

Hazel: Serena said the diverse cast reminded her of the neighbourhood in which she grew up. We had an art brief.

Ozge: Elsewhere I have seen illustrations of Hijabi characters where things weren't just right, hair showing, short sleeves etc. Serena researched well and I checked.

What advice would you give to other writers who want to write about a culture that's not their own?

Hazel: Research respectfully. Or collaborate.

What was the Islamic community's response to the book? The non-Islamic community?

Ozge: Extremely supportive from both. 'It's about time for a Muslim character in mainstream.' At the launch we autographed all the first print run.

How did you get word out about the book?

Hazel: By offering culturally appropriate but 'fun' resources. Classroom playscript. Teachers' notes. Activities. Sample chapter to download.

Ozge: Hazel's newsletter, radio and blog interviews, Craigieburn library launch with Hume City Council's media, Twitter with hashtags like #WeNeedDiverseBooks. Panels at literary festivals.

Has there been any overseas interest in it yet?

Hazel: Yes. And distribution via Ali-Gator to Islamic schools in U.K, New Zealand, Australia and Malaysia.

Ozge: But we're interested in mainstream readership too.

How did you get the book into schools?

Ozge: As Hazel is an established author, fans buy her books. Schools order directly from publisher BookPOD's own online store:

www.bookstore.bookpod.com.au/p/9146280/hijabi-girl.html. The launch and media release helped with awareness in schools. All information centred on Hazel's 'Hijabi Girl' book page.

www.hazeledwards.com/page/hijabi_girl.html

What is Hijabi Girl about?

Ozge: It's the Book Parade. Unable to find a character in a hijab who looks like her, Melek writes her own, with cartoons from newcomer Tien who draws fantastic worlds as an escape, and interruptions from soccer-mad Zac who never agrees with Melek's ideas for a girls' Aussie Rules footy team. Then there's dress-ups-guru Lily who likes stuff from the past. The quirky classroom of Miss has a Rainbow Reading Chair and Zac's escaping pet rat is allowed to stay as long as Rattus Rattus is being read to in any language by any child. Even Zac. It's about a mainstream, multi-cultural Australian school with fun, food and culturally adapted clothes and stories.

'Hijabi Girl' is about friendship and imaginative problem-solving, not bullying.



Hazel Edwards, Ozge Alkan and Serena Geddes, co-authors & illustrator of Hijabi Girl (image courtesy of Hume City Council)

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What are your hopes for the book?

Ozge: That students will dress up in their next book parade as characters from 'Hijabi Girl'.

Hazel: That schools find our discussion resources a fun way to appreciate other cultures.

And a TV series.

What have been the reviewers' responses?

'More kids' books like this please. '(George Ivanoff)

'...a refreshing look at the diverse mix of cultures within most Australian school yards.' Coral Vass

'...all the differences make no difference, in a way.' Joanna (Good Reads).♦

Hazel Edwards OAM has published 200 books. Best known is 'There's a Hippopotamus on our Roof Eating Cake' currently touring as a musical. Hazel has been on an Antarctic expedition, trekked in Nepal and co-writes across cultures. 'Not Just a Piece of Cake; Being an

Author' is her memoir. www.hazeledwards.com has hints for aspiring writers and an online e-book store.

Ozge Alkan was former head librarian at Ilim College but is now on maternity leave from Boorandara Public Library. Holding a Masters of Information Studies (Children's Librarianship), she is a passionate reader and literacy advocate. Her first book 'Hijabi Girl' and her first baby arrived in the same year. She loves Book Character Parades. Ozge wears a hijab, sometimes in her footy club colours.

Serena Geddes is a Melbourne based illustrator who spent six years working for Walt Disney Studios in Australia on sequels to The Lion King, Peter Pan and The Jungle Book. She has illustrated over 36 books since 2009 and is known for her work on the Lulu Bell series written by Belinda Murrell (Penguin Random AUS) and the Misty Inn series (USA). www.serenageddes.com.au

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