

THE WAITING PLACE

WHEN HOME IS LOST AND A NEW ONE NOT YET FOUND

DINA NAYERI PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNA BOSCH MIRALPEIX

About the Book

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) cites an unprecedented 82.4 million forcibly displaced people on the planet as of 2020. In 2018, Dina Nayeri—the daughter of a refugee and a former refugee herself—invited documentary photographer Anna Bosch Miralpeix to accompany her to Katsikas, a refugee camp outside Ioannina, Greece, to record the hopes and struggles of ten young Farsi-speaking refugees from Iran and Afghanistan. “I wanted to play with them, to enter their imagined worlds, to see the landscape inside their minds,” she says. Ranging in age from five to seventeen, the children live in partitioned shipping-crate homes crowded on a field below a mountain. Battling a dreary monster that wants to rob them of their purpose, dignity, and identity, each survives in his or her own special way.

This book is an unflinching look at ten young lives suspended outside of time—and bravely proceeding anyway. Each lyrical passage leads the reader from one story to the next, revealing the dreams, ambitions, and personalities of each displaced child. The stories are punctuated by intimate photographs, followed by the author’s reflections on life in a refugee camp. Locking the global refugee crisis sharply in focus, *The Waiting Place* is an urgent call to change what we teach young people about the nature of home and safety.

This guide can also help students meet National Council for the Social Studies standards along the themes of People, Places, and Environments, Global Connections, Civic Ideals and Practices, and other themes.



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Also available as an e-book

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can be used in writing prompts for independent work.



If you would like help pronouncing the names in *The Waiting Place*, visit <https://bit.ly/NamesWaitingPlace>.

Our thanks to Neilab Habibzai for this audio guide.

Matin

Pronunciation: Mah-TEEN

Age: 5

From: Afghanistan

Family: Mobina (sister)

Friend(s): Ahmad, Hashmat, Yusuf

Some likes from the book: Keeping busy, solving problems, airplanes, learning about pilots, negotiating peace

Ahmad and Hashmat

Pronunciation: AH-mahd and HAHSH-mahd

From: Afghanistan

Ethnicity: Tajik

Family: Brothers; Shokrieh (sister)

Friend(s): Matin

Some likes from the book: Playing ball with each other and friends, finding beautiful things in nature

Mobina

Pronunciation: MO-bean-ah

Age: Almost 11

From: Afghanistan

Family: Matin (brother)

Friend(s): Two girls that draw, read, and play aunties

Some likes from the book: Computer games, reading, videos that give her a calm feeling, friends

Left behind: Her computer

Setareh

Pronunciation: Seh-TAR-ah

Name means: Star

From: Iran

Ethnicity: Hazara (Afghan minority)

Friend(s): Shabnam, Kosar, Shokrieh

Some likes from the book: School, taking charge and being a leader, writing letters

Left behind: Metal pencil case

Personality: Assertive, bookish, always plans ahead

Preparing for a Discussion

Your readers may know that parts of the world are unsafe for children. They may also know that their own towns and homes can be unsafe. The stories of the children featured in the book, and what those stories might remind readers of personally, could cause anxiety. Consider working as a team within your school community to address any big feelings that arise. If you have refugees in your classroom or program, it is especially important to be prepared for them to possibly revisit trauma. One way to assuage anxiety and fear is to empower your readers to express empathy for refugees and one another in words and actions.

Building Background Knowledge

“Every war, famine, and flood spits out survivors.” —Dina Nayeri

In preparation for exploring *The Waiting Place* with your readers, you may wish to build background knowledge about refugees and what drives the displacement of millions—war, tyranny, economics, climate change, and the combination of any of these crises.

“Teaching About Refugees”

Source: *UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency*

<https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/teaching-about-refugees.html>

“Understanding the Global Refugee Crisis”

Source: *Facing History & Ourselves*

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/understanding-global-refugee-crisis>

“Climate Change and Disaster Displacement”

Source: *UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency*

<https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/climate-change-and-disasters.html>

“Talking and Teaching About Afghan Refugees and the Fall of Kabul”

Source: *Re-Imagining Migration*

<https://reimaginingmigration.org/talking-and-teaching-about-afghan-refugees-and-the-fall-of-kabul/>

“Finding the Courage to Continue On in Greece’s Refugee Camps” (video)

Source: *International Rescue Committee*

<https://www.rescue.org/video/finding-courage-continue-greeces-refugee-camps>

“UN Global Education Envoy Urges New Funding for ‘Lost Generation’ of Children Forced Out of Classrooms by Conflict”

Source: *UN News*

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1033091>

Shabnam

Pronunciation: Shahb-nahm

Name means: Night dew

From: Afghanistan

Ethnicity: Tajik

Family: Yusuf (brother)

Friend(s): Setareh, Shokrieh, Kosar

Personality: Quiet, thoughtful, observant, kind

Kosar

Pronunciation: KOH-sahr

From: Iran

Ethnicity: Hazara

Friend(s): Setareh, Shokrieh, Shabnam

Shares shipping crate with: Shokrieh

Some likes from the book: Math, gymnastics

Personality: Fast, clever, full of energy

Shokrieh

Pronunciation: Shew-KREE-ah

From: Afghanistan

Ethnicity: Tajik

Family: Ahmad and Hashmat (brothers); sister

Shares shipping crate with: Kosar

Some likes from the book: Cartwheels, games

Personality: Quiet, sometimes shy, quick, playful

Shokrieh's Sister

From: Afghanistan

Ethnicity: Tajik

Family: Shokrieh (sister); Ahmad and Hashmat (brothers)

Shares shipping crate with: Kosar

Some likes from the book: Fashion, lightning bolts, drawing, planning, cooking

Personality: Brave, bold, ambitious, full of fire

Yusuf

Pronunciation: YOU-sef

From: Afghanistan

Ethnicity: Tajik

Family: Shabnam (sister)

Friend(s): Matin

Some likes from the book: Games, climbing, his sister, standing up to the Waiting Place

“Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees”

Source: *United Nations*

<https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/3b66c2aa10>

“Dina Nayeri Discusses Her New Book *The Waiting Place*”

Source: *Candlewick Press*

<https://vimeo.com/468319841>

Discussion Questions

1. Many perceive refugee camps as places of safety, reached after a flight from war, conflict, or climate change disasters. When describing where children go after their home is lost, the author says, “At first the Waiting Place welcomes you.” How quickly does she change the reader’s perception of that welcoming, of that safety? Why do you think she chose to personify the refugee camp?
2. Five-year-old Matin keeps himself busy and thinks of good things, but the Waiting Place tells him to nap, throw rocks, and pinch his sister. From your understanding of the refugee crisis and what Matin may have experienced, are you surprised by the way he is fighting against depression and aggression? Explain.
3. The older boys at the Waiting Place “make war,” and Matin has the scars to prove it. Matin tells the arguing brothers Ahmad and Hashmat that the warring boys did not start out mean. It “happened slowly.” How is Matin warning Ahmad and Hashmat and hoping they will all take a better path? Does Matin blame the warring boys for their meanness? Or does he blame the Waiting Place? Whom do you blame?
4. Matin’s older sister Mobina gets a “calm feeling” when she watches videos with objects being cleaned, improved, or fitted into their proper places. Why do you imagine Mobina likes to watch these videos and why does she “defy the stupor”? How does this relate to the idea of “unpausing” that the author introduces when first describing the Waiting Place? When you have the opportunity to pause, does it feel good or does it feel uncomfortable?
5. After fleeing their homes, Shabnam approached Setareh on the ship from Moria and befriended her with a single word. What was that word? If either girl were resettled in your school or neighborhood, what word or words could you use to form a connection? Is there immigrant resettlement in your area? If so, what languages could you begin to learn words from?
6. Setareh’s name means “star.” Can you name some of the things she does to stand out and behave like a star? How does her Hazara identity

Nina

Pronunciation: nee-NAH

Age: 13

From: Kept secret

Family: Minoo (sister)

Friend(s): Not allowed; secret Instagram friend

Some likes from the book: Creating beautiful things with her hands, social media, reading, telling stories

Minoo

Pronunciation: mee-NO

Known as: Miracle girl

From: Kept secret

Family: Nina (sister)

Friends: Not allowed

Waiting Place

Appears: Anywhere that families are forced to wait

Needs: Children to forget the hours and days; dust; peeling paint

Loves: Nothing

Friends: None



Photograph © 2022 by Anna Bosch Miralpeix

affect her need to be a star? How does your identity and other people's perception of your identity affect how you act in public?

7. The pencil case that Setareh saved all her money for was too heavy to take when her family fled Iran. If you were leaving your home with just a backpack, what would you take? What would you leave behind? What dear things can you take with you that wouldn't require a backpack?
8. The Waiting Place stirs up mischief by placing newcomers Kosar (Hazara ethnicity) and Shokrieh (Tajik ethnicity) in a shipping crate between best friends Shabnam (Tajik ethnicity) and Setareh (Hazara ethnicity). How did the ethnicities of the two newcomers change Shabnam and Setareh's relationship? What can you discover about the treatment of the Hazaras in Central Asia? Are Shabnam and Setareh acting out long-held ethnic misunderstandings from their region? How do Shabnam and Setareh reconnect after a month of anger and hurt? How is that a model for cross-cultural understanding?
9. Kosar jumps on her bed and imagines herself "taking off like a bird." Make a list of circumstances that might have forced Kosar's family to leave their old home and a list of circumstances that might prevent them from settling quickly in a new home. Make a list of behaviors of birds. Why do you think Kosar imagines herself as a bird?
10. In the Afterword, author Dina Nayeri speaks about the Geneva Convention of 1951 and the cap the United States has put on the number of refugees that can resettle in America. She says the Geneva Convention sets legal criteria for the suffering, "not obligation limits for the privileged." Read the Geneva Convention. Do you agree with Dina Nayeri's assessment?
11. Shabnam tells Shokrieh that she should go to a "strong country." How does she define a "strong country"? Do you think *your* country fits that definition? Why or why not? Do you think your country can become stronger if it does more to help girls like Shabnam and Shokrieh?
12. Shokrieh's big sister has a scar from the bombing of their house. How has the sister turned that scar into a sign of her strength and resilience? Who do you admire for overcoming pain or obstacles? What do you admire about the children in this book?
13. Children in the Waiting Place can sometimes lose their names. Thirteen-year-old Nina and her little sister, Minoo, were given new names to protect them from harm. Like these sisters, some refugee children forget to respond to their new names. At the school bus stop, children have to listen carefully when a Greek woman calls out their names but mispronounces them.



Have people ever forgotten your name, called you by a name you did not like, or mispronounced your name? How did it feel? You can welcome new friends by learning to pronounce their name. You can further welcome them by asking them to tell you the *story* of their name and by sharing the story of yours. The story of our names can tell a lot about our families and backgrounds. For example, Shabnam means “night dew,” and some friends find her quiet and calm like dew.

14. Shabnam’s brother, Yusuf, “stands tall” in his nightmare and chases off a menacing lion and snake. Being awake in the Waiting Place can also be a nightmare. Why is Yusuf strong in his dream but struggles when he is awake? What would you like to give to Yusuf and other kids in the Waiting Place to make them stand tall? Can you see a path to making that happen?
15. Matin tells his friend Yusuf, “Let’s set our clocks and clear our schedules.” How does the passage and use of one’s time change, help, or hinder children in the Waiting Place? What would reduce the amount of time refugees spend waiting for resettlement? Who has the power to change that? What power do you have?
16. In shipping crate A31, there are two girls who are “nameless and faceless to everyone else,” two sisters who are “vanishing.” Explain how Nina and Minoo might be seen as nameless and faceless. Are they vanishing, or have author Dina Nayeri and photographer Anna Bosch Miralpeix helped them appear? Make a list of all the things you observe about these two girls in the pictures and the words. By making the list and sharing their story, you can also help prevent Nina and Minoo from vanishing.
17. Dina Nayeri (or the lady with the American papers, as Nina and Minoo call her) tells Nina she has to work, make things, and learn to prevent all the waiting from taking away her power. Who does the lady think holds the power? How is Nina finding and maintaining her own power?
18. In the Afterword, author Dina Nayeri calls the Waiting Place a “monster” that makes everything in the camp “heavy and dreary and exhausting.” But she also sees children winning against the monster. She sees refugee children “becoming braver, kinder, more astonishing versions of themselves.” Make a scorecard with the Waiting Place on one side and the children on the other. Go back through the book and make notes of the actions of both the Waiting Place and the children. Who is winning? Or is the game not yet over?
19. In the Afterword, the author says, “We create refugees.” Does she mean that you and I personally play a role in creating refugees? Another way to ask this is, Who contributes to climate change? Does our elected

About Dina Nayeri

Dina Nayeri is a former refugee and the author of the adult title *The Ungrateful Refugee*, a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and the Kirkus Prize. Her work has been published in more than twenty countries and in *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, *The Best American Short Stories*, the *New York Times*, and many other publications. Of her work with Anna Bosch Miralpeix for *The Waiting Place*, she says, “Each morning we set off, me with my notebook, she with her camera and tripod, to see these brave little people fighting back against the Waiting Place—the monster that wants to get inside you, to change you.” Dina Nayeri lives in Paris.

About Anna Bosch Miralpeix

Anna Bosch Miralpeix is a documentary photographer whose projects include the award-winning *Bubble Beirut*. A graduate of the Institute of Photographic Studies of Catalonia, she is also a teacher and visual project developer. Anna Bosch Miralpeix lives in Barcelona.



Photograph © 2022 by Anna Bosch Miralpeix

government provide other countries with the weapons for war? What can you do to fight climate change? How can you tell your government that war hurts other children?

20. At the time this book was published, the United States government had said they would let 125,000 refugees a year into the country. If you have learned to calculate percentages, what percentage is 125,000 of the 26.6 million world refugees waiting to be resettled? What percent is 125,000 of the 4.9 million asylum seekers? How do those numbers make you feel?
21. We know that refugee camps like the Waiting Place provide “urgent needs: food, clothing, safety.” Dina Nayeri asks us to think about how we can provide “purpose, dignity, ambition, and skill” to refugees as well. Explore the attributes of purpose, dignity, ambition, and skill and write about how you do or do not have those things in your life. With a group, brainstorm ways you might help refugee children maintain and grow those attributes.
22. Dina Nayeri and her mother were refugees. Nayeri’s daughter was born in Europe, her family’s new home after leaving Iran and America. Nayeri hopes her daughter’s “luck doesn’t make her blind.” What do you think she means? How do you feel lucky? How can you make sure you see the people and circumstances that are less lucky?

Social Action

“I want children to read about young refugees’ battles with the Waiting Place. . . . We can listen to stories of those who have been gripped in its clutches, learn what they know, and be ready.” —Dina Nayeri

One way the Waiting Place wins is by making the children in its grasp invisible. This book has brought the stories of ten children to you. How can you continue to make the stories of children in waiting places visible? I’m Your Neighbor Books, a project that shares and engages with New Arrival and New American stories, offers ideas for helping and engaging with children and teens in waiting places worldwide. Visit <https://bit.ly/HelpWaitingPlace>.

These questions were prepared by Kirsten Cappy at I’m Your Neighbor Books. The nonprofit strives to build a stronger America, one where immigrants are welcomed and where first-through third-generation Americans truly belong. They facilitate deep engagement with children’s books that represent our New Arrival and New American communities with projects like the Welcoming Library. I’m Your Neighbor Books was assisted in this project by Marcia Salem, an ELL educator who taught New Arrival children in the refugee resettlement city of Portland, Maine, for thirty years; by an Afghan American college student who came to the United States as a refugee; and by Neilab Habibzai.