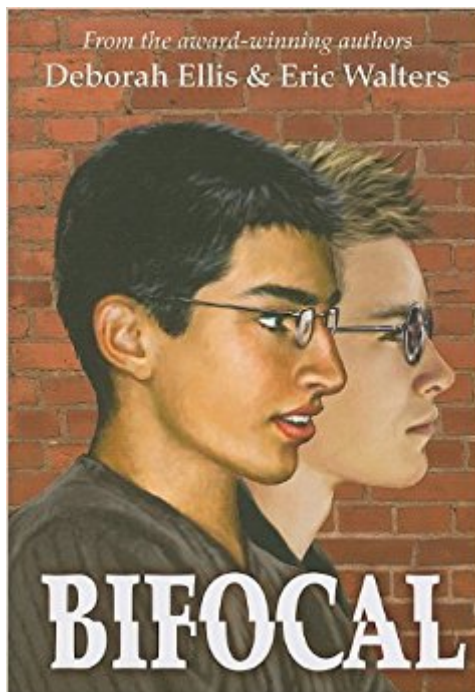


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Bifocal



Synopsis

On the White Ravens' Outstanding New International Books for Children and Young Adults list, 2008 ForeWord Magazine's Book of the Year Awards Bronze Medal Winner (YA Fiction category), 2007 Snow Willow Award nominee, 2008 CCBC's Best Books for Kids and Teens, 2008 Two bestselling authors join forces to write a powerful novel about racism. A student arrested on suspicions of terrorism. A high school torn apart by racism. Two boys from two different sets of circumstances forced to choose sides. These are the issues at the heart of *Bifocal*, a ground-breaking new novel for young-adults. The story is told from two different points of view. Haroon is a serious student devoted to his family. His grandparents emigrated from Afghanistan. Jay is a football star devoted to his team. He is white. One day their high school is put on lockdown, and the police arrest a Muslim student on suspicion of terrorist affiliations. He might be guilty. Or is he singled out because of his race? The entire student body fragments along racial lines and both Haroon and Jay find that their differences initially put them at odds. The Muslim students become targets and a smoke-bomb is set off near their lockers while Jay and his teammates believe they've been set-up to look like racists. *Bifocal* is, by no stretch, an easy book. Award-winning authors Deborah Ellis and Eric Walters deliver a serious, hard-hitting book about racism that does not talk down to young people.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 33 customer reviews

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[Literature & Fiction > Performing Arts > Dance](#) #235 in [Books > Children's Books > Growing Up & Facts of Life > Friendship, Social Skills & School Life > Peer Pressure](#) #396 in [Books > Children's Books > Arts, Music & Photography > Performing Arts > Dance](#)

Age Range: 12 - 18 years

Grade Level: 7 - 12

Customer Reviews

Two award-winning Canadian authors team up to tell *Bifocal*—a story of race prejudice that divides a high school after Azeem, a Muslim student, is arrested following a bomb plot. The story is told in the alternating voices of two students: studious Haroon, Azeem's academic-bowl teammate; and Jay, a popular football player. Neither boy seems to be aware of much prejudice in the school, although Jay describes the seating in the cafeteria as "divided in as many subgroups as tables." As Azeem's trial progresses, vandalism and racial slurs escalate, and the narrators are jolted by the actions and attitudes of people they thought they knew. Their individual struggles to understand the flaring prejudice and their journeys toward self-discovery are subtle and authentic. Secondary characters, such as Haroon's sister, who wears the abaya, and biracial Steve, raise interesting side issues but are less well developed than Haroon and Jay. This is a story that will leave readers looking at their schools and themselves with new eyes. Grades 7-10. --Lynn Rutan --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"This thought-provoking novel works extremely well as an examination of the dangers of racism and the redeeming value of tolerance." -- Quill & Quire "This is a powerful and important book, one that will speak to modern teen readers in a way that they will undoubtedly hear and respond to. . . Without falling into didacticism, Ellis and Walters thoughtfully depict a full range of reactions and widely-held beliefs and offer readers the opportunity to see not only the vastly different experiences that shape Jay and Haroon's understanding of events, but also how so many others feel and respond to events like 9/11 and the mere threat of anything similar. . . Bifocal should, and will, enjoy a wide readership and would make an excellent choice for class, or group, discussion." Highly Recommended. -- CM Magazine "This is a story that will leave readers looking at their schools and themselves with new eyes." -- Booklist "Bifocal is perhaps the bravest, most important, engaging and enraging, most satisfying work of fiction for young Canadians in a long while. Also, the most timely. It will make you think, render you angry and saddened, and leave you hopeful and reflective." -- The Hamilton Spectator "This novel is about our differences and how we treat one another. It deals with contemporary issues and could well become important reading in today's high schools." -- Winnipeg Free Press "(Bifocal) is a powerful look at a community divided along racial lines." -- The Canadian Press "Together, Ellis and Walters created two vivid characters and put them in a fictional high school that bristles with racial tension." -- The Toronto Star

This is a great book for younger readers. It will be interesting to see how much it registers with today's youth.

This is a pretty innovative book about a school where a student is rounded up and accused of being in a terrorist cell. The story is told from the point of view of two students and two authors, Deborah Ellis and Eric Walters. Each author takes the point of view of the student they are writing about. Eric Walters writes about Jay, a white American boy with prejudices and biases that affect his judgement and treatment of students who are not white. Deborah Ellis writes from the point of view of Haroon, a Muslim student from Afghanistan. Akeem, the boy who is arrested is used as a flash point for the two groups, the Browns and the Whites to experience conflict. I enjoyed Ellis' writing more than Walters but it makes sense when I found out that Walters usually writes for "reluctant" readers. Ellis' writing seems more sophisticated and the vocabulary is more complex. I thought the book was great and am going to recommend it to my students in school. I believe they will love it and be affected by the content as several of them are Muslim. One quibble I have about the book is the fact that there is no mention of the fact that the Muslim kids and Haroon probably speak another language at home and the lack of an ESOL teacher in the book. It seems that ESOL classes are invisible and ESOL teachers are non-existent in children's literature. We don't just teach kids who don't know English, we teach kids right up to the 50% in reading comprehension, which means a student can be an ESOL student and be better at reading than an American kid. The reason? There is no reason for kids learning another language to be at the bottom and end up in remedial classes which won't help them academically in American schools.

"Is the only way to fight fear to make other people afraid? Does terrorizing others really make our own terror go away?" The authors place this sentence in the speech of main character Haroon, and it indeed captures the theme of this very insightful novel. The young should be able to identify with all of the characters - ordinary teenaged students, from Goth to geek to jock, who need to deal with not only the fear of an attack on their school, and the resulting suspicion of others, but with their own fear expressed as prejudice and violence. Without including a spoiler, I shall mention that the Halloween "prank" gone awry is one of varied incidents which shows well how one may not realise the full implications of an action until things go drastically wrong. With the varied chapters told from the point of view of different students, and most action centring on such everyday occurrences as football practise, film viewing, a quiz show appearance, and sibling talk, the reader has the

opportunity to identify with every perspective. Characters are both typical and interesting, and, save for the 'voice' in each chapter, the reader is not presented with analytical reflections which tell the whole of everyone's motives. This novel is an excellent opening for personal reflection, a hard look at how fear can lead to chaos, group mentality based on 'us vs. them' and the like. Some parents may object to, for example, the Halloween vandalism, but I do not think this reading should be 'supervised.' There is much truth, with which the young may only be beginning to become familiar, in how going with a crowd can seem stimulating until one sees the aftermath. I believe the young will identify with the mess, and understand how many actions stem from not seeing the implications or outcome rather than from malice on the part of all involved. Another key point, well illustrated, is that media presentations can be taken as the whole story (even when such does not exist), and the respect for the rights of others, so extolled in theory and discussed in class, can evaporate when guilt is presumed. Much is thought provoking in this novel, and, for those who are inclined towards prejudice or have been exposed to such ideas, there well may be a means to eliminate this in seeing the same situation from the point of view of various people from different backgrounds.

If this book contained only one fatal flaw, I could try to dredge up reasons to give it at least one more star; but it contains more than one. Combined, they make me hope this book doesn't become well-known in middle school classrooms. First is an issue several reviewers have already highlighted: the sermon-not-story presentation. These characters are cut from cardboard and propped up by the moral of their story, so much so that I would never use this book in a literature class purely because of the didactic spoonfeeding. Good young adult literature presents its themes to the reader as a buried treasure to unearth, not as a suffocating blanket or a sledgehammer. Second, I take issue with the message itself: namely, "tolerance covers all." The writers take this politically correct concept and dash far and wide with it. The plot takes off (actually, the plot never leaves the runway, but that's my third issue) when a student is arrested and accused of terrorist involvement. "He might be guilty," 's product description says. "Or is he singled out because of his race?" An excellent question that remains a question. Haroon, the Muslim character, doesn't care if his fellow student is guilty or not. By extension, since he is the most lauded character in the book, the writers don't care, either. The plot meanders away from the jailed student until he's only one example of "racial conflict." But doesn't every thinking reader want to know--was this boy planning to blow up his school, or not? If he wasn't, the police will have a lawsuit on their hands. If he was, shouldn't the intention to murder another human being, whatever his race, be addressed? It isn't. In addition, the resolution (if one can call it that) is morally ambiguous at best. Why is it noble

for Haroon to let his classmates get away with vandalism? Why is it noble for Jay to pretend he wasn't party to the crime? Haroon says that honesty and justice would only create "more anger, more hatred, more problems." What kind of reasoning is this? Does he really believe the racists will be less racist if they get away with racism? Do the writers? This isn't the only instance of skewed logic. More than once, the authors write off moral non sequiturs or double standards by having a "good" character say to a "bad" character, "You just don't understand." Well, I don't, either. Finally, message aside, the book simply isn't engaging on any level whatsoever. The characters are one-dimensional (Haroon may qualify as 2-D, if we're being generous). I can say with certainty that neither of these writers is a Christian or a Muslim. Both characters feel like products of shallow research, not like children of the writers' experience. The plot plods along, mostly via bland or contrived dialogue. The final scene is cliched and flat. Overall, from sermonizing to disturbing morality to lack of entertainment value, I can't find a shred to recommend in this story.

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