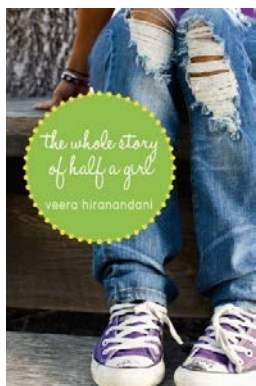


## Children's Book Review

Hiranandani, Veera. (2013). *The Whole story of half a girl*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press. 224 pp. ISBN: 978-0-375-87167-2 (pb), \$6.00 (Ages 9-12).

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Written from the point of view of a conflicted 11-year-old, *The Whole Story of Half a Girl*, a debut novel by Veera Hiranandani, provides a look into the life of a girl facing new challenges and trying to find her identity while torn between two cultures.

This realistic fiction story, written as a first-person account, begins with Sonia Nadhamundi, who is half Indian and half Jewish American, finding out that her father has just lost his job. Due to financial reasons, she and her younger sister, Natasha, are forced to leave their beloved, non-traditional private school and encounter the very different environment of a public school. For the first time ever, Sonia is forced to confront her dual ethnicity and religious beliefs, while navigating the uncharted waters of middle school politics. To compound her struggles, her father begins to display signs of clinical depression. Sonia also begins to find it difficult to communicate with her mother, a professor in a local college trying to keep the family financially and emotionally stable. Meanwhile, she does not know whether she should remain part of the popular cheerleading girls' crowd, who appear to be her friends, or join the Black girls who are always separate from the White majority in the school. One day, Sonia comes home from school to find her father has disappeared, and as the family looks for him, Sonia begins to search for the truth about who she is and where she belongs. Will she ever find herself and feel whole again?

In the beginning, the story seems commonplace, like any other children's book about having to change schools and make new friends while dealing with parents who do not understand. However, it gradually becomes apparent that there is more than meets the eye. On her second day in public school, Sonia realizes, for the first time in her life, that there are racial differences between people. In fact, the author provides a brief fictional representation of Beverly Tatum's (2003) book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Later, as Sonia begins to make friends with the most popular White girl in her class, she is exposed to derogatory ethnic remarks, which is yet another new experience for her. Although these may seem contrived and exaggerated, incidents like this do occur, even in elementary school, and give

rise to feelings of inferiority, isolation, sadness, and often rage among the targeted individuals.

The depiction of the popular White girls' culture is likewise authentic, although it may seem stereotypical. Admittedly, not all the popular girls are from the White majority, nor do they all look down on people from minority groups. However, as in most cases, the exceptions prove the rule.

The book also raises questions about religious faith, because Sonia's father and mother are Hindu and Jewish respectively. The students in her school are either curious or contemptuous about her Hindu practices. Perhaps because of the age of the character, there is no significant attempt made to counteract the demeaning remarks. Given the attacks that have been made on people worshipping in temples and mosques, particularly after September 11, it is noteworthy that the author chose to bring this issue to the forefront.

In addition to race and religion, this story also highlights the difficulties families face when they are confronted by the loss of a parent's job, resulting in financial constraints. When Sonia's father, who has a lucrative career, suddenly finds himself unemployed, Sonia and her sister are forced to change schools because their parents can no longer afford to send them to a private school. It is interesting that the author chose to highlight the supposed socioeconomic differences between private and public education by having Sonia notice that students who "don't need extra money" to go to public school possess fancy electronic gadgets and drive expensive cars. This is an over-generalization and will probably result in heated discussions among students and teachers, particularly those from less affluent school districts.

On the other hand, the reality that people who lose their jobs often suffer from physical or mental health issues, impacting family relationships, is depicted well and will encourage readers who may have had similar experiences to express their feelings about such events. The temporary disappearance of Sonia's father as a result of his illness may seem exaggerated, but the author uses the incident to present an interesting exchange between Sonia and her maternal grandmother about differences in faith and culture.

Although it is unlikely that this story of a "half-girl" will change a reader's mind in a drastic manner, it will, in my opinion, certainly give rise to valuable discussions about culture, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic issues. With a middle school girl as its main character, it may be argued that the book is gender-specific and thus appeals only to girls of a certain age. However, it is targeted towards all children between the ages of 9 and 12 and highlights the struggles many adolescents face in school and at home, struggles that are not necessarily limited to girls alone.

*The Whole Story of Half a Girl* can be used in a variety of ways for classroom instruction. To begin with, it creates awareness among students that racism exists for people of color who are not Black. In addition, it can also be used for discussions about religious beliefs and differences. Students can research and present new and interesting information as an extension to the

social studies curriculum about world cultures. Furthermore, since adolescents may not always be ready to share their personal stories for fear of being judged or mocked, the challenges resulting from household economic crises and/or mental health issues are not often contemplated as part of the daily curriculum. Using this book may help teachers bring tough topics such as these to the forefront. I am hopeful that reading about these issues will lead to more open and honest conversations. In general, this story can help adolescent students explore and understand their individual culture(s), empathizing with each other, recognizing the value of differences among people, and eventually creating a kinder, gentler, and more accepting environment in their classrooms and in schools.

### Reference

Tatum, B. D. (2003). *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* (5<sup>th</sup> anniversary revision). New York, NY: Basic Books.