

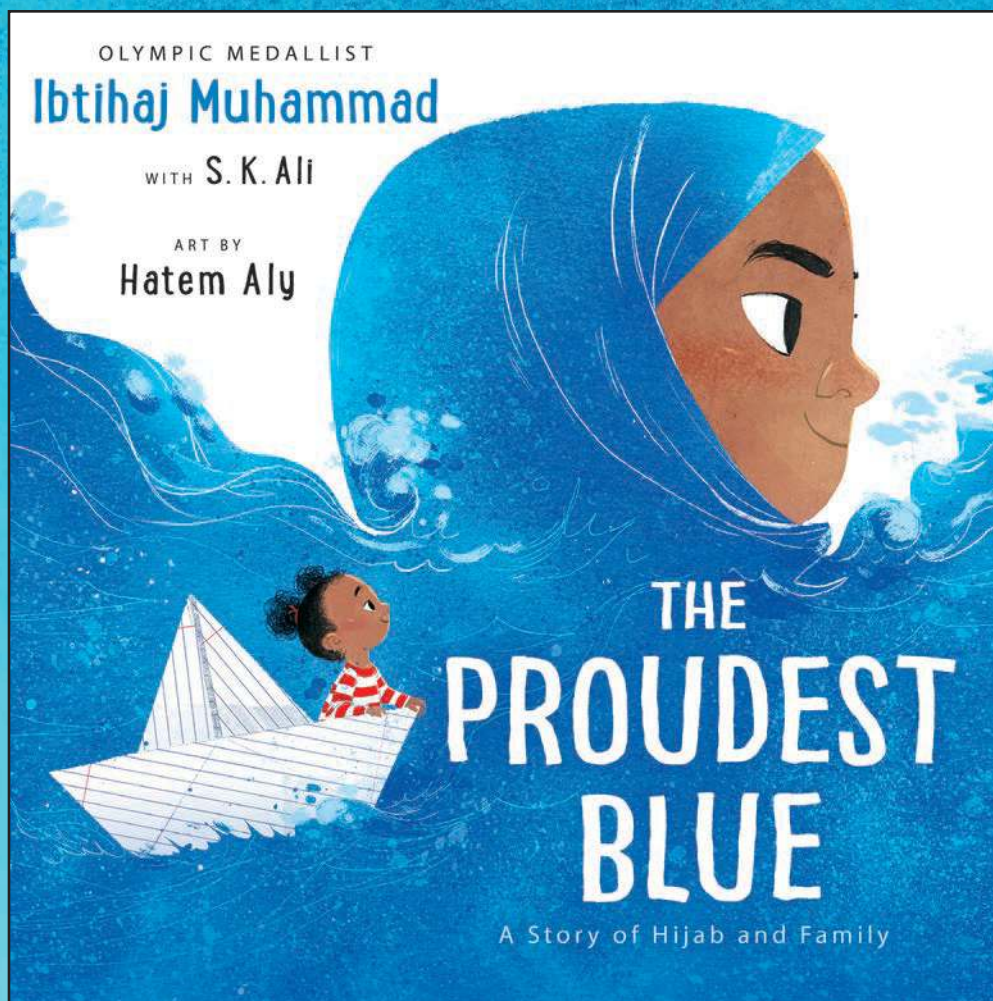
# TEACHING NOTES FOR

# THE PROUDEST BLUE

## A STORY OF HIJAB AND FAMILY

Written by Ibtihaj Muhammad with S. K. Ali and illustrated by Hatem Aly

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These notes have been written by the teachers at the CLPE to provide schools with ideas to develop comprehension and cross-curricular activities around this text. They build on our work supporting teachers to use picture books to enhance critical thinking and develop creative approaches in art and writing. They encourage a deep reading of and reflection on the text, which may happen over a series of reading sessions, rather than in just one sitting. We hope you find them useful.

The concepts explored in the book and these teaching notes are more suitable for children aged 7+.

## Pre-reading Preparations:

In order for these teaching notes to work most effectively, you will need to ‘keep back’ the text from the children initially and not show them the cover or the title of the book. It would be a good idea to cover the front with sugar or brown paper until the title is revealed. It is advised that you create a class reading journal by stapling large pieces of folded sugar paper. The pages of the journal will provide a space in which to capture thoughts, feelings and discussions about the book.

## Reading aloud and key talking points:

- Before you begin to read the book, cut a circle in the wrapping paper of the front cover to reveal a part of the blue colour that features on the front cover. Invite the children to reflect on what associations they have with the colour blue and what feelings the colour conjures up for them.
- Show the class a piece of blue fabric. Circulate this amongst the children and encourage them to look at it and touch it whilst sharing words that best describe it and reflect on the associations they might have. Note their reflections in the reading journal.
- Share the last illustration that features in the back endpapers and shows the two sisters walking to the bus. Invite the children to consider what they notice about the illustration and what these details might suggest about the dynamics of this relationship. Note their reflections around a copy of the illustration.
- Share the front cover with the title omitted and invite the children to consider what they notice and how this expands on their initial impression of the two characters and their dynamic.
  - *Why might the illustrator have chosen to incorporate the ocean and a boat as integral features of the illustration?*
  - *What might this suggest about each character and their relationship with one another?*
  - *How does the prominence of the colour blue influence or shape their impression of the characters?*
  - *Why might the illustrator have chosen blue as the dominant colour?*
  - *Do their own personal associations with the colour blue influence how they view this illustration?*
- Invite them to speculate about what the title might be and why. Note their ideas around the illustration. In the cover illustration, the characters are facing to the right of the page, why might the illustrator have directed the movement and positioning in this way? Note their thoughts.
- Drawing on their reflections up to this point, invite them to consider what the title might be and why. After allowing time for speculation, reveal the actual title and invite them to consider why this might have been chosen and what it might suggest about the story to come. Discuss with the children the idea of a colour being proud, can a colour be proud, if not why not, if yes, in what way?

- Turn to the front endpapers that precede the story, which feature the siblings and their mother approaching the hijab shop. Invite children to view the illustrations and discuss what they notice. Encourage them to ask questions and ensure that everyone understands what a hijab is. Hijab is the word used to describe a veil that usually covers the head, worn by some Muslim women in the presence of any male outside of their immediate family.
- Share the next illustration that features the family in the hijab shop. Invite the children to draw on their own personal experiences of shopping for something special, be it an item of clothing for a special occasion or new uniform at the start of the academic year. *What was it about the experience that made it special and memorable for them? What kinds of clothes do they like to wear most and why? Do they have a favourite colour, what makes this colour special to them?*



- Read aloud the first page, stopping at ‘...there’s no line between the water and the sky.’ Invite the children to consider what associations they have with the sky and the ocean, what the two things have in common, how these associations might influence the appeal for Asiya and why this might be significant. Referring to paint sample cards, invite children to choose their favourite colour and stick this in the centre of a sheet of A4 paper. Encourage them to note on this sheet what it is about their chosen colour that appeals to them, where the colour is commonly found and what kind of associations it might generate. Invite them to consider what title they might choose for a story about themselves and how they would incorporate their chosen colour into the title. This could offer a starting point for a story they later come to write as inspired by their exploration of *The Proudest Blue*.
- Read on to, ‘We’re sisters.’ Reflect on how the two sentences ‘Asiya knows it. I know it.’ convey the equitable, balanced harmony of the relationship dynamic between the two siblings. Both sentences are balanced with three words each and are placed on the same line, and the last sentence ‘We’re sisters.’ serves to emphasise the strength of their bond. Invite them to consider how the illustration mirrors the equitable nature of the relationship but also conveys the respect and awe that the younger sibling has for her older sister Asiya. Discuss with the children whether they have an older sibling or someone they look up to.
- Share the next double page spread and invite the children to reflect on the way in which the illustrator has used the backdrop to create different associations for each character.
  - *What do you think the different backdrops might symbolise?*
  - *What might they suggest about each character and their relationship with one another?*

- The younger character is bathed in light as she twirls in front of trees, sky and nature suggesting an energetic, playful, hopeful spirit. The older sibling emerges from a shadow and walks in front of the family home, suggesting stability, strength and self-assuredness as she emerges into a new age. Read aloud the accompanying text and discuss why the narrator might feel that this is a special and beautiful day and why in particular it might be ‘the most beautiful day ever?’
- Turn to the next page and read aloud the text to the children. Explain that you will read it aloud again and this time encourage the children to listen out for words or phrases that indicate the way the narrator feels about her sister. Note these words and phrases in the reading journal. Now invite the children to look closely at the accompanying illustration and consider how the enthusiasm of the narrator is conveyed in the details in the drawings and how it is not.
  - *What can we tell about the facial expressions and body language of others in the scene?*
  - *What might this suggest about how they view Asiya?*
  - *What do Asiya’s facial expressions, body language and directionality suggest about how she is feeling?*
  - *What do the body language and facial expression of the narrator suggest about how she feels about her sister in this moment?*
- Read the next page. Reflect with the children on why this interaction might have happened in whispered tones. *In what instances do we usually whisper? Is it necessary in this instance to whisper?* Consider what the facial expressions of the two characters in this scene might suggest about what each of them is thinking and how they might be feeling. You might choose to share thought bubbles for children to note their suggestions.
- Read the next page up to ‘...special *and* normal.’ Discuss why the author might have italicised the word ‘and’ in this sentence. *What do we understand the words, ‘special’ and ‘normal’ to mean? Why in this context is it important that they sit side by side and equally apply to the sky and hijab? What is special and normal about the sky and what is special and normal about the hijab? Why is it important to recognise what makes the hijab both special and normal? How does the illustration convey the balance of the two concepts of being special and normal?*
- Read onto, ‘*It means being strong.*’ Invite the children to consider why the first day of the wearing the hijab might require and represent strength.
- Read the next page and reflect on why the narrator might be concerned and how she finds reassurance. Read onto ‘...*one day they will too.*’ Invite the children to consider what associations we might have with the ocean. Note these down in the reading journal. Discuss how these might translate into positive character attributes. Invite the children to reflect on how the illustrator conveys the strength of will and conviction that Asiya’s mother has tried to instil in her. Consider how the colour blue fills the page and why this might be. Reflect on how the power and direction of waves is depicted and what this suggests to the reader. *In what ways does this provide comfort to the narrator and how is this conveyed in the illustration?*

- Read onto the next page. Consider the choice of location of the narrator’s drawing.
  - *Why might she have chosen to locate the picnic on an island?*
  - *How has she portrayed this island?*
  - *What associations do we have with horizons?*
  - *What might be the significance of being in a place where the ocean meets the sky?*
- Read up to, ‘I’m going to pull that tablecloth off your head!’ Invite the children to reflect on the ways in which the illustrator has chosen to illustrate this scene. Consider the ways in which the narrator’s joy is abruptly stifled. Reflect on how words, insults and disrespect can hurt, and discuss why the illustrator might have chosen to draw the children expressing the offensive and discriminatory words in shadow form. *What effect does this have? Do you think this diminishes them or makes them more sinister?*
- Read onto, ‘Only blue.’ Recall all of the associations that the colour blue has had up until this point and reflect on the use of the word ‘only’ in this sentence. The word ‘only’ might suggest a singular entity but we know that blue encompasses the skies and oceans, which are both vast entities. *Why might the author have chosen to juxtapose these two words together?*
- The illustration on this page shows Asiya staring directly at the reader for the first time in the book. In what direction has she been looking towards up until this point? Consider with the children why the illustrator might have chosen to draw Asiya looking out in this way, and why might she have chosen to do this at this moment in the narrative. Read onto, ‘they belong only to those who said them.’ Consider why the illustrator might have drawn the characters running towards what appears to be the sun. *How does this correspond with references to horizons up to this point and what significance might this have? If the characters are running towards the light, where does that leave those who have been mean to Asiya?*
- Read onto, ‘I look for whispers, laughs and shouts.’ Consider how the illustrator again uses shadows to convey intimidation and ill feeling. *How do these shadows contrast with the shadow of the narrator? What might this suggest?* Read onto, ‘She’s smiling. Strong.’ Consider the placement of the word ‘strong’ on the last line of this page.
  - *Why might the author and illustrator have chosen this singular word to be placed on the page that marks the end of the school day?*
  - *In what ways has Asiya embodied strength throughout the day?*
  - *What and who do we normally associate with the word strength?*
- You might choose to invite the children to draw what strength means to them before facilitating this conversation to enable them to reference their sketches as an aide memoir.
  - *How does Asiya’s strength compare with such associations?*
  - *Does Asiya’s strength challenge or consolidate our ideas of what it means to be strong?*
  - *In what other ways do people exhibit strength in day-to-day life?*



- Read onto the next page up to, ‘...hand in hand.’ Consider how the sentence structure and the illustration work together to convey the balance and harmony of this sibling relationship. Read the next page up to, ‘...I’m wearing the same hijab in it.’ Reflect on why the narrator might be keen to share her drawing.
- Read onto the end of the book. Think together about the way in which the author draws together the harmony between strength of the ocean and the power of the sky and correlates this with the dynamic between the two sisters. Invite them to consider whom they might share a special bond like this with, such as a relative or friend and discuss the value of supportive and loving relationships.
- Read the author’s note at the end of the book and allow opportunities to ask questions. Ask the children if they know what else the author has achieved aside from producing this book. If they are not aware, invite them to guess what she might do for a living. Share this instructional video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cn2J3\\_hXDLE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cn2J3_hXDLE) in which the author offers a short fencing masterclass and this clip which showcases the highlights from her performance at the Rio Olympics <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tprMKjBmIVU>. Discuss with the children how her vocation may have differed from their predictions and why. Conclude the discussions by emphasising the importance of keeping an open mind.

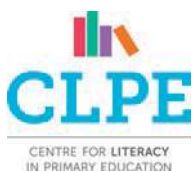
Other suggested titles to support the exploration of themes arising from *The Proudest Blue* further:

Learn more about:

- Ibtihaj Muhammad by visiting her website at <https://www.ibtihajmuhammad.com/>
- Other iconic female sporting figures past and present by sharing, *Women in Sports: 50 Fearless Athletes Who Played to Win (Women in Science)*, written by Rachel Ignofsky. Ten Speed Press, 2017.
- Other inspiring Muslim women by sharing, *Muslim Girls Rise: Inspirational Champions of Our Time*, written by Saira Mir and illustrated by Aaliya Jaleel. Salaam Reads / Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2019.

You might also choose to share fiction titles that feature strong Muslim leads or ensemble casts such as:

- Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns: A Muslim Book of Colors, written by Hena Khan and illustrated by Mehrdokht Amini. Chronicle Books, 2015.
- Ramadan Moon, written by Na’ima B. Robert and illustrated by Shirin Adl. Frances Lincoln Children’s Books, 2011.
- Going to Mecca, written by Na’ima B. Robert and illustrated by Valentina Cavallini. Lincoln Children’s Books, 2014.
- Accidental Trouble Magnet: Book 1 Planet Omar, written by Zanib Mian and illustrated by Nasaya Mafaridik. Hodder Children’s Books, 2019.
- A Hen in the Wardrobe, written and illustrated by Wendy Meddour. Cinnamon Grove, 2012.



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