

Refugee Boy

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In a short note on writing serving as a preface to the novel, the author claims: "It's a hard life being labelled 'political'" (Preface). He adds: "I am not a politician. What interests me is people." (Preface) Indeed, *Refugee Boy*, like literary writing in general, cannot be considered an instrument of politics in the classical sense of the word. Yet this short novel is unmistakably political, for it was written with the intention of righting the wrongs committed by politics. Since the two pillars of the nation-state – jurisprudence and schooling – consistently fail to recognise the human in every human being, most especially in the case of stateless people, this novel aims to show, indeed teach, that "each 'refugee' is a person, a person who for some reason has left everything they know and love to find safety in a strange and sometimes hostile country" (Preface). The educational purpose of this political novel rests on the hope that "anyone who reads the book would think before they accuse refugees of looking for a free ride" (Preface).

The story unfolds in a linear fashion. It begins with two very short chapters entitled "Ethiopia" and "Eritrea" that describe the violent intrusion of armed forces into the home of the Kelo family. The spouses – mother and father – who were born in the two neighbouring countries that are now at war, are asked about their nationality, the choice being either Ethiopian or Eritrean, and nothing in between. In two iterations of the same scene, the father repeats the same answer to the soldiers, namely "I am an African" (chapters "Ethiopia" and "Eritrea"). They threaten him with rifles and call him a "traitor", an "enemy", and his son a "mongrel" (ibid.). On both occasions, the intruders give him a simple order: "Leave Ethiopia or die" i.e. "Leave Eritrea or die" (ibid.).

Determined to get his son Alam to safety, the father manages to safely transport them both to the United Kingdom. But after they spend a few days in a hotel room and his son Alam begins to adjust his eyes and ears to the English weather and language, suddenly, without any announcement, the father returns to Africa, leaving his son unattended but – as it turns out – in good care. Not only do local refugee organisations take care of him, but after some unpleasant detours through the British orphanage and school system, Alam is eventually placed in the care of a generous family (of Irish origin) who have experience in caring for underage refugees. Alam is soon accepted as a member of the school and the local community. With a little help from his friends, he becomes a hero when he and his father (who returns to the UK after his wife falls victim to war atrocities) receive a negative court decision on their political asylum claim. As part of this decision, the father is now considered by the authorities to be the legal guardian of his son. Alam had previously been "placed in the care of the local authority because [he] did not have a guardian in this country", but now this guardianship is revoked, Alam is to return to his country of origin with his father (chapter 20). However, after a shocking twist (his father is shot dead in the street by an unknown individual), the court's decision is reversed and Alam is granted an "exceptional leave to remain" (chapter 25).

The novel was included in the Small Island Read project in 2007 and was read in workshops that focused on "young adult, reluctant and emergent adult readers" (http://www.bristolreads.com/small_island_read/education.htm).

In addition to the information about the reading project, the novel's paratext states: "Younger readers are being encouraged to read *Refugee Boy* because of its insight into the problems faced by asylum seekers as well as its celebration of the diversity of Britain." (Afterword)

Perhaps it is because of this pedagogical intent that the novel's main character is clearly a 'good refugee': Alem is forced to flee his country or countries of origin to save his life, leaving no room to question the reasons for his arrival in the UK. He is not representative of the so-called 'economic migrant', whose motivations are controversially discussed in political debates, often with the aim of denying people on the move their basic human rights. Rather, Alem symbolises defenseless children who are ready to educate themselves and become successful according to the standards of the host society. While the trauma of moving to a foreign country, including being abandoned by one parent and soon losing both parents, first to war, then to anti-immigrant hatred, is likely to provoke resistance to the new country, its language, its customs, and its explicit expectations of assimilation, Alem acts out his grief in an almost unwavering determination to learn, to read, and to take advantage of the opportunities he is given. Even his commitment to human rights is portrayed as an act not against but for the host society, which makes the refugee in Zephaniah's novel a "bearer[] of hope for progressive change" (Behrmann 44).

In a short but excellent essay titled the "Novel Representations of the Refugee", Simon Behrmann points out that *Refugee Boy* "ends up cleaving closely to a romanticized refugee subject capable of being valorized within the dominant discourse" (44). The question a critical reader might ask, then, is less about refugees themselves than about the image expectations that refugees must meet in order to be accepted in a new society – both legally and culturally. This pressure to make narratological and ideological compromises has been brilliantly portrayed in another milestone in refugee literature, Dina Nayeri's *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019).

Further reading:

Behrman, Simon. "Between Law and the Nation State: Novel Representations of the Refugee." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 32.1 (2016): 38–49. Nayeri, Dina. *The Ungrateful Refugee*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2019.

LANGUAGE: English

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