

one word, SIX LETTERS

TEACHER'S GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Two teen boys grapple with identity and accountability and set off a ripple effect within their community after a school assembly is disrupted by a shouted slur.

★ “[A] searing, deeply felt dual-POV novel.” —*Publishers Weekly*

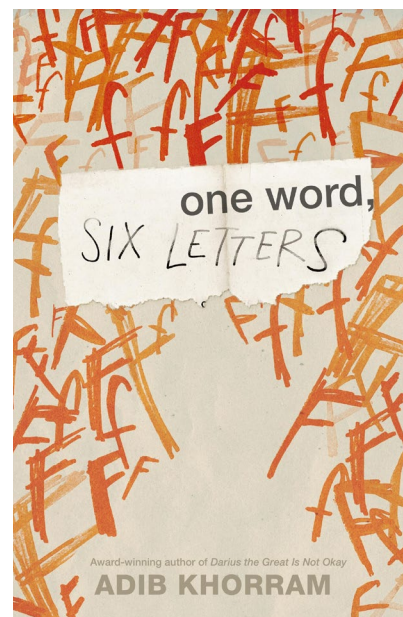
★ “A must-have.” —*School Library Journal*

Freshmen Dayton and Farshid couldn't be more different—or so it seems. When Dayton takes a dare and shouts the f-slur at a visiting author during a school event, it sets off a chain reaction that forces both boys to face parts of themselves they'd rather ignore.

Dayton, grappling with the fallout of his actions, faces rejection from his friends, disappointment from his parents, and a growing awareness of the harm he's caused. Meanwhile, Farshid is left to untangle his own feelings—about himself and about the quiet struggle of coming to terms with his queerness in a world steeped in heteronormativity.

As their lives unexpectedly intersect, Dayton and Farshid must reckon with what kind of men they want to become and whether they have the courage to defy toxic masculinity and societal expectations.

Timely, raw, and deeply thought-provoking, this novel is perfect for fans of Jason Reynolds and Nic Stone.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adib Khorram is a queer Iranian American author. His critically acclaimed novels include *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, *Darius the Great Deserves Better*, *Kiss & Tell*, and *The Breakup Lists*. When he's not writing, he enjoys yoga, figure skating, electric guitar, food, wine, tea, board games, and explaining to people why Kansas City has the best barbecue.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Educator,

I can't thank you enough for sharing *One Word, Six Letters* with your students, and I'd like to share with you a little about where the story came from.

I was maybe a third of the way through giving a talk about *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* to an auditorium full of high schoolers, most of whom had read all or part of the book, when it happened. A student interrupted me, shouting at the top of their lungs, "Faggot!" I didn't let it disrupt my presentation; I pretended I heard the word "bacon," talked about my love of breakfast food, and carried on, while the student was bodied out of the auditorium by a group of teachers. I moved on.

But the students in that auditorium didn't. So many of them apologized to me, as if they were responsible for what their classmate had said. Others admired how I handled it, asked for advice on how to do the same, because they were queer and knew they'd need that skill in their lives too. Teachers and administrators told me about the discipline planned for the student who shouted. But none of it really stuck with me.

The ignorant words of a fourteen-year-old, even a hateful one like the slur he used, didn't hold much weight for me, a grown man visiting from out of town. Instead, I found myself thinking of his peers, who have to walk the halls with him, sit in class with him, who will remember this moment for the rest of their school days and maybe the rest of their lives. Who's apologizing to them? Who's making sure they feel safe and respected? How are they healing from this?

And I found myself thinking, too, of the boy who shouted the slur. Why did he do it? Was he a homophobe? Was he parrotting what he heard at home? Was he put up to it by a classmate? Had he eaten breakfast that day?

The older I get, the less I care about punishment, and the more I care about justice. How can an individual or a community make amends, and how can an individual or a community heal and move on? What does it mean to forgive? What does it mean to remember?

Will that boy ever be given a chance to reflect on his mistakes, learn and grow, apologize for the hurt he's caused and try to heal it? Will his classmates ever get to feel safe and welcome in their school again?

I don't know if any of the students who inspired this story will ever read it. But I hope they found their own healing, whatever that may be.

Thank you again for sharing *One Word, Six Letters* with your students. Happy reading!



Adib Khorram

EDUCATOR'S NOTE

Dear Educators,

One Word, Six Letters is a powerful novel that tackles sensitive topics that benefit from care and pre-reading. As you read and enjoy, consider tabbing pages you want to be sure to ask students questions about. In the story, the teenage characters are grappling with their identities, appearances, fitting in, changes in their bodies, and doing what's right. In the first scene, one of the protagonists, Dayton, succumbs to peer pressure and shouts a single word during a talk by a visiting author, which not only gets him suspended but also ousted from various friend groups. Adib Khorram's Author's Note in this guide elucidates how he came up with the idea for the story—and where his mind lingered, asking himself how teenagers are affected by each other's mistakes and how apology and accountability happens. Consider sharing this context with students at the conclusion of the book because it shares so much about how writers generate ideas for stories, and how redemptive arcs go.

This is also an immigrant story. The other narrator, Farshid, is not only discovering his own sexuality at a pivotal time in his life but also faces discrimination for being Iranian and Bahá'í, and feels othered by his peers as a result. His family left Iran to avoid religious persecution. Please handle this story with the love and care it deserves, especially at a time in our country when historically marginalized voices have been silenced and Middle Eastern people have been negatively stereotyped.

In the text it says, "You might only be fourteen, but you're old enough to know that people who run around shouting what Dayton shouted usually use other words, too. Words for people with brown skin, words for immigrants who come from places America looks down on even though America messed them up in the first place, words for people who are different in whatever way matters that day." (page 68). This, perhaps, elevates the crux of the entire story—and it's one we must combat as educators tasked with caring for young people. How can we ensure that all of the children—and families—in our care feel safe and have a sense of belonging in our schools and communities? We teach them that these words are wrong. We teach them how to repair. And we work ourselves to unlearn erroneous negativities we might, ourselves, have been socialized to say.



Nawal Qarooni

PART 1: LEARNING ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

- How must it feel to be called stupid by your caregiver or parent (page 12)? What kind of relationship does Dayton seem to have with his father and his mother, and what lines help you know (page 21).
- The first line in Farshid’s story is: “You’re so used to people saying your name wrong, you don’t realize it at first. After all, people have been messing up *Farshid* for as long as people have been saying it” (page 13). Have you ever had your name mispronounced? How did it feel? What is the story of your name, and how was it given to you? (See Beyond the Text: Application for a more involved assignment.)
- Describe Farshid’s friend Nour and what we know about her. Why are Farshid and Nour drawn to each other? What does she mean when she refers to “all from the terrorist-y part of the world” (page 16)? How have Middle Eastern people been portrayed in American media and stories? Be ready to share what a [keffiyeh](#) is, and why it’s important to Palestinian culture.
- The first we hear about accountability is when Marshall tells his brother Dayton that he hurt his feelings and did nothing about it. Why is Marshall so upset?
- What do we learn about Farshid’s language, culture, ethnicity, and background in the early chapters?
- On page 39, Farshid says, “by then Nadeem was in high school and had decided America wasn’t so great after all. Better than Iran, to be sure, but far from perfect, and maybe pledging allegiance to the flag painted on all the bombs that had been falling on people that looked like you for so many decades wasn’t cool after all.” What is Farshid feeling about being an Iranian in America?
- On page 40, the word “invisible” is isolated when Farshid is describing how he feels. Why do you think he feels this way? Have you ever felt invisible?
- Cooper says on page 47 to his friend Dayton that he’s “not a homophobe just because I used to be friends” [with him]. How has shouting the six-letter word publicly changed Dayton’s relationship with his peers? Be sure to clearly state for students the meaning of the word “[homophobe](#),” perhaps breaking down the word into its parts.

PART 2: UNDERSTANDING IDENTITIES

- Why does Farshid join the Rainbow Coalition? What does it mean to be an ally?
- In the text it says, “You can’t let the Dayton and Brodys of the world win” (page 60). What does this line mean?
- What pressures does Dayton face? Throughout the text, Dayton feels like he can’t do anything to correct the painful incident he caused. What lines in the text make you know this (pages 64, 77)?
- How does Farshid feel around Dayton, and why does this tension exist (page 64)?
- In Dayton’s sections of the story, the phrase “no homo” is thrown around a lot. The phrase associates homosexuality with negativity, especially in a world where oftentimes even platonic relationships between boys are cast as suspicious

or sexual. Why do the characters in the story use it? What does it really mean (page 94)? Teachers, you'll want to offer a safe space for honest conversation about vulnerability and friendship, being careful to curb commentary that feels judgmental.

- Farshid and his family believe in the [Bahá'í](#) faith (page 79). What do we learn in the story about being Bahá'í (page 100)? Do you and your family believe in a specific religion, and if so, which one?
- Farshid's mother is always trying to feed him (page 80). What does nourishment represent for her, and what makes you think that?
- The teenagers in the story are concerned with their appearance (page 93). In some instances, the characters become too obsessed with how they look (pages 131–32). What parts of the story feel similar to or different from your own experiences of caring about how you look—what you wear, what your body looks like, and what you eat? In the scene on page 97, Farshid tells Cooper he smells good. How did their interaction go?
- On page 101, when Farshid says, “You can't get away from that word, can't get away from the hate in people's hearts. Not hate for you, because you're not that, you're not one of those, but hate for your friends in here,” we learn that the six-letter word continues to haunt him and cause him pain. How is Farshid internalizing the slur that was shouted by Dayton at the start of the story? What was the word's impact on him?

PART 3: MAKING AMENDS

- Farshid continues to hide parts of himself. Why do you think he is hiding, and who is he hiding from? What lines in the story make you know this (pages 119, 135, 137)? Have you ever hidden parts of yourself in different spaces?
- Describe the scene between Brody, Mariana, and Dayton on pages 126 to 128. How could it have gone differently? Have you ever been in a similar situation?
- The ways that crushes—specifically male attitudes toward girls—are described in this story between some of the boys borders on disrespectful. Dayton notices this in the way Reggie talks on page 141, and Reggie continues to speak disrespectfully on page 143. What stands out to you? How does Reggie seem to differ from the other characters in the story?

PART 4: THE ARC OF MORAL JUSTICE

- Describe what you learn about Farshid's home when he visits Dayton's for their project (pages 152–54). How are they similar or different?
- Throughout the text, Dayton repeats “he's not,” as he worries that everyone else believes they're better than him (page 158). What do you think this says about Dayton?
- Why does Dayton call Farshid a bully? How does their interaction go? What does Farshid mean when he says, “You did it to *everyone*. All of us. And you act like you're the victim” (page 159)?

- What takes place on pages 160 and 161 is pivotal, because Dayton begins to truly see Farshid and feel remorse. What made you know how important this scene is for the arc of the story?
- How does the author leave us clues as readers that Farshid’s obsession with appearance is erring on the side of unhealthy? (Page 165: “your pecs aren’t nearly as developed as you want them to be, and your core is still lacking definition.”)
- On pages 167 and 168 Farshid finally unleashes one of his biggest fears. What happens here? How does Farshid’s mother react (page 178)?
- Dayton makes a critical decision on page 185. What is it? How does Farshid learn about what happened to his locker and what Dayton did afterward (page 192)?
- Why do you think Farshid feels the need to control his eating and his body (pages 196–97)?
- How do Dayton’s final actions in the story contribute to accountability and responsibility for the first slur he shouted at the beginning of the story? How has he changed?
- Khorram writes in the Author’s Note: “The older I get, the less I care about punishment, and the more I care about justice. How can an individual or community make amends, and how can an individual or a community heal and move on? What does it mean to forgive? What does it mean to remember?” How do you think this specific school community and these characters may have healed and made amends? Do you think that Farshid forgave Dayton? Why or why not?

BEYOND THE TEXT: APPLICATION

- Farshid’s name is often mispronounced. In Persian, it means “sunshine” or “radiant.” What does your name mean, and how was it given to you? What is the origin of your name? Art Extension: Write your name in bubble letters and fill in each letter with drawings and designs that represent you, what you love, and whom you love. Teachers, you might layer this part of the book with another [name story](#).
- Throughout Farshid’s chapters, we learn that he feels insecure and scared to come out or face head-on that he is gay. Write an essay that draws from each of his chapters to explain how you think he feels and why he is fearful, being sure to use evidence from the text. As an alternative, you can visually represent Farshid’s feelings in a “pressure map,” or any other sort of drawing, but be sure to use quotes from the text to support your thinking.
- What is the architecture of a strong apology, one that also takes accountability? Review this one-pager on the [Elements of an Effective Apology](#). Write (or talk in table groups) about a time when you made a mistake. Did you make it right by taking accountability and mitigating—or understanding—the harm you caused? How did your apology compare to how Dayton behaved after he shouted the six letter word (pages 50, 143)?
- The ancient poets Rumi, Hafez, and Saadi are well known. Throughout the text, Persian poetry and the melodious nature of the Farsi language are mentioned (pages 14, 56, 167). Read the Rumi poem [found online here](#) and analyze it for meaning. What literary devices are used? Write your own hyperbolic lines of love after reading page 167.

WORDS AND PHRASES:

joonam and jan: sweetheart

tavalodet mobarak: happy birthday

khoresh: stew

Naw-Ruz: New Year at the time of spring equinox

haft-seen: seven special items placed on a spread for the new year holiday to represent growth, vitality, health, and prosperity

shirini: sweets

This guide was written by Nawal Qarooni, a teacher educator and consultant for school districts across the country in literacy and family engagement. She and her team of coaches at [NQC Literacy](#) provide teachers with professional learning in foundational skills, culturally sustaining pedagogies, and literacy curricular work. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan, holds master's degrees from both Syracuse University and Brooklyn College, and is a member of the Library of Congress Literacy Advisory Board. She is the author of *Nourishing Caregiver Collaborations: Exalting Home Experiences and Classroom Practices for Collective Care*.