

# Teaching *Home Is Not a Country*



Safia Elhillo's *Home Is Not a Country* is a novel in verse that offers a love letter to the Sudanese diaspora in North America. The narrator, Nima, struggles to find how she fits into a divided world as she imagines a version of the life she never had in her parents' homeland. Suffused with magical realism, the poems each stand as individual works of art, but together they weave a story of the choices—both those we make and those that are made for us—that create our circumstances and identities. While offering glimpses of xenophobia and violence, the story is also marked by the beauty and joy to be found in family and in the art, music, food, and dance of one's culture. It invites readers to explore the role that parents play in our development of self, and the unique experiences of "third culture kids."

The themes of this novel 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 otherness, choices, nostalgia, "third culture" experiences, perspective, empathy, and home.

**Note on edition:** This guide is based on the 2021 edition of *Home Is Not a Country* by Safia Elhillo, published by Make Me a World, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, NY (ISBN: 978-0-593-17708-2).

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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 *Home Is Not a Country***

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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 *Home Is Not a Country*

### About the Book

#### Publisher's Summary

From the acclaimed poet featured on *Forbes Africa's* "30 Under 30" list, this powerful novel-in-verse captures one girl, caught between cultures, on an unexpected journey to face the ephemeral girl she might have been. Woven through with moments of lyrical beauty, this is a tender meditation on family, belonging, and home.

*my mother meant to name me    for her favorite flower*

*its sweetness    garlands made    for pretty girls*

*i imagine her    yasmineen    bright & alive*

*& i ache to have been born her    instead*

Nima wishes she were someone else. She doesn't feel understood by her mother, who grew up in a different land. She doesn't feel accepted in her suburban town; yet somehow, she isn't different enough to belong elsewhere. Her best friend, Haitham, is the only person with whom she can truly be herself. Until she can't, and suddenly her only refuge is gone.

As the ground is pulled out from under her, Nima must grapple with the phantom of a life not chosen—the name her parents meant to give her at birth—Yasmineen. But that other name, that other girl, might be more real than Nima knows. And the life Nima wishes were someone else's . . . is one she will need to fight for with a fierceness she never knew she possessed.<sup>2</sup>

### 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 some events described in this novel. 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.

<sup>2</sup> Penguin Random House website, "About *Home Is Not a Country*."

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:

- **Imagery of violence.** Nima's father was shot and killed by police officers when Nima's mother was pregnant with her. His death is referred to on pages 88, 89, 93, and 182–83. On pages 132–34, Hala is imprisoned on the charge of adultery; the police strike Hala's face and back and shave her head against her will.
- **Islamophobic violence.** Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a group of men attack Haitham while calling him "Mohammed" and injure him severely; he is hospitalized, rendered unconscious, and comes close to death but ultimately recovers.
- **Dehumanizing language.** Racist and Islamophobic slurs appear in multiple poems. Prominent examples appear on pages 49 ("terrorist mom/terrorist dad"), 54 ("terrorist"), 65–66 ("my dad's a pilot . . . he could have been on that plane . . . Terrorist bitch"), and 86 ("between blows they were calling him mohammed").
- **Indirect reference to sexual violence.** In "The Stranger" and subsequent poems, (pages 99–107), a man Nima does not know pays for her meal and offers to help her get home but instead drives her to a hotel. While he is checking in, she senses that she is in danger and boards a bus to leave. In "Touched" (page 88), Aisha explains to Nima that on the night Nima's father was shot, he was protecting Aisha from officers who "stopped us in our car & wanted to touch me."

## 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 characters' experiences. 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, organized by topic:

*Note to readers: The novel never directly states what country Nima's parents emigrated from, but the cultural references in the book point to Sudan.*

### The Second Sudanese Civil War

- **South Sudan Profile**

This BBC timeline provides a chronology of key events in the history of South Sudan, including the second civil war in the 1980s and 1990s that forms the backdrop of this book's story.

- **Second Sudanese Civil War**

This overview provides more detail about the origins and events of the second Sudanese civil war.



## 9/11, or the Terror Attacks of September 11, 2001

- 9/11 Primer

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, occur in the background of this book and are a catalyst for harassment and violence toward Muslim students, including both Nima (in “The Headscarf,” pp. 65–66) and Haitham (in “Haitham,” p. 80, and “Haitham,” p. 85). This website from the 9/11 Memorial & Museum provides brief high-level overviews of the events of September 11, 2001, as well as a range of primary sources, lesson plans, videos, and interactive timelines.

## Sudanese Cultural References

The following resources provide more information about food, music, national symbols, and other aspects of Sudanese culture that are referenced in the book:

- And in Sudan, a Famished Food Culture

This article celebrates Sudanese cuisine and explains economic issues that have engendered food insecurity, one of several factors driving emigration from Sudan.

- Sayed Khalifa: Igd Allooli

Throughout the novel, Nima, Haitham, and Nima’s mother listen to music by Sayed Khalifa. Nima loves this music, but other kids make fun of her for liking “old people music.” This song is about a pearl necklace and has special significance to Nima and her mother.

- The Sudanese Flag

On page 91, Nima stumbles into a street fair after leaving her mother and searches for her country’s flag (“red white and green”), but she does not find it and concludes, “of course it is not there / mine / not a culture exciting enough for a booth / for a fair / only ever mentioned in a list of warnings on the news.”

- Jinn

The word “jinn” (sometimes “djinn” or “jinni”) refers to a wide range of beings that are prevalent in mythology and folklore throughout Arabic-speaking cultures. Jinn are referred to throughout the novel, and when Nima begins to experience visions of Yasmeen, she fears that she is being lured by jinn. The word “jinn” is sometimes anglicized as “genie,” and the wish-granting entities called genies in some Western stories are loosely based on stories of jinn, but it is important to note that these do not represent the original mythology or folklore of jinn.

# 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](#).*

## Prologue (pp. 3-15)

1. As children, we sometimes see our parents as only our parents, rather than as full humans with their own experiences and stories.
  - a. How does Nima see her mother in the first section of the book? What details does she focus on when describing her mother?
  - b. What do we learn about both of Nima's parents in this section of the book? What are you left wondering about them?
2. Food is often an important part of our identity, family, and culture. For many immigrants, food is an important connection to one's heritage.
  - a. In the poem "School" (p. 9), what complex or conflicting emotions might Nima be feeling when her mother packs her leftovers like "okra & lamb & rice" for lunch at school?
  - b. Have you ever felt judged or left out because of something about you that was "different"? How did this affect you?
3. The prologue section of the novel is full of contrasts between how Nima sees her life in America and how she envisions life in her parents' home country.
  - a. What do we learn in this section about how Nima sees and understands herself?
  - b. How does Nima think about belonging in this section?
  - c. Why do you think Nima's descriptions of her life in America are so negative? Why do you think her descriptions of the life she imagines in her parents' home country are so positive? Do you think her descriptions are realistic?
4. In the poem "My Name" on page 15, the narrator feels that her name comes with baggage that is weighing her down.
  - a. Why does Nima feel this way? How do you know?
  - b. Do you feel that your name fits you? Why or why not?
  - c. In what ways are names significant to our identities?

5. What expectations does the prologue set up for the rest of the book? What ideas and conflicts do you think the rest of the book will focus on?

### Part 1: The Other Side (pp. 19–81)

6. Read the poem “Haitham” on page 27.
- How would you describe Nima and Haitham’s friendship?
  - Why is their friendship so important to Nima?
  - How are Haitham’s choices and Nima’s choices different? What shapes the choices Haitham makes vs. the choices Nima makes?
7. Throughout the story, the narrator mentions the concept of “nostalgia,” which is defined as “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations.”<sup>3</sup> Part of Nima’s sense of self is her love of the nostalgic, such as music, colors, and clothing that she associates with her parents’ home country. Nostalgia is also one of the ways she connects with Haitham and her mother. Yet Nima has not actually experienced most of the things she is nostalgic for.
- Why might a person connect with or be nostalgic for something they have not ever personally experienced?
  - At the end of the poem “Pyramids,” Nima expresses a feeling of “shock / of being here instead of there” (p. 24). Where is “here” for Nima? Where is “there”? What does this poem suggest about Nima’s complicated sense of belonging, both “here” and “there”?
  - How can stories about times and places before we were born influence our sense of identity?
  - Think of an early memory that you have. Is it captured in a photograph or a family story? How might those retellings and representations have colored and shaped your memory?
  - How accurately can photographs and stories capture the past? How might our understanding of the past be flawed if we only encounter it through these mediums?
8. On page 36, Nima says that her mother “is lonely / her days and nights spent mostly with ghosts.”
- How is Nima similar to her mother?
  - How has “living with ghosts” or nostalgia for the old country hurt both of them?
  - How has it helped or supported them?

3 “Nostalgia” entry, *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2003), retrieved October 3, 2024.

9. In the poem "Videos" (p. 46), Nima indulges in her "guilty pleasure" of watching American music videos and dancing along.
- Why do you think Nima feels "less lonely" in these moments of dancing to the videos?
  - How does her mother's arrival break the spell?
  - Nima says that she feels "shame" and "so embarrassed i start to cry," yet her mother is "smiling / watching me." Why do you think Nima and her mother have such different emotional responses in this moment?
10. In Part 1, Nima repeatedly uses words that suggest vanishing or disappearing, such as "flicker" (p. 56) and "invisible" (p. 57) and "translucent" (p. 57).
- What does this language suggest about Nima's sense of self?
  - What has happened up to this point to make her sense of self begin to fade?
  - Do you think that Nima is literally disappearing? What might be happening in these moments?
  - Who do you think Nima is seeing visions of when she experiences these "flickers"? Why does she begin thinking about jinn and whether they are real?
  - What can happen to our sense of self when we focus on fitting in or assimilating?
11. Beginning in the poem "The Headscarf," the characters react to "something [that] has happened on the news." It is implied that this "something" is the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.
- Why is Nima's mother's decision to replace her headscarf with a hat significant? What does her decision prompt Nima to think about?
  - Nima lashes out in self-defense when four boys attack her at school.
    - What seems to motivate the boys to attack Nima? What do their words and actions suggest about prejudice and identity-based hate?
    - What do the boys' parents prioritize in their response to the situation? What do their words and actions suggest about prejudice and identity-based hate?
    - What does the principal prioritize in his response to the situation? Do you think his decisions are fair? What do his words and actions suggest about prejudice and identity-based hate?
    - What might Nima be thinking and feeling after she is sent home? Why do you think she lies to her family about what really happened? Why does she lash out in anger at her mother?
    - What could anyone involved in this situation have done differently to foster empathy and confront prejudice?

12. On pages 77–78, Nima creates a list of apologies to her mother. In the next poem, she says, “i chant my apology / to my mother out loud until i feel it memorized” before deciding that “yasmeen is the daughter my mother deserves.”
- a. In Nima’s apologies, which ones are for choices she actively made? Which are for things that are beyond her control?
  - b. How does this moment contribute to your understanding of why Nima wishes to be someone else?
13. The first section of the book is titled “The Other Side.”
- a. Why might the *first* section of the book be titled “The *Other* Side”? What is the significance of this title?
  - b. What “sides” or borders does Nima navigate throughout this section?

## Part 2: Old Country (pp. 85–189)

14. At the very beginning of this section (pp. 85–86), Nima finds out what happened to Haitham, who is hospitalized and unconscious after being attacked in a store parking lot by grown men.
- a. In what ways is it significant that the attackers are described as “fully grown men” and Haitham is described as “only a little boy”?
  - b. How do the men respond to the shopkeeper choosing to help Haitham? What do their words and actions suggest about prejudice and identity-based hate?
15. In the poem “Touched,” Nima becomes overwhelmed and runs away from her mother. Review the portion of the text from “Touched” through the poem “Caught” (pp. 88–96).
- a. What are all the things going through Nima’s head as she flees? What do you think she is running away from?
  - b. At the end of “Caught,” Nima looks down and discovers that “my body is not there.” This is the first time she disappears completely. What do you think is happening in this moment? What pattern does she notice at the beginning of “The Diner” about what makes her disappear and what makes her come back?
16. In “The Elevator,” the author uses magical realism to allow Nima to cross the border between present and past (p. 108). Turning points like this often happen at a moment of crisis or conflict in a story.
- a. Why do you think this turning point happens immediately after the poem “No Daughter” rather than a few pages earlier, when Nima was in physical danger in “The Driveway”? What crisis or conflict does Nima experience in “No Daughter”?

- 17.** At the beginning of her journey to the past, Nima idealizes the past, noting that the people she recognizes “all look so happy so young & full of what is possible / how could they ever have left,” and she wonders “why couldn’t i / have been born into this version of us” (pp. 110–11). But the longer she stays, the more she realizes the complexity of the truth.
- a.** What truths are revealed about Nima’s father? How do the photographs of him described in the prologue not capture the entire person?
  - b.** Why is learning about Khaltu Hala’s experiences in her home country so significant to Nima?
  - c.** How does witnessing and understanding these events from the past change Nima’s perception of the adults she loves?
- 18.** Nima observes her mother dancing and teaching others to dance in “The Lesson” on page 122.
- a.** How does this moment connect to the earlier scene in which Nima’s mother catches her dancing along to American music videos?
  - b.** How do her mother’s corrections of Nima’s dancing take on a new meaning here? How does the name “Nima” also take on new meaning here?
  - c.** Later in this section, Nima realizes how much she was wanted by her mother, and who her father really was. What changes in her relationship with her mother? (Review “The Coward” on page 140 and “Mama” on pages 141–42.)
  - d.** How does learning her mother’s migration story and the choices she made influence Nima’s perspective about herself? How does this knowledge influence her perspective about why they are in the US?
- 19.** The magical realism in this section allows the characters to cross intangible borders that normally can’t be crossed, such as the border between past and present, the border between perception and reality, and the border between what *is* and what *could have been*.
- a.** Choose one of these borders. What do the interactions between Nima and Yasmeen—including their conflicts—suggest about the relationship between the two sides of that border?
- 20.** Review the poem “The Lesson” on pages 165–66 and the poem with the same title on page 122.
- a.** How does the title “The Lesson” take on new meaning at this later point in the story?
  - b.** What has changed in Nima? How have her interactions with Yasmeen changed the way she views her life and self?

- c. How is the act of dancing “in parallel” meaningful? How does it relate to the idea of belonging?
  - d. How can helping others help us see who we truly are?
- 21. In the beginning of her story, Nima repeatedly states that she only views her mother as alone and lonely. Finally, in “Gone,” Nima says that “my mother & i were always meant to belong / to no one but each other” (p. 185).
  - a. How and why has Nima’s perspective changed?
  - b. How can the difficult choices we make and the hardships we experience contribute to our sense of who we are and where we belong?

### **Part 3: Home Is Not a Country (pp. 193–211)**

- 22. Contrast the poem “The Photographs” on pages 197–98 and “The Photograph” on page 3 and “Baba” on page 4.
  - a. What does Nima realize that she did not before? What does she now see “in the absence of his face” (line 9) that she ignored or could not see before?
  - b. How do context, time, and place change our perspective and the way we see others and ourselves?
- 23. Nima returns to her life “only to find that things / aren’t all that different,” yet everything has changed (p. 203). Give examples of how Nima sees the same life she led in a different light.
  - a. How does Nima’s trip to the past help her see herself more clearly?
  - b. What other knowledge does she gain when she knows where she comes from?
  - c. How does she see her mother’s migration experience in America differently now?
- 24. At the end of the book, Nima meets a new girl named Jazz, short for Yasmeen.
  - a. How does meeting someone with the name she thought she wanted help Nima see herself more clearly?
  - b. How can a friend reflect our sense of self back to us so that we know ourselves better?

# 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 *Home Is Not a Country*. 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. This story explores the idea of “home,” both in the title and throughout the book.
  - a. When Nima returns from her journey with Yasmeen, how does she define “home”?
  - b. If home is not a country, as the book’s title suggests, then what else might it be?
  - c. How do *you* define home?
3. *Home Is Not a Country* is not just Nima’s story—it is also the story of how generations of family members are connected. In Christopher Myers’s letter to readers at the beginning of the book, he writes, “It seems to me that this knowledge—that you could have just as easily been any one of a hundred other people—is at the heart of empathy. It’s the realization that every person you meet, or see on the news, or hear about could have been you, if you had made slightly different choices, or if your grandparents had made different choices, going way back, into a great tree of different choices that looks like an entire world of people who aren’t you, but might have been.”
  - a. What does *Home Is Not a Country* suggest about how the experiences of our ancestors can shape our sense of who we are and where we belong today?
  - b. In what ways do *you* think we are shaped by the experiences of our ancestors or the people who raised us?
  - c. What is the relationship between storytelling and healing? How does *Home Is Not a Country* help you think about this question? What about other stories you have read or heard?



- d. How is the realization that you could have easily been someone else “at the heart of empathy”?
- 4. How can Nima’s story help us better understand ourselves, other people in our communities, and the world? How does her story challenge us to consider our choices and role in creating a society that is more welcoming to all people?

## 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?