

Finalist, High School Category



Essayist: Amir, age 16, Winston Churchill High School

Advocating for: *Everything Sad is Untrue* by Daniel Nayeri

There's a kind of loneliness that doesn't come from being alone — it comes from being misunderstood. Daniel Nayeri's *Everything Sad is Untrue* captures that feeling better than any book I know. It tells the story of Khosrou, a twelve-year-old boy who flees Iran with his family and finds himself dropped into an Oklahoma classroom where no one believes a word he says.

It's not a story with perfect grammar or clean chapters. It moves like memory — looping, interrupting, doubling back. But it *lives*. In myth and memory, in the scent of saffron and rosewater, in a mother's courage, in the heartbreak of losing home and the weight of carrying it with you.

My parents are from Isfahan. I was born in the U.S., raised in English — but Persian lives in the margins of my life. I know the balancing act Khosrou performs — the cultural translation, the longing, the constant shifting of self depending on the room you're in. Nayeri doesn't just describe that experience — he *unmasks* it. And in doing so, he gives it dignity.

This book gives voice — loud, unfiltered voice — to stories that are so often softened, edited, or silenced. Immigrant stories, especially from communities labeled “model minorities,” are expected to be clean, polite, and grateful. But Nayeri's story breaks



that mold. It's messy, contradictory, and proud. He doesn't try to simplify himself for anyone. He doesn't flatten his mother's sacrifices into pity or reduce his culture to palatable anecdotes. He speaks in broken English and full emotion.

That alone is radical. Because for so long, immigrant kids have been taught to whisper their stories — or only tell them in ways that are "educational," "inspiring," or "easy to understand." But *Everything Sad is Untrue* says: that's not enough. Our stories deserve to be loud. Complicated. Honest.

This book doesn't just *include* Iranian identity — it challenges the idea that identity must be neat. And that makes it a mirror we've never seen before. Not because it's perfect, but because it's *true*.

Adding it to the Planet Word Library wouldn't just preserve a powerful story. It would tell readers — especially immigrant kids like me — that their truths matter, even when they're hard to tell. That their stories don't have to be perfect to be unforgettable. That their voices, too, belong not just in footnotes or translations, but right here — in the center.