

YA Book Review

THREE JOURNEYS TO A BETTER LIFE: *REFUGEE* BY ALAN GRATZ

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Alan Gratz's young adult novel *Refugee* (2017) intertwines the stories of three young children on the harrowing journey of survival to create a better life for not only themselves, but their friends and families. Imaginative details, heart-wrenching realities, and timeless emotion come together to create a world that tells the stories of refugees, both past and present. It earns its place on a classroom library's shelf by revealing the trials and tribulations that many refugees endure to embrace opportunity.

Josef (age 12), Isabel (age 11), and Mahmoud (age 12), all share the same experience of having to flee their homeland in search for a better life. Josef is a young Jewish boy who lives in 1930's Nazi Germany. When he is told he must leave Germany in the next fourteen days, Josef's father decides to take his family on the *St. Louis* a ship bound for Cuba.

While Josef and his family yearn to gain entry to pre-World War II Cuba, Isabel and her family yearn to leave the country in 1994. Isabel sells her prized trumpet for gasoline and sets off in a raft to cross the ocean from Cuba to Miami. Isabel is joined by her best friend Luis and his family, her father, grandfather, pregnant mother, and unborn brother on the tumultuous journey across the Atlantic. Josef and Isabel's stories are connected, and both feature the hope of *mañana*. Unlike Josef's, Isabel's journey is darkened by the tragic death of Luis just miles from the freedom of Miami.

In Syria in 2015, Mahmoud's story is one that has recently been depicted in mainstream media. He and his family flee Syria for the safety of Germany, an interesting juxtaposition to Josef and his journey. Mahmoud is forced to mature quickly due to the severe nature of his pilgrimage and the loss of his sister Hana. Mahmoud wishes to be invisible, and the horrors he witnesses during his trek through Europe create an interesting relationship between childhood and adulthood, shining a light on the realities of children harmed by war.

I enjoyed this novel. Admittedly, it made me cry several times. While I rooted for a happy ending, instead it was bittersweet but realistic. I think the thing I liked most about the novel was the fact that the characters' stories were all intertwined, not just because they were refugees, but because Gratz created their stories so that they aligned geographically and historically. For instance, Isabel's Cuban grandpa denies haven to the *St. Louis*, thus denying sanctuary to Josef's family.

I strongly believe that this book belongs in both a middle and high school classroom and should be taught within an English language arts classroom. It opens a new dialogue, not only for those experiencing this world for the first time but also to those who have been affected by a

journey of immigration. As a student, I read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and I feel that *Refugee*, while fiction, holds the same importance as the real-life memoir and should be an option for the school's curriculum. If not part of the curriculum, I think that it would be a perfect independent reading choice for students who are interested in refugees, World War II, or history.

Author Biography

Payton Dearmont is a junior at Wichita State University studying Secondary English Education and Spanish, in the accelerated Spanish master's program. She is also a part of the Beta Chi chapter of Gamma Phi Beta and serves as the president during the Spring and Fall 2022 semesters. This Panhellenic organization has helped her connect with the Wichita community through Gamma Phi Beta's International Philanthropy, Girls on the Run, and their local philanthropy, Heartspring, a school and resource for children with special needs and their families. When not at work or school, she enjoys spending time with her family and friends, reading, playing with her two dogs, and traveling. After graduation, Payton plans to continue her education by pursuing a master's degree and combine her love for Spanish, teaching, and traveling by teaching in a foreign Spanish-speaking country. She can be reached at pgdearmont@shocklers.wichita.edu.



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