

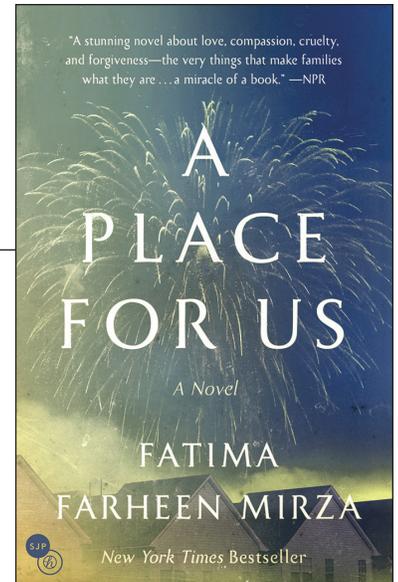
A Place for Us

A Novel

by *Fatima Farheen Mirza*

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Also available in e-book format and as an audio download



“As Marilynne Robinson has done with Protestants and Alice McDermott has done with Catholics, Mirza finds in the intensity of a faithful Muslim family a universal language of love and anguish that speaks to us all. . . . Each time I stole away into this novel, it felt like a privilege to dwell among these people, to fall back under the gentle light of Mirza’s words.”—Ron Charles, *Washington Post*

• about the book •

As an Indian wedding gathers a family back together, parents Rafiq and Layla must reckon with the choices their children have made. There is Hadia: their headstrong, eldest daughter, whose marriage is a match of love and not tradition. Huda, the middle child, determined to follow in her sister’s footsteps. And lastly, their estranged son, Amar, who returns to the family fold for the first time in three years to take his place as brother of the bride. What secrets and betrayals have caused this close-knit family to fracture? Can Amar find his way back to the people who know and love him best?

A Place for Us takes us back to the beginning of this family’s life: from the bonds that bring them together, to the differences that pull them apart. All the joy and struggle of family life is here, from Rafiq and Layla’s own arrival in America from India, to the years in which their children—each in their own way—tread between two cultures, seeking to find their place in the world, as well as a path home. This is a book for our times: an astonishingly tender-hearted novel of identity and belonging, and a resonant portrait of what it means to be an American family today.

• about the author

Fatima Farheen Mirza was born in 1991 and raised in California. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a recipient of the Michener-Copernicus Fellowship.

• note to the teacher

A Place for Us is a novel by Fatima Farheen Mirza that follows a contemporary Indian American family living in California. The story moves back and forth in time, demonstrating how seemingly small events in the family's daily life shape relationships and influence decisions that over the years prove profoundly consequential. These characters all make mistakes and despite their good intentions are still capable of hurting the same loved ones they wish to protect. Mirza's exploration of familial conflict and love incorporates a number of resonant themes, including addiction, discrimination, and loss, demonstrating how these issues can affect people of all ages and backgrounds.

Mirza portrays the characters' cultural and religious traditions with great specificity. She writes with care and empathy about the particularities of their experiences, even when those experiences situate them at odds with one another: Rafiq and Layla, immigrants whose marriage was arranged, must reckon with their children's departures from tradition. Hadia, Huda, and Amar, meanwhile, tread a careful path between their cultural heritage and their individual desires. They are each distinct in their sufferings and their triumphs, and Mirza's incorporation of each family member's unique point of view into the narrative invites the reader to understand and feel for each of them, regardless of the ways in which their own backgrounds and experiences may align with or diverge from those of the characters.

The book's structure, moving back and forth through time in a way that mirrors the flowing movement of memory, promotes careful reading and attention to detail. As a result of the novel's nonlinearity and its shifting narrative perspectives, it requires the use of critical thinking skills to identify the connections between the vignettes and to synthesize information as it is relayed in pieces from multiple points of view.

Supporting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Reading Literary Texts and Reading Informational Texts for high school curricula, *A Place for Us* is an appropriate selection for grades 11–12 in Language Arts, Social Studies, and Writing classes. At the college level, this book is well suited for use in first- or second-year Cultural Studies and general Literature courses, as well as in common reading programs.

In the following "Examining Content Using Common Core State Standards" section of this guide, activities and writing prompts that encourage critical analysis of *A Place for Us* have been provided for use in the classroom. They are organized based on the Common Core standards they support. These classroom activities and prompts are designed to encourage students' thoughtful analysis of and interaction with the text.

For a complete listing of Common Core State Standards, go to: tiny.cc/CoreStandards.

• pre-reading activities

Lead a classroom discussion on the following topics in order to prepare students to engage with the text and to provide useful context for the themes and content of the novel:

1. How do our families shape our ideas about ourselves? How are those ideas challenged or changed as we grow and spend more time with our peers and away from family members? In what specific ways and to what extent have these influences shaped your own self-perception?
2. To what extent can we determine our future? Which aspects of your own future feel within your control? Which do not, and why?
3. What do you already know about Islam's history and belief system? What are some of the misconceptions about this religion and its followers?
4. In what ways can discrimination on the basis of one's race or religious background affect one's self-perception? How can it affect one's relationships to others, including one's family, peer group, and local community? What are some practical strategies for minimizing discrimination in the U.S. today, both at the individual and structural level?

If students have any questions while reading the book that they do not want to share in class, give them the option to write them down on a slip of paper. Keep a container available in the classroom where students can drop off their questions. You may then address the questions anonymously and use them as entry points to class discussions.

Before beginning the book, review with your students the basic tenets of Islam, aspects of Muslim culture in Indian and Indian American communities, and the misconceptions surrounding Islam and the people who practice it. You may want to consult the following resources for respectful and factual background information on Islam:

- "Islam," *History* (tiny.cc/HistoryIslam): This webpage explains the history of Islam and its basic religious tenets.
- "Intro to Islam," *Religion for Breakfast* (tiny.cc/BasicsofIslam): This YouTube video by Religion for Breakfast provides a sixteen-minute overview of Islam, with particular focus on how it has evolved over the years and its integration into different cultures.

"Growing up, I never saw a life like mine reflected in fiction, and so . . . to write this novel was a way to honor the place that I'd come from and the details of the lives that I've witnessed," Mirza said in an interview that aired on *The Today Show*. Play this video clip (available at tiny.cc/MirzaToday, beginning at the 2:25 mark) for your students and ask them to consider what the word "representation" means in the context of literature. Then craft a class discussion around the following questions: In what ways is it important or empowering for an individual to see someone like them reflected in fiction? Why is it that some groups are widely represented in art and media while others are not? What are the potential consequences of this disparity?

In particular, ask students to think of representations of Muslims in literature and popular culture. On a poster in the front of the classroom or individually on sheets of paper, create three columns, one each for books, movies, and television programs, and have students fill them in with any depictions of Muslims that come to mind. Lead a discussion with the class

about the results: What sort of examples did students identify? Are these Muslim characters portrayed in a three-dimensional way or do the portrayals rely on stereotypes or misconceptions? In what ways does a lack of representation of fully fleshed-out Muslim characters contribute to an abundance of misrepresentation or negative representation in the media? What real-world consequences might this have on people's attitudes toward and understanding of Muslim individuals?

Belonging is a central theme in *A Place for Us*. Each character feels out of place in a way, whether as an immigrant in a foreign culture or as a son or daughter whose values do not fully align with those of their family, and each reacts differently in response to this feeling of alienation. Before beginning the novel, ask students to write about a time when either they felt out of place or like they truly belonged, describing the time, place, and circumstances in detail. How did they react to this feeling? Have they developed any tricks or strategies that they use in order to feel more at home in a new environment? Ask students to keep in mind their responses while reading about the characters' various struggles to fit in.

- examining content using common core state standards
- ELA standards: reading literature: grades 11 & 12
- ELA standards: writing: grades 11 & 12
- key ideas and details

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

In Part One, the circumstances that have led to Amar's estrangement from his family remain mysterious. Mirza intentionally refrains from providing much concrete background information at this time, leaving the reader to infer his characteristics and speculate about his past and the reasons he has been out of contact with his family for so long.

After finishing Part One, ask students to formulate a list of five possible reasons why Amar has become an outcast in his family, incorporating at least five pieces of textual evidence in their predictions. Share these predictions from the class and discuss. Which seem most likely and why? Ask students to explain why the pieces of textual evidence they selected are significant. What questions about Amar remain unanswered at this point in the text, and what effect might withholding this information have from the standpoints of narrative and character development?

classroom activity

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Each of the protagonists in *A Place for Us* strike a balance between an outward identity that they show the world and an inner identity that they feel they must keep concealed from those around them. In order to better understand the development of the characters' dual identities over the course of the story, have students choose one central character in *A Place for Us* after completing Part One. While reading the rest of the novel, they will keep track of the events in the story that reveal previously hidden information about this character. Once they have finished the novel, they will write a 3–4 page response on the following prompt:

Compare and contrast your character's public and private identities. Which of their characteristics does the author choose to reveal in Part One? By the end of the novel, how had your understanding of the character changed and deepened? What motivates the character to hide certain aspects of their identity from their friends and family? What do they gain by doing so? What do they sacrifice and how does doing so hurt them? Point to specific textual evidence to support your explanation.

Afterwards, discuss the topic of characterization in class. What specific decisions does Mirza make in the narrative that influence readers' perceptions of her characters? How did gradually learning more about the characters throughout the novel shape your opinion of them? Did that opinion change in any drastic way? How and why?

classroom activity

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

The characters in *A Place for Us* often debate the inevitability of their present circumstances, speculating whether they could have been otherwise had they made different decisions: Rafiq wonders how his relationship with Amar might have been different had he given his son the shoes he so desperately wanted; Layla wishes she could go back and reverse her decision to tell Seema about Amar and Amira's relationship, imagining an alternate reality in which they had been allowed to stay together and Amar had not run away.

Ask students to imagine an alternate future in which a specific event in the novel either did not happen or unfolded in a different way (e.g., if Abbas was not killed in a car accident). Ask students to write a response addressing each of the following prompts: How would the rest of the story change? Would the characters' identities be changed as a result, or would they still fundamentally be the same people and make the same decisions? Write a scene set in this alternate reality that demonstrates the significance of the selected event.

classroom activity

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Conflict colors the characters' relationships with one another as well as their relationships to themselves. Instances of conflict in the novel can largely be sorted into one of three categories: individual versus man, individual versus society, and individual versus self. Have students identify one example of each type of conflict in the novel and explain why it falls under its particular category.

Next, ask the students to choose one conflict from the novel, such as Amar's fight with his father or Layla's rivalry with Seema. Have them answer the following question in a written response: Who was affected by this conflict? How did each individual involved deal with the tension caused by this conflict? In your opinion, do the characters become better at coping with conflict as the story progresses? Generally speaking, why are some people better at handling tension and opposition than others? What are some of the ways that you personally have learned to handle conflict?

Pose the following question for a class discussion: Based on specific examples from the text, which type of conflict is the most difficult for each of the family members to overcome and why? How have their disparate experiences prepared or failed to prepare them for the conflicts they encounter?

craft and structure

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

The characters in the novel often speak in Urdu. While reading Part One, have the students complete a worksheet, filling in the Urdu terms they come across, making an educated guess on their definitions based on context, and then looking up the actual definitions. Ask students to consider how their experience engaging with the text changes as a result.

Some Urdu terms that appear in Part One include *shenai* (pg. 3 – a double-reed oboe used in Indian music), *kharra dupatta* (pg. 6 – a wedding dress worn by Indian Muslims), *sadqa* (pg. 6 – money reserved for charity or a selfless gift), *salaam* (pg. 7 – a traditional gesture of greeting in Islam, involving bowing while touching one's forehead), *ghoongat* (pg. 10 – a veil worn by Hindu, Sikh, and Jain women), and *dua* (pg. 17 – a recited testament of faith in Islam).

Discuss in class the role of language in the book. What is its relationship to identity? Why is Layla troubled by her children's adoption of English as their primary language?

Hadia and Huda make sure to practice their Urdu as teenagers, while Amar does not make the same effort. What does this say about their respective feelings towards Indian and American culture? Do the parents have a right to be upset when their children choose to use English over Urdu? Ask students to imagine how each member of the family (Rafiq, Layla, Hadia, Huda, and Amar) would respond to this question and identify the reasons their answers might differ.

classroom activity

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

After reading Part One and the first chapter of Part Two, open a class discussion on the structure of the book. Why does the author choose to start the story *in media res* at Hadia's wedding? How would one's experience of reading the novel be changed if it were to begin with Part Two and incorporate the wedding later?

Parts One, Two, and Three provide insight into multiple characters' perspectives through close third-person narration, while the final section of the novel is told entirely from Rafiq's point of view. If the narrative were to utilize a single character's perspective throughout, how would the novel change as a result? What would be gained or lost if Amar, for example, narrated the story? How would the novel differ if Rafiq's perspective were introduced earlier? What is the effect of Mirza's choice to tell Part Four from Rafiq's first-person perspective in a direct address to Amar?

classroom activity

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

Throughout *A Place for Us*, the same events are revisited multiple times from the perspectives of different characters, deepening the reader's understanding of what transpired and its consequences. To help students better understand the importance of narrative perspective, have them choose an event from the first three parts of the story as well as any character (except Rafiq) who is present to witness it. Ask them to retell the event from one character's perspective, using the first person. They should not alter the plot in any way, but encourage them to describe what they believe their chosen character is feeling and thinking at this point in the novel.

Next, have them respond in writing to the following questions: How did writing in first person affect your understanding of the character? How would the novel differ if that character narrated an entire section of the book in the first person and was enabled to explain their rationale, like Rafiq in Part Four?

Identify an instance in the story in which two or more characters misunderstand each other and another in which characters communicate successfully with each other through subtle cues that would be missed by others. What do these instances say about how shared experiences do or do not help people understand each other? How are the relationships between these characters affected as a result?

• key ideas and details

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Much of what transpires in the characters' lives after Hadia's wedding and before Rafiq's hospitalization is not detailed in the story and only revealed in retrospect, such as Hadia becoming both a mother and a doctor. After reading the first chapter of Part Four, have students make a sequential list of at least eight events that have taken place (or have been implied to have taken place) in the interim between Parts Three and Four. For each, they should note its narrative significance and include a quotation from the chapter that either directly references or implies the event to the reader.

• text types and purposes

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.A

Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

For an informational writing project, have the students choose a topic addressed in the novel, such as addiction or discrimination towards Muslims, and research more about it. They should find at least four authoritative sources, either in print or online. They will then condense and organize their gathered information into a three-page pamphlet designed to inform others about their chosen topic. The following questions should be answered: What is my topic? What are at least five important facts about my chosen topic? What is at least one popular misconception? Why should more people learn about this topic?

The pamphlet should answer all of these questions, efficiently explain the student's chosen topic, and demonstrate a clear connection to the novel.

• classroom activity

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.A

Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

In *A Place for Us*, the characters are gradually shaped over the years by events both large and small. After finishing the book, ask students to pick four events in their life that they believe have defined who they are today, and write a short memoir incorporating each of these

events. Students can write from a single, first-person point of view like in Part Four of *A Place for Us*, or they can switch between multiple perspectives in close third person, like in the first three parts of the novel.

• integration of knowledge and ideas

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9

Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

After reading *A Place for Us*, have the students find and read a novella, short story, or poem from the eighteenth, nineteenth, or early twentieth century that addresses a similar topic or theme. They will then create a poster or infographic comparing their chosen literary work with *A Place for Us*. It should contain the following information:

1. The titles and authors of both works
2. The genres of both works
3. A basic summary of both works
4. How their chosen topic or theme is presented in each
5. What they learned about this topic or theme from each

Examples of works that the students could read in conjunction with *A Place for Us* include: “A Song for Myself” by Melvin B. Tolson, “The Key” by Ladan Osman, “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou, “Invictus” by W. E. Henley, “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar, and “The Magic Shop” by H. G. Wells.

• research to build and present knowledge

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Hadia’s wedding serves as the reader’s first introduction to both the family and their culture. Have students form small groups and research Indian and Muslim wedding traditions, with particular focus on the specific traditions that are referenced in Part One such as the traditional dress, the distinct parts of the ceremony, and the positioning of the bride and groom on a raised stage. They will then compare and contrast these wedding traditions with those from an assigned country or religious group. Once they have finished their research, they will present their findings to the class in the form of a video, Prezi, PowerPoint presentation, oral report, or infographic.

classroom activity

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

In the fifth chapter of Part Two, Amar's classmates harass him in their school locker room and then beat him, accusing his father of being a terrorist. The fight happens right after the events of September 11, 2001. In the wake of this tragedy, many people were afraid and angry, and some directed this anger against racial and religious minorities. They did not understand these minorities and, as a result of their ignorance, felt threatened by them. In *A Place for Us*, Mirza emphasizes the importance of empathy, even for those whose ideas or actions do not make sense to you.

To develop a better understanding of the people around them, ask students to form small groups and conduct a research project. They will pick a cultural group that they want to learn more about, and then they will find the answers to the following questions:

1. What things do I have in common with people from this group?
2. What are some of our differences?
3. Why do these differences exist? What cultural, social, or political factors contributed toward these differing characteristics?
4. What are some of the misconceptions or stereotypes surrounding this group? How can people help combat these stereotypes?

resources

"Fatima Farheen Mirza on 'A Place For Us: A Novel' at the 2018 Miami Book Fair," PBS ([tiny.cc/MirzaInterview](https://www.pbs.org/video/fatima-farheen-mirza-on-a-place-for-us-a-novel-at-the-2018-miami-book-fair)): This video interview can serve as a helpful introduction to *A Place for Us* and its author to students. Mirza describes her motivations for writing the book and addresses many of the topics she writes about in the novel.

"Islam," *History* ([tiny.cc/HistoryIslam](https://www.history.com/topics/religion/islam)): This webpage summarizes the history of Islam and its basic tenets. It also describes the differences between the primary denominations of Islam. It provides general information about the Quran, Sharia Law, and the holy days celebrated by Muslims.

"Since 9/11, Racism and Islamophobia Remain Intertwined," *HuffPost* ([tiny.cc/IslamandRacism](https://www.huffpost.com/archive/2011/09/11/since-9-11-racism-and-islamophobia-remain-intertwined)): This article on hate crimes in the wake of 9/11 and the rise of Islamophobia in the United States examines the core motivations behind these crimes, and shows how a variety of minority groups have been targeted as a result of ignorance about their culture and beliefs.

Urdu Dictionary and Translations, Oxford Living Dictionary ([tiny.cc/Urdu-English](https://www.oxfordliving.com/)): This website offers a free Urdu to English translator. Although the translator is not always 100% accurate, it is close enough to help students understand the Urdu terms used in the book.

• other works of interest

A Long Way Home, Saroo Brierley

The House on Mango Street, Sandra Cisneros

The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction, Edward E. Curtis

The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini

An American Family, by Khzir Khan

Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11, Peter Morey

Reading Lolita in Tehran, Azar Nafisi

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood, Marjane Satrapi

The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan

Coming to America: A Muslim Family's Story, Bernard Wolf

American Born Chinese, Gene Luen Yang

The Starfisher, Laurence Yep

• about this guide's writers

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