

# OTHER WORDS for Home

## ABOUT THE BOOK

When the civil war comes too close to her hometown in Syria, Jude travels with her mother to stay with an uncle in the United States, leaving her father and brother behind. While worrying about the family and home she's left behind, Jude adjusts to a new society and its labels, a new school, new ways to express herself, and new friends. She may even turn her unwelcoming American cousin into an ally. In lovely lyrical verse that cuts to the heart of how we build barriers and how we break them down, Warga presents a memorable protagonist of inspiring courage.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jude's brother and father argue over how the people should handle the revolution, while Jude just wants peace at home (pp. 16-17, pp. 29-33). How does the revolution affect each member of the family differently? Why do you think families become divided over opinions about how their country should be?
2. When they land in the United States, Jude says "It is strange to feel lucky / for something that is making my heart feel so sad" (p. 66). Describe her mix of emotions about leaving home, and how her struggle evolves (pp. 168, 170). Have you heard or read about similar mixed feelings in other refugees' stories? How do you decide whether you are lucky or unlucky when your feelings are mixed?
3. Jude's mom tells her, "Americans don't have much history / so they like things that are old" (p. 74). Did you ever consider the United States as being young compared to other countries? In poem IX on p. 80, and in XIII on p. 91, Jude describes some first impressions and closer observations of America. How do her descriptions affect your view of the United States?
4. From the time they arrive in the United States, both Jude and her mom struggle with the idea of loyalty to home. Jude doesn't want to seem too impressed by her uncle's house (p. 76), and her mom resists forgetting home (pp. 88, 90, 96). How do their ideas of what home means change as they grow accustomed to living in the United States? Who and what help Jude see that she doesn't have to choose only one?
5. How does Jude's friendship with Layla change Jude's feelings about belonging in America? What is Layla's biggest struggle as a daughter of immigrants?
6. Jude thinks of Arabic proverbs to explain puzzling behavior she sees in other people. Discuss the proverb "He cannot give what he does not have" (p. 180). How does this help her understand her cousin and her uncle? What does this proverb mean to you?
7. When Jude begins wearing hijab, many people look at her differently, and even her aunt suspects that she has been forced or pressured to wear it. How is this reception different than what she would have received in Syria? What do you think of her decision to wear hijab even though people don't understand it?
8. Why do you think Jude is able to befriend people as different as her cousin Sarah, Layla, and Miles? Do you think it is unusual for people to have such different friends? Are your friends all similar, or different? What are some benefits of having relationships with different kinds of people with different interests?
9. After an attack in a city far away, Layla tells Jude that now she will learn what it means to be Muslim in America. What does she mean? What does Jude discover? What are some acts of kindness that help her and Layla's family get through this difficult time?
10. Discuss the titles given to the parts of the book: Changing, Arriving, Staying, Hoping, Growing, and Living. How do these words reflect Jude's journey from the beginning to the end of the book? Does she change? Do you think her changes are positive?



## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

**From the Outside In.** Think about a time when you have joined a new group or environment. It could be a new school, moving to a new city or neighborhood, joining a new sports team or activity, or something else. Try to remember the details you noticed about how people interacted and what the “rules” of the environment were. Write a poem about that environment, or any environment, from the perspective of a newcomer.

**See the Real Me.** Think of something you enjoy, or a habit you have, that some people don't seem to understand. Use art and/or writing (a short story or poem) to express how that thing makes you feel, and how it is different to you than how it appears to others.

**The Bravest, Scariest Thing.** Take five minutes to think of the bravest thing you have ever done. Write down what you did on a piece of paper in about five lines, including why it took courage or was a little bit scary. Fold up your paper and put all the papers together in a cup or hat. Everyone take turns picking one out and reading it aloud to the group. If you like, try guessing who wrote which story.

**Before the War.** Choose a region or country that is affected by war or at war. Do some research to find images and descriptions of what that society and culture were like before the war. You may have to go back many years. Create a collage, short video, or presentation using images and words that describe how the place used to look and the kinds of activities locals and tourists used to do there.

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## FIVE QUESTIONS WITH **JASMINE WARGA**

### **1. Why did you choose to tell Jude's story in verse?**

In my first prose drafts, I struggled to find Jude's voice. Then I had a lightbulb moment. Arabic is such a naturally poetic language, and I thought verse might help me overcome my mental block about writing from the perspective of a character who, unlike me, is not a native English speaker. After that, everything clicked into place.

### **2. Do you think you could move to a new country?**

Whenever I daydream about this, I'm aware it's from a place of immense privilege. I would be moving of my own volition, and in my fantasy I'm set up nicely in terms of housing and other necessities. When I was younger, my father told my brother and me that one of his biggest hopes for us was never to have to know the hardship of being an immigrant. I often think about that, especially now that I'm a parent.

### **3. Did you have a Mrs. Ravenswood, a teacher who made you feel at home?**

I had two. My fifth grade language arts teacher, Mrs. Darling, encouraged me to take pride in my love of reading and writing. And it is impossible to overstate the influence of my high school English teacher, Connie Smith, who fed my spirit as a fledging writer by introducing me to books and poems that weren't part of the curriculum but that she somehow knew I needed to read.

### **4. After publishing two YA novels, what did you have to learn about middle grade?**

So much! About voice, structure—you name it. And I'm still learning.

### **5. Have you ever been The New Kid?**

In eighth grade, my family moved to a different suburb of Cincinnati. 9/11 happened in my first month of school, and I decided—having absorbed lots of xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric—that I would hide my cultural background from my classmates. I spent that year mostly keeping to myself and doodling during algebra, which is why to this day I can't solve for  $x$ .

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