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One of the best writers of our times."

—ELIZABETH ACEVEDO,
New York Times bestselling author of
The Poet X

home

is not

a

country

SAFIA ELHILLO

DISCUSSION GUIDE

About the Book

A mesmerizing novel-in-verse about family, identity, and finding yourself in the most unexpected places.

Nima doesn't feel understood. Not by her mother, who grew up far away in a different land. Not by her suburban town, which makes her feel too much like an outsider to fit in and not enough like an outsider to feel like she belongs somewhere else. At least she has her childhood friend Haitham, with whom she can let her guard down and be herself. Until she doesn't.

As the ground is pulled out from under her, Nima must grapple with the phantom of a life not chosen, the name her parents didn't give her at birth: Yasmeen. But that other name, that other girl, might just be more real than Nima knows. And more hungry. And the life Nima has, the one she keeps wishing were someone else's . . . she might have to fight for it with a fierceness she never knew she had.



Safia Elhillo

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Ages: 12 and up

About the Author



Photo © 2021 by Aris Theodorakis

Safia Elhillo is the author of the poetry collection *The January Children*, which received the Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poetry and an Arab American Book Award. Sudanese by way of Washington, D.C., she holds an MFA from The New School, a Cave Canem Fellowship, and a Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. Safia is a Pushcart Prize nominee, co-winner of the Brunel International African Poetry Prize, and was listed in *Forbes Africa's* "30 Under 30." She is a 2019–2021 Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. Learn more about Safia at safia-mafia.com or on Twitter at [@mafiasafia](https://twitter.com/mafiasafia).

Home Is Not a Country Pre-Reading Questions

1. Define *home*. Define *country*. Think about the phrase “Home is not a country.” What do you notice, remember, and imagine as you analyze the title?
2. What does family mean to you? Who do you choose to include in your family? What has your family taught you?
3. Describe a time when someone has shown you empathy (an understanding of your feelings). Why was this moment important for you? Describe a moment when you have shown empathy toward someone else. Why do you imagine this might have been important for the other person?
4. What can a country do to be comfortable for and welcoming to all the people who live there? If you live in America or have family that does, what laws, values, and social practices make it easy or difficult or both to consider America home?
5. Do you think your older relatives’ experiences get passed down to you? How? In what ways do we live with our family’s losses inside of us, even if we don’t fully understand them or haven’t lived them ourselves? Draw a map of these joys and losses.

Home Is Not a Country Discussion and Writing Questions

1. In the opening poems of *Home Is Not a Country*, our narrator describes family photographs. What clues are provided about the family by the photographs? What can we infer has changed between the time the photographs were taken and present day? What details are meaningful to the narrator? What do you believe the narrator is feeling as she describes the photographs?
2. Nima says that Haitham “has never / made me feel that there is anything wrong with me at all” (p. 27). Compare and contrast Haitham’s and Nima’s personalities. What perspective does Haitham give Nima? How do they support one another?
3. What evidence does Nima give us to show that despite her mother’s warning, “i will never / be ashamed of where i come from / i will never let you be ashamed / of who we are”? Do you think Nima feels shame? Why? What is Nima’s reasoning for lying to her mother about who hurt her and why? How do you imagine Nima’s mother might respond if Nima told her the whole story? How does Nima’s experience in her high school compare with her experience in Arabic school, where “hierarchy puts those who have successfully / americanized at the top”?
4. In the opening lines of “My Name,” Nima says: “nima well really it’s نعمة ni’ma / mispronounced at school to sound like the middle of the word animal or stretched / into a whining neema no letter in english / for the snarling sound that centers my name / its little growl غ / nima meaning grace it would be funny / if it weren’t cruel” (p. 15). What do you learn about Nima’s relationship to her name in this poem? Compare and contrast this poem with “Yasmeen”: Nima says, “i imagine her yasmeen this other girl bright & alive / mouth full and dripping with language easy in her charm / & in essence she looks like me but of course / better” (p. 12). List the ways that Yasmeen is different from Nima. Why do you think is it important to Nima that her other self—this imagined self named Yasmeen—is “better” than her?

5. Reflect upon and respond to these quotes.

- “while she recites a stream of indiscernible / language i let my eyes blur & can / see it pouring from her mouth like smoke / & absorbing into his body”
- “i cannot stand to hear the rest / of the story my eyes are hot & my whole body is ringing / & i can’t stand to be so near her open hurting”
- “i have maybe just saved my own life by being / unnoticeable i want to figure out what / makes me disappear what brings me back”
- “i peer into each face & feel for the first time / that I belong to other people my face just a collage / of all of their faces & beyond the gray of the photos / i swear i see my exact shade of brown my exact / eyes each exact coil of my hair inherited / from the bodies in these photographs”
- “to know that mama was always enough”
- “i want a body that is mine actually mine / a body i feel fluent in”
- “& something in me bristles at hearing / yasmeen described like that like some sort of monster / hearing someone who doesn’t even know her just decide / what she is what she’s like”
- “so busy looking / at my one empty hand i almost missed everything / filling the other”

6. What clues does the writer give that all may not be as it appears in “Home” (p. 141)? What do you think Nima wants to believe? What do you as the reader think may not be true? In the following poem, “Haitham” (p. 200), why do you think Hala “slinks off into the dancing crowd / shame twisting itself in her face”?

7. Define *nostalgia*. Haitham calls Nima a “nostalgia monster,” and her grandmother tells Nima that “nostalgia is an illness” (p. 28). In “Mama,” (p. 38) we learn that Nima “always tried to make her smile / it’s why i learned the songs why i learned all / their words why i learned to love them.” What strengths does Nima’s nostalgia give her? In what moments or ways does Nima’s nostalgia hurt her? What is Nima’s relationship to nostalgia at the end of *Home Is Not a Country*? Use evidence from the text to support your arguments.

8. Nima’s family—in the past and in the present—teach Nima many lessons. What does Nima learn from the older members of her family—especially her mother, her father, Mama Fatheya, and Khaltu Hala—about herself and how to make sense of the world? What pieces of advice does she decide not to take?

9. What does Yasmeen want in “A Life” (p. 169)? What is surprising about her list? Write your own list: What would make you feel more alive, more “fluent in your body”?

10. Nima makes a series of difficult choices toward the end of the book. Why does she decide to save Yasmeen in the river? When Nima saves Yasmeen, how does this add to our understanding of both characters and the story? Why are they tied together? Nima makes a decision to help Yasmeen fulfill her truest desire. Why does Nima make this choice? Why does Nima teach Yasmeen how to dance?



11. Sayed Khalifa's lyrics appear near the beginning and the end of the book ("وين الحلوين وين راحوا / where are the beautiful ones where did they go"). What significance does this song have to Nima? What significance do these lyrics have in the story as a whole?
12. What new information does Nima learn about her family's homeland? And about her father? And about Haitham and his mother? If home is not a country, what is home? Where is home for Nima? Use evidence to support your argument. How do you define and locate your own home?

Praise for *Home is Not a Country*

★ "The vivid imagery creates a profound sensory experience, evoking intense emotions in **A STORY THAT WILL RESONATE WITH READERS FROM MANY BACKGROUNDS.**"

—*Kirkus Reviews*,
starred review

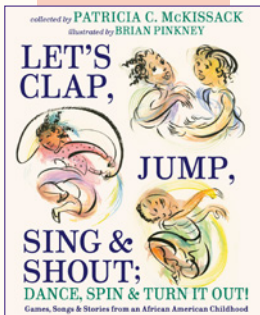
"Safia's verse is awe-inspiring and the world she's built is **LUSH AND WONDEROUS.**"

—*Elizabeth Acevado*,
New York Times bestselling
author of *The Poet X*

Further Reading

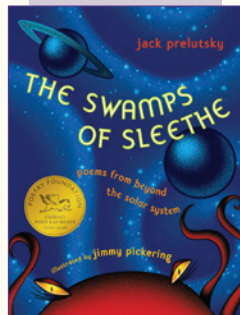
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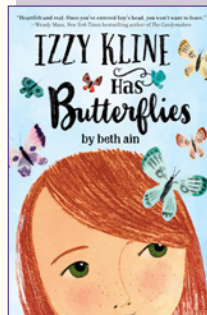
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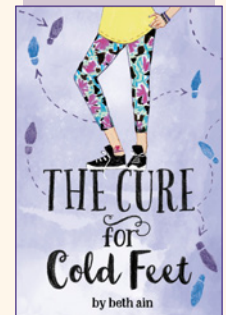
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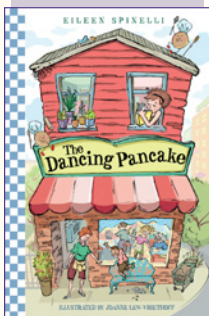
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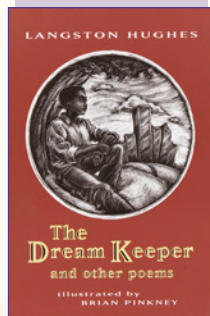
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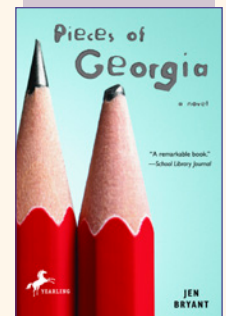
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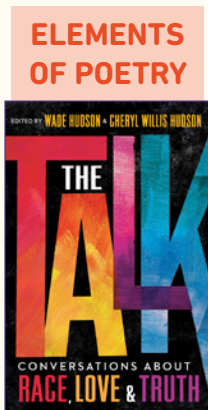
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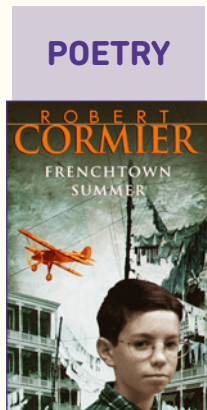
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More poetry, novels-in-verse, and books featuring elements of poetry.



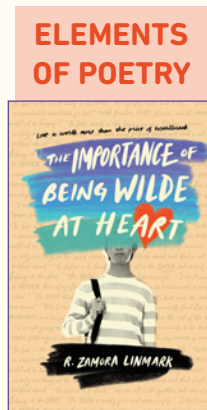
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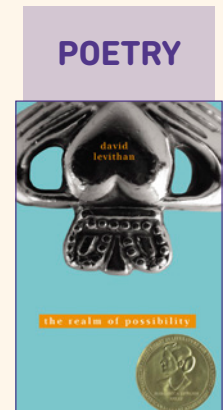
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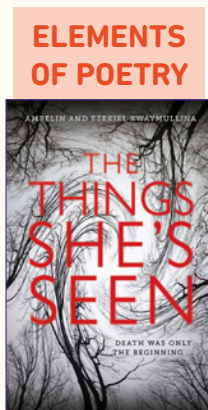
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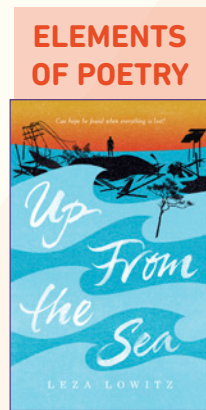
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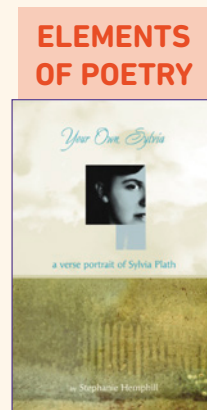
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