



## Where I Belong

*Gillian Cross*

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There are guns and bandits in this story. And supermodels. And there's drought and starvation too. Are you wondering how they can all come together? Well, that's how life is these days. Things don't happen neatly, in separate little places. We're all caught by the great spider's web of media that spans the world. That's where the story is set. The world. It's the story of Abdi and Khadija and Freya (that's me) and what happened to us because of Somalia...

## Where I Belong Details

Date : Published March 1st 2010 by Oxford University Press, USA

ISBN : 9780192755544

Author : Gillian Cross

Format : Paperback 340 pages

Genre : Young Adult, Realistic Fiction, Cultural, Africa, Eastern Africa, Somalia, Adventure

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## From Reader Review Where I Belong for online ebook

### Alice Radwell says

This is a book about culture, and how varying nations differ because of wealth, but little else. There are a mix of cultural scenarios introduced through the perspectives of three vastly different protagonists. Khadija - a girl forced to leave her home because of a drought, Abdi - whose an ethnic minority in England, and Freya - the daughter of a popular British fashion designer. This book wasn't what I expected, it was much more unique. Somalia isn't a country often bought into fiction, and so theres a great opportunity for tangential learning.

I enjoyed the realism backing the cultural mindset of each character; Cross has taken the time to think about the cultural mindsets of each protagonist, and these are subtly presented through dialogue and action, and even through the narrative tone as each individual gives their first-person view of events in their own chapters. Cross explores ideas about family and survival, identity and secrets, and the ways we express who we are through what we wear. The novel even addresses the problem of stereotyping and Western ignorance. While the story was brutal at times, there isn't really a driving tension, and the climax and ending were a rushed. Throughout the plot there are several inconsistencies, but they're not very big.

This is a good read, great for a classroom setting. It's got an interesting plot about two diverse parts of the world, the beauty and cruelty of which are told through four narrative voices.

For more reviews visit: <http://alicereadsbooks.wordpress.com/>

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### Elizabeth says

Pulled in first by the cover, this was a random find while roaming the shelves in the library.

Abdi is a fourteen-year-old Somali refugee who has never been to Somalia, since his mother fled to the Netherlands before he was born. His family then moved on to England, where they saved for years to bring his father to London. Abdi's father is not one of the lucky ones and he disappears before making it to his family in England.

Kadija is the oldest of our trio and not going by her real name. When her real father sends her by smuggler to England, she is given the name Kadija and a false age of fourteen. She never shares her true name with the reader, stating only that it traces her family back 13 generations and allows any Somali to know exactly from which family she descends. Abdi's family has taken Kadija in as a sister and she is under orders to get a good education to help her family back in Somalia.

Freya is the fifteen-year-old daughter of David, a photo journalist-cum-professor, and famed British fashion designer Sandy Dexter. Freya splits time between her parent's homes and spends time with her friends—all while despising the fashion world of her mother.

Brought together when Sandy spots Kadijah on the street and recruits her as a model for her latest collection, the teens not only spend time dodging fashion world spies, they must deal with Somali bandits and abducted younger brothers.

Where I Belong provides adventure, a collision of cultures, and a little high fashion in a fast paced read.

Relatively short chapters told from differing viewpoints prevent readers from bogging down. Occasional breaks from the main narration are offset in bold font and allow us to keep up with Mahmoud, Kadijah's endangered younger brother.

While the story carries the hint of violence in the offing, there is surprisingly little "onscreen" violence and many of the real life issues in Somalia are only hinted at, making this a good option even for middle schoolers. Gillian Cross, a Carnegie Medal winning author, delivers a story that is as relevant today as it was when it was published in 2010. The relevancy and out of the norm setting for a young adult novel increase the interest level into the high school grades as well.

While Kirkus was not thrilled with the book, I found it to be a suspenseful, fast read that appeals to both middle and upper grades.

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### **Derek Martelle says**

I personally did not like this book. It was decent at most. The beginning 70 pages or so were very slow and super boring. Later in the story suspense increased and the story got better. Overall, I would not recommend this book to others.

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### **Raina says**

There are not enough books like this.

Ripped-from-the-headlines, high action, high suspense, multiple perspectives, short chapters, girl appeal, boy appeal, internet safety tips, world awareness... I could go on and on.

Abdi is technically from Somalia. But he's never lived there. His mother moved to the Netherlands before he was born, and he's lived in England for several years. He's 14.

"Khadija" loves Somalia. She lived there until recently, when her father paid for her to illegally emigrate to England, where she lives with Abdi's family as their "sister."

Freya's mom is a fashion designer. Freya fend for herself most of the time, living the urban London life. She spends a lot of time with her dad, a photographer who used to cover ravaged African countries.

One day, Freya's mom gets a new idea for her next fashion line. She's inspired by Freya's dad's work in Somalia, and one day, on the street, she discovers the perfect model.

What follows is a fast-paced kidnapping tale. It's kind of obvious to the reader who the villain is, but, as my friend Jackie says, "That's the difference between mystery and suspense -- you know what's going to happen in suspense." It's heart-breaking how long the villain has the upper hand. And how long they stay hidden from their victims. There are also a few twists that I wasn't fully expecting.

I think it's interesting that Cross chooses to include fragments of the experience of the kidnappee after many of the chapters, instead of giving the character entire chapters to themselves.

Yeah, I loved it. Wish the cover was a little more boy-friendly. Wish the paperback cover had come out in amerika (the hardback follows a good formula, but doesn't go far enough). But yeah, dibs on this for booktalking.

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## **Queen Coloman says**

The first two chapters were lovely, and drew me in with quick, thoughtful storytelling that captured the personalities of the characters without turning them into caricatures of their nationality. Obviously Ms Cross can write, and write well.

Then the third chapter, the first from Freya's point of view, let all the air out my enjoyment with what seemed like a very forced attempt at a distinctly western teenage voice.

I'm not British - maybe British teens sound like that? But the prose and, in particular the dialogue, felt very fake, with a lot of clumsy attempts to slip background detail in naturally that didn't feel natural at all.

It took me until the second Freya chapter to work out what the problem was. It was how much the Freya POV talks *to* the reader. Obviously all first-person narratives have an element of that, but this was direct fourth wall breaking and extremely jarring.

That extra level of connection also made me realise how much I didn't like Freya. Not in an anti-hero way, but in regards to her personality and the way she 'spoke'. She was annoying, patronising and brattish. I didn't like her, I didn't care about her experience and I didn't want to hear what she had to say, particularly when she started talking about wearing a veil after ten-minutes of experience, and latching on to any stranger on the street not looking at or speaking to her as a sign that they were purposefully ignoring her because they thought she was Muslim. Then she started going on about the veil giving her power because she was hidden while at the same time being angry because people couldn't see her...I'm sorry, but no. It all felt really distasteful, like the author was writing a tacky highschool essay about every single emotion they imagine a woman in a veil might feel to show how empathetic she was with POC issues. It felt dirty. You want to tell me about POC experience? Have one of your POC characters do it, or have them teach your white western characters. Don't have your white western characters teach themselves and then share their profound knowledge with the rest of us.

Maybe the book improves, and Freya becomes less unbareable. Maybe it all ties together in a way that makes the tone of those early chapters essential to the story. I'm just not willing to hang in any longer to find out. One star.

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## **Abdullahi abdisalam says**

The reason that I chose this book is that I like to read some Muslims books fiction and mysteries book. Also, I got recommend for this book for good reads and I thought this book will be good to read and that is why I chose this book to read.

The genre of this book is fiction but sometimes it looks like mystery fiction. So the real genre of this book is Muslim religious fiction. The author of this book is called GILLIAN CROSS. This book was published in 2010.

This book is about a girl whose name Khadija she is in London and her brother is in Somalia so what she has to do is that she has to save her brother in one hundred thousand dollars. So she has to save her brother if not he will die. She is a famous fashion designer and she is QARSOON hidden her face. The moment that stood out to me was when her uncle left her alone for a new city that she doesn't know anyone. "She thought her uncle would take her to her new family house. she thought he would introduce her to Abdi and his sisters and present her to the woman who was supposed to be her mother. But what happens was different" (78). This moment stood out to me for what her uncle was doing. Another moment that stood out to me was when "he took some coins out of his pocket and gave them to her. "can you use a telephone?" he said. she lifted her head. "of course I can!" he pointed her to the phone and said put the money there and call someone who you know. "don't waste time he said" go. When she was halfway there, I looked back over my shoulder. Uncle had already disappeared. I had no money to put in if I made the first time wrong" (79). This really stood out to me it was so painful. The style of this book is third person and second person.

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### **Elzahraa says**

The reason behind making the decision of reading this novel was the distinctive cover , preface, and introduction. When the class went down to the library choosing a book to read, I discovered this particular book joined different topics and contained a different theme than any other book I've read before. It affiliated Somali culture with couture fashion in England, kidnapping, and extortion all together. The story is told through the views of three teenagers Khadija, whom we really don't know her real name, Freya, and Abdi. Khadija is to leave her family suffering the violent, aggravating conditions in Somalia in hope for a better education in England where then she will be able to help them out of their hardships. Abdi is an ethnic Somali living with his mother and three sisters in a Somali neighborhood in the Netherlands. Abdi's father is said to be dead as a result of the civil strife and drought in Somalia. Freya is the daughter of Sandy Dexter, a fashion designer, and David, a war photographer. As Khadija arrives at her new household, she starts thinking about different ways she can make money, and thus help her family out through the drought. Meanwhile, Sandy Dexter has been researching Somalia for her next collection. Designing a burqa and wearing it through the streets of Battle Hill with Freya, Sandy discovers Khadija. She secretly meets up with them promising Khadija to be on the front covers of her next magazine. Not long after Khadija met up with Sandy, her brother Mahmoud back in Somalia gets kidnapped and the kidnappers request ten thousand dollars from Khadija knowing her plans with the famous fashion designer. The events of the book climax from this point on to form a unique theme. In particular, the book demonstrates the theme of belonging where all three teenagers end up finding where they truly belong in life. Given the example of Khadija, feeling that she belonged in Somalia and had no sense of belonging in England was perceived. This also includes Abdi's feeling of belonging in Somalia although it was his first time visiting the country where his parents originated and grew up. Overall, this book demonstrates the dubious view of teenagers on their future lives.

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### **Wisteriouswoman says**

The reason I picked up this book was that the cover photo intrigued me and the name Gillian Cross rang a bell. It turns out that I read *Tightrope* when it first came out, or at least when it first showed up at my library. My library seems to be getting more books by English authors these days. Most of Gillian Cross's books have never made it across the pond.

The book was interesting because I know almost nothing about Somalia. Young adult readers need more books about Africa and other countries where people don't live the economically privileged lives that kids in the US have. Whether it rains or not can be a life or death situation for nomadic tribes.

There were loose ends in the story telling: how does Maamo support her children, was Mahmoud's father living with his other wife in Mogadishu when his family was in the camp, why are Freya's parents living separately, how did Freya's Dad's career change come about?

Freya was my favorite character and I would love it if the author wrote another book about Freya's life without the other characters. I enjoyed her disgust with the fashion world since so many other teen novels glamorize it. Her anger at, but acceptance of, her artistic narcissistic mother seemed plausible. I liked her dad and I think there is potential for a story about her quirky family.

I also like the fact that the book stresses the beauty of the desert and the love of homeland that is strong for those that grow up there. Stories and songs are an integral form of communication and entertainment in many non-industrial cultures: there can be a rich life without video games and ear buds.

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## **Dimple Mehta says**

*Where I Belong*, written by Gillian Cross, is a high speed drama that keeps your head spinning in circles; I highly recommend this novel to anybody who likes dramas, and mysteries, this is not the basic who done it story, it's more of a high pressure situation.

The novel is semi-predictable but never the less a great story. Also the story through three teenagers. The narration rotates each chapter between Abdi, Khadija (whose real name is never told, but has a nickname: Geri), and Freya. Another unique format of this book is that the story of Geri's brother, Mahmoud, is told at the end of every chapter of Freya. This layout is great to see what everyone is thinking and see the different perspectives.

The story is set during a civil war in Somalia and the main character is sent to England under a fake identity to provide for her family back home. Geri's father told her, "You can't do anything here. It's getting harder and harder for people like us, who travel around with our animals. Soon we will have nothing left. If you go to England, you'll be able to help the whole family. And maybe, one day, you can come back and help Somalia too" (16). The girl is offered a modeling job, which she accepts in dire need for money. Her real brother, back home, has been kidnapped has a ransoms of dollars. Nobody can help Geri except uncle Suliman, with his help the modeling job was possible. In the end we see who the kidnapped Geri's brother, someone trusted reveals which side they are on, and someone stands up to a bandit, "I jumped onto the stage and my hands reached for the cloth that covered the murderer's face. As my fingers closed around it, I realized that he might turn and fire. He might even kill me. But it was too late for that. I gripped the head cloth hard and pulled it away. The man whipped around, pointing his gun at my chest, and I knew I was going to die" (234).

## heather says

This book has a lot of things going on, but it manages to do most of it well. Khadija's discovery by the fashion world is far fetched but it allows for a variety of perspectives and interpretations of Somalian life. The kidnapping storyline is underdeveloped but brings all the characters and two countries together. Where this book shines is its depiction of Somalian culture from various points of view (native, first generation immigrant, westerners). The author does a fantastic job at describing the geography, fabrics, and other visuals of the story make the reader's can really "feel" the story. The text and story are not overly difficult and I would recommend this as a multi-cultural read for middle or high schoolers.

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## Ari says

I really wish the photo uploaded to Goodreads of the cover looked better because the cover of Where I Belong is simply stunning with the bright blue peeking out from the solemn veil. LOVE (ETA: It's fixed, huzzah!)

Looking at the cast of characters, you probably think there's a love triangle. WRONG. Abdi, Khadija and Freya are just friends and that is marvelous. There is no romance in this book. It's purely a story of friendship, adventure and fashion. I suppose that could count as a spoiler but whatever. If you only read a book that's about romance, I warned you. Instead this is a good book about friendship. Sort-of. We don't learn much about Abdi's friends and Khadija doesn't have many friends. We meet some of Freya's friends as well, but it seemed out of place. We are told by Freya that she does indeed have friends and as if to prove that, the author throws in some random friends with random problems. I would have rather Freya not have had friends at all or get more backstory on her friend's problems. In addition to the supporting characters not being fully fleshed out, the story can drag at times. The story sounds like it might be action-packed, but it's really not. Which is ok, but even though I didn't mind the lack of pirate/bandit action, I did mind how time seemed to fly for the main characters but nothing seemed to really happen. It's an odd thing to try and express and I hope I'm making sense. Furthermore, I wish I had gotten to know all the main characters better. The story is told in alternating points of view between Abdi, Khadija and Freya but the characters remain on a superficial level. Not till the end do we see Abdi's more intimate side and while we witness Khadija's more emotional side, we are only told about Freya's emotions.

I did like the fact that Somalia is the common thread (!). You have to suspend a bit of your disbelief (after we are all dealing with famous fashion designers and Somalian bandits, a most unlikely combination), but that allows you to fully savor the story and not scrutinize it as much. There are several different attitudes expressed in this story, an attitude that Africa is a dangerous place and that is all it has to offer. Another attitude held by a character is that Africa is an 'exotic' place, in a way the character is only trying to use Africa (there's a ring of colonialism or imperialism in that respect). And Khadija wants people to see all that Africa, specifically Somalia, has to offer. The good and the bad. She wants to become a model for noble reasons and she's an admirable character. One of my favorite parts of the story is when the author describes Sandy and Freya trying on the veil. "So how did it feel? If you're not veiled yourself, that's what you want to know, isn't it? [...] The first answer is-terrifying." (pg. 59-60). Freya then goes on to describe how she feels invisible in the veil, because most people go out of their way to avoid her. Eventually Freya says that the veil gives her a sense of power, because she can keep people guessing and hide herself from the world (in a sense) if she wants.

Where I Belong could be read by middle grade students or young adults. One of the most fascinating parts of the story comes from its fashion background and revolves around the character of Sandy, the iconic fashion designer. Sandy is not only the scarf (!) that holds everyone together, she is also the glue (although it could be argued that Khadija is the glue as well). The fashion commentary and the peeks at Somalia will help this story to stand out and trying to get to the climax of the story will keep readers turning the pages (and it is worth it although it wasn't elaborated on which was frustrating). There's nothing really wrong with this book, I just didn't love it or even really really like it. I liked it and I'd recommend it to certain people, but I'm not sure if it's for everyone. I always think it's weird when I don't have a favorite character and that is the case here (I did like Khadija more than the others though, from the little I learned about her). Ultimately my problem with the story is that several promising storylines are introduced but they are too easily wrapped up or pushed aside and the characters remain stock characters.

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### **Erika says**

*Where I Belong* was an exciting book about the origins of a Somali model. It's the kind of book you could easily read in a day, especially when you're looking for something entertaining but not too empty.

The story is written from three first person points of view: Abdi, a Somali British boy; Khadija, a Somali immigrant to England; and Freya, the Anglo daughter of a fashion designer. There is also one third person account of Khadija's brother, Mahmoud. While hearing from so many characters kept up the suspense and provided a rounded picture of the plot, the voices were so similar that I could never keep them straight. I found this frustrating, since these characters were so different from each other. Khadija in particular could have had a really interesting narrative as a recent immigrant to the UK. (I was also flummoxed by how quickly she picked up English!) And Abdi, as the only boy, should have been distinct from the girls. Also, am I the only one who thinks it's totally unbelievable that a 14-year-old boy would be surrounded by models and never once notice that any of them were attractive?

Another major issue is that even though much of this book takes place in Somalia, the author did not seem to have connection to that place. There were a few Somali phrases and stories thrown in, but I definitely did not get a sense of what it would be like to be there. It seemed more like a movie set (based on stereotypes) than another part of the world.

Even though I read this book as part of a larger project on YA fiction about Muslims, this was definitely not a book about Islam. There are a few references to veils and propriety, and the fashion is all about covering and uncovering, but the religion rarely features.

Overall, I enjoyed this book, but wouldn't necessarily pass it on.

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### **Kelly says**

An interesting trend this year seems to be books with a setting in Africa. This one's got Somalia as a backdrop, though the bulk of the story takes place in Britain.

Cross's novel explores the idea of identity as it intersects with history and family. The story's told through three voices, though I never once felt any of the voices were distinct. I found Abdi, the male voice, decidedly

female throughout and was a little surprised it wasn't when I found out.

I was confused by the bold text at the end of Freya's sections for a long time until I realized it was the narration of events in Somolia going on "in the mean time." It was in the wrong place in the book and should have been a separate voice all together, and it would have been better to introduce it a smidgen later in the story, when there's a better grip of who the characters in the story are -- see the challenge of three indistinguishable voices.

The hostage situation combined with the modeling situation was a strange mix, but it (mostly) worked. I had a hard time buying that Khadija's adoptive family would let her go on this trip for the modeling and while I enjoyed the knife-twist of who the masked man was (didn't see it coming!), it also felt WAY TOO CONVENIENT for the storyline. It was too easy.

The writing is serviceable at best. I feel like tightening the story a bit, filling out the secondary characters, and offering up more distinct voices in the three narrators would have made this okay read better.

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### **Rachel says**

The first day you come to a new country, you have to adjust to the new culture. The main character was "born in the Netherlands" (Cross 4), so moving to Somalia, which was a new country for her was difficult to get used to. What about the next day, while trying to deal with the new life, you are discovered to be a model? Her father would always spin the globe and point to Somalia saying "That's where you belong" (Cross 3). This novel, Where I Belong, by Gillian Cross, is a book for high fashion lovers and readers who love thrillers. There are many positive things about this book. Different perspectives explore different events. Also, there are many different settings. This novel is very interesting, and keeps the reader making constant guesses. But there are some flaws. The book has some words translated in Somali that may be hard for some people. Also, the different perspectives can be confusing. Otherwise, it's a great book. Think about your loved ones when making important decisions. That is the theme for the book. Khadija represents this. When Khadija looks for work, she hopes to use the money to bring her family. Also, when her brother is captured, she'll use the modeling money to free him. To wrap up, Where I Belong is a book that combines high fashion and thrillers into one great story. You will be asking many questions while reading this book. Will her brother be saved? What if her identity is revealed? Will she make the money she needs? There's only one way to read to answer these, and that is to read this book!

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### **Nada Shukri says**

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