

IT AIN'T SO AWFUL, FALAFEL

BY FIROOZEH DUMAS



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About the Book

Zomorod (Cindy) Yousefzadeh is the new kid on the block . . . for the fourth time. California's Newport Beach is her family's latest perch, and she's determined to shuck her brainy loner persona and start afresh with a new Brady Bunch name—Cindy. It's the late 1970s, and fitting in becomes more difficult as Iran makes U.S. headlines with protests, revolution, and finally the taking of American hostages. Even mood rings and puka shell necklaces can't distract Cindy from the anti-Iran sentiments that creep way too close to home.

About the Author

Firoozeh Dumas was born in Abadan, Iran, and grew up in California. She is the author of the *New York Times* best-selling memoir *Funny in Farsi* and the national bestseller *Laughing Without an Accent*. Visit her website at www.firoozehdumas.com for resources on *It Ain't So Awful, Falafel*, including videos, pictures, and more.

Discussion

Everyone has a need to belong. Why is it especially difficult for someone like Zomorod to fit in? Discuss why Zomorod feels that changing her name will help her fit in when she moves to Newport Beach. How did her experiences in Compton influence her decision?

Discuss Cindy's friendship with Original Cindy. What is the price that Cindy pays for Original Cindy's friendship? Why does Original Cindy brush off Cindy when school starts? Explain what Cindy means when she says, "I may have changed my name, but my life is still the same" (p. 54). At what point does her life begin to change?

What is Cindy's first impression of Lincoln Junior High School? She has been taught that studying and learning is important. Why do American students think that it isn't "cool" to be smart? Cindy and Carolyn become friends because they have similar views toward education. Explain the sign in Carolyn's house: "If you can dream it, you can be it" (p. 83). What is Cindy's role in helping Brock realize his academic potential?

Define *stereotype*. What are the stereotypes that the students at Lincoln Junior High School have of Iranians? How do prejudices grow out of stereotypes? Brock Vitter is rude to Cindy. What prompts him to apologize? How does he blame his behavior on peer pressure? Discuss ways to confront peer pressure in schools.

Cindy's mother has a difficult time adjusting to the American culture. Compare and contrast the American and Iranian cultures.

Cindy says, "I don't like for people to meet my parents. I just want them to hide until they stop being embarrassing" (p. 32). What is it about Cindy's parents that embarrass her the most? How does Brock Vitter's father embarrass him? Explain how Original Cindy's mother embarrasses her at the end of the novel.

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Explain what Cindy means when she says, "When it comes to spending money, my dad's head is still in Iran" (p. 8). Explain the term, "Flushing money down the toilet" (p.22). Define *frugal*. What is the difference between being frugal and "flushing money down the toilet"? What is significant about the trip to Sears to buy a bedroom set?

Cindy's family is Muslim, but they aren't religious. Her dad says that their religion is "kindness." Discuss how Mr. and Mrs. Yousefzadeh show kindness toward others. How is their "brand" of kindness sometimes a source of embarrassment to Cindy?

In drama class, Cindy reads *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. Discuss why Cindy is so drawn to the line at the end of the play when Blanche DuBois says, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." Discuss the people who are kind to Cindy throughout the novel.

Cindy doesn't have much problem telling her mother what words mean in English, but she finds it difficult to explain why something is funny. Discuss why humor requires more than vocabulary to understand it. What are some of the most humorous scenes in the book? Cite evidence that Cindy is still learning how to respond to humor, especially among her classmates and friends. Have the students give an example of something they find funny that their parents do not.

The author uses similes to create certain images. For example, "There are trees everywhere and the city looks like it has just come back from a visit to a beauty salon" (p. 1). Find other examples of simile in the novel. How does the use of figurative language contribute to the literary quality of the novel? Explain the quote from Madeleine L'Engle: "Hate hurts the hater more'n the hated" (p. 352). Identify the haters in the novel. How are they hurt in the end?

Some pages have "notes" at the bottom. What do they contribute to the novel?

Curriculum Connections

Cindy's job is to look up words in the dictionary for her mother, who doesn't speak much English. Divide the class into groups and ask them to brainstorm words that Cindy's mother should know to get along better in America. Then have them create a picture dictionary that Cindy might use to teach her mother English words and phrases.

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution is the free-speech amendment. Cindy says no one in Iran can complain about the shah because there is no free-speech protection. Ask students to write a paper that explains why the First Amendment is the basis of a democracy.

Mr. Yousefzadeh believes that democracy in America keeps the country together. In Iran, the people fear the military. Instruct students to read the newspaper or listen to the news and prepare a brief speech about fears in America today. Is it war, gun violence, terrorists, the economy, or something else? Support thoughts by citing specific news sources.

Ask students to discuss the differences in an autobiography, a memoir, and fiction based on fact. After reading the Author's Note, have students write a short essay that discusses the genre to which this book belongs. Instruct them to support their views by making specific references to the book.

Zomorod translates to "emerald" in Persian. Use books in the library or sites on the Internet to find out about the "emerald" gemstone. The following website is helpful: gemstone.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=84:sapphire&catid=1:gem-by-gem&Itemid=14. Think about the special qualities of the emerald and its value, and the unique characteristics of Cindy. Then write an acrostic poem using Zomorod as the spine word.

Zomorod is hesitant about having friends in to visit because she is embarrassed that there are no American snack foods at her house. Conduct a "Snacking Around the World" project by asking students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to research

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common foods of a particular country. Ask them to make special note of snack foods that children enjoy. Have them write a one-page paper that describes a typical meal, and one snack food common to the culture.

Use books in the library or sites on the Internet to learn about the Iranian Hostage Crisis. The following website is helpful: www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-hostage-crisis/. Then write an article that Carolyn might write for the Lincoln Junior High School newspaper that puts the issue in simple terms for the students. Remember to include who, what, when, why, and how. Include a quote from Cindy and her father.

The president of Egypt and the prime minister of Israel won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978. Cindy's father thinks that Jimmy Carter should have won. Read about the Nobel Peace Prize: www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace. Find out what year Jimmy Carter won, and write a letter of congratulations to him from Mr. Yousefzadeh. State in the letter why he should have been a candidate in 1978.

Vocabulary/Use of Language

Nomadic (p. 2), *vent* (p. 51), *deface* (p. 59), *interjects* (p. 87), *impending* (p. 123), *effigies* (p. 139), *exile* (p. 145), *monotheism* (p. 149), *monopoly* (p. 150), *monogamy* (p. 150), *monocle* (p. 150), *sarcasm* (p. 203), *gumption* (p. 204), *vendetta* (p. 241), *revenge* (p. 241), *foray* (p. 242), *ominously* (p. 246), *ruminates* (p. 251), *perpetrator* (p. 255), *culprit* (p. 266), *equilibrium* (p. 300), *riveted* (p. 311), *magnanimously* (p. 318), *commission* (p. 329), *hospitable* (p. 336), and *conflicted* (p. 346).

Guide written by Pat Scales.