

Refugee Boy Benjamin Zephaniah

About the Book

Alem's Father is Ethiopian and his mother is Eritrean. Their countries are at war and Alem is not safe. He is not welcome in Ethiopia because he has Eritrean blood. He cannot live in Eritrea because his Father is from Ethiopia. His Father takes him to a place of safety but staying there will not be easy. Alem meets many challenges, which he faces with courage. Circumstances beyond his control force him to live away from the land of his birth. He has to pick up the pieces and start again. As he struggles to come to terms with all that has happened to his loved ones there are some people prepared to help him and some who do their best to make life as difficult as possible.

Discussion Questions

1. there are two introductions to the story. In what ways are they both the same and different? How do they help the reader to focus on Alem's struggle?
2. Alem's father keeps in contact with his son by letter. What do we learn about the beliefs and values of Alem's family from these letters? How do we know that the choices his parents make are not straightforward?
3. when he first meets Mariam why does Alem wonder 'Was she a good guy or a bad guy'? What are his first thoughts about Pamela?
4. in chapter three Alem makes a statement about his experiences. Make a list of the events he describes which are linked with people's prejudice against others and a list of incidents linked with individual love of power. How might the two lists be related?
5. choose two characters linked with the children's home and discuss their actions when Alem meets them. What evidence is there of contrasting efforts to welcome him and to intimidate him? Why do you think the people you have selected chose to act in the way they did? Try to explain how there are elements of prejudice and power in their actions.
6. when Alem is advised to report acts of violence what is his honest opinion of the instruction? Why does he think in this way?

7. what is Alem's opinion of people who fight over a few chips? What led him to form this opinion?
8. when Alem is screened how do we know that Mariam was once a refugee? Why does she have to stop herself from talking about her own experiences and beliefs?
9. think about Alem's relationship with his foster family. How does his relationship with Ruth change as times goes by? Why does it change?
10. discuss the headlines in the newspapers and the conversation which follows Alem's reading of them. (Pages 127-128) What evidence of prejudice and power is highlighted by the words of both Mr and Mrs Fitzgerald?
11. why is Alem's Father arrested?
12. what reasons are given for refusing to grant Alem asylum?
13. how do people try to get the decision reversed? What actually reverses the decision?
14. read the final chapter aloud and then decide why the book has no ending.
15. find out more about the work of the Refugee Council and how it tries to promote the right of individuals. How might the stories of asylum seekers like Alem be linked with the lessons humanity promised to learn from the Holocaust?