Written in the Stars

A Discussion Guide to

Written in the Stars

AISHA SAEED

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About the Book:

Naila’s conservative immigrant parents have always said the same thing: She may choose what to study, how to wear her hair, and what to be when she grows up—but they will choose her husband. Following their cultural tradition, they will plan an arranged marriage for her. And until then, dating—even friendship with a boy—is forbidden. When Naila breaks their rule by falling in love with Saif, her parents are livid. Convinced she has forgotten who she truly is, they travel to Pakistan to visit relatives and explore their roots. But Naila’s vacation turns into a nightmare when she learns that plans have changed—her parents have found her a husband and they want her to marry him, now! Despite her greatest efforts, Naila is aghast to find herself cut off from everything and everyone she once knew. Her only hope of escape is Saif . . . if he can find her before it’s too late.

Praise for Written in the Stars:

“Readers will be drawn into Naila’s trials and tribulations as she navigates the reality of her new life in Pakistan and explores what inner resources she needs to change her fate. . . . Sheds light on the difficult phenomenon of forced marriage, still prevalent in many cultures around the world and often shrouded in silence.” — Kirkus Reviews

“Compelling. . . . This is a cross-cultural eye opener . . . resonates in its explanations of the rituals, especially how they would look and feel from an American point of view. Yet the setting is pure Pakistani, with culturally rich descriptions of Naila’s extended family, their cuisine, and strongly held beliefs. . . . Evocative.” — School Library Journal

“Movingly conveys the intense cultural pressure that motivates Naila’s parents and the heartbreaking betrayal Naila feels as she is deprived of her rights, cut off from the outside world, and threatened with shame and death. Saeed includes resources for those who, like Saif’s family, wish to help real-life Nailas, in this wrenching but hopeful story.” — Publishers Weekly

About the Author:

Aisha Saeed is a Pakistani American writer, teacher, and attorney. As one of the founding members of the much talked about We Need Diverse Books Campaign, she is helping to change the conversation about diversity in literature. She is also a contributing author to the highly acclaimed Love, InshAllah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women, which features the story of her own (happily) arranged marriage. Aisha lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband and sons. Visit her on her website at www.aishasaeed.com.
Themes: Culture, Identity, Relationships, Family Life

Discussion Prompts/Questions

1. Naila places a high degree of value on family. We see this in how she relates to her brother, her parents, and her family in Pakistan when she first arrives. Discuss how Naila’s values are similar to her parents’ and how her values are different.

2. Naila has a younger brother and there are instances in the novel where matters of gender inequality are exposed. How do her parents treat Naila and her brother differently? How does gender inequality play a part in Naila’s story?

3. When Naila notices her cousin Selma’s quiet demeanor and aloofness, she mistakenly thinks her cousin is jealous of her. What were the signs Naila could have noticed that would have clued her in that something other than jealousy was the matter?

4. When Naila is captured during her escape attempt and her uncle brings her back to the house, the reader does not hear what is happening outside her locked door. Discuss what may have been happening on the other side of Naila’s door. What do you think would be happening with her parents, Imran, Selma, her uncle?

5. After Naila’s marriage, Selma convinces her to stop fighting her destiny. After all of her attempts to escape, why does Naila decide to stop trying? What would you have done and why?

6. When Amin first meets Naila, she thinks he is a family friend and smiles at him. He misunderstands her smile to mean she likes him and is interested in marrying him. How does Amin’s cultural upbringing affect his perception about what is truly going on?

7. Amin’s sister Saba does not like Naila. Why is she so disdainful of Naila, particularly when the marriage could help give Saba a better future?

8. Amin’s mother, Nasim, believes Naila had an arranged marriage. She has no idea it was actually a forced marriage. Does the fact that Nasim doesn’t know this is a forced marriage change your feelings towards Nasim?

9. Why does Naila initially resist Saif’s plan to go back to Florida? Is she happy with her life in Pakistan? Or is she scared to leave and unsure of what to expect? Why?

10. When we read the epilogue, Naila and Saif are still together. While they do still love each other deeply, the epilogue indicates it hasn’t been a simple “happily ever after” since they drove away at the end of the final chapter. What difficulties and challenges might they have faced? How would Naila have difficulty adjusting to life back home after what happened?

Personal Response Questions

1. Much of what drives Naila’s parents is their fear of what people think of them. How much of what we do is driven by our fears of what people think of us? What would we do differently if we didn’t care about what others thought?

2. At the start of Written in the Stars, Naila struggles to balance her desire to follow her heart with her parents’ expectations. Have you ever had to balance your own values with those of your family? If so, how?

3. Naila’s secret relationship with Saif is exposed when someone at prom takes a picture of her and texts it. By the time her parents find out, the text has gone viral in her community. Have you ever had a situation in which social media has negatively impacted your life? Is it a big issue among your peers?

4. After Naila’s marriage, her cousin Selma tells her she can’t help Naila defy the family anymore. She urges her to accept her life and not fight her destiny. Do you believe in destiny? Do you believe there are some things we just can’t control because they are written in the stars?
**Essay Prompts**

1. Arranged marriages and forced marriages are often lumped together. Research and then compare and contrast the differences between arranged marriages and forced marriages.

2. The actions Naila’s parents take against her by forcing her into a marriage are a form of domestic violence. Research and share the top five domestic-violence related issues teens face with family members in the United States.

3. When Naila is trapped in her uncle’s home, we never see what is going on outside her locked door. Pick one of the characters and write a chapter showing what may have been happening while Naila was imprisoned inside. Would Selma have tried to help open the door? Her brother Imran? Do her parents experience regret or are they simply too furious?

4. In the final scene of the novel, Naila sees her parents outside her front door. It is the first time she sees them in over two years. Write the next chapter of the book. What happens next? How does the encounter go?

**Suggested Articles and Links for Teachers to Share as Companions to the Book**

1. **Unchained At Last**: An organization with resources and stories of women forced into marriage against their will. A helpful tool to see real life examples and to also see that the situation is not just limited to one person or culture, but instead is an issue that happens in non-immigrant communities, too. [www.unchainedatlast.org/](http://www.unchainedatlast.org/)

2. **Tahirih Justice Center**: An organization with resources and statistics on forced marriages and child marriages from around the world, with ways to help. [www.tahirih.org](http://www.tahirih.org)

3. **Spoons and Forced Marriage**: An article about spoons used to help people at airport security if they are being taken overseas against their will. The article can serve as a prompt to discuss the fact that Naila had no idea what was to happen to her, and what sort of steps she could have taken if she had known. [www.salon.com/2013/08/16/can_a_spoon_end_forced_marriage/](http://www.salon.com/2013/08/16/can_a_spoon_end_forced_marriage/)


5. **National Geographic “Too Young to Wed”**: Photo gallery of child brides from around the world with their own personal statements on the topic. Helpful to share with students to see the range of experiences within this tradition. [ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/06/child-brides/sinclair-photography](http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/06/child-brides/sinclair-photography)

6. **Forced Marriage in the United States**: A comprehensive multi-part series of essays from the perspective of victims, police officers, and others involved in helping combat the problem of forced marriage in the United States. Great to teach students about real life situations and about people involved in working to stop such situations from happening. [america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/1/21/forced-marriage-isaliveandwellintheus.html](http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/1/21/forced-marriage-isaliveandwellintheus.html)
Q&A with Aisha Saeed

Q: The topic of this novel is a very important one. What led you to write this book?

A: Authors refer to some stories as the “stories of their heart,” the story they always felt driven to write. *Written in the Stars* is the story of my heart. While Naila’s story is entirely fictional, her struggles were inspired by real life events from situations my own childhood friends went through and from stories I saw in the news about girls from all over the world forced into marriages they didn’t want.

Q: What has your own experience been with arranged or forced marriage?

A: There is a big distinction between forced and arranged marriages. The term “arranged marriage” covers a broad range of scenarios from couples that marry sight unseen, to couples that are simply introduced to each other by family in a “blind date” manner. The key with an arranged marriage is choice. I, myself, had a semi-arranged marriage. When I was twenty-one years old, my mom told me she heard about a great guy through a friend of hers that she thought I should meet. I was skeptical at first, but figured why not? Meeting him and talking to him felt like reconnecting with a long-lost friend. We shared many of the same dreams and goals for our future, and after talking more over the course of a few more weeks, we decided we wanted to take the ultimate leap of faith to spend our lives together. It’s been twelve years, and marrying him remains the best decision I ever made. A forced marriage, however, is completely different. In a forced marriage, the bride and/or groom are not consenting to the marriage. This practice is unacceptable and is condemned by every country and faith on earth. If you or someone you know is affected by the problem of forced marriage, please check the resources in *Written in the Stars* for guidance and to get help.

Q: Many of your readers may consider becoming authors themselves one day. What advice do you have for them about the process of writing a novel?

A: I think when most people start writing their first book it can be a bit of a shock to realize just how much work is involved. There are definitely the romantic moments of inspiration where the ideas just flow and the sentences fit together perfectly, but writing also involves a lot of discipline, hard work, and patience. My biggest advice would be not to let this discourage you. If you dream of writing a novel, keep at it every day. Hone your skill and push your creative boundaries. Write poetry, verse, write essays and stretch out your writing repertoire. The more you write, the better you get at it and the more confidence you will have with time.

Q: Can you describe the experience of writing a book that deals with such important social and cultural issues?

A: Because this story is inspired by people I knew, writing it was a deeply personal experience and oftentimes an emotional one. I almost didn’t finish it because of this. Ultimately, I followed the advice of Stephen King, who in his book *On Writing*, says that the most important thing a writer can do is write truthfully. This is what I endeavored to do. I love Pakistan. It is the home of my ancestors. There is so much beauty both in the country and in its people. This novel talks about a problematic issue that happens in Pakistan (and many other places around the world) but it is written from a place of love. We can love something or someone, but that doesn’t mean we shy away from the important conversations that must be had. Forced marriages are a problem that needs to be solved; the only way to begin solving it is to talk about it.

Q: Naila’s story is incredibly powerful, and one that many readers don’t realize happens every day for women (and men) around the world. What was the most meaningful part of writing for every real-life Naila?

A: The most meaningful part of writing for every real-life Naila is hearing from people who have gone through the same thing or are going through it now. Just a few days ago, someone saw the summary of *Written in the Stars* online and e-mailed me because her parents were pressuring her to marry someone. I was able to talk to her and give her resources to get help. I am grateful my novel helped someone in this concrete and tangible way. I hope it will continue to do so for others.