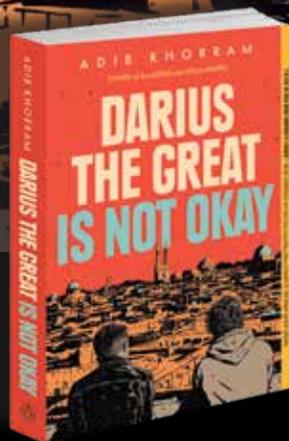


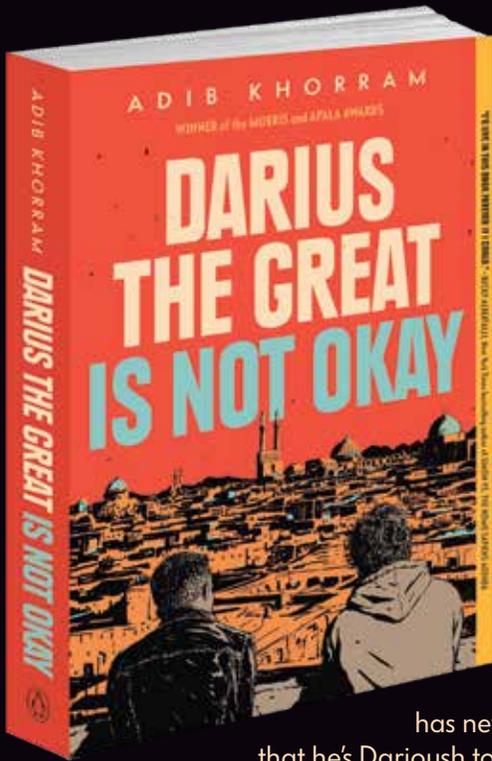
A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO

# DARIUS THE GREAT IS NOT OKAY



About

# DARIUS THE GREAT IS NOT OKAY



Darius Kellner speaks better Klingon than Farsi, and he knows more about Hobbit social cues than Persian ones. He's a Fractional Persian—half, his mom's side—and his first-ever trip to Iran is about to change his life. Darius has never really fit in at home, and he's sure things are going to be the same in Iran. His clinical depression doesn't exactly help matters, and trying to explain his medication to his grandparents only makes things harder. Then Darius meets Sohrab, the boy next door, and everything changes. Soon, they're spending their days together, playing soccer, eating faludeh, and talking for hours on a secret rooftop overlooking the city's skyline. Sohrab calls him Darioush—the original Persian version of his name—and Darius

has never felt more like himself than he does now that he's Darioush to Sohrab.

Adib Khorram's brilliant debut is for anyone who's ever felt not good enough—then met a friend who makes them feel so much better than okay.



Praise for

# DARIUS THE GREAT IS NOT OKAY

**William C. Morris Debut Award**  
**Asian/Pacific American Award for Young Adult Literature**  
**Lambda Literary Award Finalist**  
***Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Honor***  
**Three Starred Reviews!**  
**2019-2020 FYE selection at Kansas State University**

**“LAYERED WITH COMPLEXITIES OF IDENTITY, BODY IMAGE AND MENTAL ILLNESS THAT ARE SO RARELY ARTICULATED IN THE VOICE OF A TEENAGE BOY OF COLOR.**

Khorrām writes tenderly and humorously about his protagonist’s journey of self-acceptance, making it hard not to want to reach through the pages, squeeze his hand and reassure Darius that he is, in fact, going to be O.K.”

—*The New York Times*

“I love this story, and the way it combines the bitter of adolescence with the sweet of friendship and family. Brewed together they make

**A BEAUTIFUL, MEMORABLE BOOK.”**

—Laurie Halse Anderson, award-winning author of *Speak*

**“DARIUS THE GREAT IS NOT JUST OKAY—HE’S WONDERFUL.**

A story about learning who you are, who you want to be in the world, and how family will always be there, no matter how great the physical or emotional distance.”

—Sara Farizan, author of *If You Could Be Mine*

“I’ve never read a book that so powerfully demonstrates how connecting with where you come from can illuminate who you are and help you figure out where you’re going.

From its deadpan *Star Trek* humor to its brilliant examination of mental health,

**DARIUS THE GREAT IS NOT OKAY IS A SUPERNOVA OF HEART AND HOPE THAT’S SURE TO BECOME A CLASSIC.”**

—Nic Stone, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Dear Martin*

# Discussion Questions

## 1. Dad always said that. Not Hi, Darius, but Is everything okay? (11)

At the outset, the title of the book informs us that our narrator, Darius, is “not okay.” What does this mean to you? What does it mean to “be okay” or “not okay”? How does this okay/not okay dichotomy affect the relationship between Darius and his father? Between Darius and others? Why do you think it feels like such a monumental realization/revelation that it could be okay to be not okay?

## 2. That was before Dr. Howell switched me off Prozac, which gave me mood swings so extreme, they were more like Mood Slingshot Maneuvers, powerful enough to fling me around the sun and accelerate me into a time warp. (33)

Early in the text, Darius tells us that both he and his father take medication for depression; a few pages later he reveals the long and incredibly difficult process he went through while discovering which medications worked—and didn’t work—for him. How did the author alert us to when Darius was sensing a Mood Slingshot Maneuver? Knowing he experiences these intense emotions, does Darius’s narration seem faithful to the events as they happened? How does his perspective and interpretations impact our own, as readers?

## 3. I let everything bother me too much. It was one of the reasons Stephen Kellner was always so disappointed in me. (111)

Much of Darius’s interpretations of events, especially regarding his father, center on his feeling that his father sees him as an immense disappointment. What are some characteristics that Darius attributes to this disappointment? How does Darius “know” his dad is disappointed in him? Do you think Darius and his father are as dissimilar as he thinks, and as he would have us believe?

## 4. I never had a friend like Sohrab before. One who understood me without even trying. Who knew what it was like to be stuck on the outside because of one little thing that set you apart. (267)

Sohrab tells Darius that his place had been empty in Iran, not just for his family, but for Sohrab, too. For Darius and Sohrab’s budding friendship, a shared experience of feeling marginalized or excluded by peers forms a foundation of mutual understanding and a common bond. In what ways does Darius feel exclusion? How has Sohrab experienced “being a target”? What else do you think they have in common? How do Darius and Sohrab express their emotions to each other differently than to others? Have you ever felt that someone you’ve met somehow filled a gap in your life, one that you maybe didn’t even realize existed?

## 5. True Persians are heavily invested in the reproductive opportunities of their descendants. (74)

In Iran, Darius finds he has to navigate Iranian Social Cues that are different from American Social Cues (78). While taarof is one of his main challenges, he also expresses surprise and varying degrees of (dis)comfort with physical affection. His understanding of a True Persian seems wrapped up in many norms surrounding gender and sexuality, especially regarding physical affection and what boys are “supposed to do” or not do. Why do you think this is? How have gender norms in Portland framed his sense of self and expectations of others? How are those challenged by different norms when he visits Iran?

## 6. “When you were born I wanted you to grow up American. So you would feel like you belong.” (201)

Darius’s mother migrated to the United States from Iran. A diaspora is a group of people who have been scattered to many parts of the globe from one common homeland. According to this definition, Darius and his family are members of the Iranian diaspora in America. How does this position affect how Darius experiences his life as an American? What does his perspective as a teenage narrator add to your thinking about immigrant belonging and identity in America?

## 7. Those things were normal back home, but not in Iran. I would never fit in. Not anywhere. (115)

Darius uses the term “True Persians” to describe those who (among many other attributes) have two Iranian parents; he describes himself as a “Fractional Persian,” a mixed identity about which he has lots of mixed feelings. Many young people living in diaspora—whether of mixed heritage, like Darius, or not—may feel they don’t fully belong in either of their “homes.” Scholars have described this experience as feeling “neither here nor there” but in between, or liminal. When does Darius have this kind of feeling, of not being Persian enough—not a “True Persian”—in Iran? In Portland? How is he made to feel not American enough in America? When and where does he feel belonging?

### 8. "Ali-Reza said, 'They don't even play football in America.' But it doesn't matter. Darioush is Persian too." (264)

Other scholars have argued that living in diaspora doesn't have to be a feeling of being stuck in between, experiencing loss, or lacking in belonging on one side or another, but rather a feeling of belonging "both here AND there" and taking from and contributing to both cultural homes. In Iran, Darius wishes he had grown up there, with Sohrab. Yet he is also eager to return to the United States. Do you think Darius feels more "neither here nor there" or more "both here AND there"? After returning to America from Iran, Darius reflects on whether or not he has changed: Do you think Darius's experiences in Iran have changed him? Has the trip to Iran led him to feel more exclusion or more inclusion? How can you tell?

### 9. That's the only time dad and I were on the same team: when we were stuck with Farsi-speakers and left with each other for company. (21)

How does Darius feel about his limited understanding of Farsi? How does it limit him? What does it afford him? How does this change over the course of the book? What is the role of language in the life of immigrants and their families? What role does language play in your life?

### 10. Part of me expected the customs officer to have a turban and a full beard, like all the other Middle Easterners on TV. Which was sad, since I knew it was just a stereotype. (64)

From the very beginning, Darius sets out to clarify misconceptions about Persians and Iran. But, perhaps without realizing it, Darius's own expectations of Iran also have been informed by these stereotypes and narrow representations. Media scholar Hamid Naficy has argued that these kinds of ideas have emerged about the Middle East over several decades of mediawork—for example mass media like film and television that "produces, circulates, and naturalizes a certain limited representation of society's others" such that they come to seem obvious, natural, and "common sense." What are some of the ways that Darius's expectations about Iran differed from his actual experiences in Iran? Even though his mother is Iranian, why do you think Darius's expectations—and indeed, likely many Americans' views—were so distorted? Where did they come from? What examples from Darius's descriptions of Iran were different from your own expectations?

### 11. I had stepped into a world of Elven magic. Into Rivendell, or Lothlórien. (246)

Darius is a big fan of *Star Trek*, *Lord of the Rings*, and science fiction and fantasy more generally. He often describes feeling like Iran is in another time and place, perhaps created by Elven magic. These descriptions reveal how Darius is relating to his experiences of being in an unfamiliar place using what is familiar to him. But he has trouble reconciling how this very foreign-feeling place is nevertheless populated by people he loves and connects with, like Sohrab and his grandma. For example, he feels it to be a major contradiction that his grandma is a woman who lived in Iran her whole life AND loves listening to ABBA, or that Sohrab would have an iPhone. Why do you think he feels these would be contradictions? What misconceptions about Iran, modernity, and global everyday life in the 21st century do these kinds of feelings also reveal? What other evidence of unexpected similarity does Darius encounter in Iran to challenge these ideas of living in a different time-space or alternate realities from Iranians?

### 12. How could I be a tourist in my own past? (230)

Darius's boss, and later Babou and Sohrab, all tell him it's important to know "where you came from." What do they mean by this? Despite these urgings, while visiting sites and learning about his family history Darius worries that he feels like a tourist. Why is he concerned by this? Later, he returns to this worry, saying, "I felt like I was on an away mission... I felt like an actor... I felt like a tourist." (230) What do you think he means? How do you think he feels by the end of his trip? Have you ever felt like a tourist of your own past?

### 13. Our family was woven into the fabric of Yazd. Into the stones and the sky. (230)

Anthropologist Keith Basso has written about the Western Apache notion that "Wisdom sits in places," exploring what places, place-names, and narratives about places mean to people and the role they place in Western Apache culture. Family histories are often rooted in places, even if modern life may spatially separate us from them. While visiting a number of sites in Yazd and beyond, Darius's grandfather explains the significance of historical monuments, religious sites, and architecture to him and to their family. How do these places hold meaning for Darius and his family? What does it make Darius feel? What places hold significance for your family? Are you able to visit them? What meanings and values do they hold for you?

**14. "Darioush was a great man. Strong. Smart. Brave." I didn't feel strong or smart or brave. (158) ... And I loved being Darioush to him. But it was time to be Darius again. (298)**

The names we are given at birth often reveal the desires, hopes, and love of our parents, and have lifelong impacts beyond what our parents can imagine. They can also reveal the stories, mythologies, and values of a society. Think about the names in the book—for Darius, his sister, his parents, his grandparents, his friends. How did Darius get his name? How does its meaning begin to change for Darius over the course of the book? Do you think he prefers Darius or Darioush? Can he be both? Now think about your own name(s). How was it selected? What does it mean? How has it affected you?

**15. I was kind of jealous of her—Mom had inherited Mamou's pale coloring, which meant I didn't even get a half dose of Persian melanin—but then again, Javaneh was constantly getting asked where she was from, something I mostly avoided until people learned my first name. (31)**

Darius expresses deeply ambivalent feelings about his mixed identity, not only regarding his name and national identity, but also through what he looks like—his phenotype. He describes how his hair and features seemed to be the opposite of his Teutonic father and can draw unwanted attention from bullies, and in describing others, he admits his jealousy over their eye color, skin tone, and hair. Sociologist Neda Maghbouleh has written about the racialization of Iranians in America—how others perceive Iranians in terms of American racial categories and politics—in her book *The Limits of Whiteness*: "caught in the chasm between formal ethno-racial invisibility and informal hypervisibility." How does Darius describe his mixed heritage? Why do you think he is ambivalent about his looks? How does his phenotype affect his belonging at school? At work? In Portland? In Yazd?

**16. "Your dad is a good man," he said, "but he is not Zoroastrian. You and Laleh are not either." (164)**

Iran is a country of many religious communities. Darius's Iranian family are Zoroastrians. What have you gathered about Zoroastrianism and its role in Iranian history? Why does Babou say that his mom is Zoroastrian but he and his sister never will be? What have you gleaned about the Baha'i Faith? Why does Sohrab say achieving his dream of becoming an architect is made more difficult by his being Baha'i? How do these Iranian faiths challenge other representations you've seen of Iran and religion?

**17. Fariba Bahrami loved photographs. (138)**

Mamou's house is covered with photographs of the Bahrami family, forming a gallery of all her relations, who now live around the world. Why do you think Mamou loved photographs? What role do they play in Darius's coming to better understand his family? What role do family photographs have in your life? Darius recognizes some of Mamou's photos as ones taken in Portland, some taken in the past of relatives he now knows, and some taken of people he doesn't recognize at all, even though they are all in the Bahrami Family Portrait Gallery. Have you seen all of your parents' or grandparents' old photos? Do you recognize everyone in your family photographs? What value do these images have for you and your family?

**18. I knew that Babou was going to be one of those ghosts soon too. No one had to say it out loud. (271)**

Darius reflects numerous times about what is said aloud and what isn't. What is he not allowed to say out loud? Why? What difficulties does Darius have with his grandfather's impending death? Have you had to mourn the death of a loved one? What did you feel you had to say? What did you feel intuitively, that didn't need to be said? How do revelations about Darius's father lead him to think differently not only about death, but also about the sacrifices we make for love and the value of life?

**19. Maybe all Persian boys have Father Issues. Maybe that is what it means to be a Persian boy. (243)**

Darius's relationship with his father—and a feeling that his father is continuously disappointed by him—is a major focus of the book, and appears to consume much of Darius's thoughts. Their awkward silences, short interactions, disagreements about "dietary indiscretions," and near-constant misalignment present numerous moments of tension in the book. In the end, how would you describe Darius's "Father Issues"? Do these feel familiar to you? What role does Darius's mom play in their relationship? What about Laleh's role? Do you think being a Persian boy has something to do with his "Father Issues," as he suggests?

“ The thing about Farsi is, it’s a very deep language: deeply specific, deeply poetic, deeply metaphorical.” (20)

## A Beginner’s Guide to Farsi

(that Darius really could have used!)

Salaam  
سلام  
Hello (literally “peace”)

Mamou\*  
مامو  
Grandmother

Taarof  
تعارف  
Putting others first

Alláh-u-Abhá  
الله ابهى  
God is the most glorious  
(a traditional Bahá’í greeting)

Dayi  
دایی  
Maternal uncle

Baad gir  
باد گیر  
Ancient Persian air-conditioning  
(literally “wind catcher”)

Khodahafes  
خدا حافظ  
Goodbye

Zandayi  
زندایی  
Maternal aunt,  
by marriage

Faludeh  
فالوده  
Rosewater sorbet  
(Don’t forget the lime juice!)

Doost  
دوست  
Friend

Maman  
مامان  
Mother

Ja ye Shoma Khalil  
جای شما خالی  
Your place was empty

Khanevadeh  
خانواده  
Family

Baba  
بابا  
Father

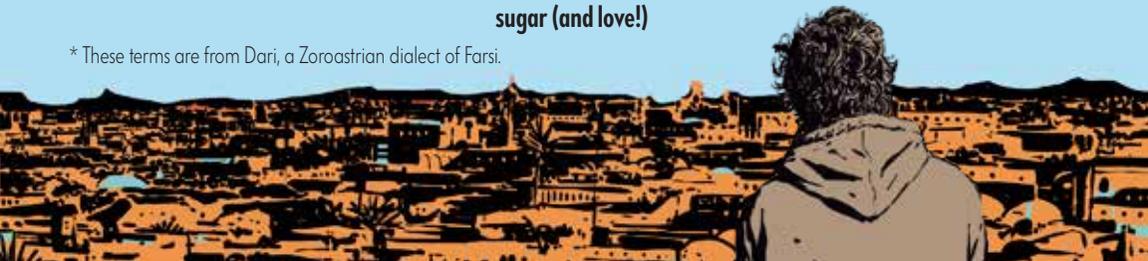
Sekanjabin  
سکنجبین  
Mint syrup  
(with a vinegar-y surprise)

Babou\*  
بابو  
Grandfather

Qottab  
قطاب  
Fried pastries filled  
with almonds and  
sugar (and love!)

Chelo Kebab  
چلو کباب  
The most delicious food ever  
(meat and rice)

\* These terms are from Dari, a Zoroastrian dialect of Farsi.



About

# ADIB KHORRAM



ADIB KHORRAM is the award-winning author of *DARIUS THE GREAT IS NOT OKAY*. If he's not writing (or at his day job as a graphic designer), you can probably find him learning to do a Lutz jump, working on his handstands, or steeping a cup of oolong. He lives in Kansas City, Missouri, where people don't usually talk about themselves in the third person. You can reach him on his website at [adibkhorram.com/](http://adibkhorram.com/) or on Twitter @adibkhorram.



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