

TEACHER NOTES

Refugee: The Diary of Ali Ismail

Written by Alan Sunderland

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SYNOPSIS

Ali's story begins when the Taliban visit his village in Afghanistan. They are looking for young fighters so Ali's father hides him in the storeroom of his butchers shop. An argument develops which ends with his father's murder. Realising Ali is not safe in Afghanistan his family pay for him to be taken out of the country. His journey begins in the boot of a car that takes him into Pakistan. From there, travelling on a false passport, he flies to Indonesia where he embarks on a perilous journey to Australia on an overcrowded boat. As the boat begins to sink he is rescued by the Australian Navy and taken first to Darwin and finally to the Woomera detention centre in the middle of the South Australian desert.

As his stay lengthens, Ali struggles to understand why he has been imprisoned and why he hasn't been granted a visa to stay in Australia. After three months at Woomera Ali is taken to Adelaide. He is still in detention, but he attends an ordinary high school and starts to make friends and to develop an interest in AFL football. But when he skips school for the afternoon and goes to the airport to say goodbye to his Indonesian friend, he is arrested and returned to Woomera.

Things take a dramatic turn when people protesting against the government's refugee policies break through the perimeter fence and Ali escapes. Supporters help him find accommodation and a job, but life on the run is difficult. After Immigration officials visit his workplace and arrest his friend, Ali is forced to steal food to survive. He is offered work at the Melbourne markets but his employer calls the police and the story ends with Ali back in detention.

Told in the first person diary style of the *My Australian Story* series, this tale of a fourteen-year-old's struggle to find freedom and a new start for himself and his family deftly explores the often controversial issues surrounding Australia's treatment of refugees.

BIOGRAPHY

Alan is an award-winning television journalist. He has travelled the world covering all kinds of news stories in a career spanning twenty-five years. At one point he spent a couple of years managing the News and Current Affairs Department at SBS. During that time Alan missed writing so he started to write down the stories he made up for his two young sons. Those stories developed into his first book *Toy Wars* published by Scholastic in 1999. Another book *Cosmo Cooper and the Lemons of Lockbarrel* followed in 2002. These were works of pure fiction. He says, 'I just invented some characters, put them in an imaginary world, and worked out what adventures they would have.'

Refugee is a very different kind of book. While it is still fiction it is set in the real world. Alan had to use his considerable research skills to accurately bring to life an important time in Australia's history and honestly reflect the stories of the real detainees.

There is a short biography at the end of the book and you can find out more about Alan by visiting http://www.golvanarts.com.au/clients/sunderland_ch.htm.

AUTHOR INSPIRATION

Alan says, ‘The story of detention centres like Woomera, and the people who were detained there, is one of the most important stories to be told about Australia’s recent history. It has provoked enormous divisions in the community between those who believe such detention practices should never have existed and those who believe they were necessary. With *Refugee*, I didn’t want to enter that debate. I was more interested in exploring how these detention practices affected people’s lives—something every Australian needs to understand. My hope is that *Refugee* will bring to life a reality that can sometimes be overlooked or forgotten.’

The central character, Ali Ismail, isn’t based on anyone Alan actually met. He decided that a fourteen-year-old boy coming from Afghanistan would provide an authentic starting point and being alone, without a family to talk to about his experiences and feelings, made it more likely that he would keep a diary. Many of the details are based on stories written by people who were detained in Woomera or who worked there. The book’s bibliography lists some of these sources.

While changes to government policy have seen the release of all children in detention, Alan stresses that, whatever the details of our current processes, ‘the experience of fleeing one’s country and seeking asylum remains a dangerous, traumatic and painful experience for people around the world, and most particularly for children who are separated from family members. It is this essential truth that *Refugee* tries to capture.’

IDEAS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

1. What crimes do you think would result in a fourteen-year-old Australian receiving a fifteen-month prison sentence?
2. Apart from Indigenous Australians everybody in Australia has come here, or is descended from someone who came here from another country. What are some of the reasons people have had for coming to Australia at different times?
3. Ali’s family paid a people smuggler to get Ali out of Afghanistan. Why do you think they chose this illegal method?
4. The Taliban were formed in Afghanistan in 1994. See what you can find out about their activities and how they have influenced world politics since then.
5. The International conventions governing refugees are mentioned in the notes at the end of the book. What problems did Ali face trying to prove that he qualified as a refugee under these criteria?
6. If you were the Immigration Department official interviewing Ali would you believe his story? Why? What extra difficulties would working through an interpreter create?
7. In July 2005 the Australian Government changed the rules governing detention and all children in detention centres were released. What do you think would happen to Ali if he arrived by boat today?
8. The book ends with Ali back in detention. What do you think happened to him after that?
9. Talk to someone who has come to Australia, or whose parents have come here from another country? Why did they leave their country? Why did they choose to come to Australia?