

Hanna Alkaf. *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*. New York: Harper Collins, 2023. 390 pp. ISBN: 978-0-06-320795-0.

Reviewed by Sharifah Aishah Osman
Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Since the publication of her breakthrough young adult (YA) novel *The Weight of Our Sky* in 2019, critically acclaimed Malaysian author Hanna Alkaf has impressed global audiences of youth literature with a stunningly prolific publication record. Hard on the heels of her riveting depiction of the May 13, 1969 conflict in *The Weight of our Sky* came the middle-grade Kirkus Prize Finalist *The Girl and the Ghost* (2020), a heartbreakingly beautiful story of love, friendship, and family trauma. This was followed by *The Queen of the Tiles* (2022), a YA murder mystery set in the world of competitive Scrabble, and in 2023, *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, as well as *The Grimoire of Grave Fates*, a murder mystery set in a magic school featuring the stories of eighteen different contributors, which she co-created and also co-edited. Currently, Alkaf has two works in progress, *Night of the Living Head*, based on the well-known Malaysian mythical spirit, the “Penanggalan” (to be published in Fall 2024, under the series *The Tales from Cabin 23*), and *The Beasts Beneath the Winds*, an illustrated “compendium of mythical creatures from Southeast Asian lore” (to be published in Spring 2025), both of which are middle-grade anthologies that emphasize diversity and inclusivity of representation. If *The Weight of our Sky* heralded her rising reputation as an author of “unapologetically Malaysian books for kids and teens”, the extensive reach of Alkaf’s creative projects in the last few years clearly indicates the global recognition of her prowess, influence, and marketability as an author of youth literature. These collaborative projects, beyond putting Malaysia on the world map of children’s and YA literature, also serve to amplify the voices of other Southeast Asian

authors such as Nadia Mikail, June CL Tan, Jesse Sutanto, and Moniza Hossain, exposing readers to the wealth of literary talent in the region.

Alkaf's latest middle-grade novel, *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, set during the years of the CoVID-19 pandemic, blends fantasy and bildungsroman, and combines the key tropes of personal quest and growth common to middle-grade fiction with a richly layered narrative of the pernicious effects of dementia ("a thief that stole Opah from them in the cruelest way") and its heartrending implications on both the afflicted and their caregivers. Tapping into two familiar yet different literary traditions, one drawn from Malay folklore (specifically of the mythical weretiger or harimau jadian), and the other, the Brothers Grimm fairytale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, Alkaf weaves and transmutes aspects of these well-known narratives, and elevates the magical and fantastical into a retelling of the enduring bonds of family and friendship, forged through a bittersweet journey in search of the truth, or more specifically, the retrieval of lost memories deep in the jungles of Langkawi and its surrounding isles.

Alkaf's depiction of thirteen-year-old Hamra ("Little Red") is all heart, and captures succinctly the trials and travails of adolescent girlhood, burdened by the expectations of caring for the elderly and the irksome tasks of household management in a world "full of sickness" (10), made acute by the restrictions and isolation of the pandemic. Much as she adores her family, her anger and rebelliousness come to a head when all her family members forget her birthday, reinforcing the gulf between the stultifying reality of her position as "good ol' dependable Hamra" (13), and her yearning for freedom and significance. However, it is also Hamra's love for her ailing grandmother that propels the story, for having disregarded the rules of the jungle and stolen a jambu (Opah's favorite fruit) one day, she becomes indebted to Pak Belang the weretiger, who promises her more of the memory-restoring fruit for Opah should she assist him in his quest to return to his original human form. Through the thematic emphasis

on the role of memory in the creation of the self, Alkaf sets up the parallel journeys of Pak Belang, who needs to shed all remnants of his supernatural beastly powers and remember his “true” name before he can become human again, and Hamra, whose decision to help the weretiger is motivated by the desire to restore the life and humanity of her beloved Opah, who has been reduced to a shell of her former vibrant self (“*the lamps blown out, the house abandoned*”).

In focusing on the adventures and experiences of Hamra, a young Malaysian, Muslim, hijab-wearing girl, Alkaf’s portrayal of her protagonist not only challenges canonical models of heroism prevalent in Western androcentric quest narratives but also reflects the impact of critical multiculturalism on children’s literature through its engagement with issues of cultural diversity and social justice. If “stories belong to the heroes” (as the cover proclaims), Alkaf’s depiction of Hamra affirms the latter’s deserved status as the hero, one who will chart her own heroic trajectory, not only for herself but also for all those who see themselves in her. As Atok, her grandfather and the storyteller in the family reminds her, the story has chosen *her*, and as the hero, it is “time to save the day” (77). Besides, there has been precedent, and she is in illustrious company: “Remember Puteri Gunung Ledang, Cik Siti Wan Kembang, Puteri Saadong? Our history is littered with young girls who found themselves thrust into the heart of the story and fought their way through. And you can too.” (78). Indeed, this is a mantra that Hamra remembers well and repeats to herself in moments of doubt and distress (“Puteri Gunung Ledang, Cik Siti Wan Kembang, Puteri Saadong, Hamra... You can do this.”), one that inspires her, and other “human younglings” (103) to harness their strengths and exercise their agency to overcome the various obstacles in their own coming-of-age journeys. The bayan, in his role as the Seer of Fates, similarly affirms the principle of the mighty child when he counsels Hamra over what she perceives as her powerlessness: “As the tiniest seed grows into the

mightiest tree, as the smallest nail brings down the most powerful stallion, so too can a child change the shape of the story, and in doing so, the shape of the world” (136).

Yet Hamra’s quest would not be possible without the presence and participation of the other two main characters, her best friend Ilyas Chang Abdullah, and Pak Belang, both of whom are central to the development of her moral self-awareness, and empathy and compassion for others. Ilyas, a child of divorced parents coming from a mixed family background, is more than just a supportive, “Somewhat Useful” (70) and “maddeningly calm” (143) sidekick who serves as a foil to the nettlesome and fiery Hamra, but also offers her several opportunities to gain insight into her own weaknesses as a friend and human being through his kindness and generosity in wanting to sincerely help her. As he notes, “accepting help isn’t the same as being weak” (143), a lesson in humanity and friendship that Hamra, in her constant need to conceal her vulnerabilities, eventually learns. Likewise, while the narrative begins with Hamra being highly distrustful of the weretiger, perceiving him as sinister and monstrous, and their relationship as merely transactional, her sympathy for him increases with every episode of physical sacrifice and suffering that he endures, so much so that by the end of the story, she no longer regards him with fear and suspicion but empathy and understanding, declaring that “for all we’ve done and all we’ve been through...yes. Yes, you are my friend” (317).

From the detailed worldbuilding and deliberate selection of settings in the novel, it is not difficult to perceive that Alkaf has written yet another “unapologetically Malaysian” book for the Malaysian child, or child at heart, who would readily recognize the many familiar figures from the folklore and legends mentioned, ranging from langsuir, orang bunian, Nenek Kebayan, and Mahsuri, to (of course) the harimau jadian. The novel also reads like a fictional travelogue of well-known natural attractions in Langkawi and its surroundings islands, and may even inspire readers to visit and learn more about the legends associated with locations

such as Pulau Dayang Bunting, Gua Langsuir, Gua Wang Buluh, Pantai Tengkorak, and the Telaga Tujuh Waterfalls. Indeed, some of the most pleasurable moments the reviewer experienced was in identifying the numerous easter eggs (often conveyed in the original Malay) that appear throughout the novel – a pun about the Penanggalan spirit, the predilection for polygamous plots in Malay soap operas, the bizarre demands of Puteri Gunung Ledang, the wrath of Malaysian mothers over missing Tupperware containers, and even particular ways we consume national dishes like char kuay teow, nasi lemak, and nasi ulam – giving it a uniquely Malaysian charm. Still, Alkaf’s poignant examination of what it means to be human in all its wonder, magic, and beautiful messiness, as depicted through themes like loss, grief, and sacrifice, has a lasting, universal appeal that will leave readers of all ages ruminative and reflective. As the author notes in an interview published earlier this year, “Locations and worlds may change, but emotion is forever.”¹

Notes

1. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2023/03/28/hanna-reimagines-little-red-riding-hood-in-langkawi/>