



Eighth-grade student Ali Khan finds that writing poetry—first about his crush, then about what it means to be an immigrant and the anti-Muslim racism around him—helps him discover who he truly is.



About the authors

While growing up, **Wali Shah** faced pressure from his Pakistani-immigrant parents to choose a profession that would justify their many sacrifices. He surprised them by becoming a poet and public speaker, inspiring youth at hundreds of schools with his powerful, provocative verse. He is a fresh and current voice of the times at a diverse range of corporate events, has delivered TED talks, and once closed out a keynote speech made by President Barack Obama. Recently he served as poet laureate for the City of Mississauga, Ontario.

Eric Walters is a Member of the Order of Canada and the author of over 125 books that have collectively won more than one hundred awards, including the Governor General's Literary Award for *The King of Jam Sandwiches*. A former teacher, Eric began writing as a way to get his fifth-grade students interested in reading and writing. Eric is a tireless presenter, speaking to over one hundred thousand students per year in schools across the country. He lives in Guelph, Ontario.

About their partnership

Wali and Eric met over a decade ago at an awards ceremony in the city of Mississauga, where they both resided. They struck up a friendship—despite being almost four decades apart in age—based on an appreciation for each other's writing. Ultimately, this was the catalyst for the book *Call Me Al*, which features Wali's poetry and Eric's prose, although Wali also wrote some of the prose and Eric wrote some of the poetry. For Wali and Eric, writing the book was a joyful process, and they got a chance to work together, learn from each other and become better writers together. Just as importantly, they became good friends.

Did you know the first book Wali ever read with a Muslim main character was the novel *Bifocal*, co-written by Deborah Ellis and Eric Walters? Wali read this novel while he was in grade 8 at Camilla Road Middle School, the same school that *Call Me Al* is set in! While they were writing the book, Wali was out with friends and called Eric to “prove” to them that he was co-writing a novel with a writer they all knew from when they were in middle school. Eric, of course, jokingly told them that he had “no idea” who Wali was before admitting he was so pleased to be sharing this book with such a talented co-writer.



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Discussion Questions

Don't let someone tell you that you're worthless.
See your imperfections for what makes you perfect.

1. Who is your favorite character? Why?
2. What is your favorite chapter of the book? Why?
3. What are the similarities and differences between spoken word poetry and rap?
4. What do you want to be when you are older?
5. Ali's father was a doctor in Pakistan but a taxi driver in our country. Why are some people not allowed to practice their occupation when they come to a new country?
6. Which character grows more in the story—Ali or Zach?
7. Is thinking that one racial or ethnic group possesses more positive skills—e.g., good at math—a form of racism?
8. How many foods from different cultures do you regularly eat or really like?
9. What would be the meal—both food and drink—that you would choose after fasting for twelve hours?
10. How would you react if you witnessed Ali's family being attacked?

Activities

1. Pick one of the poems in *Call Me Al*, memorize it and recite for your class.
2. Write your own spoken word poem.
3. In the novel, Ms. McIntosh assigns a poster assignment to Ali. Take a quote from *Call Me Al* and design a poster to go with it. Include an illustration on your poster.
4. Characters in a novel or story fall into three categories:
 - Main or primary (they are the major characters in the story)
 - Secondary (they play a significant role but are not the primary characters)
 - Tertiary (they may show up once or twice and have a role to play—sometimes it's significant)List the six main characters, six secondary characters and six tertiary characters and why you feel they are in that category.
5. Go online and find a video clip of Wali reciting some of the poetry from *Call Me Al*. How does hearing Wali recite the poem change your understanding of it, compared to reading the poem in the novel?
6. Eric and Wali wrote *Call Me Al* together. Choose a partner in your class and collaborate on a poem. Reflect on how writing together was different than writing by yourself.
7. "To err is human and to forgive is divine." —Alexander Pope
 - What does this quote mean?
 - What characters made mistakes, and what characters forgave?
 - Does Ali's grandfather believe this quote as well?
8. Explore your class. On a map, plot where everybody in your class is from and what languages are spoken.
9. Compare and contrast two characters in the novel. What makes them similar and dissimilar? Do these similarities and differences change over the course of the novel?
10. Participate in a day of fasting as a class, like Ali's classmates did in *Call Me Al*, and organize an iftar to break your day of fast together. Discuss what you've learned through this experience. You could even ask a spiritual leader from the Muslim community to talk about Ramadan and fasting.

Sometimes the struggles that make us fall
Help us stand up, together.

