

SWIMMING ON THE LAWN

YASMIN HAMID

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YEAR LEVEL: Y6–9

ABOUT THE BOOK

Farida lives with her family in Khartoum, Sudan. For Farida the 1960s are a time of fun and adventure, from riding the train to a remote village by the remains of Nubian pyramids to seeing the twirling dancers of the Mawlid festival. But as columns of black smoke rise on the horizon, can Farida's happiness last?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yasmin Hamid grew up in East Africa with her siblings, English mother and Sudanese father. She loves reading and has been in the same book club group for almost twenty-five years. She is happily married and has lived in Western Australia since 1988. This is her first novel for children.

THEMES

- Family
- Childhood
- Sudanese culture and customs
- World conflicts

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Y6–9 English

Y6–9 Humanities and Social Sciences – Geography; History; Civics and Citizenship

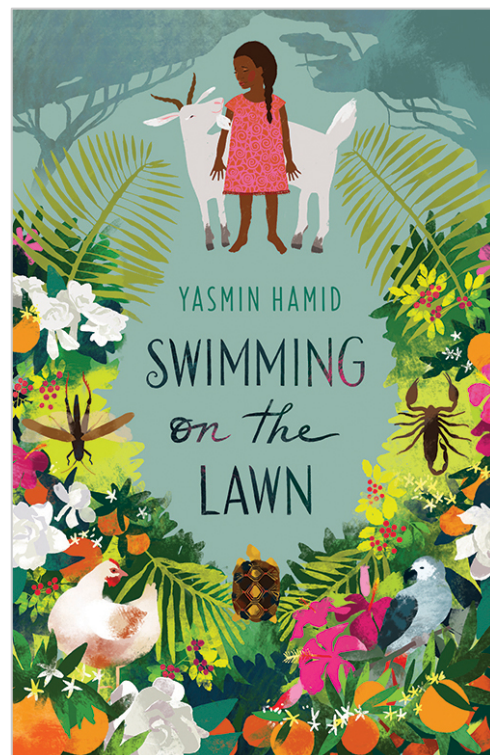
USEFUL WEBSITES

- *Our Africa* – Sudan: www.our-africa.org/sudan
- *Our Africa* – teaching resources: www.sos-schools.org/our-africa-teaching-resources

CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. Each chapter title is presented in both Arabic and English. What does this add to the book? What language/s do your family members speak at home?
2. How would you describe the personality of the narrator, Farida? Use three adjectives.
3. How is Farida's day-to-day life in Sudan similar/different to yours? For example, what time do you have breakfast and what sort of food does your family eat? How do Farida's chores compare with yours? There are sixty girls in Farida's class – how many students are in yours?
4. How would you describe Farida's relationships with her siblings?
5. Farida and Selma demonstrate resourcefulness when they discover they have run out of glue but decide to collect some sap from a nearby acacia tree. When have you been resourceful?
6. Review the glossary on pages 174–5. What is the Mawlid? What are Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha?
7. Why do you think Mama does not want Sami to buy weapon-shaped candy (p. 67)? Do you think it trivialises war? Why/why not? Does it glamorise violence? Did you play with toy guns as a child?
8. Uncle Yousif shows Farida the ruins of Nubian pyramids. Locate these on a map of Sudan and view images online. In a written report or PowerPoint presentation, answer: When were they built? Why were they built? What materials were used? Who built them? How do they compare to the Egyptian pyramids?
9. Reread pp. 58–59, then define the terms 'relative poverty' and 'absolute poverty'. How is the issue of poverty explored in the novel?



10. Farida's friends Nadia and Azza are the only two girls in a home with six brothers. Farida notes, *As they are the only girls in the family they have to do a lot of housework as well as looking after the younger children.* (p. 125) How are gender roles represented in this novel? How are the expectations for boys and girls similar/different to those in your household and community?
11. What role do books play in the life of Farida and her siblings? Give examples from the text.
12. Reread page 143. How does the author use foreshadowing? How is the theme of childhood innocence reflected here and throughout the novel?
13. Why do you think Farida's father was taken away by soldiers? What may have happened to him?
14. How does Farida feel in the final chapter, 'Leaving'? Why do you think the author chose to end the novel here?
15. Where are there conflict zones in the world today? Who is affected by them and in what ways?
16. What is the significance of the book's title, *Swimming on the Lawn*?
17. What themes stood out to you in this story? What did you enjoy most about the novel?

Creative writing

1. Reread the last paragraph on p. 39. How are personification and simile used in this passage to evoke vivid imagery? Experiment with simile, metaphor and personification in your own creative writing in the style of Yasmin Hamid. Then illustrate the scene you imagine when you read this passage, using a medium of your choice, e.g. watercolour, acrylic, charcoal (alternatively, illustrate your favourite scene from the novel). Display the artworks around the classroom.
2. Diary entry – Compose a diary entry from the point of view of Farida after her father is taken away.
3. Memoir – Farida revisits many of her favourite childhood memories throughout the story. Write a recount of one of your own favourite childhood memories. Use figurative language to appeal to all the senses, including the sights, smells, tastes and sounds you vividly recall.

History and geography

1. Locate Sudan on a map of Africa. Which countries does it share a border with? Make a list.
2. When did Sudan become an independent country?
3. Create a poster or pamphlet about Sudan displaying the following information: capital city, population, languages, geography and history, agriculture, weather and climate, resources, environmental issues, education, food, arts and culture, religion, sport and recreation, inequality and poverty, interesting facts.
4. What are the official languages of Sudan? Can you learn some basic greetings in Arabic (see p. 71)?
5. Research traditional Sudanese foods. In pairs, choose a recipe to try. Hold a Sudanese lunch where students are invited to sample the various dishes produced by their classmates.
6. In 2011 Sudan separated into two countries: Republic of the Sudan and Republic of South Sudan. What were some of the reasons for this decision?
7. Compare and contrast Sudan in the 1960s (as depicted in the novel) to modern-day Sudan in the twenty-first century. What significant changes can you see? What traditions have endured? (Hint: Watch the videos created by Sudanese schoolboy Mojtaba Abdelah as part of the *Our Africa* project. How are his schooling, hobbies, family life and aspirations similar/different to your own?)
8. Reread Farida's description of the Blue Nile meeting the White Nile on p. 65. Research the Nile river and present your findings in a fact sheet, including the river's length, its major tributaries, and a list of countries through which it flows.
9. Farida experiences a swarm of locusts (p. 76). Research the characteristics and lifespan of these insects. What effects can they have on agriculture? What role do they play in the spread of famine?

Civics and citizenship

1. Define the terms 'secular', 'multi-faith' and 'diverse society' and discuss their relevance to Australia today (establish that Australia is a secular nation and a multi-faith society).
2. Is Farida's 1960s Sudan a secular, multi-faith society?
3. What religion does Farida's family belong to? What are the key beliefs, values and traditions of this faith?
4. What religions are practised in contemporary Australia (e.g. Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism)? In groups of four, allocate one religious tradition per group. Each group is to identify the values and beliefs central to this tradition, and present the findings to the class as a poster or PowerPoint presentation.
5. Why is freedom of religion important? What other freedoms enable active participation in a democracy (e.g. freedom of speech, association, assembly and movement)?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

To what extent does the story of Farida resemble your own experiences of growing up in Sudan?

Many of the events in Farida's story are based on fictionalised memories from my childhood. Early memories are often just fragments of incidents, which include smells/scents, and fleeting feelings. So in a broad sense Farida's story reflects the kind of childhood I had; relatively carefree, with plenty of freedom and independence, as well as the comfort and safety of a family that fostered life's possibilities.

How long did it take you to write the book and what was the writing process like?

The novel took about three years to write.






I must admit that I was (and still am) a very reluctant writer. I would put off writing anything until the day before I had to have something written for my writing group workshop, by which time a sense of panic would set in. I would then pick a word off my list (e.g. oranges) and use it as a starting point, which hopefully would evolve and grow and trigger other ideas that could be added until I had the outline of a chapter to work on.

What do you hope readers will take away from your book?

I would hope that readers would feel the same way about my book as I do about some of the books I read when I was young. Although the characters, places and situations we read about may seem to be different from our own experiences, we can still feel a sense of recognition, empathy and understanding on an emotional level that shows us that children everywhere just want to be with their family and to have what is to them a 'normal' life. Sadly, for lots of children around the world a 'normal' life is disrupted by decisions made by adults, governments and people in power.

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