

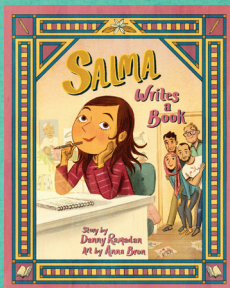
Salma won't let anyone stop her from becoming the swimming champion she knows she can be.

When Salma gets the chance to try out for her school's swim team, it feels like her dreams could come true. But learning to swim is only her first challenge—some people don't think Salma belongs in the pool. With the help of her friends and family, Salma must find her own way to make a splash.

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US \$8.99 / CDN \$11.99

ISBN 9781773218298



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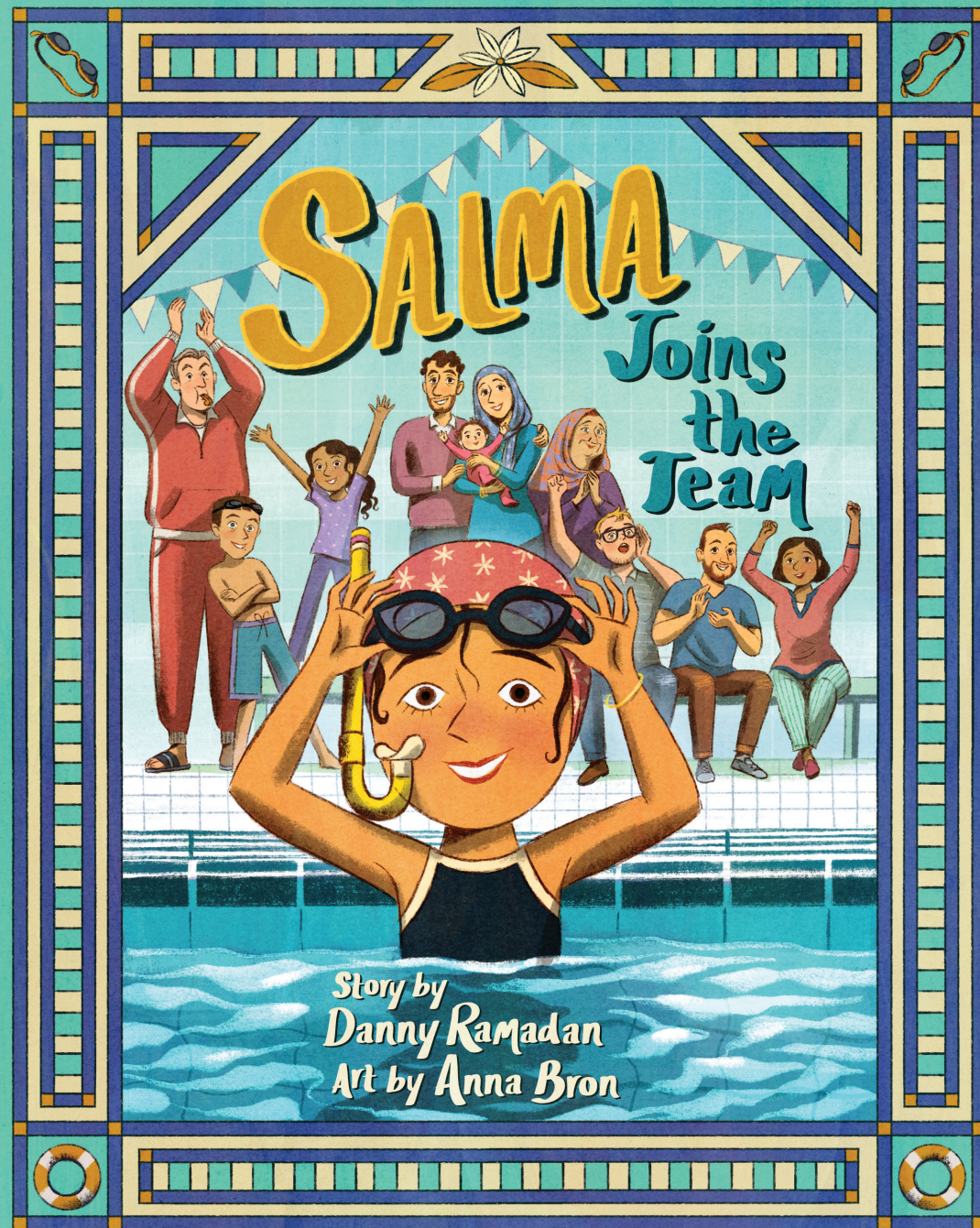
Salma Joins the Team

Ramadan



Bron

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Story by
Danny Ramadan
Art by Anna Bron



SALMA

Joins the Team

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Bron





Chapter 1

Salma has a big question to ask, but she doesn't know where to start. She hovers in her bedroom doorway, watching Mama breastfeed her new baby sister, Nora, in the living room.

“Hi, Salma. Do you need anything?” Mama asks while the baby coos.

“Nope. Nothing,” Salma says, losing her nerve.

“Well, it feels like there is something,” Mama says



playfully. She pats the couch beside her. “Come sit with us.”

Salma pauses, then crosses over to sit by Mama’s side. She bounces her legs on the couch, still not sure how to bring this up with her mother. Mama tightens the shawl around Nora, then looks Salma in the eye.

“Salma,” Mama says, “what do you want?”

It’s now or never, Salma thinks. “Mama, you know how much I love Yusra Mardini, right?”

Mama nods. “Of course.” Over the past few months, Mama has helped Salma redecorate her room: there are pictures of Mardini standing by the Olympic torch, a poster of her bundled up in a towel after winning a qualifying swimming race, and a little replica of an Olympic gold medal hanging on the wall.

“Well, today I shared a video of her with my class.”

Salma pictures it: the swimmer standing proudly at the edge of the pool. She doesn't look nervous. Like Salma, she has light tanned skin with some dimples and birthmarks. A wisp of hair—chestnut brown, just like Salma's—escapes her swimming cap. Her eyes are the color of honey, Salma knows, even though Yusra is wearing goggles.

“All my friends loved Yusra,” Salma insists.

She remembers her friend Riya turning to her in excitement when the video finished. “Yusra is so cool. She went through so much, but now she's thriving!”

“It's very common for immigrants and refugees to be successful when given the chance,” Ms. Singh said.

“Yusra is my new favorite Olympian,” Ayman added. “I don't know any other Olympians, but she is my favorite for sure.”

Even though she'd seen the video many times, Salma's eyes had been glued to the big screen, watching her hero doing the butterfly—breaking the surface of the water, and splashing it in an arc over her head, pushing herself forward with purpose.

“I wish I could swim like Yusra,” Salma told her classmates.



And that's when Ms. Singh had shared the most amazing thing ever. The thing Salma needs to ask Mama about now.

"Maybe you can be like Yusra!" Ms. Singh had said. "There's a swimming club here at school!"

Salma doesn't know how to swim and no one in her family has ever been to a swimming pool. But Ms. Singh had explained that she could learn to swim if she joined the club. If she worked hard, she could even try out for the school swim team. And if she made it onto the team, she'd get to race against other schools!

All she needs is her parents' permission.

Salma leans into Mama's side and lets images of her possible future fill her head. She, too, could dive elegantly into the swimming pool. She could push the water with her arms and legs until she floated on its

surface like a butterfly. She could win all the Olympic medals in the world and carry them around her neck proudly.



“That’s nice, Salma.” Mama’s voice breaks into her thoughts. “It’s always wonderful to share your interests with friends. But was there something else you wanted to ask me?”

Salma takes a deep breath. She is scared to ask her question. What if Mama says no? But there’s only one way to find out.

“Mama, I want to join the school swim club,” she says in a rush. She shares what Ms. Singh told her. Mama leans back and rocks the baby softly. Then she gets up and puts Nora in her crib.

“Mama? Why aren’t you answering?” Salma asks. “Are you afraid I will drown?”

“Oh, don’t say that! Of course not,” Mama says, busying herself with the dishes. “You are a strong girl, and I am sure the school has many lifeguards.”

“Then what is it, Mama?” Salma pulls at Mama’s robe. Mama sighs. She turns off the tap and bends down to Salma’s eye level.

“Honestly, Salma, the problem is that our religion and traditions say that girls cannot wear revealing outfits in public,” Mama says. “That includes the swimsuit you will have to wear if you join this sport.”

Wait, what? Salma’s never thought about that before. She wears long sleeves more often than most of the other girls at school, and there is a section of her closet for the clothes she can wear to the mosque. But she’s never really thought about why . . . or that wearing a swimsuit would be a problem. “I don’t understand. Yusra wears a swimsuit all the time.”

“There are many different cultures, religions, and traditions in Syria. We come from a more traditional

background than Yusra.” Mama reminds Salma of the other Syrian women they meet when they go to the mosque. They wear long sleeves, and long skirts, too. And they all wear the hijab around their heads like Mama. “For Syrians like our family and the people who go to our mosque, wearing a swimsuit could be seen as disrespectful.”



Salma doesn't want to be disrespectful. She loves going to the mosque—it's the only time she meets other Syrian girls, as none of them go to her school. But she wants to be like Yusra Mardini, who is also a Syrian girl, even if she is from a different background. It's not like Salma would wear her swimsuit to the mosque!

“Please just think about it, Mama.” Salma channels Yusra's determination. “I really want to be part of this swim team. It means the whole world to me, Mama.”

Mama's face softens. She pulls Salma in for a hug and kisses her on the forehead. “I will think about it, Salma,” Mama says. “I will discuss it with Baba and let you know what we decide.”

Salma nods. She will do whatever her parents think is best, but she hopes they will make the right decision and let her swim.



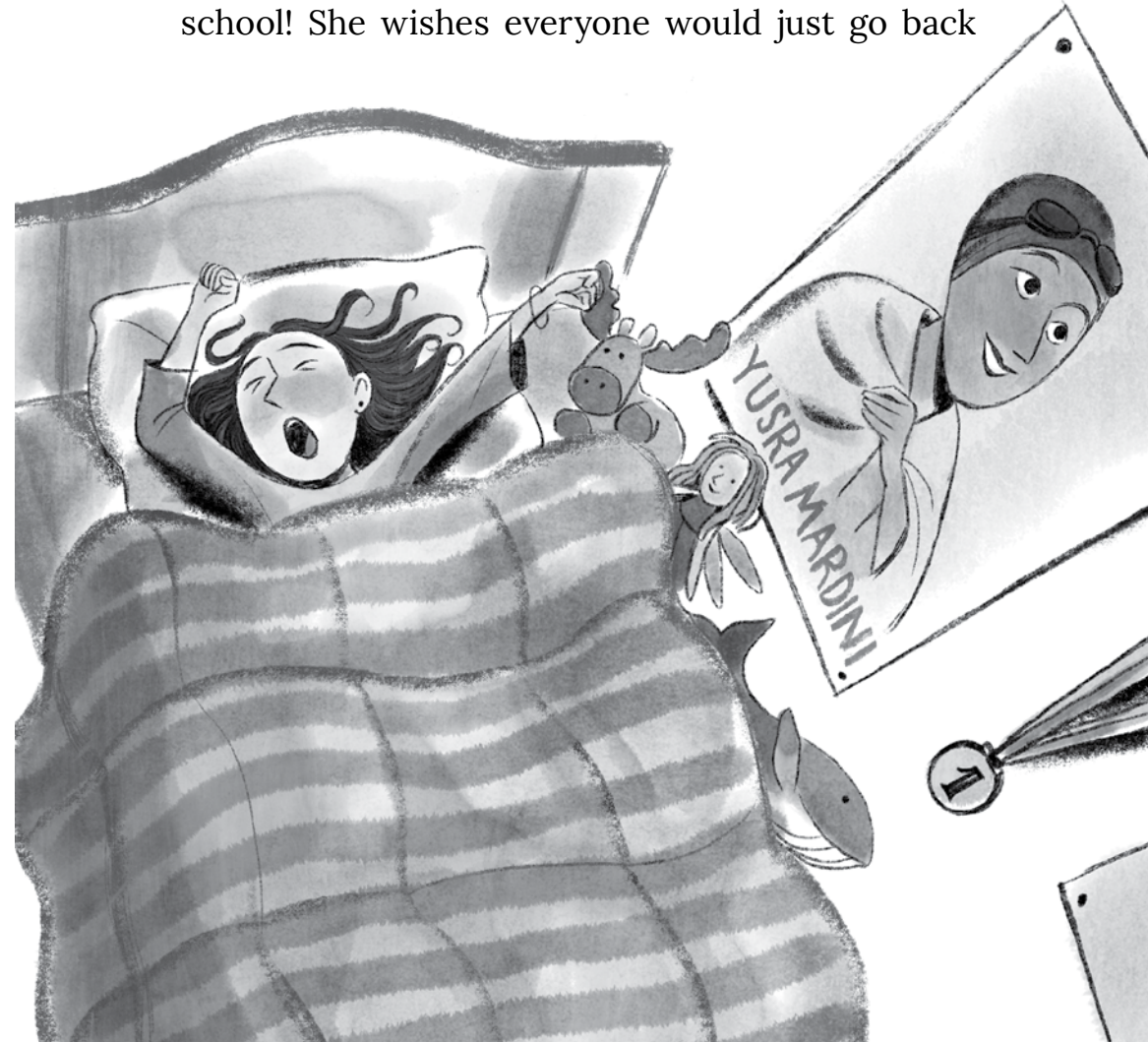
Chapter 2

“Salma, you’re going to be late for school!”

Mama’s voice is soft and singsong-like. Salma opens her eyes to the bright fall light coming through her window. She flips over and buries her face in her soft pillow. She was having the most wonderful dream. Ice cream mountains and unicorn ponies and all the good cotton candy clouds she could ever ask for. She would much rather go back to her dreamland.

“Salma!”

With sleep still in her eyes, Salma turns over and sighs. It’s unfair that she has to wake up early for school! She wishes everyone would just go back



to bed so she could stay in hers. This soft, warm, cozy bed with her fluffy pink pillow . . .

Salma's eyes land on her poster of Yusra. It has been almost a week since she asked her mama for permission to join the swimming club, and she hasn't gotten an answer yet. Maybe today is the day.

"Okay!" Salma finally jumps out of bed.

"We have raised the laziest girl in the world," Baba teases when he sees her exiting her bedroom. He sips his cup of Turkish coffee while cradling little Nora in his other arm. Mama prepares their lunch boxes in the kitchen.

"I am not lazy!" Salma says. "I'm just selective about where I spend my energy."

"Spend your energy on getting ready for school, then," Mama says.

Salma huffs in annoyance and walks back into her room. She stuffs her schoolbooks in her bag, quickly makes her bed, then lays out her clothes before she grabs her towel and heads toward the shower.

"Hey, before you do that, come over here for a second," Baba says. Salma turns on her heel and stomps toward the kitchen. She stands, arms crossed, towel on her shoulder, and waits for her baba to speak. Baba puts down his cup of coffee, then ruffles her unruly hair.

"Wow, you really don't like mornings," Baba says.

"I like them a lot, actually," Salma says. "I just wish they happened in the afternoon."

Mama and Baba burst out laughing. After a second, Salma joins them, and the baby giggles, too. *Mornings are not that bad*, Salma thinks. She gets to spend time

with her three favorite people in the world.

“Well, maybe this will make your morning better.” Baba picks up a gym bag that Salma hadn’t noticed before and hands it to her. It’s heavier than she expects.

“What is this?” Salma is puzzled.

“It’s a surprise,” Mama says. “Open it up!”

Salma unzips the bag and digs her arm into it up to the elbow. She feels something round and plastic and pulls it out.

“Swimming goggles!” Salma’s sleepiness evaporates on the spot. She shrieks in excitement. “What? What does this mean?”

“Keep digging, Salma,” Baba says with a joyful smile.

Salma pulls out a beautiful swimming cap with little jasmine flowers printed on it, a yellow snorkel, and a small kickboard she can float on while training.

There is a white cotton towel, and a water bottle, too. She touches something smooth and stretchy and pulls it out. It’s a swimsuit: black, with sporty white trim.

“This is the best surprise ever!” Salma jumps and hugs her baba around the neck. All of her new swimming gear falls to the ground. “Thank you so much.”

“Well, your mama and I spoke, and we decided that you should do whatever brings you joy,” Baba says.

Mama walks over. Salma gives her a hug, and Mama kisses Salma’s forehead. “Whatever makes you happy, Salma.” Mama hands Salma a piece of paper with a signature at the bottom. “Here is your permission slip.”

Salma feels like the luckiest girl alive. The warmth gathering in her chest travels up to her face. “Thank you so much, Mama and Baba. You are the best parents in the world.”



Baba brings Salma in for a closer hug, and Mama joins them. They hold on to one another for a moment.

“Now, go get ready for school.” Mama rolls up her sleeves, returning to the kitchen.

“See? Mornings don’t have to be such a bad thing,” Baba adds.

Salma gathers her new swimming gear and takes it toward her bedroom. “I am not saying I’m changing my views on mornings, but I will consider today as a better example.”

She hears her parents laugh again as she looks up at her posters of Yusra Mardini. She sees the swimmer’s wide smile and the joy of winning on her face. “I will make you proud,” Salma promises. “I will win every race. But first, I have to learn how to swim!”