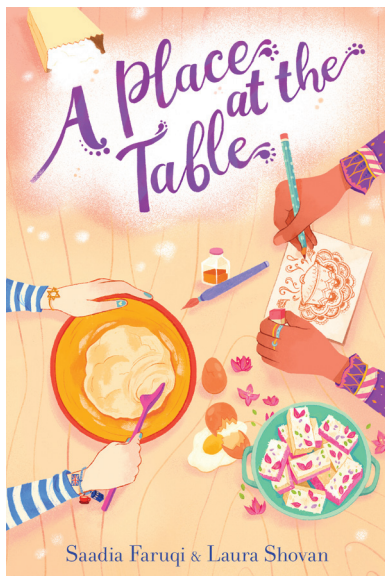


A Place at the Table

by Saadia Faruqi & Laura Shovan



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About the Book

Sixth-graders Sara and Elizabeth could not be more different. Sara is at a new school unlike the small Islamic school she used to attend. Elizabeth has her own problems: her British mum has been struggling with depression. The girls meet in a South Asian cooking class, which Elizabeth takes because her mom has stopped cooking, and which Sara is forced to attend because her mother is the teacher. The girls form a shaky alliance that gradually deepens, and they make plans to create an amazing, cross-cultural dish together and win a spot on a local food show. They make good cooking partners . . . but can they learn to trust each other enough to become true friends?

About the Authors

Saadia Faruqi is a Pakistani American author, essayist, interfaith activist, and author of the Yasmin books, an early reader series about a Pakistani American girl. She lives with her husband and children in Houston, Texas, where she is editor-in-chief of *Blue Minaret*, a magazine for Muslim art, poetry, and prose.

Laura Shovan is the author of two middle grade novels, *The Last Fifth Grade of Emerson Elementary* and *Takedown*. She lives with her family in Maryland, where she is a longtime poet-in-the-schools for the Maryland State Arts Council.

Discussion Questions

1. As the story begins, what do Sara, Elizabeth, Stephanie, and Maddy each think about the cooking club?
2. As the story focuses on Sara and Elizabeth, we learn more about their lives at home and in school. What challenges does Sara face? What challenges does Elizabeth face? What do you think each girl should do to face these challenges? What advice would you give?
3. Several issues are explored in this book—racism, prejudice, parents' expectations for their children, cultural differences, financial insecurity, and citizenship. Read the following quotes from the book and then discuss your thoughts and responses.
 - Quote #1, PLU: Maddy says, "Her mom's not even American. My dad says they should only hire PLU at this school." "What the heck is PLU?" Micah asks. Maddy tosses her ponytail. "Oh, you know. 'People like us.'" (p. 46)
 - Quote #2, Sara's Memories of Past Discrimination: I remember the time the clerk at the grocery store snarled, "Stupid Arabs!" at Baba as he struggled to find change in his wallet. I think of all the times since I came to this school when a teacher has scoffed at me or a student has glared. The message is clear: *You're different. You're not wanted.* (p. 47)
 - Quote #3, What Sara's Mother and Father Expect: "Your job is to study hard, get good grades, and one day get a good job that will make me proud. None of this cooking business for my daughter, okay? Be a doctor, or a teacher, or a journalist maybe. Your baba and I are working so much because we want you to have more opportunities than us. That's the reason why we came to this country." (p. 229)
 - Quote #4, Misunderstanding about Halloween Cultural Differences: "Do you want to go trick-or-treating together?" I ask Sara. "I don't do

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Halloween,” she says. Her voice has a hard edge. “That stinks. Is it a religious thing?” She glares at me as if I just tore up her favorite princess costume. “Don’t you know anything about Muslims?” (p. 94)

- Quote #5, Elizabeth Wants Her Mother to be a Citizen: It’s not that I want Mom to give up everything about being English. Of course not. But I want to know she’s here, that she belongs to our family one hundred percent. That she’s not going to fade into her sadness or go back to Nottingham for good. (p. 37)
4. Find a quote in the book that you want to discuss. Meet with three or four others to share your quotes. First, have one person read his or her quote, then have the other group members respond to it. The last person to talk about the quote is the person who selected it. That person gets the last word. Then have others share their quotes.
 5. Over the course of the book, the characters change in the way they see themselves and how they see others. Think about how these characters changed:
 - Maddy
 - Mrs. Kluck
 - Mrs. Hameed, Sara’s mother
 - Mrs. Shainmark, Elizabeth’s mother
 - Sara
 - Elizabeth

Consider the following questions as you discuss:

In the beginning, what did the character think about herself and others?

What events and experiences caused the character to change?

How did the character develop and change by the end of the book?

Do you think the change was for the better?

6. What was it like at Poplar Springs Middle School? (See, for example, the school description on pages 2 and 3 and how Sara and Elizabeth describe their classes and their experiences in the cooking club.) Is this setting believable? How is it similar to your

school? How is it different?

7. Many events in the story influence or change the characters because they prompt them to question and even change their ideas. Discuss how the events listed below affect the characters’ actions and beliefs:
 - When Elizabeth asks Sara to go trick-or-treating with her and does not understand her why this upsets her (pp. 94–101; 112–13)
 - When Maddy confronts Elizabeth about hanging out in the mall with Sara and Rabia and says, “You’d rather hang out with a bunch of Arabs than us?” (pp. 145–52)
 - When Sara’s art teacher tells her that she is the perfect person to create a sign for the entrance to the International Festival because she can use “the henna patterns and the other cool ethnic designs” she’s been using in her drawings (pp. 158–59)
 - When Sara goes to Elizabeth’s house to work on their recipe and sees unfamiliar items like a mezuzah (pp. 176–79)
8. Do you think Sara and Elizabeth were right to use Mrs. Kluck’s ice cream machine? When they were discovered, do you agree with how they were treated?
9. How did the story end? Discuss the following questions: What were the results of the recipe contest? How did Mrs. Hameed and Mrs. Shainmark help each other? What changes did each family make and what future changes are they planning? How did you feel at the end of the story?
10. What advice would you give to Mady, Stephanie, Sara, and Elizabeth as they continue to learn about their “place at the table”?
11. Why is *A Place at the Table* a good title?
12. What are some things we can all do to help everyone feel they have a place at the table?

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Activity: Examining the Authors' Craft with Similes

Similes are comparisons between two different things using the word “like” or “as.” In this book, the authors use similes to help the reader understand the content of the book. In the examples below, identify the two things being compared, and then explain what the sentence means.

1) **I feel their questions hanging in the air like heavy steam. (p. 3)**

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

2) **I suddenly miss Rabia like a craving for that mint chutney Mama used to make when I was little. (p. 9)**

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

3) **The idea of making a new friend—a white girl at that—is scary and exciting, like standing in front of a roller coaster, not knowing whether I should get on or stay back. (p. 59)**

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

4) **The words bubble out of my mouth and deflate, like dough that's been left to rise too long. (p. 75)**

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

5) **The five hundred dollars Mama owes the bank makes it worse, looming over me like a giant spider spinning a web around my family. (p. 102)**

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

6) **Her smile is like a big hug I didn't know I needed. (p. 117)**

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

7) **Now those memories are like a gray winter tree, sharp and bare. (p. 131)**

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

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8) The sadness falls off my mother a little bit each day, like peeling the ugly brown fuzz off a kiwi fruit and finding the sweet green goodness inside. (p. 205)

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

9) School takes on a nightmarish quality, like a house full of ghosts that won't quit bothering me. (p. 268)

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

10) "You've been carrying around worries like a heavy rucksack, haven't you?" (p. 278)

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

11) My mood is as light and sunny as a lemon meringue pie. (p. 282)

_____ is being compared to _____.

In my words, the sentence means: _____.

12) The girls move inside like a wave in the ocean, taking Rabia with them. (p. 286)

_____ is being compared to _____.

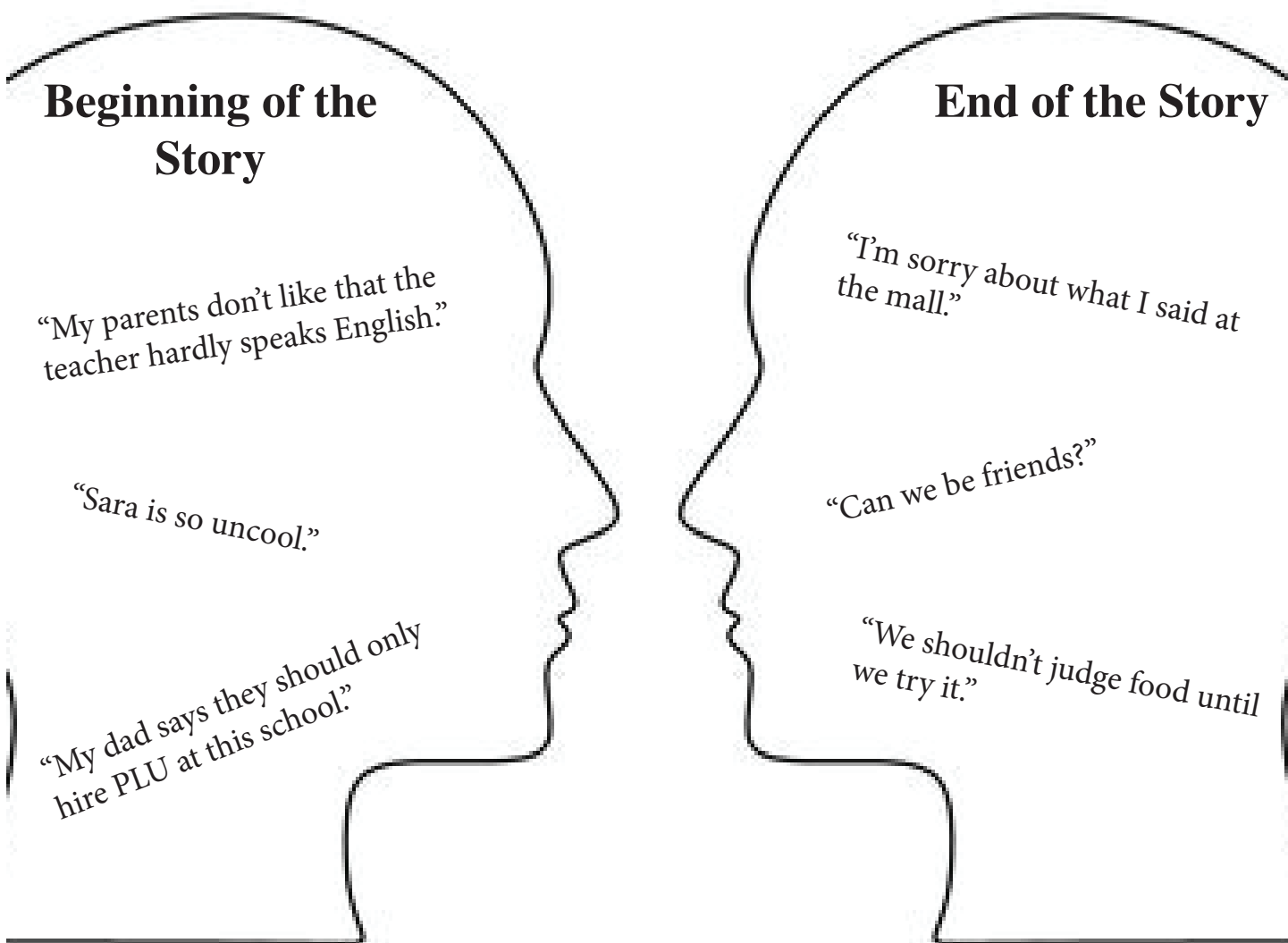
In my words, the sentence means: _____.

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Activity: Open Mind Portraits

What did the characters in the book think at the beginning and the end of the story? How have they changed? You can show how their thoughts have changed by creating open mind portraits. First, for each character you select, draw two empty faces with no features. Inside the first empty face, use words and pictures to show what the character thinks at the beginning of the story. Inside the second empty face, show what the character thinks at the end of the story. An example for Maddy is provided for you. You can also add pictures to illustrate your points.



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Activity: Writing from a Different Perspective

The entire book is told from either Sara's perspective or Elizabeth's. What do some of the other characters think? Consider writing from the perspective of one of the character's listed below:

- Maddy
- Mrs. Hameed
- Mrs. Shainmark
- Mrs. Kluck
- Rabia
- Stephanie

Write a memory of one or more of the events that happened in the story. What did the character you selected see and think about what happened? Here are some suggestions for topics to write about:

- Maddy talks about how she realized that what she said at the mall was wrong and that she wants to be friends with Sara.
- Mrs. Hameed discusses how she told Sara why succeeding in her catering business is so important to her, but so is becoming a citizen.
- Mrs. Shainmark comments on how she is working towards keeping her family together and happy, despite her past difficulties. What is she doing to help?
- Mrs. Kluck tells how she changed her mind about Mrs. Hameed and what she did to show this.
- Rabia talks about how her friendship with Sara has grown and changed to include Sara's new friends.
- Stephanie discusses her goals as a baker and how she wants to help others. Why does she work so hard to make her business a success?

Activity: Writing from a Different Perspective

Decide which characters are needed. Then use the dialogue in the book to create your play. Use a narrator to provide any information that is necessary, but not part of the dialogue. Once you are finished writing, practice reading your play with a partner. Then share your play with your classmates. Discuss why you selected this scene and what it shows.

Here is an example:

Topic: Halloween

Characters: Sara, Elizabeth

Elizabeth: Do you want to go trick-or-treating together? I usually go with Maddy, but she's helping Stephanie with some catering thing. I was thinking of going as Alice in Wonderland.

Sara: [Banging her spoon hard against the pot of lentils she is cooking] I don't do Halloween.

Elizabeth: That stinks. Is it a religious thing?

Sara: [Glaring at Elizabeth] Don't you know anything about Muslims? We cover our hair and fast from sunup to sundown all year long and we're not allowed to do anything fun.

Elizabeth: I guess that means no?

Sara: You guessed right.

Elizabeth: Sorry. When are we meeting to work on our showcase recipe?

Sara: I was going to say Wednesday after school, but you'll be out begging strangers for candy, so forget it.

Activity: Find Out More about Authors Saadia Faruqi and Laura Shovan

Watch a video featuring Saadia Faruqi discussing her series of books about a young character named Yasmin and her career as a writer. She is being interviewed by author Roxie Munro of KidLit TV at www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDzJPJ_Ouwk.

Find out more about author Laura Shovan by visiting her website and reading about her and her books at laurashovan.com/about.