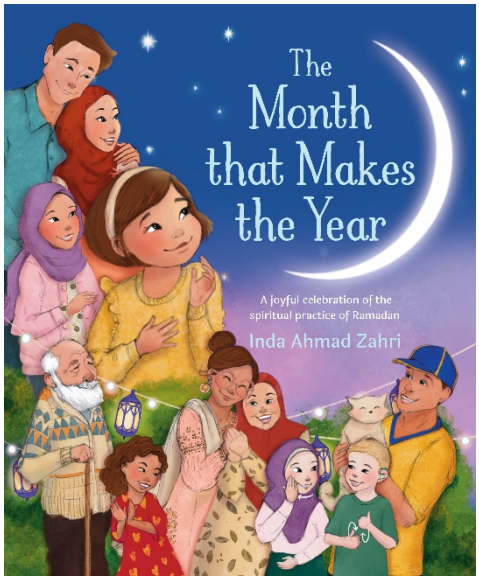

THE MONTH THAT MAKES THE YEAR

Written and illustrated by INDA AHMAD ZAHRI

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 4-8 years old (LOWER/UPPER PRIMARY)

GENRE: Picture Book

THEMES: Ramadan, Islamic Culture, Diversity and Empathy.

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- English: Literature, literacy and language
- Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)
- Visual Arts

NOTES WRITTEN BY: Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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INTRODUCTION

'Slow down, be kind to yourself and think good thoughts.'

This month is different from the others. It starts with the sighting of a new crescent moon. This month we learn to do big things by changing one little thing at a time … this is a joyful celebration of the spiritual practice of Ramadan.

PLOT SUMMARY

This is the first time for Deenie, the youngest member of a Muslim family, to fast during Ramadan. She comes across some challenges, but by the end of the month she learns that there is a lot more to Ramadan than giving up food and water.

Exploring Ramadan through the eyes of a Muslim child, this graceful and authentic story illuminates the sense of belonging to both the community and the universe that this month of fasting, prayer and reflection brings, as well as the sense of accomplishment that springs from sacrifice. It is a warm and joyful story offering children the chance to see themselves or their friends in the celebration of the spiritual practice of Ramadan.

BEFORE READING

- Ask students if they can name any periods of time when family and friends come together to celebrate a special time of the year. Hopefully, Diwali, Passover, Christmas, Eid and Lunar New Year will be mentioned, along with others. Encourage further discussion of how each of these moments are celebrated by preparing special food, visiting family and friends, and gift giving. Point out that each might be slightly different, but that they share lots of similarities.
- Next, show the cover of The Month That Makes the Year to the class and explain that this book will talk about Ramadan, a period that is very important to Muslims. Examine the front cover and ask questions such as:
    - How might the moon be linked to the word *month* in the title? [A: the time a moon passes through all of its phases is called a month.]
    - What sort of moon is shown here? [A: a crescent moon.]
    - Do only adults celebrate Ramadan? [A: no, children take part, too.]

- The illustration shows people in a community: some of whom are Muslim and some who are non-Muslim. Is it possible to guess people who celebrate Ramadan by the way they dress and the way they look? [A: No. Some of the people are Muslim and are wearing head coverings, but some are not. People from India, Eastern Europe, the US and many, many other countries are Muslim yet dress differently. Also, some of the people on the cover are non-Muslims who come to celebrate Eid at the end of the story.]

AFTER READING

- Read the story through once and close the book before asking the following questions to gauge comprehension:
  - Ramadan follows a lunar calendar, meaning it is a different date every year. What in the night sky tells people when it starts?
  - What is the hardest thing about Ramadan for Deenie?
  - What are some of the good things she learns to do during Ramadan?
  - Why do Deenie and her family believe it is important to fast during daylight hours?
  - What do they do after the sun sets?
  - What else do they try to give up during Ramadan?
  - Where do people gather to pray during Ramadan (as well as the rest of the year)?
  - How does looking at the night sky tell people when Ramadan is over?
  - What does Deenie mean when she says, 'a month like this makes my whole year'?

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

a) Why did you decide to write about Ramadan?

Where I grew up, food was a constant celebration. Malaysian cuisine is renowned for its many delicious forms, and back home, you could find savoury meals and sweet treats at every street corner, with eateries open all hours of the day. Yet, during Ramadan – a month that is best known for abstaining from eating and drinking during the day – a different spirit would take over the nation, one that was just as joyous as when people came together to indulge.

When I moved abroad for study and work – first to England, and then to Australia – this huge annual event became one that I observed alone, or with only a handful of friends. I missed the festiveness of the Ramadans and Eids I spent back home, but the distance allowed me to reflect on why this month was so important to me. When I was able to distil the reasons why we observe the practice of Ramadan, it was easy to see that it was so much more than just not eating or drinking.

b) What is the underlying belief you wish to express in this work?

This is a story of many things, but the subject matter is grounded in faith. As a Muslim, my faith is very personal to me, but it is also very visible to others. The way some women wear headscarves or hijab, the way we pray five times a day, the way we eschew certain types of food and the way we abstain from food and water during Ramadan. Is that even possible? Why would you do that? Isn't that unhealthy? Do you stay up to eat all night? These are some of the questions I've been asked when I explain why I'm sitting out of lunch and declining coffee shouts at work.

I had a good grounding in these practices, having grown up in a community where it is the norm. I didn't even really mind being in the minority when I began studying and working abroad. I realised that people were curious about my practice, and in answering their questions, it reaffirmed why I take it upon myself to fast every day for a month.

c) Who do you picture reading this book?

Now that I'm living in a Muslim minority country and have young children of my own, I wonder what their experience would be like when we do things as a family that are quite different from most of the people they know in the community. I'm curious to see how their friends would react to the concept of Ramadan. And I'm hopeful that there will be a healthy exchange of questions and understanding, and ultimately empathy and kindness between Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

So I wrote this book for Muslim children who already know about Ramadan, so that they can reflect and celebrate this month that is so different and special, and also for children who might be coming across Ramadan for the first time, curious about their Muslim friends, learning about differences while also realising they are not that different after all.

'I believe that through stories, we can learn so much about the world, which is made up of people from many different cultures, backgrounds and faiths.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

ENGLISH

LITERATURE

1. Write a story or a poem about a child enjoying Ramadan.
2. What are some other picture books or junior fiction books you have read that feature Ramadan? [See **Corresponding Literature**.]
3. This text is written in first person as if Deenie had written it. How does this contribute to the telling of this story? What other aspects of the picture book text did you notice when reading it?

LITERACY

1. Quiz students about the spiritual meaning explored in this text.
2. What foods would Deenie and her family eat for *suhoor* apart from dates?
3. Why does Deenie mention a hibernating bear?

LANGUAGE

1. Discover the meaning of Islamic words included in this text and which appear elsewhere as well. [See **Worksheet 1** for a related activity.]
2. Write a letter to a friend describing what Ramadan is about.
3. Write an acrostic poem using the letters in the word 'Ramadan'.

ASSESSMENT:

- Answer this question in essay format: What does this book suggest about fasting during Ramadan?
- Fasting is a form of self-discipline. Write a list of other instances where you need to demonstrate self-discipline.
- Write a dialogue between Deenie and her sister Juju about how Ramadan makes them feel.

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

Relevant Topics Include:

1. **Ramadan**

   What is Ramadan?

   Ramadan occurs annually, and goes by the lunar calendar. In 2023, Ramadan begins 22 March. In 2024, Ramadan begins 10 March. Conduct art-based activities around the phases of the moon.

   Why do Muslims fast during Ramadan?

   What activities are performed during Ramadan?

   Create Ramadan or Eid decorations. [See **Worksheet 4**.]

2. **Islamic Culture**

   Discuss Islamic cultural celebrations – how is Ramadan or Eid celebrated around the world?

   Discuss terms or points of information in the book relating to Islam and Muslims.

   Discuss the countries that have a Muslim majority in terms of population. Which countries have the most people who identify as Muslim?

   Discuss the meaning of the words 'Islam' and 'Muslim'.

   Discuss the headdresses worn by Muslim women and their various interpretations, e.g. burqa, hijab, etc.

   What is the history of the Quran?

3. **Diversity and Empathy**

   Discuss empathy, for example, what could we hope to learn by fasting (putting ourselves in someone else's shoes)?

   How does this book relate to our understanding of children in other parts of the world?

   Examine the image where the mother is taking things from the cupboard, jars with labels containing the words that describe people who lack empathy. (e.g. Unkind words, Jealousy, etc.) Invite students to make a list of other such words.

   Diversity means that people represent many different cultures that share different beliefs. Read books about diversity such as Eliza Hull and Sally Rippin's *Come Over to My House* (2022) illustrated by Daniel Gray-Barnett.

   Diversity also refers to other forms of difference between people. For example, there are two children (including a boy with a hearing aid) using Auslan signs for 'Ramadan mubarak' on the front cover, and they appear again on pp 30-31 with the lady in pink, signing 'Eid mubarak'. There are white arrows showing the hand movements, and this was done in consultation with a Muslim Deaf sign language advocate. Discuss disability with students. Are they disabled or know someone else who is (e.g. family member or friend)?

ASSESSMENT:

- Define 'diversity' and the various groups the word might refer to.
- What is empathy? Write an essay describing it and how important it is in the world today.
- What challenges do we face in terms of social issues, with regards to having empathy? For example, our treatment of refugees and immigrants; our approach to gender equality; our design of public facilities to encompass the needs of the disabled?

VISUAL ARTS

1. The art was hand-drawn with Apple Pencil on iPad Pro using Procreate. Discuss the use of this medium with students and if the technology is available, demonstrate for them how this medium works.
2. Turn to the page showing a ribbon with multiple images of Deenie's family learning big things by doing one little thing at a time. Match the big things below with the little things each person learns to do during Ramadan.
    - Health [A: Deenie's dad and Juju go for bike rides together]
    - Kindness [A: Deenie's mum pays special attention to looking after the kitten]
    - Knowledge [A: Juju reads more books]
    - Mindfulness [A: Deenie and Juju learn to pay closer attention to beautiful things in nature, such as butterflies]
    - Gratitude [A: Deenie learns to stop and play with her pet kitten]
    - Why do you think the creator of the book chose a ribbon to connect all of these images?
3. Now turn to the page featuring all the kindness that Deenie sees everywhere and encourage students to describe each different act of kindness pictured. Ask older students to see if they can work out the connection between earlier and later acts of kindness in the story. Provide a scaffold by showing how the soccer goalie being consoled by a fellow player goes on to help the old lady with her groceries. Encourage students to search for other connections.
4. Turn to the page where Deenie gives her own coins to help people who are going hungry most of the year. Ask students: why do they think she decided to do this during Ramadan? Explain that Deenie is learning *empathy*, the ability to better understand how other people feel. Encourage discussion of why this might be an important skill to have. Make a list of other things students might be able to do to learn empathy.

5. Turn to the page where Deenie's mother goes to the art gallery with her friends. Ask students to explain how going somewhere different for their usual lunch date shows the friends have empathy.

[Visual Arts Questions and Activities above written by Carolyn Walsh.]

ASSESSMENT:

- Create your own Ramadan calendar to count down the days of Ramadan until Eid. Place a card with a good deed written on it – and a small treat – in each of the thirty boxes on the calendar. Choose a different student to open a box every morning and encourage them to perform the good deed during the day.
- Complete Worksheet 2 below.
- Draw a picture of what good deeds you might do during Ramadan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Inda Ahmad Zahri writes and illustrates stories that are often imbued with her fervent wish for a kinder world. Originally from Kuala Lumpur, she now splits her time between her garden home in Meanjin/Brisbane and a sandy spot in the Middle East. She counts books, languages, Malaysian rice dishes and the ocean as some of her greatest loves. Inda's debut book, *Salih* (illustrated by Anne Ryan) was a Notable Book in the CBCA Picture Book of the Year Awards. She has written several other picture books and received an ASA/CA Mentorship Award in 2021 to develop a middle grade novel. *The Month That Makes the Year* is her first author-illustrator title. Inda is also a surgical doctor, a vocation that has taught her to be meticulous while embracing chaos, and to appreciate the gentler moments in life. www.indabinda.com

ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award. She is President of IBBY Australia and Deputy-Chair of the Australian Children's Laureate Foundation. In 2021 she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

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Dittmer, Lori Ramadan (Seedlings series) Creative Paperbacks, 2023.

Eliot, Hannah Celebrate the World, Ramadan: Ill. by Rashin Kheiriyeh. Little Simon, 2018. (Board Book)

Faruqi, Reem Lailah's Lunchbox: a Ramadan Story Ill. by Lea Lyon. W.W. Norton & Co., 2015.

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Gani, Irawan The First Night of Ramadan Malam Pertama Ramadan Author Solutions, 2017.

Holli, Conger Rashid's Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr (Cloverleaf Books) Lerner Publishing Group, 2012.

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Khan, Hena Under My Hijab Ill. by Aaliya Jaleel. Lee & Low Books, 2019.

Khan, Hena Like the Moon Loves the Sky Ill. by Saffa Khan. Chronicle Books, 2018.

Khan, Hena Night of the Moon: A Muslim Holiday Story. Ill. by Julie Paschkis. Chronicle Books, 2018.

Khan, Farjana Yippee, it's Ramanda! Author House, 2010.

Lumbard, Radiya York The Gift of Ramadan Ill. by Laura K. Horton. Albert Whitman & Co., 2021.

Mobin- Uddin, Asma A Party in Ramadan Ill. by Laura Jacobsen. Boys Mill Press, 2022.

Muhammad, Ibtihaj with Aly, S.K. The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family. Ill. by Hatem Aly. Little Brown Books for Young Readers, 2019.

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Rashid, Qasim Hannah and the Ramadan Gift Viking, Penguin Group USA, 2021.

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Talkhani, Zeba The Most Exciting Eid Ill. by Abeeha Tariq. Scholastic, 2022.

Thompkins-Bigelow, Jamilah Mommy's Khimar Ill. by Ebony Glenn. Salaam Reads/ Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2018.

Whitman, Sylvia Under the Ramadan Moon Ill. by Sue Williams. Whitman & Co., 2011.

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Abdel-Magied, Yassmin *You Must be Layla* Penguin Random House UK, 2020.

Abdel-Magied, Yassmin *Listen, Layla* Penguin Australia, 2021.

Ali. S.K. and Saeed, Aisha *Once Upon an Eid: Stories of Hope and Joy by 15 Muslim Voices.* Abrams, 2021.

Faruqui, Saadia *Meet Yasmin!* Ill. by Hatem Aly. Picture Window Books, 2018. [24 titles in the series.]

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DePalma, Kate *Let's Celebrate: Special Days Around the World* (World of Celebrations) Ill. by Martina Peluso. Barefoot Books, 2017.

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Jones, Grace *Ramadan* (Festivals Around the World) Book Life, 2022.

Malik, Humera *The Story of the Holy Prophet Muhammad* (Ramadan Classics) Geen Key Press, 2017.

Shaffi, Sarah *All About Eid: Things to Make and Do* Ill. by Aaliya Jaleel. Scholastic, 2021.

ONLINE LINKS

'A Glossary of Islamic Clothing' *Learn Religions*
https://www.learnreligions.com/islamic-clothing-glossary-2004255

AMUST Australasian Muslim Times
https://www.amust.com.au/

'Books' *Islamic Museum of Australia*
https://shop.islamicmuseum.org.au/collections/books

'Celebrating Ramadan' *Encyclopedia Britannica*
https://www.britannica.com/story/celebrating-ramadan

'Difference between Islam and Muslim' *Difference.Between.net*
http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/difference-between-islam-and-muslim/

'Easy Iftar Recipes for kids To Make: Ramadan Activities' *Jeddah Mom*
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'Islam by Country' Wikiepdia
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'Islam: Seven Articles of Faith' *londoni*
http://www.londoni.co/index.php/18-islam/basics-of-islam/9-islam-seven-articles-of-faith

Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia
https://www.iamm.org.my

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'Mohammad, prophet of Islam' *Britannica*
https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad

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'Qurʾān' *Encyclopedia Britannica*
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'Ramadan Activities for Kids: Ramdan Family Guide' *Local Passport Family*

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'Ramadan Around the World' *Google*
https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/umich-ramadan/exploring-ramadan/ramadan-around-the-world

'Ramadan Craft Activities for Children' *twinkl.com*
https://www.twinkl.com.au/blog/ramadan-craft-activities-for-children

'The Holy Qur'an' *Al Islam*
https://www.alislam.org/quran/

'Ten Beautiful Ramadan Traditions From Around the World' TMV 3 April 2022
https://themuslimvibe.com/faith-islam/10-beautiful-ramadan-traditions-from-around-the-world

'12 Ramadan Crafts and Activities for Kids' *Artsy Craftsy Mom*
https://artsycraftsymom.com/10-ramadan-crafts-and-activities-for-kids/

'World Ramadan Celebrations' c*ultural infusion*
https://culturalinfusion.org.au/world-ramadan-celebrations/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIxfall9bh_AIVEjErCh1FOQ11EAAYAyAAEgItC_D_BwE

WORKSHEETS

Worksheet 1 ISLAMIC WORDS AND MEANINGS

In the second column, write a definition beside each of the words below. Then check the answers below.

Words	Definition
1. Ramadan	
2. Suhoor	
3. Iftaar	
4. Tarawih	
5. Imam	
6. Sadaqah and Zakat	
7. Eid or Eid'ul Fitr	
8. Quran (Koran)	
9. Eid Mubarak	
10. Mosque	
11. Islam	
12. Muslim	
13. Allah	
14. Shia	
15. Sunni	
16. Halal	
17. Madrassah	
18. Muhammad/Mohammad	
19. Salaam	
20. Hijab	

ANSWERS: 1. The month where Muslims abstain from food during the day and bad habits. 2. A meal taken before dawn. 3. The breaking of the fast at sunset. 4. A special prayer performed during Ramadan. 5. A person who leads a congregation in prayer. 6. Donations or alms. 7. The celebration after Ramadan. 8. Holy Book of Islamic religion. 9. An Arabic term that means 'Blessed feast/festival'. 10. Muslim place of worship. 11. Islam is generally used in conversation to denote the religion or community of beliefs as a whole. 12. Muslim is generally used in conversation to qualify or distinguish a person who is a follower of Islam. 13. The Arabic word for God. 14. The second largest denomination of islam after Sunni Muslim. 15. The largest branch of Islam. 16. A term describing something that is lawful and permitted in Islam, according to Islamic law. Often used to describe food or drink which is permitted for consumption under Islamic dietary laws. 17. The Arabic word for an educational institution for any kind of learning. Often used to refer to an Islamic religious school or a school with courses in Islamic theology and religious law.18. The prophet of the Islamic faith. He was born A.D. 570 and died in A.D. 632. 19. A salutation, greeting, or blessing which means peace. 20. A headscarf worn by some Muslim women.

Worksheet 2 RAMADAN COLLAGE

In this book Deenie's family is seen through a window preparing for the first day of Ramadan. Invite students to colour and collage this image using different materials (cardboard, fabric, tissue paper, etc.), in colours similar to those used in this visual text. 3