



2020

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Recommended Citation

Nicholls, Kayla (2020) "Stories Across Borders: Recontextualization of Home, Identity, and Trauma in Contemporary Stories of Syrian Displacement through the Novels *The Map of Salt and Stars* by Zeyn Joukhadar, *Escaping Aleppo* by Atia Abawi, and *The Land of Permanent Goodbyes* by N.H. Senzai," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 110.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/110>

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Stories Across Borders:

Recontextualization of Home, Identity, and Trauma in Contemporary Stories of Syrian Displacement through the Novels *The Map of Salt and Stars* by Zeyn Joukhadar, *Escaping Aleppo* by Atia Abawi, and *The Land of Permanent Goodbyes* by N.H. Senzai

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Abstract

The 2011 Syrian Civil War shattered the lives of too many people, but the media snatched the story and quickly turned it into one of unending violence and malice rather than one of complex individual actions. As the conflict continued, media began engaging only with images of the war's destruction—not of the Syrian people's strengths but only their weaknesses. Perhaps the most popular image was of three-year-old Alan Kurdi who lay on the sand in Turkey, his face to the side, dead. Media outlets all over the world published this image, and his human face launched the conflict into one that the world suddenly cared about. But his face, full of sympathy, turns Syrians into victims. Novels, unlike the photos of Kurdi, enable agentic and individual narrators to tell their own stories. Stories about refugees leaving Syria provide space for Syrian collective healing, as well as the creation of an audience of listeners and readers who can empathize with the stories contained within novels. Using three fictional accounts of refugees leaving Syria after the Civil War, I examine the literary styles which convey the way that the narrators' recontextualize their relationships to family, home, land, violence, as well as

how the power of gaining a voice through the novelization of true accounts can create greater understanding and empathy from readers. This empathy, harnessed by reading novels such as these, can amplify the voices of those whose stories are shared and turn the emotional capital into political action.

Keywords: Displacement, Refugees, Literature, Identity, Belonging, Storytelling, Trauma, Healing, Syria, Syrian Civil War, Dislocation, Narrative.

A Boy on the Shore

The war in Syria shattered the lives of too many people: estimates place the number of lives uprooted as over 5.6 million people. This figure excludes the estimated 511,000 people who have died as a result of the fighting (Roth). Among those are people loyal to President Bashar Al-Assad, rebel groups, foreign fighters who supported or undermined existing groups, and most importantly those caught in the middle of the conflict. Every individual in Syria has been touched by the war in some way, and the media snatched their stories to quickly market it into one of unending violence, malice, and “foreignness.” This kind of civil conflict became unfathomable to many outside of Syria who couldn’t understand—or didn’t want to—the complexities of the politics involved. All that was shown was the terror of Islam and the backwardness of Syria. Reports on the protests centered on pro-democracy protestors rallying to overthrow the corrupt and authoritarian leaders who represented the backwardness of a whole region. Though the political depiction of those stories had some merit, they lacked the nuance of the human lives which were affected. Other reporters, however, reported on the deeply sobering news to explain and educate what was being obfuscated by other sources. These voices played a

crucial role in bringing wide-spread knowledge and attention to the nuances of Syria's rapidly escalating conflict.

As the fighting continued and more and more people fled their homes—which had been turned into war frontiers—media began engaging with images of the destruction of both lives and homes. Some attempted to bring the tragedy to the doorstep of spectators in ways that capitalized on creating a pitying spectacle. Others, including the perhaps most popular image released at the time, worked to espouse a truth often covered up. Three-year-old Alan Kurdi lay on the sand in Turkey, his face to the side, dead. Suddenly, the plight of Syrians reached an international audience, and “The resulting image became the defining photograph of an ongoing war that had killed some 220,000 people [already]. It was taken not in Syria, a country the world preferred to ignore, but on the doorstep of Europe, where its refugees were heading” (Demir). Media outlets all over the world published this image, or had to justify their decision not to; a human face launched the conflict into one that people cared about. Following its widespread notoriety, many European countries welcomed refugees more openly, encouraging their integration and resettlement. For photographer Nilüfer Demir, this picture was “the only way I can express the scream of his silent body” (Demir). Following her example, artists, journalists, authors, humanitarians, and others tried to put a human face to an incomprehensible war. Quickly the world became hyper-focused on the material reported from the region and the ways to help. Media and reporting from the Syrian war that was honest and vulnerable propelled others, like authors Atia Abawi, Zeyn Joukhadar, and N.H. Senzai, to continue to write about the complex social, environmental, political, and religious environment around which conflict emerged. Their goal, like the photo of Alan Kurdi, was to express the silenced violence that,

without proper and considerate amplification, seemed worlds away from a western audience. Through their humanizing portrayals, the world started to care; it began with a photograph.

Photographs are limiting, however. Susan Sontag writes of the ways that photographs have evolved over time to “shock” the audience:

It is a shocking image, and that is the point. Conscripted as part of journalism, images were expected to arrest attention, startle, surprise. The hunt for more dramatic (as they're often described) images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value. (Sontag 18)

Shock has indeed become a major part of war photography, but this shock is also a galvanizing one. It can reach audiences far and wide, for it has an “only one language and is destined potentially for all” (Sontag 18). This kind of universality enables the photograph of Kurdi on the shore to do more than an article published in a lesser-known news site could. But what a photograph cannot always do is tell you more. All we learn from the boy on the shore is that he is just that: a boy on a shore. The words and the story told to accompany such an image give it more life, as it tells how his was taken away. As an audience, we depend on the written word to clarify, contextualize, add richness, and remove the unaccountable shock. The image cannot rely only on its limited shock value, “Shock can become familiar. Shock can wear off” (Sontag 65). When this shock wears off, or the photo can convey only the shock of violence in a single moment, literature can facilitate understanding a situation with more than sympathy, more than shock, and more than pity. Stories can bring all those things because they force a reader to sit with a life, examine it from all angles, and come to know those contained within its covers. As Sontag concludes, “A narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a

question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel” (Sontag 95). These feelings are complex, variable, and ever-changing; they come from a place of empathy and understanding on which the rage, confusion, indignation, sympathy, and every other emotion elicited from the novel is based.

Authors Abawi, Joukhadar, and Senzai responded to the war in Syria and the photographs, reportage, and media accounts by creating fictionalized narratives detailing the experience of children forced to migrate from their homeland. These stories seek to allow audiences to understand—to ruminate on the complicated emotions of their characters. Indeed, each story they’ve written gives agency and humanity to a people whose story has been overlooked. Joukhadar’s novel, *The Map of Salt and Stars* depicts the journey of Nour: from New York City back to Syria, and then as tensions escalate and her home is shelled, through Egypt, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco. In *The Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, Abawi writes about 15-year-old Tareq as he loses most of his family to a bomb that destroys his house. He travels the “conventional” way of Syrian’s seeking a better life: on a raft from Turkey to Greece. Senzai’s work, *Escape from Aleppo*, captures the harrowing journey just to get to the border; for 12-year-old Nadia her story ends before she can cross the border and leave Syria behind. By fictionalizing the story of these Syrians forced out of their homes, the authors humanize those who’ve become refugees and re-center the story of conflict as one comprised of individuals rather than faceless entities. Their experiences, therefore, become more understandable and readers have empathy, comprehension, sadness, and more for the characters and the homes they lose. With the length and insight enabled in literature, the readers sit with the fears with which the characters grapple, their hardships, and their hopes. In these three novels, the authors use the narrators to cast the Syrian conflict in a new light: one filled with empathy and compassion.

Each hurdle in the protagonists' journeys serves to enhance the reader's empathy toward the war and the subsequent forced migration of those caught in the middle. The characters' attitudes towards identity, home, violence, and family shift as they become core elements in the experience of refugees, and while each character in the three novels experience these differently, at the heart of their journeys are the same struggles for humanity. The fictionalized stories also act as a medium to amplify the voices of people whose thoughts, feelings, and emotions are consistently pushed aside. They are not portrayed as lifeless bodies onto which action occurs, but rather protagonists in the stories of their own lives. In the authors' search for this portrayal, their depictions can veer into the sensational, removing agency from the characters, although largely these novels provide space for Syrian stories to be in the foreground.

The Act of Storytelling

Storytelling aids all three characters in coping with their displacement, lending them an outlet to process their trauma. Storytelling functions as the backbone of these works, guiding the readers on a journey with the narrators. Telling a life narrative is vital to the healing process for those who experience trauma—though these narratives are often far from linear. Stories from children like these who are forced to leave their homes follow a jumbled path which tries to capture their experiences. The authors all capture the non-linear state of the stories by bisecting, interrupting, and interjecting into the main narrative. Joukhadar tells Nour's story in conjunction with Rawiya's—creating a historical counterpart to both interrupt and guide the journey that Nour finds herself forced to take. Nadia's story is jumbled over time, stuttering between her experiences before fleeing and the trauma she faces while journeying through her destroyed homeland. Abawi writes Tareq's journey but interrupts the telling of it by including the voice of the omniscient Destiny.

All three of these retellings capture the quality that trauma imparts: the brokenness and incoherence of a straightforward narrative. Telling the stories in a fictive form cannot reassemble the lives torn asunder by the trauma of dislocation, but it can encourage the understanding and empathy needed to move forward:

Telling stories doesn't solve anything, doesn't reassemble broken lives. But perhaps it is a way of understanding the unthinkable. If a story haunts us we keep telling it to ourselves, replaying it in silence while you shower, or in our moments of insomnia.....The only thing to do was tell the story over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, and surrounds itself.

(Luiselli 69-70, 96-97)

These fictionalized books do just that: they are stories detailing that which has been told over and over by many different people and from many different angles. The experience of dislocation is one with which many are familiar; the UN reports that there are 272 million migrants worldwide (United Nations). For those that aren't, the narratives eked from those journeys become instrumental in fostering a sense of cross-cultural understanding. The telling of these stories provides space for greater understanding and empathy for those who have experienced a home being ripped from them and the ways that this cleavage alters everything. Telling these trauma narratives includes "outsiders" in the process of healing. It legitimizes the experience of trauma and recasts it as a shared event, rather than an isolated experience of a single person. Nadia, Nour, and Tareq are not alone in their suffering, and these novels collectivize understanding their trauma narratives:

Trauma narrative imparts knowledge to the community that listens *and* responds to it emotionally. Emotion carries essential cognitive elements; it is not separable from the knowledge. Something quite profound takes place when the trauma survivor sees

enlightenment take hold. The narrator now speaks as his or her free self, not as the captive of the perpetrator. This aloneness is broken in a manner that obliterates neither the narrator nor the listener in a reenactment. (Shay 191)

The form of a novel itself allows both the narrator and the listener to join together without harm for either. It also creates space for a variety of emotional responses, including empathy—an emotion which is a vital element of storytelling. Feeling empathy is a benefit of telling stories—“The point of literature is precisely to force us out of ourselves, to expand our understanding of the world by allowing us to see it through the mind of another person” (DeLillo et al). Readers orient their feelings of empathy toward the characters in the books they read. But these people are not the ones who have suffered the trauma of displacement. Our narrators are not real refugees. They have not suffered. Nor are the authors who created these accounts refugees from Syria. Therefore, fictionalizations of this experience subvert the role of healing on behalf of the narrator. The people who, like Nadia or Tareq or Nour, *did* experience these traumas of dislocation do not have a direct voice in these novels.

Even without a direct voice for those who are displaced, these novels do grant a similar perspective. Joukhadar emphasizes his goal of creating a path toward listening, reading, and hearing the stories of Syrian refugees themselves. He recognizes the way that his book lends representation to an underrepresented issue, but that it is by no means a complete story. It is but one tale in a lifetime of stories:

I don't want readers to come away from this book thinking they know everything about Syrian refugees or that they know what it is to be one...I want readers to understand that, if they haven't read anything by Syrians or refugees in their own words, this book is only

a starting point. I also hope that this book will be a comfort to people of Syrian descent living in diaspora. (Maximum Shelf)

Using his book as one glimpse in the fullness of an entire nation of unique individuals, he writes in order to celebrate Syrian peoples' accomplishments. He may not be a refugee, but his book strives to present one story of what it means to be a refugee without ignoring the importance of reading work that refugees themselves create.

Senzai is also not a refugee herself but is devoted to researching and probing her own connection to the experience of seeking refuge. She spoke to journalists and Syrians who shared first-hand accounts of their experiences. Immersed in research for months, her work attempts to understand and portray the interconnectedness of refugees. The community of "outsiders" who listen and respond emotionally to the story are her main focus:

As Americans, whether we consciously realize it or not, we have a particular connection with refugees; at one point of time, most of our families sought refuge in this country.

They arrived from all around the world, fleeing war, persecution, famine or just hoping to find a better life for themselves and their children. (Houtman)

The common humanity that she envisions enables empathy in readers, which strongly captures the feeling of being dislocated. The feeling of a life being upended is not one that is unusual, and her novel capitalizes on that feeling to paint Nadia's experiences as both relatable and generalizable. Although Nadia is not a real person who really faced dislocation, Senzai lends her voice to amplify the others. For Syrians who do not have the safety, ability, or desire to share their stories, both Nadia and Nour act as magnifications for those who lost everything to the war.

Abawi *is* a refugee herself, although she is not from Syria. Writing this story was for her an exploration of her own place within the story of migration. She came upon her birth

certificate, refugee papers, alien identity cards, and old passports a mere few weeks before seeing thousands of Syrians fleeing from war. Her parents fled Afghanistan while her mother was eight months pregnant with Abawi, who was born as a refugee in Germany. Abawi felt a compulsion to tell the story of herself, the story of her parents, and the story of the families she saw on TV:

While watching the Syrian crisis unfold, as a former refugee myself, I saw a familiarity that I couldn't shake. The stories almost seemed parallel: though my parents' story took place at a different time and started in a different country, they too had lived comfortably until their lives were turned upside down at the onset of a war...I felt a pained connection to the Syrian refugees..They weren't looking for a better *life*, they were looking for a chance to *live*. (Abawi 283)

This connection is what compelled her write, to throw herself into hours of interviews and research. She met with refugees in Greece, Turkey, and Syria and stood in a life vest graveyard in Lesbos. Her research, she believes, takes the accounts she heard and creates a new reality: “Although this book is a work of fiction, it is very much real” (Abawi 283). Real or not, these stories are useful for creating a community of supporters, amplifying the stories of those who have lived through forced dislocation, and encouraging a new perspective from which to consider the refugee crisis. This perspective is not one of pity, nor is it one without agency. Tareq, Nadia, and Nour all find ways—big or small—to affect their own lives in these novels. And as they function as the first-person narrators of their own stories, they have the agency to tell us what they want, how they feel, and what they need. Their journeys center around their ability to tell stories, and to find echoes of their own experiences in the stories of historical counterparts. These novels exist as a place where their stories take primacy. Readers have the ability to spend the time to understand and recognize the individuality of these experiences and

the multitude of emotions such displaced journeys convey. These characters are written for US audiences to understand the many contradictions and complexities of their dislocation: their plight and their independence, their sadness and their joy, their unity and their separation. What stands above all is the quest for agency in a situation often painted as helpless.

Moving Forward

Through the act of storytelling, and because of the nature of time itself, the characters begin to move on from their struggles and adapt to their new lives. These novels enable the characters to create their own life narratives. Like the life narratives that Dan McAdams studies in patients with trauma, they fall into two categories: redemptive narratives and contamination narratives. The redemptive narratives center around themes of overcoming trauma, recovery, growth, and learning. Contamination stories, however, include a positive, identity shaping event which is followed by one with a “very bad, affectively negative outcome. The bad ruins, spoils, sullies, contaminates the good that preceded it” (McAdams 96). These life narratives are vital; they contribute to the creation of identity and an understanding of the self. Therefore, redemptive arcs can correlate to a healthier and more positive overall well-being. Conversely, contamination stories usually correlate with higher rates of depression and lower rates of life-satisfaction and self-esteem (McAdams). Present in these novels are both: Nour writes a contamination narrative but ends her life story more positively with a redemptive arc, Nadia’s story is redemptive, and Tareq’s journey told by Destiny co-opts his story into a redemptive one.

Nour’s story contains elements of a contamination narrative, and she feels utterly despondent for a large part of her journey. Indeed, her story is not without pain, and she is both shaped and plagued by the misery she witnesses daily. She also sees countless other families who deal with the same trauma she does: death, terror, and separation. Each leaves the families more

and more fractured, “The earth seems like it's overflowing with families from every country, not just our own. I see other wars everywhere—in the scar along a lady's chin, or in the bruises on a boy's ankle” (Joukhadar 199). All these families are marked—physically and mentally—by their experiences. They are all searching for an escape from the brutality of everyday life. For truly the battering of war and the horrors of exile have become commonplace. Nour feels the normality and an inverted sense of familiarity while faced with the struggles of fleeing. There is no escape from the countless wars, from the meaningless violence, from the pain of separation. As these daily realities become familiar to Nour; she writes about the contamination of her beliefs.

The new reality that Nour has come to accept is plagued by the misery around her. She has learned the harshness of life: a life devoid of color, sculpted by borders, guided by words. She interacts differently with this world, so that each family she sees is no longer one illuminated by the color of their voices, but rather “in my head I am counting up the broken families I have seen. I am counting the missing fathers and buried brothers, giving form and breath to those who were left behind, asking myself how many times you can lose everything before you open yourself to nothing” (Joukhadar 221). Nour becomes aware of the nothingness and numbness of her feelings, and she becomes aware of the lack of control anyone has over anything, “I wonder if *almost* can cost you as much as *did*, if the real wound is the moment you understand that you can do nothing” (Joukhadar 165). Her musings capture her feelings of despondence and her lack of hope. It is through her migration that she realizes small fixes can't solve the rifts forged deeply within her; the gulfs in her homeland cannot be solved with meager promises, “Why didn't I realize you can't just superglue a dining table back together, a house? How long will it be until we get back the things we lost?” (Joukhadar 121). In fact, it will be quite long, for though the memory of Syria and the feeling of home will always remain within Nour, she can no longer

return to that place in her life. There are too many lost people, and too many wars, and too much violence for her home to be returned as it once was. Many other people experience a similar dislocation, and it's a reality that Nour begins to see in the detention center she lives in with Zahra in Ceuta, "it's not easy to apply for asylum, that there are too many people who don't have anywhere to go and not enough places to put them all" (Joukhadar 140). None of these people have permanent homes, but they make small homes along the way, just like Nour did.

As she creates small moments of comfort, her story begins to transform. By the end of her life narration, it includes the cardinal requirements which McAdam's writes about redemptive life narratives: overcoming trauma and embracing recovery. Her story becomes redemptive as she finds the elements of humanity and clings to them. She understands the inherent violence in people, the chaos of war, the terror of fleeing but acknowledges that these are not the only things present in her world. She decides to search out the humanity. She sees the wonder in humankind and its abilities, "I tried to picture [Qasr Amra] like it once was, the paint smooth, the stones polished. People make such beautiful things, I think, even though they destroy so much" (Joukhadar 143). Qasr Amra is an ancient palace and bathhouse in Jordan. Its ceiling was painted once, bright colors like cobalt, lapis, and yellow ocher. It used to depict the constellation in the sky. Nour remarks that one day only the foundation will remain, but its beauty will never leave. That beauty is created by man, "it was a noble thing to seek beauty in a calloused world" (Joukhadar 117). She vows to search for this beauty, and to see it and recognize it for what it is. She wants "to make something good out of what was bad, something precious out of something small" (Joukhadar 144). All the brutality, the violence, the loss, the grieving, the pain, and the struggle that Nour undergoes as she flees a war she is uninvolved in creates within her a vitality. She commits to finding beauty, and she loves the stars that help her do this. The darkness is

never truly devoid of all light, and she is the light which guides her to beauty. She once thought that night was too dark to see the guiding light of stars, but she learned that, “If anything, the darker the night the brighter they shine” (Joukhadar 83).

The night shines brightly for Nadia, too. Her story is also redemptive, and her journey culminates at the border where she spies her father’s coat among the people milling around the Turkish border. Her story ends with reunification—even if the reunification is on the horizon and not yet within her grasp. Through traveling with Ammo Mazen she has the patience and faith that she will reunite with her family. From him she also learns about growing from knowledge, learning from history, and being kind and accepting. When she learns that Ammo Mazen had, nearly 40 years prior to meeting her, worked for the Mukhabarat, she instantly feels betrayed and deceived. Yet, she still feels tenderly toward the ailing man. Through her journey, he teaches her to accept people and their ability to change. Accordingly, her opinion of him changes throughout the time they spend together and this news—though startling for her at first—matters little, “The scorching anger that had flared within Nadia fizzled, leaving the deep affection that had grown over the past few days. He was a gentle old man who’d spent his life helping people. A man who decided to take a lost girl and two orphans to safety” (Senzai 311). He is a helpful and selfless man who travels across the dangerous land that Syria becomes, while dying of cancer, to help two children. He renounces the Assad regime and it’s “absolute power which allowed injustice, inhumanity, and corruption to seep into the country [he] loved so much” (Senzai 309). Instead, he devotes himself to saving artifacts, finding medicine, locating family members taken by the Mukhabarat, and helping some children to safety. She learns from his growth, and she too narrates her story in a redemptive way, highlighting the work of helpers like Ammo Mazen.

The “helper” persona is the most important part of Destiny’s redemptive arc. Not only does it take over Tareq’s story, it also predicates his successes on the assistance of others. The way he moves on is through the work of others, and his dependence on their support. The helpers are Tareq’s lynchpin to success; without them, he would still be stuck under the chalky debris of his destroyed house. Tareq first meets the people he considers the “helpers” at the refugee camp he stays in temporarily in Greece, “Volunteers came by with paper cups and thermoses of tea. *The helpers*, he told himself as he let the warm liquid filter down his throat, through his chest and into his vacant belly. First, it was the old man who shared his fire. Then Khalil, who gave him corn. And now these strangers who were offering tea. *The helpers*” (Abawi 261). Destiny uses these helpers to bluntly remind—and on occasion to guilt—readers into action. She rather overtly condemns those who choose inaction in the face of the refugee crisis:

The story of displacement and loss is woven into the fabric of human history. One day it’s them, the next day it’s you. But as generations past, most forget that their people, too, have suffered. Some, though, still hold the empathy in their souls. But others choose not to; they choose to help themselves before helping others. Those are the souls who never find true happiness. Their hearts are never full. (Abawi 111)

In this passage, Destiny creates the separation between “them” and “you,” dividing the reader from the character. It manufactures a distance which, ironically, inhibits the same empathy that it writes to engage. Abawi in this passage callously calls out those who don’t respond exactly as she sees fit. She also generalizes her experience of the history of displacement and loss to all, dismissing those who do forget as never finding satisfaction. Instead, she celebrates the helpers who, like her, were mobilized into action:

The stress on the heart and mind cannot handle being spectator, not when the suffering is literally washing up on our yard. You're not human if you don't want to help. (Abawi 117)

Every action of compassion in this novel is celebrated, celebrated because Abawi cannot abide by an audience who chooses inaction—or even less visible action. She condemns those people as inhuman. By denouncing their humanity, she herself loses sight of the very same empathy and compassion she writes to cultivate. Her stark opposition stands counter to her novel, which celebrates all of humanity and blurs distinctions between in favor of commonalities:

They were no longer Israeli or Syrian, Jewish or Muslim, they were what they were intended to be—human....I see helpers. I see many good people from the countries who come to say hello. They smile at us and make us human again after being yelled at by their military and police. They make me remember, every country has good people and bad people. Just like mine. (Abawi 263)

The emphasis here is back on the humanity of giving, of feeling compassion and extending it. Abawi, through the voice of Destiny and Tareq, believes in helpers as a “testament to humanity” (186). But she gives little space for the humanity of those who are being helped. Their individuality and agency matter in ways that she ignores in her fixation with recruiting more helpers. When she mentions the specific groups that Tareq sees—the International Rescue Committee, the UNHCR, the Red Cross, and Save the Children—she adopts a tone of recruitment to her cause, as if telling the readers that this action is the only right action.

Despite her heavy-handed enlistment, Abawi espouses an important point: the experience of being a refugee is one that shatters the ties to any sense of commonality. Moving on from such a place is difficult, and the support of strangers is often required for success in the long term.

Once these characters leave Syria and resettle elsewhere, their traumas do not end. Reyna Grande, a writer who fled Mexico, describes the trauma she felt even after moving to the US:

I wish I could tell you that we got our happily-ever-after, and the trauma ended with the border crossing, and as soon as we overcame that barrier the psychological wounds began to heal. Unfortunately for us immigrants, the trauma doesn't end with a successful border crossing. I believe that for the rest of your life, you carry that border inside of you. It becomes part of your psyche, your being, your identity. (Grande 34)

There is no easy conclusion to relocation for Grande, nor is there a simple end for Nadia, Nour, and Tareq. Each of them will continue to struggle. Nour reunites with her family but she lives in an unfamiliar place. Nadia's future is also uncertain; meeting her father does not guarantee any future ease for her. Tareq has lost most of his family, and the path forward for the ones that remain is not without struggle. Their stories are complex and contain both contamination and redemption, but ultimately the act of telling these stories is their strongest connection to healing.

Merely by constructing a narrative, the characters begin to heal and connect with a supportive community of empathetic readers, reducing their placement in the discourse as an "other" to be pitied, or a helpless and lifeless picture to be photographed. Instead, the characters are full of life and individuality which connects people to their struggle in meaningful and constructive ways, "Distance often safeguards the heart. It preserves and shields you from letting the pain into your spirit, changing you forever. Bridging that distance can make you hurt. But that isn't a sign of weakness; it's the power of compassion and love—the two elements that can save the world" (Abawi 223). This love and compassion matters even when the authors interpret the voices of the characters. Even though these stories are not first-person accounts from actual refugees, they are conglomerations of that which is true. The stories are merely made more

accessible and able to bridge this distance between the reader and refugees, while also celebrating representation. Joukhadar writes explicitly about his goal of representation: for Syrians both within Syria and those in the diaspora:

I was born and live in diaspora, and this gives me a unique perspective. For me, it can often mean having a sense of belonging to more than one place and also belonging nowhere, and this creates its own struggles and questions... I hope it will be a reminder that we, too, can be the protagonists of our own stories, that there is an alternative to the stories that so often get told in the West about Syrians these days. (Maximum Shelf)

He writes to acknowledge the media representation of Syrians—and especially of refugees—and recontextualize their experiences. Providing space for Syrian stories builds a community of Syrians, a community of listeners of all backgrounds, and the distance between these groups narrows. Instead, it creates a cross-cultural understanding of the suffering and trauma of forced dislocation while also moving forward:

But if trauma does happen to us—particularly the violence inherent in war, displacement, and human cruelty—I wanted to ask: How can one make something beautiful of a life that has been irrevocably changed? What can we take with us after loss that can sustain us through, and beyond, that darkness? (Maximum Shelf)

This cross-cultural interaction that Joukhadar seeks is facilitated by these novels. They capture a time, and a place, and a moment in history that they share with a vast audience of readers. This sharing is not without complication, however. Though each author is motivated by their own reasons to write these novels, they are still writing about an event by looking *in*. The complexity lies in these authors writing about an event already highly politicized and deeply contentious that they are not from. These are outside spectators contributing to the body of media which

capitalizes on human suffering. They tell stories that give the characters within them agency, but these books are ultimately creations of fiction at the liberty of those who wrote them. They cherry picked information from interviewees to craft the most meaningful, or most emotional, or perhaps most sensational account to write and eventually to publish. They've also tailored their accounts to write out other violences to make these books palatable to the general populace of readers and, in the case of both *Escaping Aleppo* and the *Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, to a child audience. Indeed, nowhere in these pages are descriptions or mentions of the prisons set up around Syria. Saydnaya is one of the most infamous prisons used to torture and execute opponents of the regime. Over 13,000 people have been hanged between September 2011 and December 2015, accounting for both men and women, political opponents or innocent people (amnesty.org). All of this is neatly avoided in these books, choosing to present instead children on their journeys out of the country with no interaction with the prison systems.

These books also neglect to talk about overt political opinions of the characters. Nadia's family was political and did join the rebels, but aside from briefly mentioning this in hushed discussions, Senzai remarks on little else with regards to their political leanings. Both Joukhadar and Abawi stay clear of writing in any political efforts of their characters. These families are not active in the conflict on the rebel or government side, with only vague mentions of any possible dissent from Assad. Instead, these characters are all bystanders in a conflict they have no role in. This is a notable choice by the authors to create added sympathy for the characters whose lives are upended through no fault of their own. The apolitical nature of these books, compounded by their avoidance of Saydnaya and the torture that takes place in similar prisons around the country, intentionally creates a more palatable and sanitized narration for their audience. These books are telling a story and it's a story not confined by reality or full truths.

Stories don't need to be truthful, though. Each of these authors are clear about the fictional nature of their work. They cite their work as research based on extensive interviews and work to create a novel resembling the historical reality. Their audience is young in some cases, and perhaps less educated on the events of the war. But these limitations do not discount the value of these works. Fictionalizing the civil war creates a platform to make it more accessible. The characters are apolitical to an extent in order to allow readers with a multitude of political beliefs to enjoy these books. Readers don't need to choose a political side to understand, relate, or empathize with the characters. The value of a novelization of reality is not lost. All three authors create a visceral and impactful universe charged with a complexity of emotions. The responses evoked by these novels are full—empathy, fear, frustration, hope, hopelessness, care, concern. Above all, these novels provide a space to understand other people. To understand the complex and fluctuating circumstances that led to the creation of over 11 million refugees—some forever banned from their homes and some trapped within borders that have turned hostile (Amnesty International). These novels enable time for readers to sit, think, reflect, and understand—truly understand—what it is like to be another person. The thoughts, fears, joys, and lives of these characters are on full display to the readers, and this space is one with no expectations and no judgements. These novels call on readers only to understand, it is not an imperative to go any further and act—although that is always a choice, as Abawi not-so-subtly implies. Rather, they seek, and succeed, in creating contained units with uncontained emotions. Sitting with these books, and with books of similar ilk, provides a moment in the readers lives for contemplation of another human's life that allows for empathy—or anger, action, or inaction—that is unbounded. These emotions, and the responses from such novels, surpass the pages of only these three books and encompass everything else.

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