



Omar Rising

AISHA SAEED

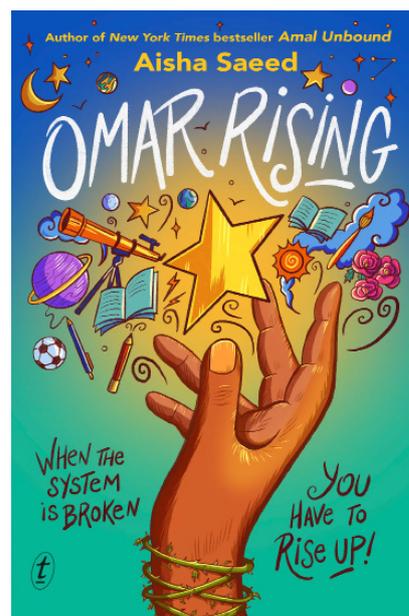
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Fiction

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning and connect it to an audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms with a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they promote the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

Omar can't wait to start school at Ghalib Academy Boarding School—his scholarship there opens doors to opportunities he'd never dreamed of having.

But the reality of life as a scholarship student isn't at all what Omar expected. While the other students are signing up for the amazing extracurricular activities, Omar and the other scholarship students are pulled aside and told that they won't have time to take part—they're expected to do chores to earn their keep. Omar resigns himself to keeping his head down and working hard, he excels in all of his classes, even art, which feels unfamiliar and intimidating to him, but struggles to learn English, despite all his efforts.

When an older scholarship student tells Omar that the school is known for weeding out the first year 'scholars' by setting standards that are impossible to achieve, Omar is furious, and incredibly sad. After all the work that he and his friends have put in they might have to go home. It just isn't fair. Omar and his friends have had enough of being treated like second-class citizens, and they're not going to get kicked out of school without a fight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aisha Saeed, the Pakistani-American author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Amal Unbound*, is also a teacher and attorney. As one of the founding members of the We Need Diverse Books Campaign, she is helping to change the conversation about diversity in literature. Aisha lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband and sons.

BEFORE READING

1. Does everyone have access to the same education? Discuss the factors that determine the education people receive, including where they're from, how much money they have, their gender, their family, or their intelligence. Why do you think that access to education is considered to be a human right?
2. Write about what a normal school day looks like for you—think about where you go to school, which parts of the day are your favourite and least favourite, how you get there and the kinds of lessons you have. Then, as you read, compare your day to one of Omar's days. How are they the same, and how are they different?
3. Read the blurb of the book as a class (<https://www.textpublishing.com.au/books/omar-rising>). What is a 'rigged system', and why do you think it is so impossible to change? Come up with examples of systems that are, or could be, rigged, and discuss who they benefit and who they don't. Make some predictions about where you think that Omar will fit into this system.

WHILE READING

1. How do Omar's friends feel about him getting a scholarship? What does this tell you about the kind of friendship they have?
2. What kind of school is Ghalib Academy? How does Omar's school compare with yours?



3. What does Mr Adeel say about art for social change? Do you agree with him? Write about a piece of art that you've felt strongly about.
4. The phrase 'fake it 'til you make it' is repeated throughout the book. What does it mean? Is it a good idea, or would you have handled the situation a different way?
5. 'Work hard on what you truly believe in and persevere. If you do, anything is possible' (p. 37). Can you think of any examples where this isn't the case?
6. Is it luck that got Omar into Ghalib Academy or something else? Luck can mean different things for different people. What does it mean for each of the characters in the book? What does it mean to you?
7. How do you think Omar's mum would feel if she knew that Omar was being excluded at school?
8. Why do you think Omar doesn't just give up?
9. 'What he shows on the outside doesn't match the inside' (p. 73). Have you ever acted in a way that was different from how you felt? Why? Why does Kareem do this in this scene?
10. Shuaib tells Omar that his dreams changed from wanting fame to wanting family. How have your dreams changed over time? How do Omar's dreams change in the story?
11. Omar is worried that, whatever he does, he's always disappointing someone (p. 126). Is he right? Why does he feel this way?

AFTER READING

CHARACTERS

1. Omar talks about the 'weight of that responsibility' (p. 16) he feels knowing that his family is so proud of him. Why is this pride a burden? Have you ever felt pressured to succeed at something? How does this pressure prevent Omar from sharing his true experiences at Ghalib Academy with his family?
2. There are several moments in the book where characters reveal unexpected parts of themselves that change the way others see them—for example when we discover that Moiz was once a scholarship student. What other examples can you think of? How do these revelations change your understanding of their actions?
3. How does Omar see Pluto as a metaphor for himself? Write about a time you felt like the odd one out.

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. Omar lives in two very different places in the book. At Ghalib Academy he eats in a dining hall that 'looks like the expensive restaurants [he's] seen pictures of', whereas at home he 'brought food in a cloth sack and ate on the lawn beneath a shade tree' (p. 24). What are some of the other differences

Omar describes between the two places? What are some of the things he loves in each place?

2. 'I hated how beginnings had to be tied to endings. That in order to start the next part of my journey I'd have to leave all of this behind' (p. 6). What does Omar really leave behind, and what does he gain when he goes to Ghalib Academy? What other endings in the book are tied to new beginnings? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

THEMES

Self-confidence

1. What does headmaster Moiz mean by 'like you' when he says, 'English is where kids like you are most deficient' (p. 24). How do you think this makes Omar feel?
2. How does keeping things from his friends start to make Omar less confident in his abilities?
3. Mr Adeel tells Omar about imposter syndrome (p. 59). Imposter syndrome can mean that we worry about not being good enough, and feel anxious that others will 'discover' us. Have you ever felt this way? Why does Mr Adeel say it's so common in the arts? Why do you think Omar feels this way?
4. In the end, it's the support of his friends and family that helps Omar to feel confident. What helps you to feel confident? How do Omar's friends and family demonstrate their support?

Friendship

1. Kareem is Omar's best friend at school, but he doesn't tell Omar that his dad is the janitor. Why doesn't he share this? Is it okay to keep secrets from your friends?
2. What are your first impressions of Aiden? How does he redeem himself for some of the nasty things he says to Omar and his friends?
3. Omar is worried that his friends will think less of him when they find out that he's a scholarship kid. How do they react? How does he feel when they stand up for him at the end of the book? Write about a time when a friend has supported you.

Privilege

1. On the very first page Fuad accuses Omar of cheating in soccer, and Omar says, 'Why is it whenever you win, it's hard-earned victory, [...] but if anyone else does, they're cheating?' (p. 2)
2. After you've finished the book go back to this quote. Is the attitude exhibited in this scene found elsewhere in the book? Are double standards like this fair? Where do they come from?
3. Does privilege just mean having more money than someone else? In *Omar Rising*, Aisha Saeed explores some of the different ways we can be privileged, including money, education, and family. Choose three characters in the book and write about the kinds of privilege they experience and the



kinds they don't. What other kinds of privilege can you think of? Which do you experience?

4. 'We were told all about Ghalib's stellar reputation, but why weren't we oriented to the fact that scholarship kids would be second-class citizens?' (p. 52). Why do you think the scholarship kids are treated like this? Why do you think Ghalib doesn't advertise the fact that these kids will be treated differently?

RESPONDING

1. To Aiden, the rooms at Ghalib Academy are 'a prison cell'. Omar is surprised that they are both 'at the exact same school but we see two completely different things' (p19). What factors change or shape the way we see things? As a class, choose an area in your school (or nearby) that everyone is familiar with. Write individual descriptions of this place, including your own personal feelings towards it. Compare your pieces with those of other students. How are they the same? How are they different? Why do you think this is?
2. Omar doesn't see himself as an artist, but when he finds an artist whose work 'speaks to him', it gives him the language he needs to speak up when it matters the most. In an art form that speaks to you (it might be painting, collage, photography—anything you like!) make a poster for the walk out. Write a short paragraph about how you could use art to speak up about something important to you. Do you know of any artists who have done this?
3. Omar assumes that Aiden is just another snobbish rich kid, but Omar turns out to be wrong. Choose a scene in the book and write it from Aiden's perspective. How does the story change?
4. *Omar Rising* is a companion novel to *Amal Unbound*. Read both books, and compare the two. Which parts of the first book continue into the second? How are the characters similar and how are they different? If you were going to write a third book in the series, who would it be about and why?