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you must be
LAYLA

The first novel from award-winning social activist

**YASSMIN
ABDEL-MAGIED**





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Note about the story

Yassmin Abdel-Magied was born in Sudan but moved to Australia with her family when she was 18 months old. She travels around the world for her work and she has lived in the United Kingdom since 2017.

Layla is a 13-year-old **Muslim*** girl who wears a **hijab**. She likes making things and is good at finding answers to problems. Her biggest adventure begins when she moves to one of the best schools in the city of Brisbane in Queensland, Australia. She quickly makes new friends at school, but not everyone is excited to see a black girl in a hijab. Can she show that she is a good student by winning a **robotics competition**?

Layla's older brother, Ozzie, also has problems. He cannot get a job because he is black and Muslim.

You Must Be Layla talks about being different, working together, **forgiveness**, and being true to yourself.

Before-reading questions

- 1 Look at the girl on the cover of the book. What is she wearing? Why is she wearing this, do you think?
- 2 In some countries, it is difficult for girls to study things like computers or robotics. Why do you think this is?
- 3 Where is Sudan? Why do you think some people from Sudan move to Australia?

*Definitions of words in **bold** can be found in the glossary on pages 78–80.

CHAPTER ONE A new start

“Layla! Where are you? We’re going to be late!” her father called from downstairs.

Layla was in her bedroom. “This is the worst skirt ever,” she said, looking at herself in her new school clothes. She put her dark red **hijab** round her head. Now her hair, ears and neck were **covered**, but not her face. This was how women wore a hijab in Sudan. Layla was **nervous** because it was her first day at a new school and she did not know anybody there.

Layla’s old school – the Islamic School of Brisbane, or ISB – was like a family. Everybody knew everybody. The students came from India, Fiji, Nigeria, Pakistan (like her best friend, Dina), Lebanon, Jordan, Algeria, Malaysia and South Africa. Their families were together all the time. Layla saw Dina at school, at the food shop after school and then at the mosque in the evenings. Sometimes their families visited at the weekends.

Layla wanted to travel the world and have adventures when she was older, and she liked finding answers to problems. But she did not meet many children from other schools – until she met Adam years ago.

One afternoon, Layla went to the park with her younger brothers, Sami and Yousif. The boys were twins and they looked the same. Layla loved climbing trees and decided to climb the biggest tree she could see. Halfway up the tree, she met a boy called Adam. They quickly became good friends and talked about everything – school, music, sports and places that they wanted to visit in the future.

That summer, Adam became a part of Layla's family. He joined them for Eid. "It's like a **Muslim** Christmas," Layla explained. And he went to her brother Ozzie's soccer games with her and Dina. Layla was happy that Adam and Dina seemed to be good friends, too. "Now I don't have to pick a best friend," thought Layla. "They're both best friends."

Adam's house was very different from Layla's. Everything was very quiet and very, very clean. Adam did not have any brothers or sisters. His parents were always busy at work, so he was often alone. Layla thought that Adam's life and school were wonderful. His school had everything – sports, exciting visits to new places, and a **tech** room where you could build anything that you wanted. Layla loved making things and learning about how things worked.

"If I go to a school like yours," said Layla, "I can learn to be a real adventurer. I can see more of Australia and I can learn about building different things."

"Why don't you come and visit it?" Adam asked.

"I'd love to do that!" Layla said. But then she thought, "What will the people at the school think of me?" She decided not to worry.

"I have an idea," she said to her parents when she got home.

Her parents were in the kitchen. Mama, Layla's mother, was peeling potatoes. She was tall, with dark skin and a kind face. She always wore a hijab when she left the house.

"Why are you so excited?" Layla's father asked. He was cutting tomatoes for a salad.

Layla's father, Baba, was shorter than his wife, and his skin was a lighter colour than Mama's because his family was from a different part of Sudan. His hair was thick and black, and he wore black glasses that were always falling down his nose.



When Layla told her parents about Adam's school and the tech room, her mother looked at her father and they both smiled.

"Layla, dear," Mama said. "We've already spoken to Adam's parents about different private schools. If you work really hard and take a very difficult exam, you could get a scholarship. A scholarship will pay for a private school like Adam's. Baba and I think that it's a good idea if you want to follow some of your dreams. Your brother Ozzie has decided to stay at ISB, but you don't have to."

"What do you think, Layla?" Baba asked.

Layla could not believe what she was hearing. "WOW! Yes, of course!" she said.

That summer, autumn and winter, Layla studied as hard as she could. Finally, she went into "Shutdown Mode" – she studied as much as possible and did not use her phone. She wanted a scholarship to one of the best schools in Queensland, so she needed to be in the top two **per cent** of students.

The Hussein family waited for weeks after Layla's exam. Then, one day, a letter arrived at the house with LAYLA KAREEM ABDEL-HAFIZ HUSSEIN written on the front in large letters. Layla had got a scholarship to one of the best schools in Brisbane: Mary Maxmillion Grammar School (MMGS).

At a special meeting before school started, Layla discovered that she was the first person ever to wear a hijab at MMGS. Mr Cox was the **Chair of the Board** and he talked a lot at the meeting.

"You're allowed to wear your hijab in school," he said, "but I'm not happy about it."

Layla could not understand why her hijab was a problem.

"This is not a Muslim school," Mr Cox continued. "This is an Australian school. You should do things our way."

But then a small man with a soft voice started speaking. "My name is Tyrone Savage," he said. "I'm the **principal** and I decide what happens in the school. Your exam **grade** was excellent, and we've given you a full scholarship. We're happy to have you and your family at this school."

After the meeting, Mr Cox walked up to Layla.



“Well done!” His moustache moved as he spoke. “But remember to be a good girl, because we can stop your scholarship if we want to.” Then he added, very quietly, “You’re a brave girl to come to this school. Not everyone at MMGS is as excited as Mr Savage to see you here.”

“Do I laugh or do I cry?” thought Layla. “Is that a **threat**? And why am I brave? Is it brave to be myself? Isn’t that the easiest thing to be?”

CHAPTER TWO

You must be Layla

“LAYLA!” Baba shouted again.

Layla picked up her school bag and ran downstairs. She jumped into the back seat of the car next to Sami and Yousif.

“We nearly left you at home!” Ozzie laughed from the front seat. Her big brother was in Year 11 but sometimes he acted like a little child. Baba drove to MMGS, where he stopped the car.

“Good luck today, Layla!” Baba called from the driver’s seat. “Show them that you’re clever and be a good girl!”

She waved at him and then passed through the school gates. As Layla went past groups of students, they stopped talking and their eyes followed her as she walked towards the school. It took Layla a long time to find her classroom, 8A. She arrived late and everybody looked at her when she entered.

“Come in,” said the teacher. “You must be Layla.”

The teacher’s face looked old. She wore glasses and her mouth was a bright pink colour. Her hair was white.

“YES! I’M LAYLA,” she said, loudly. A couple of people laughed. “Sorry for shouting, Miss. But I have to shout at my grandmother when we speak on the phone because she doesn’t hear very well. When I look at you, I think of my grandmother.”