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## Teachers Guide for *Refugee Boy* by Benjamin Zephaniah



### In Brief

A conscience-raising novel for young adults about the complex issue of refugees.

### In Detail

Life is not safe for Alem. His father is Ethiopian, and his mother his Eritrean — and with both countries at war, he is welcome in neither place. As a treat, Alem's father takes him on a holiday to London: he sees grey skies, smooth roads, bad television, traffic fumes, and old and new buildings side by side. But when he wakes, he is alone in the hotel room. To save him from the conflict in their homeland, his parents have given him up to a new home. He finds himself in the hands of social workers, lawyers, foster parents, teachers, judges — in children's homes, hostels, schools, courtrooms. His father had told

him that England had compassionate people who understand why people have to seek refuge. As Alem tries to stay strong throughout all that happens to him, he finds that some people seem to understand more than others.



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### About the Author

Benjamin Zephaniah is probably one of the most high-profile international authors writing today, with an enormous breadth of appeal, equally popular with both adults and children. Most well-known for his performance poetry with a political edge for adults and ground-breaking performance poetry for children, Benjamin also has his own rap/reggae band, and has appeared on Desert Island Discs. He is in constant demand internationally to perform his work: There are rumours that he is Nelson Mandela's favourite poet, and is the only Rastafarian poet to be short-listed for the Chairs of Poetry for both Oxford and Cambridge University. Benjamin lives in East Ham, London.

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## Discussion

1. 'He thought this was a gross misuse of language ... he had decided that words weren't enough' (pp.72—3). What could you say about Alem's use of language and his understanding of it?

2. How does it differ from the way others in the novel speak and listen from the boys in the children's home and at school, from the Fitzgeralds, and from his father? How do these differences help and hinder him in getting on with the people around him? How might his experiences have been different if he — as many refugees do — had come to the country without any English?

3. What do you think of the front cover of the paperback? Look closely at the image, and at the title and its appearance. How does the boy walking along the line — with his shadow behind him, and his back to the viewer — relate to the story? Are there any similarities between this figure and the portrayal of Alem you have from the book? Why might the author have chosen to call the novel *Refugee Boy*, as opposed to, for example, just *Refugee*?

4. 'This was his first look into a British home. It was warm and he liked it' (p.86). Could you make a list of all the places Alem sees during his time in Britain? Based on such a list, what impression do you think he is likely to have of the country? How different would this impression be from that of someone who was born in Britain? To which aspects of London life might he be most sensitive, in contrast to the environment of his earlier childhood?

5. What do you think of the Fitzgerald family? Is Alem's comment, 'they don't pressure me in any way' (p.200) a good way to describe them? In particular, what were your first impressions of Ruth? How did your response to her change as the story went on? Do you think that she treated the Fitzgeralds' other foster children fairly? Did the relationship she builds with Alem surprise you? Why, at times, does he respond to her and no one else? Might there be any significance in the author's choice of the name 'Ruth'?

6. 'They were not starving ... but they looked miserable' (p.143); 'You're always on a downer ... and your dad's loaded' (p.183). What point might Robert (and Benjamin Zephaniah) be making about Buck? Is there any conflict — or even hypocrisy — in his values? Given his comfortable background, would it be better for him not to be involved in this sort of music? How much sympathy does the author want you to have for him?

7. *Refugee Boy* contains many complex issues of identity. How important are these issues to the characters in the novel, and to our understanding of them? What do you think the author's ideas about identity are? Is there a way of understanding the issue that allows for all the following sentiments: 'I am an African' (pp.7 and 9); 'I is an Ethiopian that happens to be born in England' (p.187); 'how can I return to a place I've never been to?' (p.177)?

8. 'We do have a very fair system of justice here so you do have the right to appeal' (p.232). Do you think the system which decides on Alem's fate is 'very fair'? In which

ways does it work well, and how could it be improved? What do you think of the adjudicator, the barrister, and the formal traditions of the court? How effective do you think the organised protest would have been, had Alem's situation not changed so drastically?

9. Why do you think the author chose the Ethiopia—Eritrea conflict as a focus for the novel? From which other countries do refugees come to Britain? How fairly do you think this novel portrays those seeking asylum? What do you think of the treatment they receive, their status, and the response of the press and public to their presence? What do you think are the best and the worst aspects of being a refugee in Britain? How easy would it be to change the system?

10. Alem receives many kinds of support, from individuals and organisations. Who are all these people, and who do they work for? What do you think their motivation is? How effective is their help? Many say they are 'there' if Alem 'needs' them — what does this actually mean? Why, at the end of the news report about the death of Alem's father (p.287), does it mention that he has 'been offered counselling — is this news?

11. 'What we should be doing is ... making no fuss ... He is the law' (p.238). Why does Mr Kelo take this stance? How does it relate to his political activism in Africa, and all the risks he takes there? How might you explain the differences in his and Alem's approach to the decision to protest? Which sounds like the voice of greater experience?

12. 'Alem hated the meal, as did his father, but they both felt it was their duty not to show it' (p.220). In what ways does food play a part in the novel? How and why might it be a 'duty' not to show such a hatred for poor living conditions? Does this kind of determination do Alem and his father good? When Alem says, on pp.276—7, 'I haven't done anything. Ruth has done more than me, Robert has done more than me ... I am just a normal boy', do you agree with him? Why does Alem win so much praise and support from those around him? Does he deserve it? If so, why?

13. 'It was as if they were in mourning' (p.233). How does Alem mourn his mother? What opportunities does he have to grieve, and what makes it difficult for him? How, in the longer term, do you think he will be affected by the deaths of his parents? How, in general, would you describe the part played by death and bereavement in *Refugee Boy*?

### Further Reading

*The Other Side of Truth* by Beverley Naidoo  
*Lost for Words* by Elizabeth Lutzeier  
*Exodus* by Julie Bertagna  
*A Little Piece of Ground* by Elizabeth Laird

### Other Books by the Author

*Gangsta Rap*  
*Face*