

**Second Reaction: *Refugee* and *The Odyssey*:
Connecting the Ancient, the Past, and the Present**

Gratz, Alan. *Refugee*. Scholastic Press, 2017.

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I wish I had known of this book last fall because we study *The Odyssey* in eighth grade. In order to make *The Odyssey* more relevant to students' modern world, I proposed that Odysseus was a refugee—except he was trying to get home instead of fleeing his home. His voyage was dangerous and full of unknowns, and he had to rely on strangers—just like Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud in *Refugee*. Is this connection perfect? Far from it; yet, this lens gave us an entry point to talk about xenophobia, trauma, and grief.

To highlight similarities between the story of the teens in *Refugee* and *The Odyssey*, I would screen a video diary of a young woman's escape from Syria, privileging the story of a young person. Students could participate in several strategies that would force them to examine two parts of the refugee experience, both of which are included in *Refugee*. First, after we watch the woman's journey by overcrowded boat, I would tape an outline of the boat's size on the floor, and then have 50 students sit down inside the outline. I would ask them to imagine what it would be like to ride in a crowded boat on open ocean—how it might feel and what they would think about during

the journey. I can imagine my students wondering how long they could stand the crowding, how people would use the bathroom, and where supplies would be stored. The answers would sober them. Finally, I would ask three out of every five students to leave the boat—the number of people who survived the passage from Cuba to Florida, as described in the Author’s Note.

For the next strategy, I asked them to make a list of what they could bring on the journey that would fit in a backpack. Many listed their pets until others explained why that would be impossible. Most chose their phones and mementos. Only a few listed food, clothing, and supplies. When those students shared their lists, the mood sobered as realizations dawned. If we had read *Refugee*, I would have asked them to make the list in one minute—about how long Mahmoud’s mother had to collect important items before their home collapsed.

As an arts educator, I would also use the following strategies to further learning via *Refugee*. For each, debriefing to process students’ emotions while learning about others’ difficult experiences is key.

1. I would divide students into three groups, one for each main character. Then I’d ask them to create one **tableau** for each chapter of their character’s story and analyze the images created by each group. To debrief, I’d ask: How did it feel to physicalize these images? What common images do you notice between groups?
2. I would have students create **visual notes** as they read, tracing each character’s journey. Occasionally, students could discuss their notes and the artistic choices they made.
3. *Refugee* provides stories to dig deeper into the refugee experience, so I would ask students to write an **immersive poem** based on one sound Josef heard along his escape from Nazi Germany, such as breaking glass, a ship’s horn, dogs barking, or a waltz. They would then play the accompanying audio while reciting their poem.
4. In order to consider how actions (or inactions) affect others, I’d ask students to **roleplay** or write a **journal entry** from a minor character’s point of view, explaining the reasons for the actions they take in the book and what effects their actions ultimately had on the refugees. For example, students could write as soldiers, port officials, or smugglers.
5. To connect to *The Odyssey*, I’d have small groups trace Odysseus’s emotions along his route and examine the different welcomes that he and his men experienced at each stop. In some places, they were welcomed with hospitality. In others, they were driven out or killed. And, of course, Odysseus was the only one to make it home. We learn how Odysseus reacts to the suitors, but not his own mental health as a survivor; so for all three storylines in *Refugee*, I would ask students to **roleplay** as surviving characters and those who died on the journey. This might help students imagine the long-term emotional toll even survival can take to make clear the effects of grief and trauma. What happens after the journey is over? Is it ever over?

Finally, I would challenge students to determine how we can help immigrants in our city or country through research, education, and service. While writing this piece, the separation

of children from their parents while trying to claim asylum and/or immigrate to the U.S. came to light. *Refugee* provides clear narratives that can help students empathize with that experience more than numbers, articles, or even images.

Refugee will be 2019's summer reading.

About the Author

Leslie Rowland teaches seventh and eighth grade English at an independent school in South Carolina. Her work focuses on critical literacy and arts integration.