First Opinion: *Refugee*—A Novel Relatable to Many People’s Life Histories


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“The wall of his apartment exploded, blasting broken bits of concrete and glass through the room. The floor lurched up under Mahmoud and through him and the table and chairs back against the wall of the kitchen. The world was a whirlwind of bricks and broken dishes . . . The entire outside wall of Mahmoud’s apartment was gone” (Gratz 32–33).

The novel *Refugee* by Alan Gratz is the about the trials and tribulations within the lives of three children, Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud, and their families who are forced to leave their countries due to intolerable circumstances. Josef’s narrative is set in 1939 Nazi Germany and walks readers through the horrific experiences of Jewish families and the terror some lived through, though many were brutally killed. Josef’s narrative, like many other narratives about the Holocaust, is a portrayal of unfathomable inhumanity. Isabel’s narrative is set in 1994 Cuba and portrays the difficult living conditions under Castro’s rule. Mahmoud’s narrative is set in 2015 Syria and reveals the horrors of civil war. These three children’s interwoven narratives across timelines provide a bleak picture of the human condition as a result of bigotry, viciousness, and political
oppression while presenting small rays of hope in humanity through the strengths, sacrifice, and perseverance of the characters and those few who showed them mercy. This book resonated with me in many ways as a scholar and as someone who lived through war and had a difficult life as an immigrant living in four countries.

The bombing scene in Mahmoud’s narrative where they lost their home was very difficult for me to read as it brought back memories of a bomb dropping in our neighborhood in Tehran/Iran when I was about seven years old. It was a miracle that my mom, two brothers, and I survived the blast as we were caught between two walls while all the windows in our apartment blasted across the rooms. Mahmoud’s story was most relatable for me especially when he was describing his daily routine of living through surviving. Reading these stories brought back many emotional memories that highlight the importance of learning other people’s narratives to identify similarities in strength and struggle that help us relate to each other on a deeper and more sympathetic level.

These three narratives reveal the brutal realities of struggles experienced by many people around the world. I could not fathom the idea of leaving/having to give my child away in the middle of the forest like Josef’s mother (159–163), or in the middle of the ocean like Mahmood’s mother, to ensure her survival. It is utterly heartbreaking and terrifying, and yet, it is the reality in many people’s lives. But a more terrifying reality is the cruelty that exists in many who terrorize and cause such circumstances and take advantage of people in need. The Trump administration’s “zero tolerance” policy at the US-Mexico border that separated children from their parents is a great example of such atrocity happening in our own backyard. Separating families, especially children from parents, is the cruelest punishment for both the parents and the children; a practice that was very typical of the Nazi regime as outlined in Josef’s narrative.

These stories are difficult to take in but they are so important to know about because they portray the realities of life and the possibilities compassion can present. My kids (ages 7 and 10) hear my stories and read similar narratives and have some understanding of these issues. However, they cannot have true understanding of these circumstances as they do not have such experiences; and for that I am thankful because they are fortunate. The point is not that only those who experience can relate, but that through exposure to such narratives, we can enhance understanding, compassion, and empathy in those who cannot relate to such experiences. Regardless of whether we can relate to the stories or not, it is crucial to learn about these lived experiences so that we can become more aware of our own position and how we can aim to improve others’ experiences through kindness and understanding.

Though I believe this novel provides important perspectives to the readers, its structure makes it difficult to read. The book lacks a table of contents and the chapters are only 4–7 pages long, sequentially changing stories between each character’s narrative. Chapter 1 begins with Josef in 1939 Germany, chapter 2 is about Isabel in 1994 Cuba, and chapter 3 is about Mahmood in 2015 Syria; and the sequence of stories continues in that order. I found the
intertwined short chapters took away from the emotional impact of each story. Even though such narratives were not new to me and the names of the characters are distinguishable, the setup of the chapters caused interruption in the flow of each character's narrative and I found myself mixing up their stories. Hence, I read each character's story alone and did not follow the sequence of the book. I read Josef’s story first, Isabel’s second, and Mahmoud’s third.

I read the book to my kids, and they were extremely engaged and emotional as they were listening to the stories. I know the book is geared toward older ages, but I think none are too young to hear about others’ experiences and realize what is happening around the world, and as a result develop compassion at an early age.

**About the Author**

_Bita Zakeri_ is a scholar of immigrant women's cross-cultural experiences. She holds a doctoral degree in literacy, culture, and language education and is currently an administrator in the School of Medicine at IUPUI.