then onto San Francisco. Interspersed with these chronological events are Fadi’s memories of earlier events which serve to inform the reader of the backstory of who the family is and why they are attempting such a dangerous journey. The backstory and recollections are introduced into the narrative as Fadi’s thoughts in the chronological story. For example, as the family are huddled together waiting for the truck in Jalalabad, Fadi started to think about the night Habib told them all that they would have to leave Afghanistan. The sequence in which Habib broke the news to the family is then included, written in the past tense, before a paragraph break indicates that the flashback is over and the narrative returns to the present day as the family continue to wait for the truck in Jalalabad.

There are two main plot devices which drive the structure of the novel: the loss of Mariam and the photography competition. When Mariam is left behind it creates a situation which must be resolved in order for the story to come to an end. Whether



Mariam is dead or alive, the rest of the family will not rest or settle happily into their new lives in America until they can be certain what happened to her. When Fadi discovers her whereabouts while browsing through Clive Murray's photograph collection at the Exploratorium, the author brings to a conclusion the events that were setup in Chapter 2 when Mariam first went missing. When Mariam is reunited with the family in the Epilogue it brings the story as a whole to an end. The other element which drives the events of the story is the photography competition. Fadi has always had a passion for photography but finding out about the competition merges his two goals of taking photographs and finding Mariam. The competition is used as a plot device which builds suspense as the reader is led to believe that success in the competition is essential if Fadi is going to be able to find Mariam. When Fadi fails to win the competition it is a moment of anticlimax, although later chapters reveal that entering the competition did allow Fadi to find Mariam after all.



## Quotes

Fadi blinked, his eyes watery. For all the problems in Afghanistan, this was still home. Would this be the time he ever saw it?

-- Fadi (chapter 1 paragraph 101)

**Importance:** This quotation sums up Fadi's feelings as the family make the dangerous journey from Kabul to Jalalabad. Although the Taliban have made life in Afghanistan very hard for ordinary people there, Fadi still loves his country and thinks of it as his home. This is the same attitude that motivated his father to bring the family back to Afghanistan when they left the United States.

Father and son looked at each other in horror as the truck raced up the alley, leaving stragglers behind. Mariam was swallowed up in the dispersing crowd, a tiny little girl in a sea of strangers.

-- Narration (chapter 2 paragraph 56)

**Importance:** This is the moment when Mariam is left behind and the family is separated from her. This is the most significant moment in the novel because every action that the characters take after this point is directly related to their guilt over the loss of Mariam and their motivation to come up with a plan to find her.

Unlike his brothers, who had joined the army after high school, Habib had gone to the university. He didn't believe in war, or that violence was the way to solve problems. His dream had always been to rebuild Afghanistan and bring peace to its people. Fadi could see the disillusionment in his father's eyes.

-- Narration (chapter 3 paragraph 55)

**Importance:** In this chapter, the author explains why Habib wanted to return to Afghanistan which is important background information if the reader is going to sympathize with his character. The author also uses this section to make clear that despite stereotypes, not all Muslims are violent or believe that terrorism is the right way to respond to a problem. Habib is a peaceful man who loves his country and wishes to see it prosper.

Cocooned in the flow of people, Fadi and his family were bundled into the house. Over the next half hour Fadi met a blur of people, which included Uncle Amin's two brothers and their wives and children. Zafuona was settled in a bedroom for a quick nap despite her protests that she wanted to help, while the other women retreated to the kitchen to prepare endless platters of food. The men caught up on the latest news, and the kids set out plates and cutlery.

-- Narration (chapter 5 paragraph 20)

**Importance:** This quotation from the moment when Fadi's family are first welcomed by their extended family in San Francisco represents the strong family bonds which are a central theme of the novel. Although thousands of miles away from his home Fadi is still



surrounded by the love and support of his family. By taking photographs of his family, Fadi will eventually be responsible for finding Mariam.

You have the choice of going to the Great Wall in China, the Taj Mahal in India or on a safari in Kenya. You and your companion get to travel for free with room and board provided for a week.

-- Anh (chapter 10 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** When Anh tells Fadi about the prize for the photography competition she doesn't know why Fadi would be especially interested in this prize. Once Fadi is aware of the possibility of winning a trip to India it alters his goal in the novel. After this moment, he will pour all of his time and dedication into winning this trip so that he can search for Mariam.

Study hard, young man," said the passenger, bending down to look through the driver's window. He tapped on the steering wheel with his cane. "If you don't study and work hard, you'll end up a taxi driver like your father.

-- Taxi Passenger (chapter 11 paragraph 13)

**Importance:** When the Taxi Passenger says this to Fadi about Habib, he doesn't realize that Habib has a PhD from an American university and that he was a well-respected expert in his home country of Afghanistan. In America, Habib must drive a taxi to make enough money to support his family and some uninformed passengers assume he has to do this kind of work because he didn't study hard enough when he was younger. Fadi is upset by the comment because he knows how intelligent and hardworking his father really is.

Whoever did this has no value for human life, and whatever statement they're trying to make is lost by their evil actions.

-- Zafoona (chapter 13 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** Zafoona says this to Fadi when he asks her who was responsible for the terrorist attacks of 9/11. This demonstrates that many Muslims felt the same way as other Americans did when the attacks took place. Just because they were Muslim didn't mean that they supported the terrorists. Zafoona was horrified by the attacks and criticized the people responsible.

\*There are so many kinds of pink\* ... Beach Barbie carried a coral-hued towel, Movie Star Barbie drove a fuchsia jeep, Ballerina Barbie twirled in a pale pink tutu. Unbidden, an image flared in front of him. It was Mariam, holding out Gulmina, asking him to put her into his backpack. \*And I didn't do it\*.

-- Fadi/Narration (chapter 15 paragraph 35)

**Importance:** When Fadi sees the rows of pink Barbie dolls in Toys "R" Us it reminds him of Mariam. Pink was her favorite color and Fadi believes that the reason she was lost was because he refused to put her Barbie doll in her backpack when she asked him to. The Barbie dolls and the color pink remind Fadi of his guilt.



Let's see what we got in here," he said, and sniggered. "A bomb? A manual for flying airplanes?"

-- Felix (chapter 17 paragraph 36)

**Importance:** Felix and Ike bully Fadi after the 9/11 terrorist attacks because Fadi is a Muslim, like the men who attacked New York and the Pentagon. They think that because Fadi is a Muslim that he is a terrorist too and don't understand that Fadi and his family were just as shocked by the attacks as everyone else. Fadi is being punished for a crime he didn't commit.

Relieved, the elderly couple stood up from the bench. In the process, Abay's scarf got caught in the rosebushes. Dada grinned, revealing a strong set of white teeth. With gnarled hands stricken with arthritis he gently unhooked her scarf and broke off a large yellow bloom and handed it to her. Abay giggled like a young girl and took a sniff of the rose.

-- Narration (chapter 20 paragraph 26)

**Importance:** This is the moment that Fadi captures on camera and which wins him an honorable mention in the photography competition. By paying attention to the warmth and love between his family members he was able to take a photograph which captured the attention of the judge Clive Murray. Fadi's photograph of the love in his family led to Mariam being found and the whole family being reunited again.

Fadi's euphoria fizzled like a coal drenched in cold water. He looked from the gang of boys back to the tree, where Ike and Felix sat huddled in fear. All thoughts of revenge disintegrated. \*Beating them up won't solve anything. It won't bring my camera back.\*

-- Narration/Fadi (chapter 23 paragraph 60)

**Importance:** When Fadi and some other students decide to take revenge against the bullies Ike and Felix they are initially excited by the power they hold over the bullies and intend to do them harm. But Fadi realizes that revenge and violence do not solve anything. This reflects the lessons Fadi learned from the 9/11 attacks. The terrorists didn't achieve anything, they only caused more harm. Fadi ends the cycle of violence and revenge by deciding to forgive Ike and Felix instead of harming them.

The picture showed a refugee camp. Transfixed, he stared down at the group of children playing, framed by a group of tents. One of the girls clutched a doll wearing a stained and torn hot pink burka.

-- Narration (chapter 25 paragraph Final)

**Importance:** This is the moment when Fadi sees Mariam in one of Clive Murray's pictures. The reader knows that Mariam's favorite color is pink and that she refuses to part with her Barbie doll Gulmina, so when these details are described the reader knows it is her without having to be told so.