

Title: *More Than Just a Pretty Face*

Author: Syed M. Masood

Genre: Realistic Fiction

Reviewer's Name and Grade: Benjamin W., 9th Grade

Date Reviewed: March 23, 2021

This book takes place in California. The main character goes to a school called Aligheri Prep and works in San Francisco at a restaurant called Remarquable.

Danyal Jilani is more than just a pretty face, just in case you didn't know. Even though he may have no academic or athletic achievements, he is an accomplished chef. Unfortunately, in the Muslim world, being a chef has no real future. This is why he is stuck still trying to find a wife in the "bargain bin". His latest prospect was a girl a year older than him by the name of Bisma. When she was younger, a video of her sleeping with a white guy went on the internet, shaming her to the rest of the Muslim world. Although he feels bad for the girl, Danyal doesn't accept her offer because he has his eyes on someone else. When he gets selected as a contestant for Renaissance Man, an annual academic competition at Danyal's school, he sees this as a chance to show his dream girl, Kaval, that he has more than just looks. However, there is one problem. A student selected for Renaissance Man is usually one of the brightest in the school. Danyal is one of, or may even be the dumbest one in the school. Even worse, he has to write his report on Winston Churchill, which he knows nothing about other than the fact that he likes to wear bowties. Danyal decides to go to his dad for help. He's surprised when his dad drops an f-bomb at the mention of Churchill's name. This intrigues Danyal, since he has never heard his dad curse like that, and after a little bit of research, he learns about the Bengal Famine. Danyal can't get his mind off of the famine and even though everyone suggests against doing it, he decides to write his Churchill report on it. He believes that he must talk about the famine. He goes to Bisma for help because she is very smart, and doesn't object to what he is choosing to write about. As Danyal spends more time with Bisma, he begins to think less of Kaval and more of Bisma. With Kaval seeing top prospects with a lot of money, Danyal will have to sort out his feelings for the two girls and choose one of them.

Now, I will answer some questions about the book:

Did the plot keep you interested?

This plot definitely kept me interested. The plot was funny and had a couple of plot twists. The characters were so well built that I felt for them. I wanted the characters to do certain things so I kept on reading to find out.

Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?

I think the pace of this book was just right. The author never spent too long on one part of the story but also made sure to explain things fully before continuing.

What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?

I think this book is appropriate for kids in grades 8-12. There is a little bit of cursing and sexual content that wouldn't make this book appropriate for younger kids. Older kids will understand Bisma's situation better and be able to follow the plot easier.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

I would recommend this book to readers who like a well written, funny novel. Any reader will enjoy this book even if realistic fiction is not the genre for them.

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book - There are a lot of Muslim terms in this book and some of them you have to search up.

Rating:

I would rate this book *5 stars*. The plot was really good and funny and kept me entertained the entire time. The book opened my eyes to a new topic and culture. The characters were really well developed and everything was clear. The only thing that was confusing were some of the non-English words.

Reviewer Name and Grade: Kate S., 11th Grade

Date Reviewed: July 10, 2021

Danyal Jilani is a world-renowned heartthrob. Correction: Danyal Jilani *thinks* he's a world-renowned heartthrob. The book begins with nineteen year old Danyal sporting what he believes to be an "irresistible grin" to who else but Kaval Sabsvari, the girl he's had a massive crush on since possibly the beginning of time. They attend Alighieri Prep in California, along with Kaval's twin brother and close friend of Danyal's, Sohrab, and Danyal's other close friend, Zar. Kaval is outspoken, sporty, hardworking, and has good looks- all traits Danyal is head-over-heels for. On the other hand, Danyal doesn't care about school in the slightest. He probably has some of the worst grades at Alighieri Prep, most notably in history. His dream is to be a chef and he pursues his love for food at just about anywhere: a French restaurant he works for, as well as Sohrab's well-furbished, dream kitchen. There, he cooks just about anything from his traditional *khatti daal*, to French croissants. However, in the beginning of the school year, his focus shifts from daydreams about picnicking and playing basketball with Kaval and newly crafted recipes to a recent honor bestowed upon him- the Renaissance Man. The Renaissance Man is a competition held at Danyal's school every year. At the start of a school year, teachers from each subject nominate a qualified student to represent them through a speech that is presented in front of the entire school at the end of the year. Danyal never believed he would be nominated-especially not by the old, boring history teacher, Mr. Tippet. However, a hasty and rash decision by none other but Mr. Tippet in the middle of a history lesson yanks the glory out of the title, and Danyal becomes Renaissance Man. Danyal must write about Mr. Tippet's beloved historical figure, Winston Churchill. But after Danyal has a brisk chat with his father, he finds that maybe Winston Churchill isn't as beloved as history paints him to be. He isn't completely sure why-just that his father has a strong hatred for the man-until Bisma Akram walks into the picture. Bisma is a kind-hearted and gentle woman, who is already attending her first year in college. Danyal had

become acquainted with her in the beginning of the school year, as a possible wife, and learned of her difficult past, which is seen as a disgrace and burden to her Muslim family but tugged at a part of Danyal's sympathetic heart. They reconnect, mostly through Bisma's insistent younger sister, but also through Bisma's willingness to help Danyal out with his Renaissance Man speech. Through Bisma, he learns about the devastating Bengal Famine of 1943, a widespread event occurring in India due to Churchill's policies and British plundering. Danyal struggles with whether to tell a glorified version of Winston Churchill's story or the truth about Churchill. A truth he knows will make Mr. Tippett furious-which could potentially mean failing history and not graduating for the second time. Bisma believes he should use the speech as an opportunity to teach the truth, whereas Kaval thinks he should stick to the heroizing script. Which path will he take and who will he choose in the end?

Did the plot (for fiction) or presentation of information (for nonfiction) keep you interested?

Yes, definitely. There were a lot of moving parts- the Renaissance Man competition, Danyal's love for cooking, and the overarching theme of Danyal wanting to become a better person and finding his voice, so I was entertained the whole step of the way. This is also all coming from a male perspective which not only kept me interested since it is a different perspective, but can also be an example to young men, showing that it is ok to express their feelings and talk about their problems, like Danyal. For example, Danyal is seen reaching out to many people for help, like his hard-to-please boss, Brodeur and his closest friends, Sohrab and Zar.

Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?

The pace of the book starts out a little slow, but ends up going at just the right pace towards the middle, and ending with a very heartwarming conclusion.

What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?

I would recommend this to 13+ year olds because though it does discuss some mature themes, it is mostly lighthearted and a relatively simple read.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

I would recommend this book to anyone who appreciates a touching romance, as we see Danyal struggle and inevitably succeed at finding his lifelong partner and first love throughout the story. "More Than a Pretty Face" is also an easy and funny read, with characters like Zar and Sohrab acting as comedic relief in all the drama Danyal faces, so readers who want to get back into reading more books would probably enjoy it.

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?

Like I mentioned before, the beginning of the book is a little slow, but trust that the ending is all worth it! Danyal really does prove that he is "more than a pretty face" by maturing and growing as a person by the end. Also, because the main characters are Muslim, this book incorporates a lot of the religion and Islamic culture which I found myself learning more about while reading it!

5 stars: I'm really glad I read this book; it was awesome!

Despite this book being an easier read, the ending makes it all worth it. The loose ends at the start of the book get tied together perfectly in the end, making me give “More Than Just a Pretty Face” five stars. Moments where Danyal was being vulnerable and open to his friends about his relationship with Bisma and asking for help were always good to see, like the night he talked to Sohrab about everything on his mind a few days before his school’s Renaissance Man competition. Bisma is also such a great character. She is kind, warm, caring, but also a super cool person who has a strong love for superheroes, and has a lot of admirable strength and independence (despite the shame she is put under for not conforming to her family’s standards). Overall, this book is a definite read for those who love to read about cute and touching stories.