

**DOES MY  
HEAD LOOK BIG  
IN THIS?**  
Teen Muslim  
fiction P.58



**AMIEL  
ON COPING**  
P.14



**ZIP-A-DEE  
DOO-DOO**  
Disney's racism  
mess P.62

**Canada's  
secret  
China  
problem**  
P.20

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**GREEN REPORT P.38**



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**ON THE  
ROAD WITH  
AL GORE P.42**



# R U THERE, ALLAH?

**A new Muslim young-adult novel is Judy Blume with a twist**

**BY LIANNE GEORGE** • It's amazing what a piece of fabric can do. A regular teenage girl can swathe her head in a scarf, for instance, and be instantly transformed into a humourless, vaguely threatening fanatic who prays all day long, censors everything she says, has no interest in boys or fashion, and clearly—as Quebec officials determined recently—doesn't belong anywhere near a soccer field or a tae kwon do tournament. Such is the bizarre,

exploration of the various challenges and misconceptions that underpin a Muslim girl's decision to don the hijab: the reactions of her Muslim and non-Muslim friends—some of whom assume she's been forced into it against her will—the effects on romantic crushes and class bullies, body image issues, and ultimately, the quest to find joy in a deceptively simple act of faith.

Amal, the novel's heroine, is the only child of devout but moderate Muslims. She is also, the author will have us know, a regular girl who reads *Cosmo*, loves shopping, and spends most of her time on the phone, gossiping about fashion, dieting and her dreamy (non-

ning with the fact that it's God's will. "The way I see it," she writes, "I'd rather follow God's fashion dictates than some ugly fake-tanned old fart in Milan who's getting by on a pretty self-serving theory of less is more when it comes to female dress." Besides, the hijab has certain benefits for a teenager who's worried about whether she's put on a few pounds or has a pimple—especially when she has to deal with Tia Tamos, "the resident 11th grade bi-yotch," on a regular basis.

Amal knows her parents will stand by her choice—along with her friends Yasmeen, Eileen and Simon; her teacher Mr. Pearse; nuns; bald women; and people who appreciate good fabric. She is less sure, however, about everybody else at school; her pro-assimilation aunt and uncle; the convenience-store owner down the road; hard-core feminists; punky store clerks; and scariest of all, her beloved Adam. What ensues when she walks into school will, the book's publishers are hoping, resonate for a whole generation of young teen girls.

According to *Muslim Girl*, a new bimonthly glossy magazine based in Chicago, there are some 400,000 teenage Muslim girls in the U.S., and they remain among the most underserved, misunderstood demographic groups. The magazine's primary mandate, says editor-in-chief Ausma Khan, is celebrating these young women and challenging stereotypes. "The majority of girls who wear hijab, and Muslim girls in general, like to look chic and modern, and fit in with their friends, even to the extent of wearing some minimal makeup in addition to the head scarf," she says. "In the Islamic commandment, the emphasis is on modesty, not on erasing a woman as a human being or erasing her beauty."

It's hard to imagine a more perfect vehicle for conveying the colossal amount of guts it takes to don a hijab and face a roomful of 16-year-olds than the teen novel—with all of its transcendent pathos and angst. And so, on her first day back to school, Amal spends 45 minutes adjusting her hijab—a plain white scarf chosen to complement her maroon-and-yellow uniform—to get just the right "symmetrical arch" to frame her face. "To wear the hijab in the face of peer pressure and in the context of a world which so fears and misunderstands it takes courage," says Abdel-Fattah. "I wanted to celebrate and champion that courage." ■



THE HEROINE, like many Muslim girls, reads *Cosmo*, shops, and worries about boys

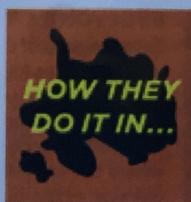
transformative power Western society has invested in the hijab (traditional Muslim head scarf), according to the author of a new young-adult novel about the trials of teen life as a "UCO" (unidentified covered object).

*Does My Head Look Big in This?*, the debut novel from Randa Abdel-Fattah, an Australian-born Muslim, lawyer and human rights activist, deals with the messy fallout of an 11th-grader's decision to take up the hijab in a white-bread, secular suburb of Melbourne. Alternately sweet and mortifying, it's a typical Judy Blume-style teen confessional, only with an "Are you there, Allah, it's me Margaret" kind of twist. "So many people I've met since writing the book have told me they never have considered that Muslim girls would joke, take their fashion seriously, or go through normal teenage angst," says Abdel-Fattah.

More than anything, the novel is a witty

Muslim science partner, Adam. One afternoon, four days before the end of winter break, Amal is hit with an epiphany during an episode of *Friends* (in which Rachel refuses to be victimized by a hideous bridesmaid's dress); she's ready to become a "full-timer," someone who wears the scarf whenever she's in public, not just at the mosque.

Overwhelmed with certainty, but concerned about what people will think, Amal makes a list of the reasons to take the plunge—begin-



## SAUDI ARABIA: OH, THOSE LONG-LEGGED BEAUTIES

Saudi Arabia's Qahtani tribesmen last week welcomed contestants to the "Mazayen al-Ibi" competition, a gathering of the desert's most beautiful camels. Judges looked for drooping noses, long necks and high humps. The competition was rich, with US\$2.7 million in prizes and 72 SUVs to be won by lovely camels' owners. "In Lebanon they have Miss Lebanon," says the moderator of the competition's website. "Here we have Miss Camel."