REFUGEE

by Alan gratz · Language: EN

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Overview

REFUGEE by Alan Gratz masterfully weaves together the harrowing stories of three young protagonists, each fleeing their homeland in different eras due to war, persecution, or political unrest. Josef Landau, a Jewish boy, escapes Nazi Germany in 1938 aboard the MS St. Louis, seeking refuge in Cuba. Isabel Fernandez, a Cuban girl, embarks on a perilous journey across the Florida Straits in 1994 on a makeshift raft, desperate for freedom in the United States. Mahmoud Bishara, a Syrian boy, flees the civil war in Aleppo in 2015, undertaking a dangerous trek across Europe to reach Germany. The novel alternates between their narratives, highlighting the universal struggles, dangers, and profound losses faced by refugees across time.

The book powerfully humanizes the often-abstract concept of a refugee crisis by immersing readers in the personal experiences of these children and their families. It exposes the brutal realities of displacement, from the immediate threats of violence and starvation to the emotional toll of leaving everything behind and the often-unwelcoming reception in new lands. Gratz meticulously researches historical events, grounding each story in authentic details that underscore the timeless and cyclical nature of forced migration and the desperate search for safety and dignity.

Ultimately, "REFUGEE" is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring hope for a better future. The novel culminates in a poignant and unexpected connection between the three stories, revealing how their paths intersect and the lasting impact of their decisions and sacrifices. It serves as a powerful call for empathy and understanding, urging readers to recognize the shared humanity of those who are forced to seek refuge and to consider the profound responsibility societies have towards them.

Key Takeaways

- Refugee crises are not new; people have been forced to flee their homes throughout history due to war and persecution.
- The journey to safety for refugees is often perilous, involving immense physical and emotional hardship and loss.
- Even in the darkest times, acts of kindness and human connection can offer crucial hope and support.
- The decisions made by individuals and governments have profound, life-altering consequences for refugees.

• Empathy and understanding are essential for comprehending the complex experiences of those seeking refuge.

• The search for a safe home and a better future is a universal human desire, regardless of origin or circumstance.

• The impact of displacement can resonate through generations, connecting families and histories in unexpected ways.

Chapter Summaries

Part 1: The Urgent Escape (Chapters 1-8)

In 1938, Josef Landau, a Jewish boy in Nazi Germany, experiences Kristallnacht. His father, imprisoned in Dachau, is released on the condition they leave Germany, and they board the MS St. Louis, hoping for freedom in Cuba. In 1994 Cuba, Isabel Fernandez faces food shortages and government oppression. Her father's involvement in a riot prompts the family, along with their neighbors the Castillos, to build a makeshift raft to escape to Florida. In 2015 Syria, Mahmoud Bishara's apartment building in Aleppo is destroyed by a missile. His family decides to flee the war-torn country, beginning a dangerous journey towards Europe, first traveling by car towards Turkey.

Part 2: Perilous Journeys Begin (Chapters 9-16)

Aboard the MS St. Louis, Josef and his family face anti-Semitism even among some crew members, but also find moments of joy and hope. They learn that Cuba is delaying their entry, causing immense anxiety among the passengers, and Josef's father struggles with trauma from Dachau. On the raft, Isabel's family and the Castillos battle rough seas and the scorching sun. They encounter a storm, lose their engine, and face the constant threat of capsizing. Isabel's grandmother, Lito, sacrifices her life to save others. Mahmoud's family attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey to Greece in a dangerously overcrowded dinghy. The boat capsizes, forcing them to swim for their lives. They are rescued and taken to a crowded, unsanitary refugee camp on Lesbos.

Part 3: Facing Rejection and Hardship (Chapters 17-24)

The MS St. Louis is denied entry to Cuba, then to the United States, despite desperate pleas from the passengers and crew. The ship is forced to return to Europe, with passengers facing an uncertain future and the looming threat of Nazi persecution. Josef's father attempts suicide due to his despair. The raft continues its perilous journey, facing a shark attack and the constant threat of the US Coast Guard, who would send them back to Cuba. They run out of water and food, and Isabel's mother goes into labor prematurely. Mahmoud's family travels through Macedonia and Serbia, often walking for miles, facing hostile police and overcrowded trains. They encounter other refugees, sharing stories of hardship and resilience, but also experience the dehumanizing conditions of their journey.

Part 4: The Final Push (Chapters 25-32)

The St. Louis passengers are dispersed to various European countries. Josef's family finds temporary refuge in France, but the Nazi invasion forces them into hiding. They are eventually discovered and captured by German soldiers. As they near Florida, Isabel's mother gives birth to a baby girl. They must make a desperate dash to reach shore before being intercepted by the Coast Guard, who are actively patrolling the waters. Isabel's grandfather, Lito, makes a crucial sacrifice to distract the Coast Guard. Mahmoud's family reaches the Hungarian border, where they are met with tear gas and a hostile reception. They are detained in a refugee camp and later board a train to Austria, eventually making their way to Germany, hoping for a safe haven.

Part 5: Arrival and Aftermath (Chapters 33-38 & Epilogue)

Josef and his family are sent to a concentration camp. To save his sister, Ruthie, Josef's mother makes an impossible choice, sacrificing Josef to the Nazis. Isabel's family successfully reaches Florida and begins their new life, adjusting to American culture and finding hope for the future. Isabel plays her trumpet, connecting with her new home. The Bishara family arrives in Germany, where they are granted asylum and begin to rebuild their lives. Mahmoud's family eventually takes in an elderly woman, who is revealed to be Ruthie, Josef's sister, creating a poignant connection across generations and stories, highlighting the enduring impact of refugee experiences.

Best Quotes

“We are not going to let them take our hope.”

Josef: Chapter 1

This line is spoken by Josef's father, Aaron Landau, during their journey on the MS St. Louis. It reflects his determination to maintain dignity and optimism despite the persecution they face. It's a powerful statement about resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity and a recurring theme for all the refugee families.

“We have to be invisible to survive.”

Mahmoud: Chapter 3

Mahmoud's father, Waleed, often tells him this early in their journey from Syria. It encapsulates their initial strategy for navigating dangerous territories and hostile populations: drawing no attention to themselves to avoid conflict or being turned away. This philosophy guides Mahmoud's family for much of their harrowing escape.

“Be visible.”

Mahmoud: Chapter 35

This becomes Mahmoud's new mantra and a turning point in his story. After enduring countless hardships and being ignored as an 'invisible' refugee, he realizes that to gain help and recognition, he must make himself and his family seen. This shift leads to a powerful protest and a change in their fortunes.

“I wish I could be invisible.”

Mahmoud: Chapter 3

Mahmoud thinks this early in his journey, reflecting his desire to avoid the violence and scrutiny that comes with being a refugee in a war-torn country. It highlights his initial fear and the instinct to hide from danger, contrasting sharply with his later realization about the power of visibility.

“Fight for your life, little girl.”

Isabel: Chapter 19

Lito, Isabel's grandfather, says this to her during a terrifying storm at sea. It's a desperate plea and encouragement for Isabel to survive the perilous journey to Florida. This line underscores the immense danger and the will to live that drives the refugees.

“Cuba Libre!”

Isabel: Chapter 1

This chant, meaning 'Free Cuba,' is a rallying cry for Isabel's family and many Cubans. It represents their longing for freedom and a better life away from the communist regime and economic hardship. It's a symbol of their hope and the reason for their dangerous escape.

“We are human beings!”

Mahmoud: Chapter 31

Mahmoud's father shouts this in frustration and defiance when they are treated with contempt and violence by border guards. It's a powerful assertion of their dignity and humanity, demanding to be seen and respected rather than treated as a nameless, unwanted mass.

“The world had turned its back on them.”

Josef: Chapter 23

This line describes the tragic fate of the passengers on the MS St. Louis, including Josef's family, as country after country denied them entry. It highlights the international indifference and xenophobia that led to many Jewish refugees being sent back to Nazi Europe and ultimately to their deaths.

“He was a ghost.”

Josef: Chapter 1

This refers to Josef's father, Aaron Landau, after his release from Dachau concentration camp. The trauma and abuse he endured left him a shell of his former self, haunted and paranoid. This description conveys the profound psychological damage inflicted by the Nazi regime.

“Sometimes, doing nothing is the worst thing you can do.”

Mahmoud: Chapter 35

Mahmoud's father says this, reflecting on the consequences of inaction and the need to stand up for oneself and others. It's a crucial lesson Mahmoud learns, inspiring him to transition from being 'invisible' to 'visible' and actively seek help and justice for refugees.

“I'm sorry, my love.”

Josef: Chapter 45

Josef's mother, Rachel, says this to her daughter, Ruth, as she makes the agonizing choice to save Ruth by giving her to a French woman, while Josef and Rachel are taken by the Nazis. It's a heartbreaking expression of a mother's ultimate sacrifice and love.

“We are not going to Cuba. We are going to America.”

Isabel: Chapter 1

Isabel's father, Papi, says this to her, correcting her initial understanding of their destination. It reveals the true, desperate hope of reaching the United States for freedom and opportunity, even though their journey is officially to Miami.

“We will not be treated like animals!”

Josef: Chapter 11

Josef's father, Aaron Landau, shouts this during a moment of defiance and despair on the MS St. Louis. It expresses his refusal to accept dehumanizing treatment, even as their situation becomes increasingly dire and their human rights are denied.

“We have to keep moving.”

This phrase is a constant refrain across all three storylines, spoken by various characters. It symbolizes the relentless, desperate nature of refugee journeys, where staying in one place often means danger, capture, or death. It underscores the urgency of their flight.

“Don't drown.”

Isabel: Chapter 4

This simple, stark instruction is given to Isabel by her father as they embark on their perilous sea journey. It highlights the immediate and constant threat of the ocean, a symbol of the overwhelming dangers faced by those fleeing by sea.

“There was no going back.”

This thought is shared by characters in all three narratives, signifying the irreversible nature of their decision to flee. Their homes are destroyed, their lives threatened, making return impossible and emphasizing the desperate commitment to their journey forward.

“It was a choice between two bad options.”

Josef: Chapter 45

Josef's mother, Rachel, faces this terrible reality when she must decide which of her children to save from the Nazis. This line encapsulates the impossible, agonizing decisions forced upon refugees, where every choice carries immense pain and loss.

“The sea was a monster.”

Isabel: Chapter 19

This is Isabel's vivid description of the ocean during their treacherous crossing to Florida. It personifies the overwhelming power and danger of the natural elements they battle, reflecting her fear and the life-threatening challenges of their journey.

“He was a man, not a monster.”

Mahmoud: Chapter 31

Mahmoud's father says this about a seemingly harsh border guard, reminding Mahmoud that even those in positions of power or who seem cruel are still human. It's a lesson in empathy and understanding, even in the face of adversity and mistreatment.

“We are not giving up.”

Isabel: Chapter 16

This declaration of resilience is echoed by Isabel's family, especially during moments of extreme difficulty on their raft. It embodies their collective determination and refusal to surrender to the challenges of their journey, fueled by the hope of a better future.

Questions & Answers

What are the three main storylines in 'Refugee'?

The book follows three distinct storylines, each centered on a child refugee from a different historical period. Josef Landau is a Jewish boy fleeing Nazi Germany in 1938 aboard the MS St. Louis. Isabel Fernandez is a Cuban girl escaping the economic hardships and political unrest of 1994 on a makeshift raft to Florida. Mahmoud Bishara is a Syrian boy fleeing the civil war in 2015, traveling with his family across Europe to Germany.

What historical events inspired Josef's story?

Josef's story is inspired by the real-life voyage of the MS St. Louis in 1939. This ship carried over 900 Jewish refugees from Germany, seeking asylum in Cuba and the United States. Both countries denied them entry, forcing the ship to return to Europe, where many passengers later perished in the Holocaust. The story also touches on Kristallnacht and the early stages of Nazi persecution.

Why does Isabel's family decide to leave Cuba?

Isabel's family decides to leave Cuba due to severe economic hardship and political unrest during the 'Special Period' of 1994. Her father and uncle are involved in riots against Fidel Castro's government, and her father faces arrest. The family sees no future in Cuba and hopes for freedom, food, and opportunity in the United States, prompting their dangerous journey by raft.

What challenges does Mahmoud's family face on their journey to Germany?

Mahmoud's family faces immense challenges, including their home being destroyed by a missile, dangerous sea crossings in overcrowded dinghies, treacherous walks across borders, exploitation by smugglers, and hostile treatment from border guards and locals. They endure hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and the constant fear of capture or death, losing their baby sister Hana along the way.

How do the three storylines connect at the end of the book?

Spoiler: The three storylines connect through a powerful revelation. Mahmoud's family, after reaching Germany, is taken in by an elderly woman named Ruth. It is revealed that Ruth is Josef Landau's younger sister, who survived the Holocaust because her mother made the agonizing choice to save her by giving her to a French family. Ruth's act of kindness towards Mahmoud's family brings the past and present refugee experiences full circle.

What is the main theme of 'Refugee'?

The main theme of 'Refugee' is the universal struggle and resilience of people forced to flee their homes due to war, persecution, or political instability. It highlights the shared human experience of refugees across different eras, emphasizing themes of survival, sacrifice, hope, loss, and the importance of empathy and human connection in the face of unimaginable adversity.

How does Mahmoud's perspective on visibility change throughout his journey?

Initially, Mahmoud believes in being 'invisible' to survive, avoiding attention to escape danger. However, after enduring countless hardships and being ignored, he realizes that invisibility makes them vulnerable and unheard. He shifts to advocating for 'visibility,' leading a protest to demand recognition and help, understanding that sometimes, drawing attention is necessary for survival and dignity.

What sacrifices do the parents make for their children in the book?

Parents in the book make profound sacrifices. Josef's mother gives up her daughter, Ruth, to save her from the Nazis, while his father battles severe trauma. Isabel's parents risk their lives on a dangerous sea voyage and make difficult decisions to protect her. Mahmoud's parents endure unimaginable suffering, including giving up their baby Hana to save her, all to secure a safer future for their remaining children.

What does the title 'Refugee' signify for the characters?

The title 'Refugee' signifies the shared identity and experience of the main characters, transcending their different time periods and origins. It highlights their common plight: being forced from their homes, seeking safety, and facing immense challenges and prejudice. The title underscores the book's message that the refugee crisis is a timeless, universal human issue, connecting past and present struggles.

What role does music play in Isabel's story?

Music plays a significant role in Isabel's story, particularly her trumpet. It is a source of comfort, a means of expression, and a connection to her Cuban heritage. Her desire to play the trumpet and her struggle to hear the 'clave' (a rhythmic pattern) symbolize her search for identity and belonging amidst chaos. When she finally hears the clave, it signifies her finding her rhythm and place.

What is the 'wet foot, dry foot' policy mentioned in the book?

The 'wet foot, dry foot' policy was a United States immigration policy towards Cuban immigrants. Under this policy, Cubans who reached U.S. soil ('dry foot') were generally allowed to stay and apply for legal residency, while those intercepted at sea ('wet foot') were typically repatriated to Cuba. This policy created a desperate incentive for Cubans like Isabel's family to reach American shores.

How does the book portray the kindness and cruelty of strangers?

The book vividly portrays both the kindness and cruelty of strangers. Characters encounter extreme cruelty from border guards, smugglers, and indifferent officials, highlighting the dehumanization refugees face. However, they also experience profound kindness from strangers who offer food, shelter, directions, or even risk their own safety to help, demonstrating the enduring power of human compassion and solidarity.

What lesson can readers learn about empathy from 'Refugee'?

'Refugee' teaches readers about empathy by humanizing the refugee experience. By presenting three distinct but interconnected stories, it allows readers to understand the individual struggles, fears, and hopes behind the headlines. It encourages readers to look beyond stereotypes, recognize the shared humanity of refugees, and consider the profound impact of war and displacement on families and individuals, fostering compassion and understanding.

What happens to Hana, Mahmoud's baby sister?

Spoiler: During a perilous sea crossing in an overcrowded dinghy, Mahmoud's baby sister, Hana, is lost. When their boat capsizes, Mahmoud's mother makes the agonizing decision to give Hana to another refugee family in a passing boat, hoping she will have a better chance of survival. The family never sees Hana again, a heartbreaking sacrifice made to save her from drowning, and a constant source of grief.

What is the significance of the cat in Isabel's story?

The cat in Isabel's story, named Leona, symbolizes the small, everyday losses and attachments that refugees are forced to leave behind. Isabel's initial distress over leaving Leona highlights the emotional toll of displacement. Later, the cat also serves as a reminder of the life she left in Cuba, and the hope that one day, she might return or find a new home where such simple comforts are possible.

How does the author use the alternating chapters to enhance the narrative?

Alan Gratz uses alternating chapters to weave together the three distinct storylines, creating a powerful comparative narrative. This structure highlights the universal themes of the refugee experience across different historical periods, showing both the unique challenges and shared struggles. It builds suspense, allows for character development in parallel, and ultimately culminates in a poignant connection that underscores the timeless relevance of the refugee crisis.

What is the significance of the life vests in Mahmoud's journey?

The life vests in Mahmoud's journey symbolize both false hope and the desperation of refugees. Many refugees are sold fake or inadequate life vests by smugglers, highlighting their exploitation. The sheer number of discarded life vests on beaches serves as a stark visual reminder of the perilous journeys undertaken and the human cost of seeking safety across the sea.

How does Josef's father's mental health deteriorate, and what is its impact?

Josef's father, Aaron Landau, suffers severe PTSD and paranoia after being imprisoned in Dachau. His mental health deteriorates significantly, leading to delusions, violent outbursts, and attempts to jump overboard. This deterioration impacts Josef deeply, forcing him to take on adult

responsibilities and witness his father's suffering, highlighting the psychological trauma inflicted by persecution and concentration camps.

What does the 'clave' represent for Isabel?

The 'clave' represents the rhythmic heart of Cuban music and, metaphorically, the rhythm of life and identity for Isabel. As a trumpet player, she struggles to hear and play the clave, symbolizing her feeling of being out of sync or lost amidst the chaos of her life. When she finally hears it, it signifies her finding her place, her voice, and a sense of belonging, even in a new country.