First Opinion: Authentic Syrian Story During Traumatic Times, or a Gentle Story of Steps and Stones


*Tania Mertzman Habeck*

The story behind the story of Margriet Ruurs’s *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey* is as emotional as the one in the pages. Like many of us, Ruurs was moved by the recent pictures and stories coming out of Syria as families were fleeing violence and taking harrowing, life-threatening trips with entire families—even with very young children. One of the images that moved her was a picture of a refugee family meticulously constructed from small, smooth stones by native Syrian artist Nizar Ali Badr. After an unsuccessful attempt to contact Badr through his Facebook page, Ruurs was eventually able to contact the artist through a friend of hers in Pakistan, and after a brief series of communications, Badr agreed to create a series of works to illustrate a book Ruurs would write.

A writer is often finished with the text before the artist begins the illustrations, yet this book flipped that power structure. It was Ali Badr who created his works of stone first and only then did Ruurs create her narrative. Ali Badr’s illustrations dominate the narrative, which seems appropriate for a Syrian story. Ruurs’s writing may be informed by her travels in many Middle-Eastern regions, but Badr’s art is truly Syrian. Ruurs made sure the process of creating *Stepping Stones* was as collaborative as possible for two people working thousands of miles apart.

Badr’s images are a worthy focus of this very important text. Backgrounds are simple monochromatic backdrops for dramatic yet simple compositions evoking love, danger, loss,
and hope. The stones are chosen for color, shape, texture, and impact so well that it is easy to forget that they are stones. The shapes they create convey the weight of baggage as well as the weight of the issues they address. The book is made more emotional by the tactile nature of the stones. You can almost feel the smooth and rough parts of the stones; stones that are made by the Syrian landscape and shaped by the wind, waves, and the feet or shoes of the people who walked there. That physical quality adds a tactile connection not usually found in children’s books. These two-dimensional images of a three-dimensional medium of stones seem at once familiar and foreign. Badr’s art is a poignant centerpiece of this collaborative work.

The story Ruurs created in response to Badr’s creations is beautiful and sweet. Mirroring the images, her words are simple but powerful descriptions of the life of the main character, Rama, and her family before the violence, during their flight from danger and after they have finally found safety and a new home. The story presents a child’s point of view with a child’s discomforts, fears, and confusions. Her text, like Badr’s illustrations, also calls to the senses of the reader, evoking familiar sounds, smells, tastes, and discomfort during the journey of the young female protagonist. The simple message of the happy ending will be comforting, despite the allusion to death and danger at sea.

Parents and teachers can use this book to discuss difficult issues around refugees and war without worrying about upsetting children. Although one of the illustrations shows bodies floating in the water near a boat tightly packed with refugees, the narrative generalizes and softens the blow by euphemistically referring to loss without reference to death. Without spoiling the ending, I can assure readers that the children in the story find a place of kindness after their perilous journey. The story bypasses any direct political statements, referring only obliquely to government suppression of freedom and accompanying military action against the civilian population. Some might argue that the narrative oversimplifies the situation of the family, but it is easily digestible by sensitive children in light of its overarching themes of love, hope, and family togetherness.

In this author’s opinion, *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family’s Journey* presents a powerful and rare collaboration between a Syrian artist and a western author during a time of tension between the regions. The illustrations and text represent the Syrian tragedy in poignant, empathetic, and accessible terms with an authenticity not often available in children’s books. Margriet Ruurs and Orca Book Publishers should be recognized for their foresight, effort, and generosity in bringing Nisar Ali Badr’s images to the public, while also donating a portion of the proceeds to refugee resettlement organizations in North America. This important book deserves to become part of children’s and classroom libraries all over the world.

**About the Author**

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