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Book review: Everything Sad Is Untrue

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Book Review: Daniel Nayeri. *Everything Sad Is Untrue (A True Story)*. Montclair, NJ: Levine Querido, 2020. iii+356 pp. Hardback. ISBN 9781646140008

Sharon Kerestes

This fictionalized memoir focuses on the early life of Khosrou (known as Daniel) Nayeri, who comes to the United States with his mother and sister as a refugee in the early 1990s. The Nayeris are a wealthy and respected Iranian family of Shiite Muslims with a direct bloodline to the prophet Muhammad, whose lives take a dramatic and dangerous turn when Daniel's mother Sima converts from Islam to Christianity. With a death sentence on her head, they flee Iran while Daniel's father chooses to stay behind. After spending a few years in refugee camps, they are granted asylum and settle in Edmond, Oklahoma, where everything beautiful and familiar is stripped away. The unconventional, multilayered narrative is told from the perspective of 12-year-old Daniel. He positions himself as a storyteller like Scheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights* and engages the reader in direct conversation: "If you give me your attention – I know it's valuable—I promise I won't waste it" (Nayeri, 2020, p. 16). The full account of his family's flight from Iran unfolds slowly. It intertwines with the memories Daniel is trying desperately to hold onto -- of his family and life in Iran and of his experiences navigating his new reality as a poor immigrant trying to perfect his English, make friends, and avoid the beatings of the school bully. Daniel's most heroic stories are reserved for his resilient, "unstoppable" mother whose self-sacrifice keeps the family moving forward. The novel explores the relationship between memory and the stories we tell – and how the telling of those stories can bring connection and healing. Weighty issues like bigotry and abuse are never far from the surface, but ultimately what emerges is hopefulness.

The novel took more than a decade to write as Nayeri collected his memories and sought to find the right voice for his story. After initially trying it as a novel for adults, he landed on middle-grade readers as his target audience (Goddu, 2020). In many ways, it is the perfect match. It is easy to believe that the storyteller, who frequently changes topics and speaks in short, quick sentences, is a seventh grader desperate to keep his audience's attention. Many of the stories are framed as responses to writing prompts assigned by his teacher, Mrs. Miller, providing relatable middle-school moments, especially for students who are immigrants themselves. Though Daniel's classmates in the story are put off by his tales of things they cannot imagine or understand, readers will be drawn in by Daniel's conversational style and wit and will keep turning pages, eager to see where the story takes them next. One potential problem is that the nonlinear structure and extensive literary references may be confusing for less-sophisticated readers. High schoolers and adults should not be dissuaded by the middle-school subject matter and moments of immaturity. There is a depth of insight and richness in the writing that readers of any age will find rewarding. It is a work that pulls at a range of emotions and leaves the reader feeling a deep connection with the storyteller.

If this novel was not ambitious enough, Nayeri bravely tackles a subject often left out of contemporary fiction for children and young adults: the hope that is found through faith in Christ. On one hand, he can't avoid it since his mother's conversion is the catalyst for the entire story. But where others might challenge her decision to risk everything for her faith, including her children's comfort and stability, he never does. Readers can wonder whether this inclusion of a conversion story is out of respect and love for his mother or if he shares her same resolute faith. The answer may lie in the title he chose, connecting the epic story of Bilbo Baggins to his own family's experiences of sacrifice, pain, and loss.

This wholly original work has garnered numerous honors, including the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature (Young Adult Library Services Association), and was named A Best Book of 2020 by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and others (Levine Querido).

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