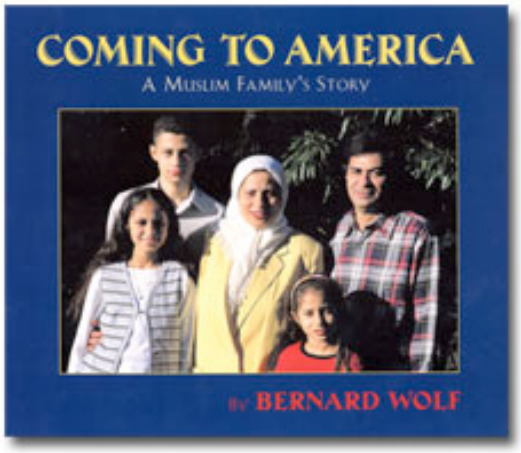

The ACTIVE LEARNER
multicultural literature for the classroom

Classroom Guide for
COMING TO AMERICA:
A MUSLIM FAMILY'S STORY
Written and photographed by **Bernard Wolf**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grade 3
Interest Level: Grades 1–5
Guided Reading Level: S
Lexile™ Measure: 870

Themes

Family Life, Immigrant Experience, Cultural and Religious Values and Traditions, Muslims in America

Synopsis

Hassan Mahmoud, an Egyptian, comes to the United States to make a better living for his family. After four years he is able to bring his wife and three children to live with him in a crowded apartment in Queens, New York. The story of the Mahmoud family in the U.S. is told in text and photographs that capture their home life, meals, schools, sports, food shopping, work, and observance of their religion as Muslims. Like thousands of other immigrants, the Mahmouds try to balance their lives between the new American ways and the traditions they have brought with them.

Background

As the author Bernard Wolf says, "In recent years a new wave of immigrants has come to the United States from countries in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America." Many of these immigrants are Muslims. Wolf also notes that "today there are between five and seven million Muslims in America." Like thousands of other immigrants, many of these recent newcomers have settled in the borough of Queens, a part of New York City. Queens is unique in that more languages are spoken there—approximately one hundred forty—than in any other place in the world. According to the 2000 census, although the vast majority speak English, more than half of Queens residents ages five and older speak a language other than English at home. Foreign-born residents make up about forty-six percent of the Queens population of some 2,230,000 people. The homelands of these foreign-born residents represent more than one hundred nations, making Queens the most diverse place in the world. It is a borough

teeming with food, dress, customs, religions, languages, festivals, and holidays of many nations. And it is here that the Mahmouds make their new life in America.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before introducing the book, share the background information with students. Then you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. What is the hardest thing you've ever done? Why was it so hard?
2. What is an immigrant? How would being an immigrant be hard?
3. Have you ever had to learn a new language? What was it (would it be) like to learn a new language?
4. What is unique or special about your family?
5. Why do people take pride in and celebrate their heritage? How does heritage affect peoples' lives?

Teaching Tip
You might consider using this book when discussing the observance of Mother's Day, which falls in mid-May, and/or Father's Day, which is celebrated in mid-June, with students.

Exploring the Book

Display the book cover and read aloud the title. Ask student what they expect to learn from the book. What story do they think the people in the cover photograph might tell?

Review the parts of the book including the dedication, title page, and afterword. Point out the copyright date (found on page 2) and mention that the children in the Mahmoud family would now be several years older.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out what life is like for a Muslim family that has recently moved to the United States.

Teaching Tip
You will want to be sensitive to the specific experiences of any students who are recent immigrants or whose parents are still struggling to adapt to life in the United States. Encourage these students to think about and make comparisons between their stories and the one they will read about.

VOCABULARY

Write the following words and phrases on the chalkboard and tell students that the words/phrases are related to the immigrant experience. Have students explore the meaning of each and then use it in a written sentence. Challenge students to add other words related to the immigrant experience to the list.

green card	traditional	custom
legally	adjusted	multiethnic
lottery	nations	memories
native language	foreign	extended family

READING AND RESPONDING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, review comprehension, and develop students' understanding of the book. Encourage students to refer to passages or photographs in the book to support their responses.

1. Why did Hassan Mahmoud come to the United States? Why did he come alone? Why might this be a common thing for many immigrants to do?

2. What are Hassan's dreams and goals? What are the dreams and goals of his wife and children?

3. Are the children's dreams and goals similar to or different from the things you and your friends dream about and want to do?

4. Why is prayer an important part of the day for the Mahmouds?

5. Why is school easier for Amr in the United States than in Egypt? How is school here different for Dina?

6. How do you think Rowan feels about life in America? What does she miss about her old neighborhood in Alexandria?

7. How does Hassan's job affect his life and the life of his family?

8. What is the main meal of the day like for the Mahmoud family?

9. Why do you think education means so much to the family?

10. Why is it important for Soad to go back to school?

11. What are the things that give the family comfort and strength?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in developing the roles of the circle members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for passages that tell about the struggles the family faces to make a new life in a new country.
- The **Illustrator** might draw scenes of the family's arrival in the United States, or other parts of the story that are not illustrated by the photographs.
- The **Connector** might find other books about immigrant families.
- The **Summarizer** should provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find books about contemporary life in Egypt.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, oral discussion, or drawings.

1. What are some things you would like to ask the Mahmouds about their religion or traditional customs?

2. How well do you think the Mahmouds are doing in becoming members of their new community in the United States? Give examples.
    a. How well is the family doing in keeping alive their own customs? Give examples.
    b. Why might it be important for them to do both?

3. What do you admire about people like the Mahmouds, who leave a place and people they know well to move to someplace far away and very different from what they know? Why?

Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for them to share and discuss their work.

1. Have students write a few paragraphs in which they compare and contrast their family life with that of the Mahmouds. Students might first make a chart to identify points of comparison.

2. Tell students to imagine they are Rowan. Then ask them to write an e-mail or a letter to a friend in Alexandria telling about her day.

3. Let students make a birthday or graduation card for Amr. Have them include a note in it congratulating him.

4. Have students research things that the Mahmouds might do or see in New York City during summer vacation. Have them prepare a list with descriptions of each possible activity.

5. The Mahmouds came from Egypt. Have students talk about where their families are from. Are they from some other place in the United States, or from another country? Encourage students to interview a family member to find out about where their family is from, and then write a description of it.

ELL (ESL) Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Make a chart showing different words from the book in English and in other languages spoken by students in the class. Post the chart in a prominent place.

2. Use the photographs in the book as clues to help make key words concrete.

3. Show students how to use the photographs as an aide to comprehending the story.

4. If students are having difficulty with verb tenses, use a calendar to help them understand when to use the past, present, or future.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Social Studies

1. Locate Egypt on a map or globe. Have students answer questions such as:

    - On what continent is Egypt?
    - What bodies of water border it?
    - What is its major river?
    - What is the capital of Egypt?
    - What countries are Egypt's neighbors?

2. Students might research and write reports about Islam. Suggest that they start with the facts in the Afterword of *Coming to America* and then find other information in books and on the Internet. Students might present their reports using maps, posters, photographs, or other visual materials.

3. Remind students that Hassan, the father in this story, works at night in a grocery store that is open twenty-four hours a day. Ask students to brainstorm a list of other jobs that people do at night. Compile a list on the chalkboard, then discuss why these night jobs are necessary. If possible, have students interview someone who has a night job and report their findings to the class.

Food and Nutrition

Have students review the text to make a list of foods that the family eats. If possible, find some simple recipes for Middle Eastern dishes that students might try in class or at home with their families.

Collect menus from restaurants in your community that offer different ethnic foods. Make a bulletin board display featuring menus and recipes of various cultures that students might enjoy trying.

Art and Religion

Have students work in groups to make a mural showing different places of worship, such as mosques, temples, churches, and synagogues, that are used by various religions. Students might also include symbols or artifacts related to each religion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bernard Wolf is a photojournalist who lives in New York City. He has traveled extensively and has had his camera aimed at the world for many years. Wolf's first book, *The Little Weaver of Agato,* was published in 1969. Since then he has produced candid explorations of many serious social issues and other cultures. In 1981, during the International Year of Disabled Persons, Wolf was honored by the American Library Association for his books featuring children with disabilities. More recent books include *Cuba: After the Revolution* and *HIV Positive.* Wolf has also had photographs in publications such as *Time, Life, National Geographic, Fortune, New York,* and *Travel/Holiday.*

COMING TO AMERICA: A MUSLIM FAMILY'S STORY has received several honors. These include:

- Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, NCSS/CBC
- Best Children's Books of the Year, Bank Street College
- "Choices," Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)

The book was also praised by *School Library Journal,* which noted that "Wolf's book looks at the life of an immigrant family from a broad perspective. A lively essay describes the Mahmouds' arrival in the U.S. from Egypt; how the various family members spend their time at school, work and at home; non-Muslim friends; interest in prototypical American activities such as watching television and playing basketball and attendance at the mosque on Friday. . . . Large excellent-quality color photographs on each spread depict events such as marketing, a birthday celebration and a graduation. Wolf portrays the Mahmouds as individuals rather than as representations; his approach serves the important purpose—especially in a suspicious and stressful time such as our own—of pointing out that differences of religion do not signify differences in humane behavior, love of family, or appreciation for hard work. Yet, the experience of this family can stand, in some ways, as a representation of the intersection of Islam with the United States."

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

For the latest reviews and awards related to **COMING TO AMERICA** visit:
http://www.leeandlow.com/books/america.html (English edition)
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