

Safiyyah's War

(Andersen Press, 2023)

Hiba Noor Khan

Reviewed by Jasbinder Bilan

Safiyyah's War is a refreshing and heartfelt World War II story. It follows Safiyyah as the threat of German invasion turns her comfortable Parisian world upside down. The story, told in close third person, challenges our ideas of this historical period by throwing light on a true to life humanitarian mission; the saving of many Jewish lives by the rector of the Grand Paris Mosque, Ben Ghabrit. It does a wonderful job of confronting stereotypes as it tells of individuals of Islamic faith who put their own safety at risk to help their Jewish neighbours. It paints a positive picture of the close-knit communities of Paris in the 40s working together to keep everyone safe.

Khan skilfully creates believable, empathetic characters as she builds the world of her story. The relationship between Safiyyah and her father is a particularly endearing one. Like all great children's books, although the adults think they are in

charge, the hero of this story is the charmingly adventurous Safiyyah. It is her kindness and passion for justice that leads her to play a major role, ensuring safe passage for her Jewish neighbours. When her father, under Nazi surveillance, is unable to continue his mercy missions for endangered lives, she carries on.

The pre-conflict world Khan conjures up for Safiyyah is artistic and filled with delight, for example, her visits to the literary, atmospheric home of Monsieur Cassan. The descriptions are so vivid, I could practically reach out and touch the plants which are his lifework. His origami butterflies were tender and uplifting and demonstrate how one small action can symbolically combat a powerfully destructive force such as the Nazi regime.

Khan's prose flows as smoothly as the Seine in this empathetic, hopeful story. In the light of recent religious conflict, the message of helping one's neighbour is even more poignant. *Safiyyah's War* allows the reader to see events from the point of view of innocence, where right and wrong is clearly defined. The heart of the story highlights a moving saying which both Jewish and Muslim faiths share: *'For whoever saves a single life, it is as if they have saved all of humanity.'*

With this idea at its core, the story holds the banner of justice high but it is ultimately a story of friendship and faith and how helping one person at a time against all odds saved whole neighbourhoods from persecution and possible death.

<https://www.andersenpress.co.uk/books/safiyyahs-war/>

Jasbinder Bilan

Jasbinder Bilan is a children's author of numerous magical realist middle-grade novels. Her debut *Asha and the Spirit Bird* (2019) won the Costa children's book award 2019. Her writing is inspired by her family roots in India and explores themes of friendship, family and hope. They include *Tamarind and the Star of Ishta* (2020) and *Aarti and the Blue Gods* (2021), which explores connections between Eastern and Western mythologies. Her first non-fiction book for children *India Incredible India* was published in 2022. She has been commissioned to write the text for the new Museum of London exhibition exploring London's pre-history.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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