

## A First Opinion: Learning About Difference

Bunting, Eve. *One Green Apple*. Illus. Ted Lewin. New York: Clarion Books, 2006.

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“Our home country and our new one have had difficulties,’ [Father] says. ‘But it will be good for us here in time.’ How much time, I wonder.” With this musing of an immigrant girl, Eve Bunting enters the conversation about globally mobile populations. The picture book, *One Green Apple*, illustrated by Ted Lewin, represents Bunting’s portrayal of a Muslim child’s assimilation issues. As a non-English speaker, wearing a *dupatta* headscarf consistent with her family’s beliefs, Farah expresses her feelings of separation. She does not voice longing for her country of origin (in fact the country remains unnamed); rather, she is concerned with her obvious separation from classmates when they go on a field trip to an apple orchard. I would term this text as social realism, a story of assimilation, because Farah’s ultimate satisfaction arises from her “blending” in with her classroom community.

As an adult reader, I found no surprises here. Bunting’s own experience, as she frames it in interviews, includes the hard lessons of co-existence learned from “the troubles” in Ireland. From a context of car bombs and retaliatory killings, to blend harmoniously represents a vast improvement in human relations. For me, however, Farah’s hopefulness based on the blending metaphor is a disappointing message. “I will blend with the others the way my apple blended with the cider” (28). The story’s operant metaphor is this: Just as the one green apple Farah chooses (unlike those of her classmates’ riper selections) blends into the cider to contribute a special flavor, so will she blend into the classroom demographic. The blend is unidirectional, however: The other children do not learn her language; she adopts theirs. They do not wear the *dupatta*; she wears the jeans and tee shirt they all sport. When Farah’s apple is chewed up unrecognizably in the cider press, Bunting speaks through the girl; the girl imagines an effect on the overall product, but we are given no confirmation from other perspectives that her presence makes a difference at all. The teacher and the children smile benignly, but the final support that personhood transcends difference is one boy’s burp. As the field trip winds up and the children ride the wagon away from the cider house, one boy (charmingly drawn by Lewin) can’t stifle “a belch [that] jumps from his throat” (28). The characters, and no doubt young readers, are

delighted with the silliness, and Farah reflects, “Laughs sound the same as at home. Just the same. So do sneezes and belches and lots of things” (28). Sameness. It is a comfort to the new girl, but it makes me wistful. The burp operates on two levels: trivializing Farah’s stress and emphasizing homogeneity. Perhaps my response is especially influenced by Lewin’s lovely depiction of Farah. She is both elegant and childlike. Her feelings are unmistakable, but delicately portrayed. The warmth of her eyes, the graceful frame of her smiling face created by her scarf, lend Farah charm in part by her *difference* from the other children. So, I found myself hoping for her positive outcome (foregrounded in the cover illustration) to be a result of the group accommodating her for her uniqueness.

But, again, I am an adult reader.

Albeit with my limited ability to project a child reader response, I suggest that the beauty of the farm landscape, the idea of dogs chomping on fallen apples, and Farah’s ability to say an English word, *apple* (perhaps a word children recently remember mastering) will be winning. Each child’s developmental level will affect the guiding metaphor’s success. Older children who are familiar with the United States’ image as a melting pot would surely transfer the notion to a combination of apples making fine juice. Less experience with conventional symbols and icons will yield a more superficial appreciation for a girl finding friends by helping with a group effort. Although to say *use* a text seems somehow exploitive, I can certainly imagine teachers and parents using *One Green Apple* as a way to model the struggle for immigrants finding new communities of friends. Farah observes at the book’s close that she has uttered only the first of her “outside-myself” words. Farah demonstrates social realism in the form of the adaptability of children as she declares, “There will be more” (32).



## A Second Reaction: A Muslim Girl in America

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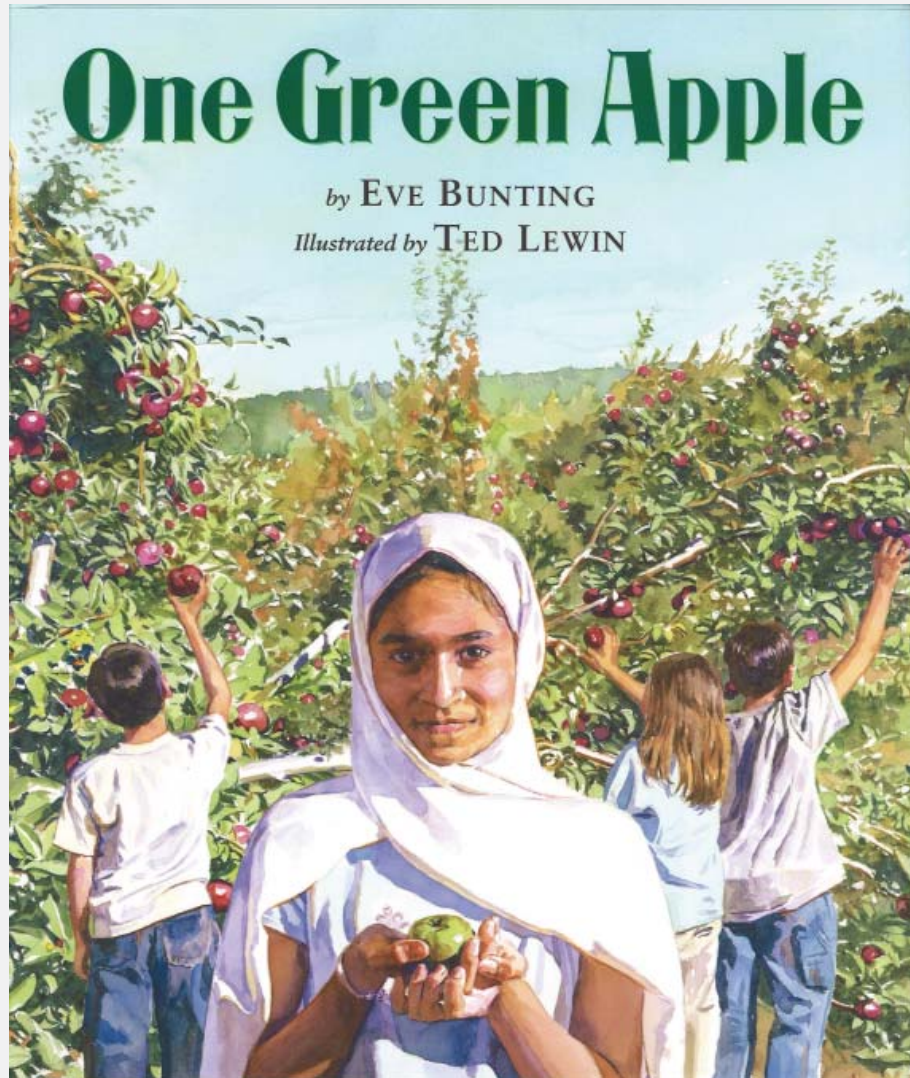
United Arab Emirates

"Farah," meaning joy, is the Arabic name of a recent Muslim immigrant girl in this picture book, who, because of her lack of English and her "different" home culture, feels isolated among her schoolmates. Though she wears the typical American garb of jeans and T-shirt, she also wears a dupatta, a traditional headscarf. It seems that the author and the illustrator are trying to identify the young girl's Islamic culture with her head cover. Some children eye Farah in a friendly way, but others look at her coldly and suspiciously. All is not bleak, however. The class trip to the apple orchard with her classmates reminds Farah of many similar happy experiences in her homeland, including the sound of dogs crunching their food and the ripple of the friendly laughter of children. Bunting writes, "Their [the dogs'] crunches sound like Haddis's [her dog]" (11).

While I enjoyed this book, as a Muslim woman, I must critique some of the cultural assumptions made by Bunting. For example, it is not true that Muslim women normally cover their heads before age fifteen or so, as it is depicted with the child Farah in the picture book. Additionally, while it might sound acceptable for American children to pet a dog, such behavior is unwelcome in Islamic culture, where pets do not have the same type of status. The green apple in the title that Farah mistakenly throws into the cider press alongside the sweet red ones tossed by her classmates helps her to connect with her peers and begin to feel that she belongs. While the experience of cider-making could serve as a metaphor for the joys of diversity rather than the obvious concept of the melting pot, where all blend into one, Bunting chooses to emphasize assimilation when she writes, "I [Farah] will blend with the others the way my apple blended with the cider" (28).

When I shared *One Green Apple* with first graders in an American school in Indiana, I felt how much this book might heighten youngsters' awareness of what it must be like to feel different and alone and how each person has something unique to contribute to the greater good. One Chinese first grader, who lives currently in the US, responded to this story by saying, "When I go to China my grandfather does not understand me when I speak English." On the other hand, I was not very comfortable sharing some of the overt political and religious sections of the book with first-grade children. I felt hesitant, for

example, to explain to the first graders what Farah means when she says, "My father has explained to me that we are not always liked here. 'Our home country and our new one have had difficulties'" (6). Although I'm an Arab-Muslim woman, I'm not sure if Farah is an Arab-Muslim girl or a non-Arab-Muslim child, which country she hails from, or which "difficulties" she is having.



Despite my criticisms, what I can't ignore is the beauty of Lewin's natural watercolors. Illustrator Lewin excels in portraying the frustrations and joys that Farah experiences throughout the book with rich colors and lovely depictions of the children's faces.