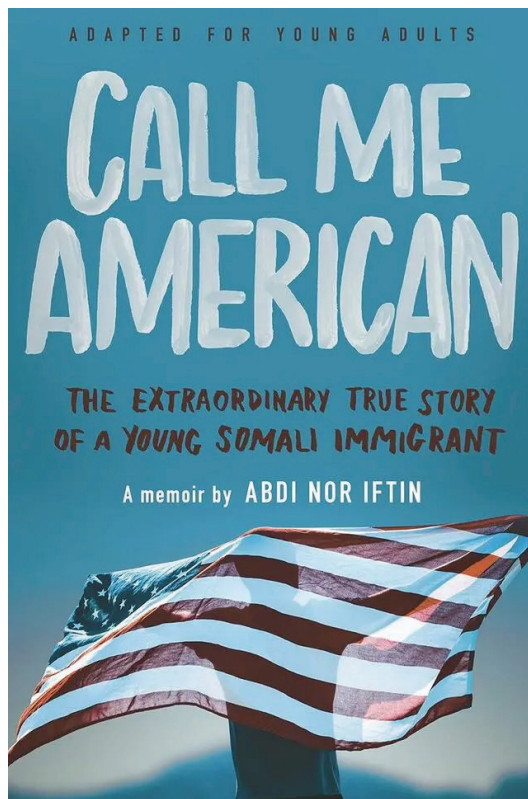


Teaching *Call Me American*



In Abdi Nor Iftin's remarkable memoir *Call Me American*, readers follow along with Iftin's improbable but very real journey through civil war in Somalia, life as a refugee in Kenya, and the harrowing process of emigrating and adjusting to life in the United States. Despite devastating losses, near-constant danger, and numerous setbacks, "Abdi American" is determined to make his way to America and send support back to his family in Somalia and Kenya. Through a combination of luck, help from a network of people who are inspired by his story, and extreme determination, Abdi overcomes many obstacles to reach the United States, only to find that life in the land he only knew through movies and music is not as simple, or as ideal, as it once seemed.

Iftin's story shines a powerful light on the nearly insurmountable obstacles that stand between asylum seekers and safety, and it invites reflection on the practical and

psychological challenges that refugees often face after resettlement.

The themes of this memoir align with Facing History's **Borders & Belonging ELA Collection**. We've created this planning guide to support your school community in small-group, whole-class, or schoolwide reading and discussion. The discussion questions are designed to spark critical thinking and conversations around issues of migration, identity, determination, resilience, and the fluidity of borders and home.

Note on edition: This guide is based on the 2021 edition of *Call Me American: The Extraordinary True Story of a Young Somali Immigrant* (Adapted for Young Adults) by Abdi Nor Iftin with Max Alexander, published by Ember, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, NY (ISBN: 978-1-9848-97-13-8).

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Who We Are

For nearly half a century, Facing History & Ourselves has championed an approach to humanities education that balances the mind, heart, and conscience. In the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, our approach integrates literacy skills development with social-emotional learning and civic education. Our professional learning opportunities and curriculum resources—including thematic text sets, unit guides, and engaging teaching strategies—enable middle and high school ELA teachers to foster environments where students can explore the complexities of human behavior and decision-making. Through these resources, students develop their reading and writing identities, build their civic capacities, and broaden their global perspectives.

You can learn more about our [approach to English Language Arts](#) and explore our wide range of [curricular resources and professional learning](#) for ELA educators on our website.

Navigating Facing History's ELA Mini-Guides

Facing History ELA mini-guides can be used to support independent reading or whole-class book units. Use them as standalone resources to support group discussion during and after independent reading, or plan a whole-class book unit by pairing a mini-guide with our [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#). Taken together, these resources support the design and implementation of a whole-class read that centers students' identities and experiences as young adults in the world. Each mini-guide aligns with one of our thematic collections—such as [Coming of Age in a Complex World](#) or [Borders & Belonging](#).

This ELA mini-guide is organized into the following sections:

- **Section 1: Introducing Borders & Belonging**

This first section of the mini-guide provides framing for themes and big ideas that students will explore during their discussions of the book.

- **Section 2: Designing Your Book Unit**

The second section supports the unit design process. Use this section alongside **Sections 1–5** of Facing History's [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#) to prepare to cultivate a brave and reflective classroom community, determine your unit's essential questions and learning objectives, and design the summative assessment task.

- **Section 3: Teaching *Call Me American***

The third section offers content specific to the book, including a brief summary, relevant historical and contemporary context, content considerations, and text-specific discussion questions. Use this section alongside **Sections 6–7** of the [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#) to design lesson plans that incorporate Facing History journal prompts, discussion questions, teaching strategies, and learning experiences.

Introducing Borders & Belonging

This mini-guide is aligned to Facing History’s Borders & Belonging ELA Collection.

There is a fundamental human desire to belong—to be part of a group that values, respects, and cares for us. Social psychologist Solomon Asch described this desire to feel valued, respected, and cared for in a community as “among the most powerful forces to be found.”¹ Our sense of belonging can impact our self-esteem, agency, and the meaning we ascribe to our lives. Young adults, deeply attuned to their peers and surroundings, are no exception. They seek respect and belonging in groups where they can be supported, heard, and understood.

Exploring the intersection of borders and belonging is especially relevant for young people, who are navigating their rapidly developing identities and social roles. Everyday actions—like choosing what to wear, making friends, or even smiling at someone—can impact their and others’ sense of belonging for better and for worse. By engaging with books that depict characters who are navigating complex borders and who sometimes struggle to belong, we can normalize these feelings for students, helping them reframe their experiences with the understanding that the factors that shape belonging are both internal and external. This dual perspective has the potential to increase empathy and deepen students’ understanding of the complex dynamics that influence everyone’s sense of belonging.

Ultimately, belonging is not just about where we come from or what we look like; it’s about our shared experiences and values as humans. Engaging in a shared reading experience that explores the relationship between borders and belonging can help students recognize their capacity to foster belonging and consider how they can build bridges across the borders that might otherwise divide us, fostering more inclusive and empathic school environments.

¹ Geoffrey L. Cohen, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 5.

Designing Your Book Unit

Because teachers take many approaches to reading and discussing a work of literature with their students, Facing History does not assume that everyone will teach this book in the same way at the same pace. For this reason, our mini-guides are designed to supplement our [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#), which features planning resources, classroom-ready activities, and a [Unit Planning Template](#) so you can apply Facing History's approach to design a book unit suitable for your unique context.

In addition to the resources in the ELA Unit Planning Guide and mini-guide, we recommend that you give consideration to how you will foster belonging in your classroom so all students feel like their voices are heard and that they matter.

Cultivate a Brave and Reflective Community

At Facing History, we understand that before students can participate in courageous conversations, they need to know that they are part of a classroom community where they are known, valued, and supported. This process begins with teachers and students co-creating rules and norms for how everyone will treat one another. The following resources support the creation of brave and reflective discussion spaces where students can bring their full selves to conversations about literature and life.

- **Create a community contract:** Before introducing the unit, prepare students to engage, take risks, and support one another by creating a [classroom contract](#) with agreed-upon norms and behaviors. Such a contract increases the likelihood of each student feeling seen, heard, and valued. We recommend routinely revisiting the contract to reestablish group norms and commitments.
- **Incorporate a journaling routine:** In addition to creating and upholding the classroom contract, [journaling](#) is an instrumental tool for helping students develop their ability to process what they are learning, practice perspective-taking, and make informed judgments about what they see and hear. Providing students with time and space to reflect on complex issues and questions allows them to formulate their ideas before sharing their thoughts with their peers. Many of the discussion questions in the next section of this mini-guide can also be used as journaling prompts.

Teaching *Call Me American*

About the Book

Publisher's Summary

Adapted from the adult memoir, this gripping and acclaimed story follows one boy's journey into young adulthood, against the backdrop of civil war and his ultimate immigration to America in search of a better life.

Abdi Nor Iftin grew up amidst a blend of cultures, far from the United States. At home in Somalia, his mother entertained him with vivid folktales and bold stories detailing her rural, nomadic upbringing. As he grew older, he spent his days following his father, a basketball player, through the bustling streets of the capital city of Mogadishu.

But when the threat of civil war reached Abdi's doorstep, his family was forced to flee to safety. Through the turbulent years of war, young Abdi found solace in popular American music and films. Nicknamed Abdi the American, he developed a proficiency for English that connected him—and his story—with news outlets and radio shows, and eventually gave him a shot at winning the annual U.S. visa lottery.

Abdi shares every part of his journey, and his courageous account reminds readers that everyone deserves the chance to build a brighter future for themselves.²

Content Considerations

When teaching memoirs and novels that address themes of borders and belonging, students will often be exposed to dehumanizing language and imagery as well as descriptions of tragic and unjust experiences. Students may have strong reactions to the events described in this memoir. For this reason, it is important to use the strategies addressed in the **Prepare to Cultivate a Brave and Reflective Community** and **Anticipating and Supporting Emotional Responses** sections of the [All Community Read Guide](#).

In addition, the following notes can help you and your students be better prepared when you encounter dehumanizing or emotionally distressing content in the text:

- **Depictions of death, violence, and suffering associated with war.** Throughout the memoir, Iftin depicts the pervasiveness of death, famine, and the ever-present threat of violence by militia groups. There are also descriptions of weapons of war, including guns and bombs, throughout the book.

² Penguin Random House website, "About *Call Me American* (Adapted for Young Adults)."

- **References to sexual violence.** Iftin explains that refugee women were targets of violence and rape in both Somalia and Kenya. This sexual violence is referred to multiple times but never depicted or described directly.
- **Depictions of children participating in war and violence.** Iftin explains how some Somali children were forced to join militant groups and become both the victims and the perpetrators of violence.

Get to Know the Context

It is not necessary to teach historical context before inviting students to engage with this book. The book is intended for young readers to read independently and therefore provides most of the context that is needed to make sense of the events and experiences featured in the memoir. However, if you would like to support students in building additional background knowledge about the historical context and/or specific references in the book, we recommend engaging with the following resources:

- **Abdi the American: *This American Life***

This episode of the *This American Life* podcast helped put Iftin's story on the map. Listening to sections of the episode with students can help build interest and background knowledge that will make the details of the book easier to understand and put into context.

- **Somalia: Civil War, Intervention and Withdrawal 1990–1995** from the UNHCR

This report from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) begins by concisely explaining the complex structures of Somali society and is clearly organized into chronological sections that provide more detailed information about the country's political history from the 1960s to the 1990s. It was written in 1995 and therefore frames the events that form the backdrop of *Call Me American* as "the present situation." Particularly relevant sections are Section 1.1: The Peculiar Nature of Somali Society, Section 1.5: The Disappearance of the State, Section 1.6: Renewed Civil War, and Section 4: Conclusion.

- **The Crisis in Somalia** from the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2020

This explainer from the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants gives a brief overview of the historical and political landscape of Somalia. It discusses the origins of the crisis and addresses several themes that Iftin discusses in his memoir, including food insecurity, child soldiers, and refugees in other parts of Africa and around the world.

Discussion Questions While Reading

These questions encourage deep engagement with the book's central themes, focusing on borders and belonging in particular. Based on the Facing History pedagogical triangle, these questions spark intellectual, emotional, and ethical engagement with the text. Spanish translations of these discussion questions are available [in this folder](#).

Note to Readers: The introduction (pp. 1–4) and epilogue (pp. 245–52) in this book include essential framing and reflections about Abdi's experiences. Be sure to read them along with the main chapters.

Call Me American has 16 chapters; we have organized these discussion questions into two sections that roughly correspond to Abdi's time in Somalia (Part 1, Chapters 1–11) and his time in Kenya and the United States (Part 2, Chapters 12–16).

Part 1: Somalia (Chapters 1–11)

1. As a child, Abdi cannot fully comprehend the nature and extent of the conflict in Somalia. He says, "There were so many sides in this war, and I was too young to understand it" (p. 36).
 - a. To what extent do the details of the war matter to understanding Abdi's experience?
 - b. How might the effect of a war on a young person who cannot understand it be different from the effect on an adult?
 - c. What tangible and intangible borders was Abdi aware of, even as a child?
2. In Chapter 3, as Abdi and his family embark on their journey in search of safety, Abdi's mother's nomadic upbringing becomes very important.
 - a. How does Abdi's mother make use of the knowledge from her nomadic upbringing?
 - b. How is her upbringing as a member of the Rahanweyn clan significant to her identity?
 - c. How is it significant to Abdi's identity?
3. On page 64, Abdi writes, "The movie shack became a second home to me, and Falis became like family." Describe the role that Falis and the movie shack played in shaping Abdi's identity. Why was this such an important place to him? Why did he feel such a strong sense of belonging there?
4. Abdi describes a sense of abandonment and confusion after US troops and the United Nations left Somalia in 1994. He says, "I now realize that I was lost—a little boy caught among the teachings of Macalin Basbaas, my mom and her view on

infidels, the American troops and their kindness and food, my love for my brave dad and the glorious Somali basketball team, and the American movies I adored" (p. 75).

- a. Why does Abdi name all these groups? Why is he feeling so conflicted?
 - b. How does this sense of being "caught among" different people and groups relate to Abdi's sense of who he is and where he belongs at this stage of his life?
5. While describing their life in Mogadishu, Abdi talks about how he and his brother Hassan have changed: "By now we had started to distance ourselves from our parents. We had no stories of our own to tell about the villages, or the nomad life. All we knew was Mogadishu" (p. 78).
 - a. How have borders between places, clans, and generations affected Abdi and Hassan's sense of belonging?
 - b. How does their sense of belonging differ from that of their parents?
6. In Chapter 6, Abdi increasingly expresses the sentiment that he does not belong in Mogadishu. And in Chapter 7, he states, "By the year 2000, Mogadishu was divided into two economic classes: those who had relatives abroad, and those who didn't. Our family was in the second group. The others received money from family in faraway places Hassan and I dreamed of seeing, called Minnesota, Seattle, London, Toronto" (p. 104).
 - a. At this point, life in Mogadishu is fairly stable. Why is Abdi more motivated than ever to leave Somalia?
 - b. Why does he stay even when his brother Hassan decides to leave?
7. In Chapter 9, Abdi describes the rise of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia after 9/11. He says that "life *seemed* peaceful," yet thousands of young people were being recruited to die for the ICU cause. Abdi refuses to join their ranks, stating, "I didn't want to die for them; I wanted to live in a beautiful American city." But he also says, "At times I was mad at America for leaving us behind in 1994. Would anyone save us now?" (p. 128).
 - a. What seems different about the ICU's role and influence in Somalia at this point compared to the influence of other groups who took control in earlier chapters?
 - b. Explain Abdi's perspective here. Why does he have conflicted feelings toward America?

8. In Chapter 11, Abdi's family moves to a refugee camp outside of Mogadishu. When discussing the hasty construction and rough conditions of the camp, Abdi says, "It all happened so quickly, and unfortunately, the people of Mogadishu had a lot of experience adapting to violence and being on the run" (p. 143).
- How are the identities and experiences of the people of Mogadishu being shaped and reshaped by the ongoing war?
 - Why is the camp particularly unsafe for Abdi? What does he worry will happen if he stays? Why would he rather spend every night hiding in a hole in the ground in Mogadishu than stay in the camp?
9. In Chapter 11, Abdi meets the journalist Paul Salopek for the first time. In Chapter 12, they begin corresponding regularly.
- What choices did Paul make in these chapters that would change the course of Abdi's journey? What other choices could he have made?
 - Why is it significant that Paul is a journalist?
10. As an adult reflecting on his family's and neighbors' experience of the war, Abdi describes the complex societal factors that influenced life in Mogadishu, such as clan membership, foreign involvement, and dialect/accent.
- What were the visible and invisible borders that affected Abdi and his family throughout their time in Somalia?
 - How did the different members of Abdi's family navigate those borders? To what extent could they choose how to respond to the borders they encountered? To what extent were they limited by those borders?

Part 2: Kenya and the United States (Chapters 12–16)

11. Abdi eventually joins his brother Hassan in Kenya and is registered as a refugee. However, he encounters many dangers and obstacles as he tries to get selected for "protection and resettlement." Abdi says, "Real life only began for those who were selected" (p. 171).
- How are the Somali refugees in Kenya vulnerable? According to Abdi, what attitudes do Kenyan citizens and authorities display toward the refugees?
 - How does Abdi navigate the challenges he faces in seeking protection and resettlement?
 - What role do other people play in supporting him? Why are they willing to offer him money, letters of support, and other assistance?
 - What does Abdi mean by *real life*? In what ways does he consider his current life to be something other than "real life"?

- 12.** As Abdi adjusts to life in America, he navigates the newness of being an outsider as a Somali in Maine. He reflects, "Maybe they didn't call themselves Darod or Hawiye, but it was a tribe, and I definitely was not a member" (p. 224).
- Explain the comparison Abdi makes here. How does Abdi make sense of the challenges of creating a new home and a sense of belonging?
- 13.** Abdi continues to adjust to his new life in America, expressing gratitude for his situation and worry for his family: "My heart warmed with the knowledge that I was far away from that pain, even as I worried for my family" (p. 226).
- How can Abdi's story help you understand the complicated emotions and choices that can come with migrating to a new place?
 - How did Abdi support his family from afar?
- 14.** Abdi learns quickly that life in America is not exactly like what he envisioned from the movies. He says, "I was trying so hard to fit in, but I had so much to learn . . . I was realizing nothing is easy, even in America" (p. 228).
- What misconceptions does Abdi realize he has about life in America?
 - What aspects of Somali life and culture does Abdi miss the most?
 - What does Abdi's experience suggest about change? About new beginnings?
 - What could members of his community have done differently to help Abdi feel like he belonged?
- 15.** On page 229, Abdi writes, "I didn't want to admit this to myself, but I was also suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Since then, I have learned that virtually all Somali refugees have some version of this. I would wake up at night in a sweat, having nightmares . . ."
- Why do you think Abdi does not want to admit this to himself?
 - What does Abdi want readers to understand about the experiences of those who become refugees from war?
 - How does Abdi's description of his post-traumatic stress disorder contrast with his matter-of-fact descriptions of the war elsewhere in the book? How does it help you understand his and others' experience of growing up during conflict?
- 16.** Discuss the immigrant soccer team that Abdi joins (p. 229).
- Why does Abdi feel such a strong sense of belonging among the team?
 - Why do you think the people on the team, who come from a wide range of different backgrounds, found common ground in playing soccer?

- 17.** When discussing his experience as a Somali immigrant, Abdi shares what another Somali immigrant said to him: “That sounded like a crime to them—to abandon your clan and become an American” (p. 234).
- a.** How do you think Abdi felt about the claim that he “abandoned” his clan? Why might he feel that way?
 - b.** Describe Abdi’s experience of being caught between multiple “homes.”
 - c.** What does Abdi’s life story and experience suggest about the challenges of belonging to multiple places, identity groups, or communities?
 - d.** What does Fatuma’s life story and experience suggest about the challenges of belonging to multiple places, identity groups, or communities?

Discussion Questions After Reading

These questions invite you to consider the book as a whole and draw lessons from the text that you can bring into your own life.

Directions: Choose from the following questions for a culminating discussion after you have finished reading *Call Me American*. You can also bring your own questions to the discussion. Spanish translations of these discussion questions are available [in this folder](#).

1. Consider your key takeaways from reading this book:
 - a. What scene from the book was most memorable to you and why?
 - b. What is one valuable idea you learned from this book? Why do you find it valuable?
 - c. What questions does this book raise for you? Where might you go to seek answers to your questions?
2. On page 252, Abdi ends his story with the sentence, “No one gets to choose when or where to be born, but what happens after that is what you can imagine.” What does he mean by this? Do you agree or disagree with this statement? To what extent?
3. Abdi’s journey to the United States was due in part to the generosity of many people along the way who supported him with housing, transportation, food, money, and emotional support. What can we learn from the people who helped him about taking action against unfairness or injustice?
4. Abdi made it out of Somalia and into the United States in part because he was able to share his story with people in Europe and the United States. What does his experience suggest about the power of sharing personal stories? What are the implications for people who are unable to share or do not want to share their stories?
5. How did this story connect to, extend, or challenge your thoughts about how and why people immigrate to the United States?
 - a. How does Abdi’s story challenge stereotypes and biases about refugees?
 - b. How does Abdi’s story promote understanding, empathy, and social change?

Connection Questions

These questions can be discussed in relation to any book with themes of borders and belonging and can be used to facilitate discussion across multiple books.

- What borders—literal and figurative—do the characters in your book navigate? How do those borders influence their sense of belonging?
- How does your understanding of where you belong shape who you are, your choices, and the decisions you make?
 - How would the main character or figure in your book respond to this question?
- What is one significant idea that is sticking with you after reading and discussing your book?