

A conversation with debut novelist

Susan Ross



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Preteens prove that cultural differences can be overcome in KIKI AND JACQUES, a middle-grade novel about a native Mainer and a Somali girl who form an unlikely and supportive friendship. Debut novelist Susan Ross discusses the events in her hometown that inspired this incredible story.

Susan, this is the first novel you've written. Please tell us about it.

KIKI AND JACQUES is a story about kids from very different backgrounds growing up in a small Maine town. It's about finding common ground and friendship in spite of cultural differences and challenges.

You were inspired to write this book when your hometown in Maine began to see an influx of Somali refugees in the early 2000s. Tell us a little bit about that experience and how the addition of Somalis to your home town changed the cultural landscape.

When I was growing up, we lived in the "twin cities" in Maine—the old mill town of Lewiston and its sister city, Auburn. My great-grandparents came from Russia and opened a store. Three generations later, my parents had a bridal shop in downtown Lewiston. The majority of the population was of French Canadian descent, and my parents often sold dresses speaking basic French. When I read a magazine article about the wave of Somali immigration to Lewiston, I thought that a small Maine town experiencing such profound cultural change would be an amazing setting for a middle-grade novel.

What kind of research did you do for this book? In researching, what did you find most interesting or surprising?

As with most things in life, I found the very best place to start my research was at the library. In this case, I went to the library in Lewiston and met with a librarian, who told me something very important: in her experience, teenagers of all cultures were more alike than they were different.

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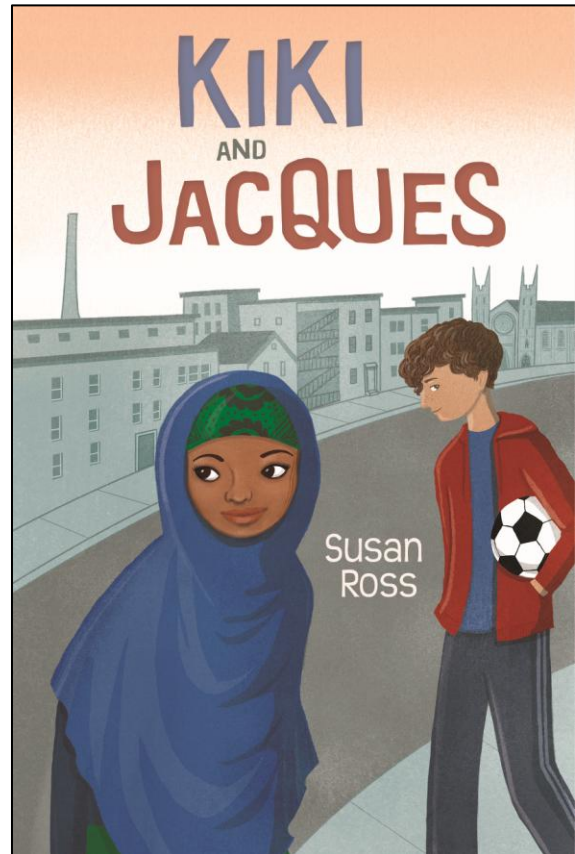
I spoke with a few Somali kids that day, who were at the library using the computers. I saw that they were on Facebook, just like my teenagers at home. Later, I met with other Somali teens and asked them to read chapters of my book. I was greatly inspired by how strong and ambitious these kids were, and I was touched by how glad they were to have an author listen and learn about their lives.

KIKI AND JACQUES focuses on the importance of two kids respecting cultural, religious and racial differences, but still becoming friends. What do you hope young readers learn from this novel?

I hope that I've written a story that kids can relate to. Kiki and her brother Mohamed's lives are very different than Jacques's in many respects, but they also have a surprising amount in common—soccer, strong loyalty to family, and great loss (Kiki's dad was killed in the war in Somalia and Jacques' mom died in a car accident). Each kid is looking for a safe and permanent sense of home and belonging.

When did you know you wanted to become an author?

I knew I wanted to become an author when I was in the fourth grade and liked to stay inside at recess and write. My first book was called *Diablo*, and it was about a wild horse with cruel masters. Not so coincidentally, I had just finished reading one of my favorite books, *Black Beauty*. I became a lawyer, but after I stopped practicing law and my kids got older, I learned about the Somali immigration to Maine and thought, wow, this would be a wonderful and important topic to write about.



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If you could give any advice to young authors, what would it be?

My best advice is simply that writers must write! Start a journal and keep it close, or take notes on your laptop or phone. Find a writing buddy and send ideas back and forth. Get your words down, whenever and however you're inspired. Even if your writing isn't close to perfect at first, it will get better, and you will learn and grow in the process—I promise!

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