



Novel Guide to *Saints and Misfits*

Written by Kelly El-Yacoubi, IMES curriculum writer, and Alison Kysia, IMES education outreach coordinator for the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University

Designed for middle and high school students, this novel guide to S.K. Ali's *Saints and Misfits* helps readers tackle new vocabulary and carefully consider the experiences of Janna, the young female Muslim protagonist. If you're interested in learning more about S. K. Ali and why she wrote this coming of age novel, [watch this live interview \(starting at 0:54\)](#) or [read this written interview](#).

Prior to reading each section, students may be given vocabulary with or without the definitions. Teachers can encourage students to look up the definitions, create their own as they encounter the words in the text, or simply review the defined words before reading. Students who own the novel may wish to highlight the vocabulary words as they come across them on the page.

Part One (Read pages 1-55)

Vocabulary

secluded (p. 2) - *adj.* hidden away from view

burkini (p. 2) - *n.* a slang word for a modest women's swimsuit that has long sleeves and pants; a blend of the words *bikini* and *burka* (a long, loose garment that covers the face and body, worn by some Muslim women)

gesticulating (p. 3) - *v.* making hand movements and being expressive while speaking
bestow (p. 10) - *v.* to give as a gift or award
diaphanous (p. 11) - *adj.* sheer, delicate, or transparent (used for describing fabric)
saunters (p. 20) - *v.* to walk with an unhurried, leisurely pace; to stroll
grandiloquent (p. 23) - *adj.* speaking in an excessively ornate or fancy fashion
obscurity (p. 35) - *n.* the state or condition of being unknown, dark, or dim
uncouth (p. 37) - *adj.* lacking manners or refinement; rude
gingerly (p. 38) - *adv.* in a careful or cautious manner
sullen (p. 44) - *adj.* silently showing anger; dark and filled with gloom
flatulence (p. 51) - *n.* pertaining to gas in the digestive tract (i.e. farting)
petty (p. 53) - *adj.* of little importance or interest
dastardly (p. 54) - *adj.* cowardly; mean; sneaky
gall (p. 54) - *n.* courage or boldness; nerve

Questions (pages 1-55)

1. What reasons does Janna give for why she prefers to wear a *burkini* swimsuit?
2. On p. 11, how does Janna view Saint Sarah's headscarf? In your own words, explain what her scarf symbolizes to Janna.
3. The clothes we wear send messages to others around us. Why aren't these messages always received in the ways we hope?
4. On the bottom of p. 14, Mr. Ram says, "When we just do things without a why, we become husks. Easily crumpled, no fruit inside." What do you think he means? Is there a time you felt like a husk?
5. On p. 47, Janna says that seeing her monster at Fizz's house was like "involuntarily pressing play on a personal nightmare." Why can't Janna bring herself to tell someone about her monster?
6. Describe the relationship between Janna and her older brother Muhammad.

Part Two (Read pages 56-108)

Vocabulary

fortitude (p. 59) - *n.* strength, endurance, and patience in the face of adversity or temptation
inertia (p. 60) - *n.* the tendency of an object that is not moving to stay still or the tendency of an object that is moving to stay in motion
modus operandi (p. 61) - *n.* a method of accomplishing something; a way of working
bungalow (p. 63) - *n.* a small, cozy house or cottage

assertive (p. 65) - *adj.* Forward or aggressive in speech or action
giddy (p. 67) - *adj.* 1. faint or dizzy 2. not serious; silly
souk (p. 73) - *n.* an open-air marketplace in Arab or Berber cities
fledgling (p. 76) - *n.* a young bird; a person/organization that is immature or underdeveloped
queries (p. 78) - *v.* questions
annihilate (p. 90) - *v.* to destroy completely
stealthy (p. 92) - *adj.* done or acting in a secretive or covert way; sneaky; furtive.
bastion (p. 94) - *n.* a place or person that strongly upholds certain beliefs or principles
echelons (p. 95) - *n.* levels of authority or rank
quaint (p. 105) - *adj.* pleasant in an old-fashioned way
fornication (p. 107) - *n.* sexual relations outside of marriage
depravity (p. 108) - *n.* moral corruption; wickedness

Questions (pages 56-108)

7. How does Janna's position behind a camera lens help her become more observant about the different types of people in her world?
8. On page 71, Janna reveals that she can't tell Fizz about the monster Farooq because "she'd never believe such an unholy thing." Do you think Janna's assessment of her friend Fizz is accurate? Why or why not?
9. Janna's life switches between her Muslim family and friends at the mosque, but also her non-Muslim friends and public school. What moments in the story so far show her attempt to balance these differences?
10. Janna's brother Muhammad thinks Farooq is "gold." How does this make Janna feel toward Muhammad? Why?
11. What type of person is Nuah? How do you know?
12. On page 83, Fizz calls a girl who wears the headscarf only while at the mosque "weak." Janna suggests, "Maybe she's gaining strength by wearing it to the mosque," and then wonders "What's wrong with being weak?" What would you have said to Jann and Fizz if you were part of the conversation?
13. Do Muhammad and Janna have compassion for what each other are going through? Give evidence for your answer.

Part Three (Read pages 109-161)

Vocabulary

inconspicuous (p. 111) - *adj.* not likely to be seen or noticed

flummox (p. 111) - *v.* to confuse or puzzle
contraband (p. 119) - *n./adj.* goods banned by law (from being imported or exported)
et cetera (p. 121) - *phrase* and the like; and so forth
lumbering (p. 136) - *v.* moving in a heavy, clumsy way
pious (p. 137) - *adj.* showing love for God in thought and action; religious
feign (p. 138) - *v.* to pretend or fake; put on a false show of
nonchalance (p. 138) - *n.* cool confidence and unconcern; casual indifference
skirmish (p. 141) - *n.* a relatively minor conflict or dispute
nefarious (p. 142) - *adj.* very wicked; evil
old money (p. 146) - *n.* established, inherited wealth
volatile (p. 151) - *adj.* rapidly changeable, esp. tending to become violent
drab (p. 157) - *adj.* not bright; dull
dapper (p. 159) - *adj.* neat and stylish in dress and appearance

Questions (pages 109-161)

14. How does Janna feel about Tatyana encouraging Jeremy to watch her exercise without her hijab on? Why doesn't she share these feelings with Tatyana?
15. On p. 116, Soon-Lee writes a note telling Robby to "MAN UP." Robby later introduces Soon-Lee by calling her "Korean BBQ." What message were each character communicating by choosing these words? How are the messages they are communicating problematic for both the speaker and listener?
16. When Ms. Eisen tells Janna to get her "hajeeb" in front of everyone, Janna says "I end up hunching over and slinking away, shame curdling inside me" (p. 131). She then showers with her track suit on. If Janna is supposed to wear her scarf in front boys, why does she feel so terrible? What does it mean that Ms. Eisen cannot or will not pronounce "hijab" properly? What message is being communicated to Janna about hijab?
17. What causes Janna to have a change of heart and move into her mom's room? Would you have made the same choice?
18. Consider how Nuah and Farooq differ by creating a list that compares their character traits. Be sure to include at least 5 traits for each. Clarifying the differences between these two characters will be useful to understand in later chapters.
19. Janna considers unfriending Lauren on Facebook, but doesn't. What evidence is there that Lauren's not a good friend?

Part Four (Read pages 162-214)

Vocabulary

reverie (p. 164) - *n.* a state of daydreaming or reminiscing; a memory or fantasy

blustery (p. 166) - *adj.* threatening in a noisy way, but without real meaning

pragmatic (p. 168) - *adj.* practical; concerned with actual causes and effects rather than ideas

ominous (p. 170) - *adj.* giving a sign of future evil or trouble

apt (p. 172) - *adj.* right for a particular situation; appropriate or suitable

piety (p. 173) - *n.* worshipful devotion to God

appraising (p. 176) - *v.* judging the quality or nature of

vicinity (p. 177) - *n.* an area near or around a place; somewhere nearby

“unlecherously” (p. 178) - *adv.* doing something without lust (*lecherous* means showing lust/sexual desire)

languid (p. 184) - *adj.* lacking or not showing strength, energy, or spirit

surmise (p. 189) - *v.* to infer without certain knowledge; suppose; guess

aloof (p. 190) - *adj.* showing little interest in or desire to be involved with other people; distant

niggling (p. 191) - *adj.* of little importance; petty

zany (p. 202) - *adj.* crazily silly or comical; far-fetched or ludicrous

sordid (p. 204) - *adj.* dirty, filthy, or foul

secular (p. 206) - *adj.* of or concerning the world and material things rather than religious or spiritual concerns

Questions (pages 162-214)

20. Who supports Janna more in her struggles as a hijab-wearing Muslim girl, Tats or Fizz? Explain.
21. Have you ever felt unfairly judged on social media? If so, when?
22. On page 183, Janna calls Sarah a “vision of the feminine mystique” because she tries to attract Muhammad’s attention with billowing floral fabrics. Mystique means a fascinating feeling of mystery, awe, and power surrounding someone. What does Janna’s word choice reveal about her evolving opinion about how girls present themselves to boys?
23. Janna calls Nuah “Mr. Nice Guy” (p. 189). What is Janna communicating by using these words? How might this terminology be perceived as problematic by Nuah? What was your reaction as a reader?
24. Sausun and Sarah both wear headscarves, but one chooses to dress in all black while the other carefully plans her outfits and accessories. What personal values do their decisions reveal? Is it any different for girls who do not wear hijab?

25. Write a list of all of the commands or criticisms that Farooq says to Janna on pages 207-208. Include notes about his body language. What emotional outcomes do you think Farooq is hoping to create through his interaction with Janna?
26. What types of power does Farooq think he has that entitles him to harass girls?
27. On p. 209, Janna asks herself about Farooq, "Why couldn't I stop him?" Answer her question, thinking about your response to question 26.

Part Five (Read pages 215-281)

Vocabulary

- elation (p. 215) - *n.* a feeling of happiness, pride, or elevated spirits
- overtly (p. 224) - *adv.* in an openly apparent or unconcealed way
- belying (p. 224) - *v.* (*belie*) giving a false impression of
- chipper (p. 224) - *adj.* cheerful
- nostalgia (p. 227) - *n.* a longing for the past
- quell (p. 227) - *v.* to put down, squash; overpower by force
- seethe (p. 232) - *v.* 1. to be very upset or angry 2. to boil or bubble
- fawning (p. 233) - *adj.* displaying exaggerated affection
- allusion (p. 236) - *n.* indirect reference or mentioning of something
- pathos (p. 242) - *n.* a quality in art or writing that evokes pity, sadness, or compassion
- ricochet (p. 245) - *v.* to bounce or skip off a surface at an angle
- fodder (p. 253) - *n.* feed for farm animals; fuel
- gullible (p. 254) - *adj.* believing almost anything; easily tricked
- flippant (p. 255) - *adj.* disrespectful or indifferent
- prowess (p. 265) - *n.* Great skill or talent; superior ability
- soliloquy (p. 269) - *n.* speech or talking by someone who is, or considered to be, alone
- benevolence (p. 269) - *n.* good will; inclination to act to benefit others

Questions (pages 215-281)

28. On p. 216, Janna imagines writing an anonymous postcard that says "My best friend's adored cousin tried to rape me..." This is the first time she uses the word "rape" to describe what happened to her. How did Janna's word choice affect your understanding of her experience?
29. On p. 217, Sausun calls Janna "weak" and says she'd "grind the guy into the ground" and "enjoy every moment of it" if some guy messed with her. How

does this compare with Janna's initial perception of Sausun in her face-veil on p. 190?

30. What does Janna mean by, "Now I know why Flannery used the line *She looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity*"? (p. 221) Think about your answer to question 23.
31. Why does Janna choose to direct her anger at Nuah?
32. Janna wonders, "Why are all the Silent Sufferers women?" (p. 231) What answer would you give her?
33. In which ways does Faruq violate Janna's privacy even when he's not with her? Do you think these actions are abusive? Why or why not?
34. Is Sausun right to get mad at Janna for not confronting her monster problem?
35. Janna doesn't tell Tats about her monster because "I can't handle people thinking I come from a messed-up community" (p. 270). Have you ever felt pressured to act a certain way due to an awareness of or responsibility to represent your "race," "religion," or "gender"?
36. Is Sausun's plan for confronting Farooq is a good idea? Why or why not?
37. What does Janna realize that she admired about Mr. Ram?

Part Six (Read pages 282-325)

Vocabulary

unflinching (p. 289) - *adj.* resolute and steadfast; not hesitating or drawing back
vacillating (p. 290) - *v.* to hesitate or waver in making a decision; be indecisive
heinous (p. 296) - *adj.* extremely wicked or despicable; atrocious
loquacious (p. 297) - *adj.* given to talking much or excessively
spiel (p. 300) - *n.* a rehearsed talk or speech that is used to amuse or persuade
bravado (p. 303) - *n.* false, exaggerated, boastful display of courage
coddled (p. 305) - *v.* pampered; treated like a baby
gait (p. 306) - *n.* a way of walking or running
wield (p. 307) - *v.* to handle and use, especially with power and control
crass (p. 312) - *adj.* lacking refinement or sophistication; crude
advocacy (p. 321) - *n.* giving support to an idea, person, or cause

Questions (pages 282-325)

38. Janna's English teacher shares a quote from her favorite author: "I write to discover what I know." What does Janna discover about Mr. Ram after writing about him?

39. Which factors helped Janna gain the confidence to assertively tell Fizz that her cousin tried to rape her?
40. After reading Amu's answer to her question, Janna wonders if she has enough evidence of Farooq's attempt to rape her, since only her and Farooq know for sure that it happened. What advice might you give Janna?
41. In which ways did the face veil contribute to empowering Janna to be able to confront Farooq?
42. As Farooq arrives at the bookstore, Janna reads "*At the height of Ottoman power, one thousand women were kept in the Harem.*" This fact makes her feel "as though I've been released from something" (p. 303). Why does this make Janna feel a release? What theme is the novel's author trying to share?
43. Consider the words Janna screams at Farooq on p. 305: "HOW DARE YOU ACT ALL HOLY? YOU DON'T KNOW HOLY! HOLY IS RESPECTING GIRLS! I AM NOT UGH! NOT WORTHLESS! I'M A GIRL! A GIRL!" Put in your own words the message that Janna is trying to communicate.
44. What does Tats' decision to leave the party to hang out at the mosque indicate about her character?
45. Janna doesn't know why she felt shame about what Farooq did to her (p. 321). Why do you think she, and other victims of violence, may feel responsible after being hurt?