

YA Book Review

---

# SELF-DEFINITION THROUGH UNCERTAINTY: A REVIEW OF *DARIUS THE GREAT IS NOT OKAY* BY ADIB KHORRAM

---

**Blake Overman**  
Wichita State University

*Darius the Great is Not Okay* (2018) is an evocative tale of a young man and his journey for self-actualization. Darius Kellner is unique. He has a love for *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek* and a steeping love for tea. Rather than sports and girls, Darius often pursues profound thoughts and enlightening reflections, revealing some advanced understandings of his own feelings. Life is stagnating for Darius. He battles bullies—the “Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy,” as Darius terms them—expectations of his father, and depression.

Darius copes by embracing significant changes thrown upon him. Taking place initially in suburban America, the setting shifts with his journey to Iran. After discovering that his ailing grandfather in Iran may soon pass, his family travels to Iran to visit his grandparents whom he has only seen on Skype calls—a trip to meet, *and* say goodbye for Darius and his younger sister Laleh. Soon after Darius arrives in Iran he is introduced to new family members and Sohrab, another young man who refers to Darius by his name in Farsi, (the primary language in Iran) “Darioush.” Darius’s trip evolves into a journey of revelation, both for himself and the people around him. New relationships are formed and existing relationships (including his own relationship with himself) are tested and strengthened. The novel includes discussions of mental health, multiracial identity, family, and friendship.

The most enjoyable aspect of *Darius* is his voice. Much of his growth is internal and his perspective is as colorful as his personality. Darius connects his experiences to his favorite media, such as referring to the prime bully, Trent Bolger, as “Fatty Bolger,” a reference to an apathetic halfling in JRR Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. His hobbies also play an integral part of his familial relationships; his main form of bonding with his father is re-watching episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Young adult readers will find a character who is relatable in having distinctive interests that are reflective of their own individuality. Darius also encounters significant discomfort throughout the novel, often thrown into completely foreign environments and situations. Part of growing up is discovering yourself through constant exposure to the unfamiliar, something Darius excels at, and something to which young adult readers can relate.

*Darius the Great is Not Okay* provides an intersectional experience for young adult readers. The themes presented in the novel are both distinct and universal, providing a unique experience with aspects to which all readers can relate. The depiction of depression, paired with the discussion of mental health found within the novel, creates opportunities for students to both relate and empathize. Darius's own thoughts portray emotional intelligence that sharpens as the narrative progresses. Teachers will also find that having this novel available can lead to discussions of what emotional literacy/intelligence is—and of how understanding emotions is a valuable asset. Emotions are, after all, an essential part of being human. A residual benefit is having a text that depicts a Middle Eastern country in a gorgeous—at certain moments, awe-inspiring—way. Post 9/11 attitudes towards people of Middle Eastern descent are still present and are proliferated through negative depictions of Middle Eastern settings. Teachers might ask students how the depictions of Iran in *Darius the Great is Not Okay* alter preconceived notions of the Middle East.

Darius's own thoughts portray emotional intelligence that sharpens as the narrative progresses. Teachers will also find that having this novel available can lead to discussions of what emotional literacy/intelligence is—and of how understanding emotions is a valuable asset. Emotions are, after all, an essential part of being human.

To promote broader discussion while providing alternative reading material, educators may offer two texts. The first is the turn-of-the-century's *Persepolis*, an award-winning canonical version of alienated Middle Eastern adolescence presented as graphic literature. This should appeal to reluctant readers who benefit from visual text. A second possibility is for students who would like to read about a different character similar to themselves. In this case, consider Aisha Saeed's 2018 novel *Amal Unbound*, another contemporary look at many of the same themes, this time from a girl's point of view.

Classroom discussions of personal subjects such as defining one's self, mental health, and mental illness can present difficulties. These topics require an open-mind, a capacity for empathy, and a capability of understanding diverse perspectives and situations for all participants. For readers who select this book, it is important to be understanding. Teachers can pursue these difficult subjects if the reader initiates them. For educators who confer with students reading this book, I recommend prompts that are targeted to the external story rather than Darius's specific internal conflicts. For example: Is Darius treated fairly by his father? Why do you think Darius's mother chooses not to teach him Farsi? Despite the difficulty, I feel these challenging topics can be rewarding if executed correctly. However, there is always the option to recommend the student to revisit and reread if they express they are not comfortable discussing difficult topics at the time of their first read.

Like Darius, we must strive as educators to foray into the unknown in order to reach valuable understandings of the world around us. We must provide students with a novel that discusses crucial topics in a way that is unique, and utterly relatable. These discussions can be difficult. But by making room for this powerful text in your classroom library, you are inviting your students to an experience that can prompt positive changes in self-awareness and perspective. I eagerly await the next chapter of Darius' journey in the upcoming sequel, *Darius the Great Deserves Better*, set for publication in August 2020.

### **Author Biography**

Blake Overman is committed to collaborating to find ways to reach a wide breadth of students and create impactful instruction and lasting literacies. Placing great emphasis on relevance, he hopes to engage his students to apply themselves in his classroom. He appreciates mutual initiatives amongst unique identities. An avid lover of visual media, particularly film, he is excited to incorporate it into his curriculum. He completed his BA in English Education 6-12 with a minor in Theater at Wichita State University in May 2020 and will pursue his master's in English and teach first-year composition at WSU beginning in fall 2020. Blake hopes to pursue his best self, through continued education and his students. He can be reached at [baoverman@shockers.wichita.edu](mailto:baoverman@shockers.wichita.edu).