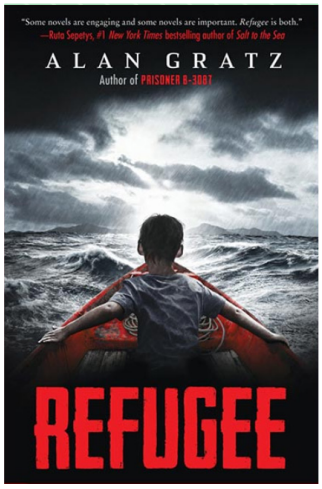
CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Alyssa Aldape



Refugee

By Alan Gratz

Introduction and Overview

In his book, *Refugee*, Alan Gratz invites us to witness the realities of war and poverty from the perspective of three young people who take great risks, along with their loved ones, in the hopes of seeing a better tomorrow.

Josef, Isabel and Mahmod all come from different regions and live in different times; but each account tells a story of a young person determined to find a better life for themselves and their families.

Josef's story takes place in the days after Kistallnacht in 1930s Nazi Germany. Josef is the almost-13-year-old older son of a Jewish family scrambling to leave Germany on the MS St. Louis setting sail for Cuba.

Eleven-year-old Isabel lives in the capital city of Havana, Cuba, in the early 90s in the midst of famine and civil unrest. Isabel's family and neighbors decide to make the 90-mile journey to the shores of Miami in hopes of a better life in the U.S.

Mahmoud lives in war-torn Syria in 2015 where each day is a struggle to stay alive and out of the way. After an attack destroys their family home, Mahmoud, his parents, young brother and baby sister escape and make the dangerous journey from Aleppo to Germany.

Refugee tells the story of what happens when children are forced to risk everything they are and know for the sake of safety. Their stories are honest and leave nothing out of what refugees experience. While most preteens spend their days adjusting to coming of age, Josef, Isabel and Mahmoud are forced to grow up fast and experience life in ways we would never wish for our own children.

History tells us of the fate of many of the Jews on the *MS St. Louis*; we remember too our own country's "wet-foot, dry-foot: policy of the early 90s and the risks Cubans took when they tried make it to shore on a perilous journey and the horrors that faced them when they failed and were returned to Cuba; and finally, we have witnessed the fate of Syria, which remains in the hands of the same regime that has harmed and killed so many Syrians since the days of the Arab Spring.

In the end, we learn that our main characters are connected in ways that transcend their time. *Refugee* is thought-provoking and honest. The outcome for each of our main

Rev. Alyssa Aldape is a Baptist minister based in Washington, D.C., and a contributing correspondent for Good Faith Media.

characters comes with its own triumphs and heart-wrenching ends that we cannot ignore or look away from. The Christian faith informs our treatment of people and our neighbor, but more specifically, it also informs how we ought to treat the sojourner. Throughout scripture there is a common theme of hospitality. And this book asks us to remember those teachings.

Here are some key themes to keep in mind:

- Invisibility/Visibility
- Tomorrow
- Coming of age
- Home
- Identity

Refugee is not divided into chapters, but there are three distinct movements in the story: the upheaval, the journey and the arrival. These lend themselves well to discussion:

Three sections

- **The Upheaval** (pages 1-65) - In the first few stories, we learn about the lives of Josef, Isabel and Mahmoud—where they live, their families and the contexts that force their families to leave. Each family experiences trauma in different ways; but one thing is clear for them: the danger in staying is greater than the risk of going. In this section, we will discuss how upheaval can be as fast as the flipping of a light switch or as slow as the boiling of a pot of water. However it happens, the effects linger for our main characters.
- **The Journey** (pages 66-269) - Josef, Isabel and Mahmoud each risk their lives for refuge—whether by sea or by foot or both. We will discuss how this journey takes a toll on the young people as well as on their families and learn that this journey comes with many sacrifices and heartaches.
- **The Arrival** (pages 270-317) - Each journey has its own outcome and we learn what the other side of tomorrow looks like for our main characters. What does home look like in the end versus when we first met them?

Book Discussion Questions

The Upheaval (pages 1-65)

Talk about the different reasons that the families of Josef, Isabel and Mahmoud families make the decision to leave their homes.

What are the events in each of their lives that force them to leave?

How are the situations similar and how are they different?

What are your first impressions of our main characters?

We learn our main characters are no older than 14. Do you remember that age? Can you see yourself in these characters?

The Journey (pages 66-269)

What role do the parents play in each of these families? What about other adults on the journey?

Josef says early on, "It was like we were invisible…people chose not to see us." How do you think this affects this young boy? What about Isabel and Mahmoud? How does the theme of invisibility play out in their journeys?

How do the adult characters change over the course of the journey? How do the events in the journey change each of them?

Each of the main characters takes a boat to get to safety. Whether it was an ocean liner or a raft, what dangers did they encounter on their journey?

It was not easy for any of the characters to reach their destinations; but how do these destinations compare, and where does the hope lie for each family? Knowing what history tells us about the *MS St. Louis*, the immigration policies for Cuban refugees, and for Syrian refugees trying to get to Europe, how do these journeys compare? What unique hardships did each family face?

When were the families shown kindness? Why do you think some received hospitality while others didn't?

In what ways did our main characters have to make adult decisions? How do you think that changed them?

The Arrival (pages 270-317)

In the end, each family has to make some sacrifice in order to get to the last leg of their journey. The decisions they make are not easy and are truly heartbreaking. Discuss the sacrifices the characters made in order to make the final leg.

Playing on the theme of invisibility/visibility, what does this theme mean in the last part of the stories? What does visibility mean for Josef, Isabel and Mahmoud in the end?

How do the stories of these three children intersect in the end? Despite the divide of time and space, what does their connectedness mean for us?

Just as their raft reaches shore, Isabel's mother brings new life into the world. What symbolism do you see there? What does this mean for their family as they begin anew in the U.S.?

Now What?

How You Can Act

There are ways you can help refugees who are resettling globally and locally. Advocacy for those seeking safety and comfort is done in community. Together, we can offer hospitality to those around the world who are beginning again.

Locally:

- Learn how you can join with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and its partners in the work of refugee resettlement. *www.cbf.net/advocacy*
- Find out what organizations and nonprofits in your area work with refugees and donate your time and resources.
- Speak with your local and national representatives about policies regarding immigrants and refugees.

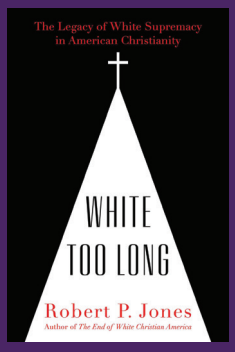
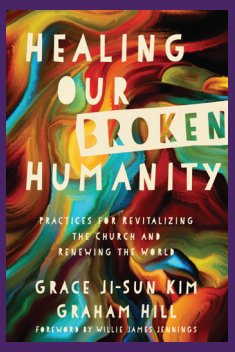
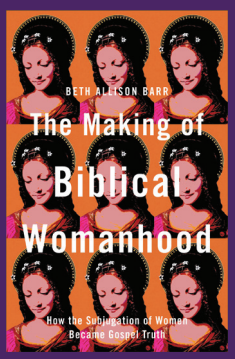
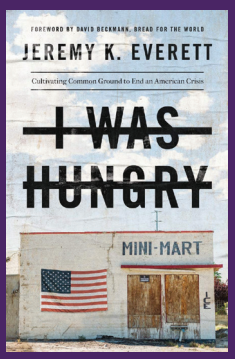
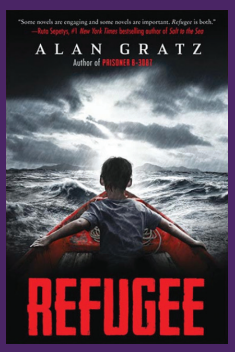
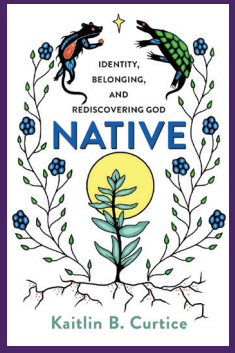
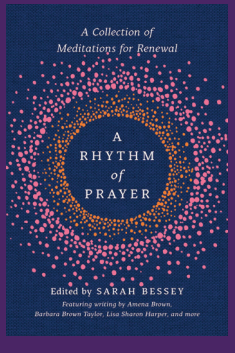
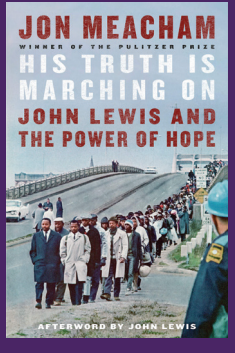
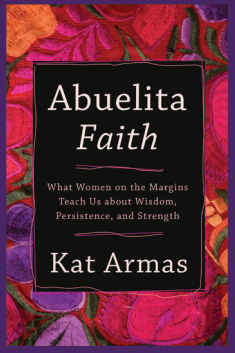
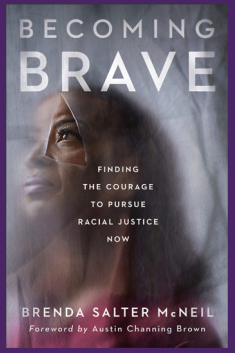
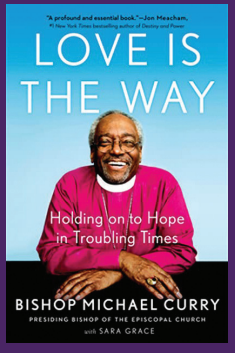
Internationally:

- Donate to organizations working to resettle and care for refugees, primarily children. Gratz names two organizations with very specific missions: UNICEF and Save the Children.
  www.unicefusa.org
  www.savethechildren.org

Further Reading:

- *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario
- *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* by Atia Abawi
- *Sea Prayer* by Khaled Hosseini
- *The Girl Who Smiled Beads* by Celemtine Wamariya and Elizabeth Weil
- *We are Displaced* by Malala Yousafzai
- *What Is the What* by Dave Eggers
- *Lubna and Pebble* by Wendy Meddour (for ages four to eight)
- *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales (for ages three to eight)

CBF Book Club 2021-22

We're excited to announce selections for this year's book club. With new subjects, great authors, more comprehensive reading guides and Fellowship-wide virtual events. We invite you and your congregation, Sunday school class or small group to join us as we read and learn together.

Learn more at ***www.cbf.net/books***.