

The Bubble Kids

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The Bubble Kids adds much-needed context to lives that could very well parallel those featured in blood-soaked headlines.

A compelling and hopeful young adult novel that reinforces the universality of the bonds of friendship, love, and family, *The Bubble Kids* is an engaging, pointed, and educational must-read for North Americans who only know of Pakistan via media oversimplification and caricature.

The story explores the soon-to-be intertwined lives of brothers Sher and Ali, in mountainous rural Pakistan, and friends Adam and Omar, privileged kids in Karachi. The 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States spark change in all of their lives. Sher and Ali's family struggles to make ends meet as their region slides into economic decline. A mysterious, bearded stranger and roving bands of armed men rumored to be Taliban fighters threaten to bring political instability and personal hardship to all of them. Meanwhile, in the city, Adam and Omar try to retain a semblance of normalcy while their parents, teachers, and neighbors are consumed by the news and debate about terrorism, the Taliban, and Islamic fundamentalism. As violence in the region ramps up, the boys are expelled from their bubble of comfort to face a terrifying challenge involving Taliban insurgents.

What's most striking about the book is the familiarity of the boys' day-to-day experience, even for a reader whose life circumstances couldn't be more different. They are distracted by thoughts of sports tryouts and pretty girls. They navigate their pending transition to adulthood with a recognizable mixture of optimism and frustration, wanting protection while feeling hypersensitive to being treated like the children they no longer feel they are.

The boys' relatability makes the dramatic and violent events that unfold around them all the more poignant, and readers gain the realization alongside Adam that "there could be no more fooling himself into thinking that bad things happened only to other people." Adam's struggle to make sense of the contrast between his affluent upbringing and the violence and political upheaval that touch everyone he knows feels very natural, not contrived to make a point, as does Sher's emergence as his brother's—and ultimately the other boys'—keeper.

With the inclusion of so many finely wrought details about daily life, the novel acts as a window into another part of the world, adding much-needed context to lives that could very well parallel those featured in blood-soaked headlines. We can smell Sher's mother's sweet tea and see the glint off of Omar's swimming trophy, and in doing so we are confronted with the humanity of those involved (especially inadvertently) in conflicts around the world. The novel excels especially at highlighting everyday moments of resistance to terrorism, violence, and extremism, practiced one brave act at a time, that mainstream journalism ignores but that fiction persists in exposing. *The Bubble Kids* is a completely engrossing and refreshing read.

SARAH STEWART (August 11, 2014)

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