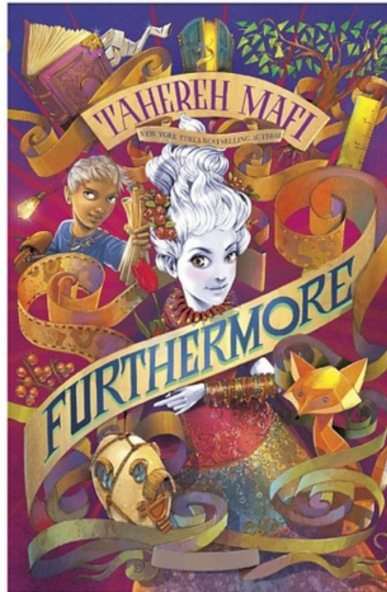


A BOOK REVIEW OF *FURTHERMORE* BY T. MAFI

BY ZARA PALEVANI

Rating:



Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/28110143-furthermore>

Note: this book review includes spoilers.

Introduction

Furthermore is an action-packed, addictive, adventurous story of the 12-year old Alice Alexis Queensmeadow by an Iranian-American author, Tahereh Mafi. The book is full of surprises. Mafi keeps surprising her readers with exciting events in her book almost all the way to the ending. While Mafi believed that she wrote a book for young adults, her publisher rated the book as a children's book. This book review pays close attention to how the story and the main character relate to the topic of diversity in fantasy fictions.

Book Summary

Who should read this book?

While the book is rated as a children's book, I can confidently recommend this book to young adults as well as adults who interest in fantasy fiction would enjoy the story. Mafi has done an exceptional job of telling a fairy tale story which is appealing to readers of all ages and but especially to readers who are familiar with the Iranian culture and the Persian language. Mafi has even exposed her non-Persian speaking readers to the joys of deciphering the meaning of magical words such as "Fenjoon", "Sabzi" or "Asal Masal".

An Iranian reader can read through the story with a nostalgic feeling of joy and love for their mother tongue and references to such endearing words that they may have heard while growing up listening to fairy tales from their parents, or even grandparents. The use of Persian words throughout the book is done in the utmost degree of intelligence. These words do not make an impact on the origin of where the main characters came from or even the story itself. While none of the characters have a Middle Eastern name, the sky is the limit for the imagination of the readers who are familiar with the Persian language. With the mentions of such words in the story, Mafi allows her readers to imagine that other Persians could possibly be living in Ferenwood. Mafi has also subtly added Persian names for some of the businesses such as the bakery or the grocery store in the book. This makes me think whether some residents of Ferenwood - the town where Alice and her family are from - could have immigrated from Iran!

The Book

The cover of the book is one of the most prominent features of the book and could double as a conversation starter. The cover is bursting with interesting colours and amusing illustrations which hint at the magic that awaits the reader in the book. However, that is not the only important hint that the cover provides. Alice is illustrated in the center of the cover all in white. That is the first time that the reader is introduced to the main character and how she looks different from others. In a land Ferenwood where its residents live a literally colourful life and where colour is the currency, our main character is deprived of having any colours. She is covered all in white with very light hazel eye colours. Mafi is truly a capable wordsmith to a degree that I didn't note the lack of a table of contents in her book, or the lack of the chapter headings. Each chapter starts with a simple yet fun illustration, but there are no real headings. She uses a conversational tone to direct her readers to the next chapter.

The book is broken down into two parts. You will only know this if you read the book as the author is secretly walking her audience through the unfolding of the events with her mastery with words. Mafi provides a comprehensive view of Alice's life from the very beginning to when she reaches almost 12 in the first half of the book. The second half is where the real excitement lies. Just in time when the reader is about to question the amount of details that Mafi is inserting into her early chapters of the story, she exposes the reader with some big shocks to motivate them keep reading. I do not like this approach in most books, but *Furthermore* is different. The story is about a young girl who is very different from not only her peers but also her family and everyone else in this world.

The Story

The Characters

- ❖ The main character is Alice Alexis Queensmeadow. The story revolves around Alice and her insecurity that is not directly spelled out, but implied to result from being different from other people. Alice's differences have had a strong impact on her life to a degree that the reader is led to believe that Alice has no real talents at all.
- ❖ Oliver Newbans is only a year older than Alice. Oliver went to the same primary school as Alice. He expressed hatred towards Alice when he was a young child. This deeply hurt Alice and made her hate Oliver for a long time. Alice and Oliver's path cross again as they

grow older. They both go through several life changing challenges which bring them closer to each other and they became good friends over time.

- ❖ Alice's father loves her unconditionally and makes a great sacrifice to make Alice happy.
- ❖ Alice's mother does not express her love for her daughter as freely as the father does.
- ❖ Alice's triplet brothers, who Alice sometimes thinks are her mom's favorite children.
- ❖ The author also appears as a character, entering the story at odd times to speak directly to the readers, adding more details or context or promising more details in the coming pages. She did this often that I as the reader connected with her as a character, a story teller, who wants to have my back and protects me from the unknown-unknown!

All characters in this story seem to be credible and they each go through their own battles in life. The author has done an exceptional job of exposing the reader to the personal stories of each character and positions the reader to judge them based on their behaviours as one would judge a person in real life. Despite this, Mafi surprises the readers with the real reason behind why each character has exposed certain behaviour in the past.

Summary of the Story

12-year-old Alice lives among people whose town's currency is colour. While Alice herself is deprived of any colours, she has a magic at her disposal which makes her capable of giving colour to everything. Alice is bothered by the fact that she can bless anything and everything with beautiful colours while she can't use that magic on herself. There are only very few close family members who are aware of Alice's magical ability. Nobody was able to change Alice's mind to use her magic in public, so her father decides to take the risk of travelling to the dangerous town of Furthermore where it is believed there is a magic solution for anything. Alice's father leaves for Furthermore with the hope to find a cure for Alice. Her father becomes imprisoned in Furthermore and Alice and Oliver take a journey together to save Alice's father. In this journey both kids face life threatening events which not only brings them close to each other, but also forces Alice to use her magical power in front of Oliver to save their lives.

About the Author

Tahereh Mafi is an Iranian-American from San Diego, California. She is married with a young daughter. She wears the hijab more similar to the Arabs than to an Iranian Muslim woman. She is a lively and fun character with an active and strong presence on social media.

Mafi's success as an Iranian woman can play an important role for the young Iranian children and teenagers who look for a role model that they connect with while they live in exile. Although Mafi's name and the references to some Persian words in her book can give away her nationality, her fashion and hijab is less like Iranians.

I find Mafi to be a true example of a powerful Iranian-American author who leans on her pure talent in writing rather than having the privilege of living in a developed country (the USA) versus in a developing country (Iran). She also doesn't seem to promote the fact that she belongs with a minor group of fantasy fiction authors (i.e: Muslim, women, Iranian) rather she focusses on the magic of the stories she writes. Many of her followers may not even know she wears the hijab, or she is half Iranian.

I think Mafi can indeed be a strong role model for immigrant children and teenagers with a message that everyone should focus on their true talent to progress in life. However, Mafi can not be known much by her Iranian community or other Muslim women because she promotes neither of those facts about herself. One can still know her in those groups via word of mouth though.

Critique

As I mentioned earlier, the first half of the book has too much details, while the real story takes place in the last half of the book. While I enjoyed reading the first part of the book, I was starting to get impatient for the author to get to the main points. I felt that I was dragged to the middle of the book without learning much about the story while I knew about every detail about the town, Alice's home and her family I felt there was hesitation to pay more tribute to the main character. There is a hesitation to touch on Alice's insecurity and lack of self-confidence evident throughout the book. The readers can even see this more prominently as they reach the end of the book. I would rather that the author used a table of contents and broke the book into two parts. Alternatively, Mafi as the narrator (not the author), could have informed the readers upfront in what sequence she would tell the story.

By around the 200th page I was just about ready to jump to the later chapters of the book to assess whether I should keep on reading the book or not. I still struggle to read Mafi's intentions for trying to set the stage in such a long time to get to the main points of the story. Is it because she doesn't feel comfortable to touch on Alice's difference from others? Does she picture a book which eventually turn into a Hollywood movie or cartoon? Is that why she spends so much effort in telling every detail of Alice's life and her surroundings? Is she too busy protecting Alice from how she may be judged by her readers that she forgets about the readers attention span all together?

I think the reason Mafi took so long to set the stage because she wanted spend more time on the character of the mother. While we see the mother's character from Alice's perspective I am surprised that Mafi doesn't spend more time telling the story of the mother from either the mother's perspective or Mafi the narrator. I was astonished that an author who dedicates a large part of her book to show off her own magical power of playing with the words without really boring her readers, does not tell us more about the mother. Did she dislike her own daughter from the day she was born? What was the mother's reaction when she saw her daughter for the first time after birth? How was Alice's relationship with her mom when she was a young child? What was the mother's relationship with the father?

Alice's father's advice for her is the favorite part of the book for me.

"Why must you look like the rest of us? Why do you have to be the one to change? Change the way we see. Don't change the way you are."

Not only do these words show the father's love for his daughter but also it has a lesson that can be useful to everyone regardless of age, race, or gender.

Every time that I closed the book and saw the cover, I felt I was having a quick review of the story. The colours, the illustrations, the pictures of Alice, Oliver, and the fox all reminded me of what happened in the story. I never had such a unique experience with a book and its cover

until I read *Furthermore*. The graphic designer has managed to present an extraordinary piece which captures the story in one page!

Conclusion

While Alice's difference was obvious to everyone, those around her had their own insecurities, secrets, and differences too. Alice's story and how it ended was a good lesson. It was a lesson to allow ourselves more time to learn about people, including ourselves. People's reactions to us could be a result of their own insecurities rather than an attempt to pinpoint ours.

I highly recommend reading *Furthermore* and getting to know the author. I felt that learning more about the author has helped me to better understand the story, or at least helped me interpret her storytelling style. I look forward to reading other titles from Mafi.

Reference:

Mafi, T. (2016). *Furthermore*. New York, NY: Dutton Children's Book.