



# A Lemon for Safiya



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TEACHERS RESOURCES

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<b>About the book</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Before reading</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Comprehension and discussion questions</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Creative activities</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Author's notes</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Illustrator's notes</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>About the author</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>About the illustrator</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Related reading</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>About the author of the notes</b>	<b>6</b>

**Teachers Resources by by Bec Kavanagh and Jemima Shafei-Ongu**

**Recommended ages:** Ages 3+, notes recommended for grades P-2

**Themes:** connection, family, home, belonging, grief

**Curriculum connections:** AC9EFLA07, AC9E1LA08, AC9E2LA08, AC9EFLE01



# ABOUT THE BOOK

When a little girl, Safiya, and her family help Maryam, a lost and confused stranger by the side of the road, to find her way home, they begin to understand who she is and the rich and remarkable life she has lived. Through kind-natured Safiya, we come to see Maryam, a woman who had been made invisible by society because of her ethnicity, race, religion, language, age and now dementia.

With Arabic text interspersed throughout, *A Lemon for Safiya* is a wonderful exploration of language, diversity and culture.

*A Lemon for Safiya* is a quietly sophisticated story that touches on loss and reveals how important family and community are in building hope and creating connections.

## BEFORE READING

- Explore the cover of the book. Who do you see? What do you imagine their relationship might be to each other? Why?
- Read the blurb aloud and consider what it tells you about the story. How do you think the story might make you feel? Reflect on this question again after you've finished the book.
- Share a time that someone in your community has seemed as if they needed help. What did you do?

## COMPREHENSION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Where does Safiya spot the old woman?
- What is the old woman holding when Safiya goes with her mother to ask if she's ok?
- What is the Arabic word for 'house'?
- Where is the old woman's home? Which home do you think she's remembering when she describes it to Safiya's mama?
- Who is Hanna? What does her name mean in Arabic?
- What is the old woman's name? Where does Safiya find it?
- What's significant about the lemon tree? What does the tree mean to Maryam?
- Safiya and her family could have driven straight past Maryam, but they stopped to see if she was okay. Why do you think they did this?
- Maryam seems to be confused. She is likely to be living with a brain disease within a group name called dementia (the most common form of dementia is called Alzheimer's disease). What things in the story tell us that this might be the case?
- How has this story changed the way you might think about an older person having difficulty with their memories or behaving in a way that is hard to understand?
- What are some of the caring and respectful ways that you noticed Safiya and her family interacting with Maryam? Pay careful attention to facial expressions, body posture and gestures.
- Maryam's memories are triggered by things she sees around her. Paying attention to the colours in the illustrations, can you think what these things might be? How has the illustrator shown the difference between memories and current happenings?
- We learn what Hanna's name means in Arabic. Does your name have a meaning? If so, what does it mean?
- The illustrator has cleverly illustrated some Arabic letters disguised as parts of a branch. Can you find these? What do you think those letters might spell? (Clue: use the glossary to find them.) Why might they have been represented in this way?
- What phrase does Safiya use to describe the way she feels after having tea with Maryam?
- Why do you think Maryam gives Safiya the lemon?

# CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

- What do we learn about Maryam's life from the small details she shared with Safiya and her family? Write one of the scenes in the story from Maryam's perspective. How do you think she might have been feeling? What might she have been thinking?
- Maryam describes playing among the olives as a child. Draw a picture that captures how you imagine her childhood, using the details provided in the story as a starting point. Draw a picture of you playing outside. What similarities and/ or differences do you notice?
- What do you think the lemon represents in the story? What does it mean to Maryam? What do you think that Safiya will think or feel when she looks at her lemon tree? Try to grow your own lemon from a seed. (You can read more about how to do this here – <https://kidminds.org/the-magic-of-growth-from-seed-to-lemon-tree/>.) Write a procedure for 'How to grow a lemon tree' and draw a picture of the life cycle of a lemon. Is there anything in your drawing that deepens your understanding of the story?
- What do you think home means to Maryam? What do we learn about her home? (Hint: consider some of the plants that matter most to Maryam). What do you think home means to Safiya? What does home mean to you? Draw a special memory from your home.
- Some of the words in the book are written in Arabic. Why do you think the author has chosen to include this language? If you don't speak Arabic, where can you find information in the story that helps you to understand what's being said? Make a list of Arabic words in the story and write down what you think the meaning of each one is before you check your answers in the glossary. Compare your answers to that of your peers and discuss in class.
- Invite an Arabic-speaking guest, who is fluent in Arabic speaking and writing, to your class and ask if they might be able to write your name in Arabic. Compare it to your name in English – what do you notice? Can you draw it? See if you can learn one simple phrase in Arabic, like 'Good morning', or 'What is your name?' Practice these phrases with your peers.
- Make a list of some of the organisations, programs or places that help to support older people in your community and make them feel more connected. Why is this important? How could you be a part of this?

# AUTHOR'S NOTES

*A Lemon for Safiya* was inspired by true events that happened when my family and I were living in Melbourne around 2006. We found a lost and confused old woman by the side of the road, with not too dissimilar circumstances to Maryam in this story. I have also worked with many children in schools who felt sad and confused when someone they loved, like a grandparent, became impacted by dementia. I also love lemons, and along with olives, they play a special role in my culture (I am of the Levant), and they have a special place in my heart. Nature has a way to teach us about life, about patience, about respect for life and about trust in its process. Lemons, like much of nature, have a life cycle that we can be trustees of and agents to.

I wrote this story so that we could have a better understanding of how to be kinder to people in our communities who are often considered invisible because of barriers they might have to language, or due to health reasons like dementia, or because certain ways that our society perceives them creates a prejudice towards them. This is dangerous, because a world where we are unkind to people who need our help most is not a nice place for us to live, especially if we have additional needs. Furthermore, being kind to people actually makes our own hearts softer, which, ironically, makes us stronger as a community. If everyone in our society softens their hearts, we could be a much stronger, kinder and connected community. And everyone would be able to live their best lives.



# ILLUSTRATOR'S NOTES

Before I begin illustrating any book, I immerse myself in the text. I read it repeatedly, making notes about the mood of each spread and identifying the key emotions driving the narrative. I allow my mind to wander and absorb the story's essence before even picking up a pencil. For *A Lemon for Safiya*, this process was particularly poignant.

When the manuscript arrived, it was the middle of winter, and my own little lemon tree was full of bright yellow fruits. I spent days sketching these lemons, captivated by their beauty – the textures of the peel, the vibrant green of the new leaves, and the delicate pink of the lemon blossoms. These observations influenced the book's limited palette. The colours primarily come from the lemon tree itself, along with the eucalyptus, bottlebrush and olive trees. And the textures of the lemon peel inspired me to use crayons and rough-textured paper. The plants became a visual bridge between the two worlds depicted in the story, with the lemon at the centre. The lemon that Maryam drops and Safiya picks up appears as a recurring motif, sometimes hinted at in the background, to create a visual thread that connects Maryam's present and her memories.

I tried to imagine Maryam standing beneath a lemon tree, her mind filled with vivid memories she can't forget, while she struggles to recall the reality of the present. During this time, an elderly Greek woman with dementia often wandered into our backyard and asked for lemons. She seemed to remember we had a lemon tree, but not that the lemons weren't yet ripe. I drew inspiration from her postures, expressions and manner for my illustrations of Maryam.

Seeing my neighbour's confusion helped me in my approach to illustrating Maryam's memories. I chose to depict them as fragmented, using sketchy, childlike crayon marks. Some of these marks are tiny scribbles that I then scanned and enlarged, adding to their raw quality. I felt it was important to have different styles for the present and Maryam's past. The present is depicted with a full colour palette and a very detailed style. For Maryam's memories, I combined fine pencil work with scribbled crayon textures and rough watercolours patches. This book is a mixed media project, combining graphite, crayon, watercolour, and coloured pencils, all digitally collaged together in Photoshop.

One example of the crayon texture can be seen in pages 18–19, where young Maryam holds her lost daughter, Hanna. This pencil drawing was one of the earliest illustrations I made for the book, and I wanted this significant narrative moment to have a sense of tenderness and warmth. I hope this visual contrast will spark discussions among young readers about how illustrations can help tell a story and convey complex emotions.

I often find inspiration in my surroundings. For example, the tray on page 27 is a photograph of a Hebron tile I own, and the teapot and teacup patterns are based on the Palestinian Keffiyeh fishnet design.

When working on this book, given the weight and seriousness of the subject matter, it was very important to me to include elements to which children could relate. I work part-time as an SLSO (Student Learning Support Officer) in a primary school, and I've noticed the number of keychains children carry and the many Squishmallows they bring to school as emotional support. This observation inspired me to include Archie the Axolotl and a multi-coloured pop-it fidget toy in the illustrations.

Happy reading and happy exploring.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jemima Shafei-Ongu** is a Sydney-based writer who is passionate about picture books. She believes in their power to create connections with readers of all ages through honouring and celebrating diverse cultures and experiences.

Jemima has a professional background in psychology and teaching. As a child of the diaspora – an 'in-between' from Australia with Levantine roots, who's also immersed in Turkish culture through marriage – she is driven to investigate and continue disrupted narratives in her writing.

She is the author of *A Lemon for Safiya* and *Aslan and Benny*. She also co-authored the picture book *Shirin and Amir and the Dragon Smoke* as part of a project with the Australian National University to promote inclusive health messaging about ways families can keep safe from bushfire smoke.

When she's not writing, Jemima enjoys long walks by her local river, watercolour painting, learning the derbake, and playing lip-sync battles with her adult daughters.

She lives on unceded Dharug country with her partner, their mini schnauzer and whichever of their three daughters is in the country at the time.

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## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Nisaluk Chantanakom** is originally from Thailand, grew up right in the thick of New York City and now calls Wangal Country home. She loves living in Sydney with her husband (whom she met while counting forty-four giraffes in Ugandan bushland), and her three kids and their delightful (somewhat smelly!) rough collie named Indiana Bones.

Nis has a Bachelor's (Boston University) and a Master's (University of Pennsylvania) in Fine Arts. She's been an en plein air painter, where she explored the outdoors through art and then transitioned into graphic and UX design. But her heart truly lies in education and crafting picture books. These days, she works part-time as a Learning Support Officer at Sydney primary schools, surrounded by books that she gets to read to her students, and she loves to chat with them about their favourites. And the rest of her time is spent in her studio, bringing stories to life through illustration.

## RELATED READING

*Afloat* by Kirli Saunders, illustrated by Freya Blackwood

*Amma's Sari* by Sandhya Parappukkaran, illustrated by Michelle Pereira

*Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox, illustrated by Julie Vivas

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

**Bec Kavanagh** is a writer, literary critic and academic living in Naarm whose work examines the representation of women's bodies in literature.

She is a regular guest at writers' festivals and has judged a number of literary prizes, including the Victorian Premier's Literary Award. Bec's most recent reviews can be found in *The Guardian* and *The Big Issue*. She has written fiction and non-fiction for a number of publications including *Westerly*, *Meanjin*, *Review of Australian Fiction*, *The Big Issue* and the *Resilience* anthology.

Bec was previously the Schools Manager for the Stella Prize, and the Youth Programming Manager at the Wheeler Centre. She is currently Senior Tutor in Publishing and Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne and teaches Faber Academy's 'Writing the YA Novel'. Independently, she runs 'Body Writing', a series of 3-hour life drawing classes for writers.

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