

Meet the Women Behind **A Galaxy of Sea Stars**

While working on my first middle grade novel, **Ruby in the Sky**, I had the privilege of working with an amazing group of refugee youth through the organization, IRIS-Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services in New Haven, Connecticut (irisct.org). These young men and women read an early version of **Ruby in the Sky**, then met with me to offer their advice and suggestions for the character Ahmad Saleem, who was a refugee from Syria.

As the project wound down, members of the group asked me to recommend other books with refugee characters. It quickly became apparent that, although there are many wonderful books about refugees, there aren't nearly enough with refugee characters. From this realization, a new group formed as five young women with roots in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, came together to help create such a book. The goal of this new project was to provide an opportunity for these ladies to reach out to world to say: This is what I want you to know about me, this is how it has been for us, and this is how we'd like it to be.

In the beginning, we met at IRIS, and I simply listened as they talked about their home countries, as well as their wishes, dreams and fears for their lives in the United States. Their experiences spun together to shape the character, Sitara Haidary. For more than a year, these young women read multiple versions of **A Galaxy of Sea Stars**, each time offering their critical insight and advice as the story developed.

From the moment I met these women, their bravery and courage inspired me, but I never fully expected how they would change my life. During this time, I faced a challenging cancer diagnosis, and our meetings were scheduled around surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation. But for me, each time we reunited was like breathing new air, and I'd easily forget about everything else. The willingness of these ladies to invite me into their lives and homes, and share their courageous optimism, has inspired me in ways I can't describe. I can only say that each time I return to IRIS still feels something like coming home—an emotion that I think many people share.

I am so grateful for this opportunity for readers to get to know the inspiring young women who helped shape Sitara's story. Like me, I believe you will feel braver for knowing them.

— Author Jeanne Zulick Ferruolo

Meet the Women Behind *A Galaxy of Sea Stars*

1. Tell us a bit about yourself.

My name is **Hilla** and I am from Afghanistan. I came to the U.S. when I was thirteen.

My name is **Deyana** and I am from Iraq, but I have also lived in Syria and Turkey. I came to the U.S. when I was fifteen.

My name is **Nour** and I left Syria when I was eleven. I lived in Jordan as a refugee and then came to the U.S. when I was fifteen.

My name is **Maria** and I am from Afghanistan. I came to the U.S. when I was twenty.

My name is **Safia** and I am from Afghanistan. I came to the U.S. when I was eighteen.

My name is **Asma** and my family is from Afghanistan. I was the first child in my family born in the United States.

2. If it weren't for each one of you, *A Galaxy of Sea Stars* would never have become a book! How did you feel about working on this project?

Deyana: This was my first time experiencing a story about a refugee. Working on this project gave me comfort because it was an opportunity to describe many feelings I experienced as a refugee coming to a new country.

Asma: I enjoyed being part of this project because it made me think of myself when I was Izzy's and Sitara's ages. Whenever our middle school cafeteria felt too loud, I escaped into books and reimagined myself as those heroines with simple, easy to pronounce names, who possessed the kind of courage I wanted for myself. But the girls in those books were not like me. Each night, I'd wonder whether those characters ever knew what it was like to occupy the lonely space between two worlds as I did. If twelve-year-old Asma had brought *A Galaxy of Sea Stars* to the cafeteria with her, I think she would have seen parts of herself in both Sitara and Izzy. I also think she would have been inspired to put the book down and talk to other kids because then she would have recognized the power of girls like her.

Hilla: Sometimes in school when I've talked about Afghanistan, my classmates didn't believe me. They had this wrong idea of what they thought Afghanistan was like so stuck in their heads from what they'd seen on TV or in the movies that they wouldn't listen to someone who'd actually lived there. Working on this project, I shared many facts about my country and my culture with people interested in really learning about Afghanistan. For example, in the *melmastiyâ* scene, readers can see how important family is to Afghans and how generosity is a big part of Afghan culture.

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Nour: It was important for me to work on this project and share parts of my own story so that **A Galaxy of Sea Stars** would accurately represent one of the many hidden stories that needs to be told about immigrant and refugee struggles.

3. What is something that you want readers to know about your home country?

Deyana: In the U.S., people are always telling me that my country, Iraq, is destroyed and that we don't have things such as restaurants, movie theaters, parks and museums. I want people to know that Iraq is a beautiful country with a rich culture and history. Iraq is the birthplace to some of the world's earliest known civilizations. There are many historical places to visit like Sami Abdulrahman Park, the Kurdish Textile Museum, Lalish, and Shanadar Park. Iraq is known for many famous poets, painters and sculptors.

Asma: Although there have been many years of war in Afghanistan, we are far from a broken people. Afghans are astronomers, poets, scientists, scholars, storytellers, and individuals. My ancestor, Ahmad Shah Durrani, was as much a poet as he was a king. I grew up on stories of Kabul's bustling streets, the emerald pastures of Logar, and summer nights spent naming constellations. Together, they construe the image of a country that is simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, as well as unabashedly alive. Despite all they may be going through, an Afghan will not let you leave their home with an empty stomach; after making you eat as much as you possibly can, they will also ensure you have more than enough to take home. I know no better indication of a beautiful life than that.

Nour: Syria, also known as the "Country of Jasmine," has the friendliest and most hospitable people. In Syria you will find a mosque next to a church next to a synagogue. Our neighbors were of all faiths, but Syrian people don't care about what religion you are as much as who you are inside. In Syria, being friendly and kind to each other is more important than anything.

4. What was the hardest part about leaving your home and coming to the United States?

Deyana: When I was six, my family moved to Syria. Even though Arabic is spoken there, it was very different than the dialect I'd grown up with in Iraq. Then we moved to Turkey and I had to learn Turkish. When we came to the U.S. I now had to learn a third language—English. I came in the ninth grade and there were so many students in my high school—it was like a sea of faces to me. Everyone was a stranger; the hallways were completely foreign. Even

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though I already knew two languages, English was so hard because it is read the opposite of Arabic (which is read right to left) and has completely different characters for its alphabet and numbers. For the first six months I didn't understand anything my teachers were saying. I couldn't read road signs or understand my classmates. I was afraid to speak because even one letter in one word can change the entire meaning of what you are trying to say. If I said something wrong, sometimes people laughed at me, so I was afraid to speak. I felt like I couldn't learn. Inside me I felt very lost and alone.

Hilla: When I was leaving Afghanistan I didn't really understand everything that meant. But when I got to the United States, my aunt immediately came to my mind. Right then, I realized how much I would miss her and how I may never see her in person again. That is when everything became more real to me. It was very hard.

Nour: We left Syria when I was eleven and we had to leave many family members behind. It was especially hard to leave my uncle and his family because he was so much like a father to me—I even called him Baba (Dad).

5. In *A Galaxy of Sea Stars*, some kids are unkind to Sitara because she wears hijab. Have you ever been treated differently because you wear hijab? How did that make you feel?

Deyana: During Ramadan, I came to school wearing hijab and a classmate told me I should take it off because I look “more beautiful” without it. This upset me because my friend was not understanding that hijab is not just a piece of cloth to me—it is my faith. It is who I am. This person thought they were giving me a compliment but their words hurt me.

Nour: On more than one occasion I have been harassed for wearing hijab. Statistics show that women are more often a target because of hijab. I have been yelled at many times and told to go back to my country. This has happened more than once in train stations as I've travelled to and from college where I major in Physiology and Neurobiology and am on the Pre-Med track. I'm not sure what right anyone has to tell anyone else where they should go.

Hilla: One time a classmate asked me about hijab, but she asked it in a really nice and respectful way. She wanted to learn more about why I wore hijab. I loved the way she asked and I was happy to answer her questions.

6. Are there other ways you have been treated differently? What advice can you offer other kids who might be feeling the same way?

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Deyana: One time an advisor kept pushing me to go to a certain school because she said that it was better for students like me who had learned English as a second language. But I didn't want to go to that school. My English was strong and I was interested in other schools. But it didn't matter to her. She would only listen to what she thought was best for me, not what I knew was best for me. Being kind requires that we not only listen to each other—but really hear each other, understand new perspectives, and show respect for them.

Asma: I will never know what it is to be a refugee, but I do know what it is like to be treated differently. I know that the distinct pain of being told to “go back home” never dulls, no matter how much time has passed since you first had to redefine what home means. I also know that kindred spirits exist the world over. It is okay to share your story with those who want to understand, and it is okay—always—to correct mispronunciations of your name, even if it takes several tries.

7. At the end of the story, Izzy and Sitara go on the school news to talk about their fathers' experiences working with the United States in Afghanistan. Why was this scene important to you and why do you think it was important for the story?

Hilla: Many Afghans have come to the United States through the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Program which Sitara talks about in this scene. I think many Americans don't know that people who come SIV have worked to help the United States in their countries, or that their families were in serious danger because of that work. This is the reality for many Afghans, so to not mention it would be like hiding the truth. I liked how Izzy and Sitara shared this with their school because it is also a part of my history and something I am proud of.

Asma: By sharing their experiences, Izzy and Sitara taught their classmates about something they knew nothing about. But mostly, this scene matters to me because it provided both girls an opportunity to claim how they were impacted by what their fathers had endured. Owning these truths in front of the entire school showed how brave they truly were. And from their courage sprung another truth—although we feel more comfortable when we understand one another, our ability to be kind does not depend on this. Our choice to be kind shouldn't either.

Nour: I loved how Sitara inspires Izzy to speak up and do the news. This scene also shows the friendship that they built and how they became stronger together. Each one of us is unique in some way—we don't all look the same or do the same things. Our world has many scars and we need people like Sitara and Izzy to speak up so they can be healed.

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Maria & Safia: In our country we have seen war. The things American kids have seen in movies, we have seen with our own eyes. It is horrible. We came to the United States with many wishes for a better life. But when we first came it seemed as if many of these wishes would never come true. It was so hard to not understand the language and we were very lonely. When Sitara tells her story – she is also telling our story so that hopefully readers will understand more about us and our lives.

8. Why do you think American-born kids should read this story and what can they learn from it?

Nour: I hope readers will understand what it is like to be a refugee. For refugees, the first week you are in the United States is one of the hardest times you will face. Imagine that you are seven years old and you are walking with your mom in a busy place like Times Square in New York City and all of a sudden you have lost your mom's hand. You are looking around and people are racing by and no one is looking down to see you there or notice that you are crying and need help. That feeling represents what it is like when you first come to the United States as a refugee. You will not always find people who understand you and where you have come from. Sometimes the wrong person will come in your face and make fun of you because you don't speak English. For many refugees, it can make them feel discouraged and make them think that they should give up and go back to the wars and struggles they've just escaped.

Hilla: A lot of people think that girls who wear hijab are being forced to or that their parents are making them wear it. I want to wear hijab because of my faith. It is important for people to understand that it is our personal choice to wear hijab.

Asma: I think readers can learn from this book that creating a space for others to speak can be as powerful as using your own voice. This might mean asking someone about the book they've brought with them to the cafeteria, especially if they are sitting alone. It also means knowing that a person may not want to answer your question. We all make mistakes, but that is not an excuse to not try to understand each other and how we are all different. Anything worth doing, believing in, and fighting for is always going to be scary because it needs to be. I have followed this truth to the front of classrooms, to the center of difficult conversations, and eventually to podiums. It is because of this that I raise my hand as high as I can to answer questions about myself and Afghanistan—especially when my hand is bright red with henna!

9. Is there something refugee kids can learn from Izzy and Sitara's story? What do you think that is and why?

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Safia: When I first came to this country, I didn't know English and couldn't defend myself with words—so when I didn't understand something, I would apologize to people even though I hadn't done anything wrong. I liked the way Sitara never apologized. She also was brave in making new friends which is a very hard thing to do when English isn't your first language.

Hilla: I think that many refugee kids go through similar things that Sitara experienced because of the way they dress or speak differently. Reading about how Sitara dealt with these challenges could be like a guide where kids could see how she faced the same situations with pride. Also when you see someone else going through something you have had to face—it can make you feel less alone.

Asma: I think that all kinds of kids can learn about what it means to find “home” from Izzy's and Sitara's story. My best friend Sophie's family immigrated to the U.S. from France and Poland. When her family visited mine for tea, my mom woke up early to prepare as extensively as she knew how. Sophie's grandmother complimented the halwa in French, my mom responded in Dari, and in the midst of our shared translation I realized that maybe home isn't actually a place. Maybe home is being with those who try their best to understand you, and who love you for all of who you are.

10. The experiences and advice each of you shared on this project shaped the character Sitara—but still, she is her own person. Is there anything about Sitara that inspired you or that you admire?

Safia: Sometimes at my work I meet police officers and from them I realized that I want to be a police officer too someday. But I thought that I couldn't do that job because I wear hijab. In the story, Sitara was very proud to wear hijab and so am I. From working and talking about the book, I realized that I can wear hijab everywhere, especially as a police officer.

Asma: Sitara skips across rooftops, ventures into the sea, raises her hand in class, shares her story with the entire school, and feels angry, alone, and afraid. Sitara is Sitara, and that is what I admire most about her. And when Izzy doesn't initially understand her, Sitara doesn't change so that she can. Instead she inspires Izzy to want to be more like her—brave and strong.

Hilla: I liked how Sitara always spoke up for herself. When I was new to my school and someone would say something offensive I would do my best to ignore it. But Sitara reminded me to be more willing to speak up. She made me realize that you don't have to get into an argument or go down to their level when you respond—just stay positive.

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Nour: I like how brave Sitara is in the story and I think that most kids who come to a new country have to find this kind of courage. One of the bravest things I ever had to do was to say “stop” to a student who was making fun of a kid who had been in the U.S. for less than a week. It was hard to see the same thing happening again and again, and nobody doing anything about it. Saying “stop” may seem like a very simple or easy thing to do for many people, but it is not. It actually takes a lot of courage. I believe that lots of kids, coming from many different experiences who read **A Galaxy of Sea Stars** will gain courage to speak up and tell their stories and stop accepting unkind and offensive treatment because of the way they look or where they are from.

11. What was your favorite scene in **A Galaxy of Sea Stars and why?**

Hilla: My favorite scene was when Izzy and Sitara did the news together at the end of the story. A lot of the kids had made assumptions about Sitara and I liked how she spoke up for herself and said who she really was.

Deyana: My favorite scene was when Sitara spoke for the first time on the school news about wearing hijab because it was an essential part of making her classmates understand why and how important it is to her. This was a very courageous thing to do.

Asma: Because I, too, dream of becoming a lawyer-astronomer (I’m working on the lawyer part right now, but I’ll get to the rest!), my favorite scene in the story is when Izzy and Sitara “journey to Narnia”. Growing up, my answer to the question of what I wanted to become ranged from pediatrician, teacher, journalist, wildlife photographer, engineer, novelist, lawyer, and world-shaker (whose job it would be to stand behind podiums and rouse audiences to action!) Like Izzy and Sitara, I feel large when I consider all that I can be, but also small when I look into the night sky. Like Izzy and Sitara, I see the connection between our individual stories, aspirations, and identities, and how—like the constellations they gaze at from their rooftop—this understanding can illuminate our way forward.

Nour: My favorite scene is when Izzy and Sitara do the news together because it shows how when one person has the courage to speak up, it will inspire others to speak up too—and that together, these voices can change minds and make a positive impact.

12. Is there any last thoughts, ideas or advice you would like to leave with readers?

Deyana: I want to say that there should be more books with refugee characters. These types of stories can create a significant and positive opportunity to understand the experiences of many refugees.

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Asma: The first time I gave a speech in front of my classmates, I remember praying that no one would notice my hands trembling behind the podium. I'd written about why we must know the shared history of our world, and I began my speech as I begin every important task. First, I said Bismillah—in the name of God. Then, with the same breath, I said let your courage be bigger than your fear. The shaking didn't stop, but my voice began. I am grateful I could contribute to a story that represents this reality. If I could tell twelve-year-old me that a character would one day come to embody some of what she was, I know she would hold her head higher. Twenty-year-old me certainly does.

Nour: I never imagined I would have the opportunity of being a consultant on a project like this. I have been inspired by every part of the process starting from day one—to the day I saw the result. And by the result, I do not mean the day the book was published—but the day people have read this book and had the chance to understand more about what it means to be a refugee.

Safia: My advice to readers would be to go out of your way to be friends and be kind to new kids. Make them not feel like a stranger. Kindness belongs to everyone.

Maria: I would like to say that it is important to always be kind to each other because you don't know what other people have gone through.