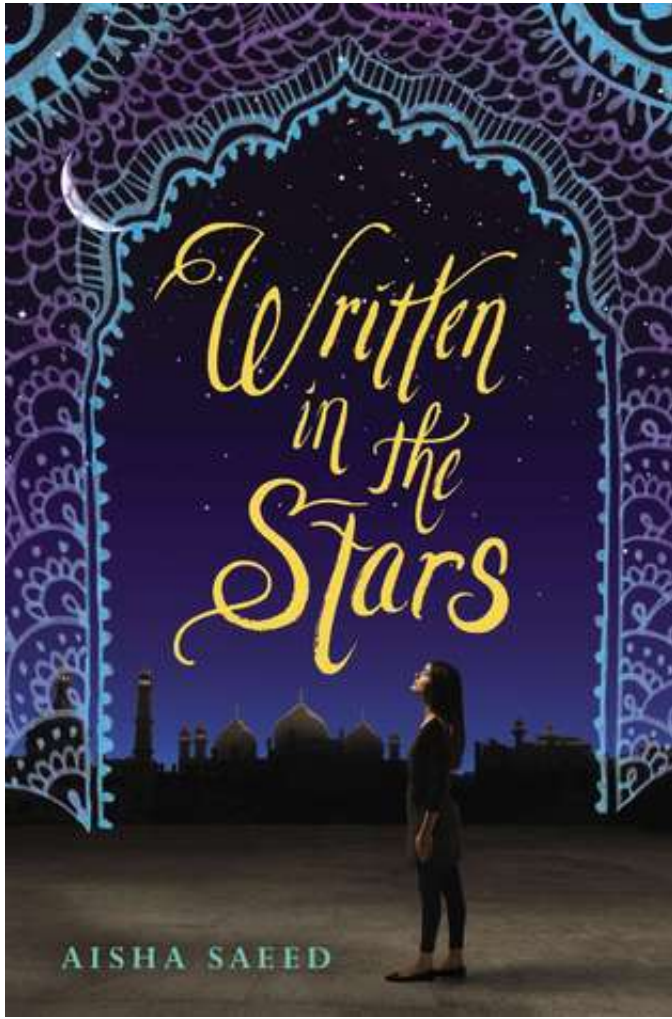


Review: *Written in the Stars* by Aisha Saeed



For my second read, I chose [Written in the Stars](#) by Aisha Saeed, one of the founding members of the [We Need Diverse Books](#) project. The summary on the inside flap seems to indicate a fairly typical teen romance:

This heart-wrenching novel explores what it is like to be thrust into an unwanted marriage. Has Naila's fate been written in the stars? Or can she still make her own destiny?

Naila's conservative immigrant parents have always said the same thing: She may choose what to study, how to wear her hair, and what to be when she grows up—but they will choose her husband. Following their cultural tradition, they will plan an arranged marriage for her. And until then, dating—even friendship with a boy—is forbidden. When Naila breaks their rule by falling in love with Saif, her parents are livid. Convinced she has forgotten who she truly is, they travel to Pakistan to visit relatives and explore their roots. But Naila's

vacation turns into a nightmare when she learns that plans have changed—her parents have found her a husband and they want her to marry him, now! Despite her greatest efforts, Naila is aghast to find herself cut off from everything and everyone she once knew. Her only hope of escape is Saif . . . if he can find her before it's too late.

Stories of teenage girls trying to escape arranged marriages so they can be with the boy they love aren't exactly new, but I'd never read one with a Pakistani-American heroine, so I picked it up, expecting Saeed's take on the arranged marriage plot to be unique. And it certainly was.

At the beginning of the novel, Naila is fairly happy. She chafes at the restrictions put on her by her parents -- not just their refusal to let her date, but the differences in the way they treat her compared with her younger brother, Imran -- but she's hopeful that they'll come around to Saif eventually, and she's excited to go to college in a few months and pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. When her parents discover that she secretly attended her senior prom with Saif, however, their impromptu decision to take her and Imran to Pakistan throws a wrench in her plans for the future.

Initially, Naila remains optimistic. She misses Saif, but she's excited to get to know her extended family and explore a country she's never been to, and she expects to be home in time for her college orientation. But soon her optimism fades -- her parents extend their stay for a week, then another week, then a month. She finds herself attending countless dinner parties, and young men and their mothers start coming over for tea and questioning her on her cooking and sewing skills. Naila is never told the purpose of these gatherings, and she's shocked and devastated when her cousin Selma finally tells her the real reason her parents brought her to Pakistan: They mean for her to marry a man of their choosing and never return to America.

Reactions: Before reading this novel, I'd always assumed an arranged marriage and a forced marriage were the same thing, but in fact arranged marriages are a legal practice and are between two consenting parties, while forced marriages are neither. Despite knowing from the beginning that Naila's parents were strict, I didn't expect them to go to such extremes to impose their will on her -- they hide her passport so she can't run away, they lock her up, they drug her, crossing the line from strict to abusive and showing that they don't care one whit what their daughter wants.

This is definitely not a typical teen romance. The romance between Naila and Saif isn't the focus of the story -- they've already been together for a year by the start of the novel, and they spend most of the novel in different countries. Rather, the focus is on Naila fighting for her agency. I found Naila to be a very compelling character -- caught between her American upbringing and her Pakistani heritage, between her desires to please her parents and to be in charge of her own destiny.

Even after she's been forcibly married off, Naila demonstrates incredible resilience and continues to try to find some good in her situation. At one point, her husband Amin -- who seems kind at first

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-- becomes fed up with her coldness and rapes her, but she can't bring herself to hate him; on the contrary, she still thinks of him as a good man and her friend. Some readers may find this off-putting, but I've read enough accounts from rape victims to know this reaction isn't uncommon. Far from romanticizing rape, I think Saeed was trying to show how broken Naila is at this point -- she views her abuser in a positive light because that makes it easier to accept her situation than hating him and being miserable for the rest of her life.

Unfortunately, the other characters aren't as well developed. For instance, we don't learn much about Saif except that he loves Naila and he plays soccer, and I had a hard time keeping Naila's various aunts, uncles and cousins straight. The only character who comes close to being as interesting as Naila is her cousin Selma, who becomes her close friend and risks everything to help her escape her marriage.

Despite the flat supporting characters and somewhat rushed ending, I would still highly recommend this book. It provides some interesting glimpses into Pakistani culture, with rich descriptions of various food, outfits and customs, and Naila is a strong and likable heroine who many young girls will relate to, particularly those who've endured some form of coercion or abuse. At the back of the book, there's an author's note in which Saeed discusses forced marriage as a "silent epidemic" affecting people of all cultures, as well as a short list of resources for people trapped in unwanted marriages. I wasn't aware that this was such a widespread problem, and I'm thankful to Saeed for bringing it to my attention.

Rating: 3.5 out of 5 stars