

All Mixed Up

Raj Tawney

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In Raj Tawney's perceptive novel *All Mixed Up*, a multiracial boy contends with bullying and finds friendship in the aftermath of 9/11.

Kamal's father is from India. His mother is a New Yorker with Italian and Puerto Rican roots. At home, Kamal relishes diverse culinary flavors and is at ease, but at school, he's scapegoated. He feels simultaneous shame, cultural pride, and confusion over his mixed identity. Though his own self-consciousness about being brown sometimes heightens matters, he also tries to deflect his peers' negative attention with humor.

Then Kamal meets Jaz, a Pakistani student whose irrepressible smile is refreshing but who is secretive about his background. Every day, Kamal and Jaz face microaggressions and prejudice, including a teacher's insinuations about refugees, Islamophobic sentiments, and a classmate's "fresh off the boat" comments. Kamal is sensitive: he bristles when he hears a classmate comparing Jaz's looks to those of a suspected terrorist and when his grandmother expresses opinions that startle him, and he worries about Jaz's precarious home situation.

Concerns surrounding undocumented immigration gain urgency as they accumulate, including with the threat of a child's deportation. The story includes tough, illuminating conversations about when to speak up about undocumented people, when to stay silent for the sake of their safety, and when to understand that even adults don't have all of the answers. Its treatment of sensitive political topics is humane, reflected in Kamal's growing emotional maturity.

In the touching novel *All Mixed Up*, a middle school student faces prejudice but also makes a friend with whom he feels understood. Plotted in gripping stages, the story culminates with hope.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2024)

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