

Teaching Guide: *Watched*

Intro

Be careful what you say and who you say it to. Anyone might be a watcher. Naeem is a Bangladeshi teenager living in Queens who thinks he can charm his way through anything. But then mistakes catch up with him. So do the cops, who offer him an impossible choice: spy on his Muslim neighbors and report back to them on shady goings-on, or face a police record. Naeem wants to be a hero—a protector. He wants his parents to be proud of him. But as time goes on, the line between informing and entrapping blurs. Is he saving or betraying his community? Inspired by actual surveillance practices in New York City and elsewhere, Marina Budhos's extraordinary and timely novel examines what it's like to grow up with Big Brother always watching. Naeem's riveting story is as vivid and involving as today's headlines ([Amazon](#)).

Length

260 pages

Reading Level (Fountas & Pinnell)

X

Recommended Grade Band

7-12

Recognition

- Walter Dean Myers Award Honor Book, We Need Diverse Books
- Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature Honor Book
- A Notable Book for a Global Society (NBGS)
- CCBC Choices Award Selection for Young Adult Fiction
- YALSA Best YA Fiction for Young Adults
- Chicago Public Library's Best of the Best

What students will love:

- A flawed/ complex protagonist
- Relevant connections to real-world issues

Potential Struggles:

- The use of languages other than English (Bangla)
 - Encourage students to use context clues, and Google Translate for more complex terms.
- Misinformation/ stereotyping about Muslims/ Islamic traditions
 - Make space for understanding the myths and stereotypes that surround the Muslim community before beginning the novel. Lesson 3.1, in particular, addresses this issue.
- Understanding the history of anti-Muslim racism in America
 - Teach this book alongside the CCC curriculum for students to have a comprehensive understanding of the history, rhetoric, and policies that allow a novel like this to take place.
- Understanding the history of surveillance in the Muslim community
 - Teach the reality of surveillance in the Muslim community by discussing this novel alongside Lesson 6.1 of the CCC curriculum.

Rationale/ Connection to Unit

Watched is a great text to teach alongside the [Anti-Muslim Racism unit](#) as it brings to life the effects of anti-Muslim racism in the United States. It connects especially well with Lesson 6, with its' focus on surveillance of the Muslim community, and the ways that surveillance enacts both institutional and individual forms of racism. The complexity of the protagonists' dilemma reflects the complexity of the Muslim experience as it intersects with race, immigration, and law enforcement.

Learning objectives

- Explain the real-world effects of surveillance on communities
- Compare and contrast surveillance policies in the novel to those that exist currently (CVE, Connect and Redirect to Respect, etc.)
- Make connections between the surveillance of the Muslim community and other minoritized groups.
- Evaluate the benefits/ harms of community-based surveillance

Literary Elements

- Strong characterization
- Flashback
- Foreshadowing
- Symbolism
- Theme

Themes

- **Coming of Age:** The novel follows Naeem as he tries to find his place in his family, community, and world.
- **Identity:** While facing pressure from his family, school and the police, Naeem needs to take charge of his life and decide what kind of son, student, and citizen he wants to be.
- **Power and Privilege:** As the Muslim-American community in this novel is criminalized and “otherized” by racist policies and laws, Naeem learns about who has power, and how he can fight back.
- **Individual v. Self:** Naeem is tempted by the benefits of being an informant, but struggles with trying to do what’s “right.”

Context

Since the events of 9/11 and the subsequent passing of the US Patriot Act, the unconstitutional and unethical surveillance of the Muslim community across the country has increased tenfold. Naeem gets a job as an informant for the NYPD’s secretive and unlawful spying operation. This surveillance unit was closed in 2014 when the NYPD was accused of violating the state and U.S. constitutions by “singling out and stigmatizing entire communities of New Yorkers based on their religion,” according to the ACLU.

But was not the end of surveillance for the Muslim community. Today, community-based surveillance programs like CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) use broad and inaccurate “indicators” (like growing a beard, or attending the mosque regularly) to determine who has the potential to become a violent extremist. These methods are controversial for two reasons: First, there is no evidence-based method to identify at-risk individuals. In fact, law enforcement use metrics like trust in law enforcement, religiosity, and political activism as signs of a potential terrorist. Second, CVE disproportionately has targeted Muslim, Somali, and other minoritized communities as uniquely susceptible to terrorism. In fact, 85% of federally-funded CVE programs explicitly target minority communities.

Summary

Naeem Rahman is a Bangladeshi immigrant and high schooler in Queens, New York. He has often used his charm to get by in life with friends, school, family and his local Muslim community. But this eventually catches up to him when he is caught for shoplifting and possession by local police. They make him a deal: in exchange for not getting arrested, he can work as an informant for the NYPD. Although Naeem is hesitant and wonders if he is doing the right thing, he starts appreciating the encouragement from the police officers and the money that allows him to help his family. He starts attending the mosque and local volunteer groups, but eventually, under pressure from the police to bring them better leads, he is forced to make a choice: entrap his friend Ibrahim into an incriminating activity, or stand up for what is right. He chooses not to go through with the plan, and after coming clean to his friends, he is able to work with lawyers to stand up to the NYPD officers and take back control of his life.

Comprehension/ Discussion Questions

- Describe the surveillance Naeem notices in his neighborhood.
- How does the setting (time, city) influence the plot of the novel?
- How does “Before-Naeem” differ from the character we meet in the novel?
- How does Naeem’s background as an immigrant shape his interactions with the police?
- Describe the friendship between Naeem and Ibrahim. Why do you think they are friends?
- What are the different opinions about the increased surveillance by the police in the Muslim community?
- What life decisions and events inform Naeem’s decision to work as an informant for the NYPD?
- How does the way Taylor treats Naeem differ from Sanchez? Why is Naeem so eager to impress Taylor?
- How do the officers justify the surveillance of the Muslim community? How does Naeem justify it?
- What role do Taslima and Ishrat play in Naeem’s struggle to do the “right” thing?
- What does Naeem’s decision to not report Noor to the police say about his character? Would you have done?
- How has Ibrahim changed when Naeem sees him again at Eid?
- Is Tareq and Naeem’s plan with Ibrahim “entrapment?” Why or why not?
- Based on what you know, would Ibrahim have been a threat without the involvement of Tareq and Naeem?
- Tareq and Naeem are both informants, how are Naeem and Tareq different or similar?
- What pushes Naeem to make the decision to leave the operation?
- What do you think would have happened if Naeem had stayed in the car with Tareq and Ibrahim?
- How does the experience of being an informant change Naeem?

Essay Questions

- What factors influenced Naeem’s decision to take on the job as an informant? What would you have done if you were in his shoes?
- What are the pros/cons of community-based surveillance methods (like the use of informants)?
- What are the indicators Naeem looks for as he spies on the members of the mosque and volunteer groups? How are they similar or different than the indicators of violent extremism that are used in real life by programs like CVE?
- Is Naeem a hero or a villain? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Possible Parental Concerns:

- Explicit language, pg. 30, 233, 279, 349