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Refugee Boy

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Zephaniah, Benjamin. *Refugee Boy*. Bloomsbury Children's Books, 2001. ISBN 1582347638. \$15.95. 291 pp.

Reviewer: Sandra L. Tidwell

Reading Level: Intermediate; Young adult

Rating: Dependable

Genre: Historical fiction; Contemporary realistic fiction

Subject: Eritrean-Ethiopian War, 1998- --Juvenile fiction; Refugees--England--Juvenile fiction; Asylum, Right of--England--Juvenile fiction; Foster home care--Juvenile fiction; Books--Reviews;

London seems like a wonderful 4-day vacation place for Alem Kelo and his father, natives of Ethiopia. Alem, who is interested in architecture, is fascinated with the huge buildings, the variety of food available in restaurants, and the mystifying absence of sounds he is used to. "Can you hear the nothing, Father? There are no animal noises – no birds, no donkeys, no hyenas, nothing" (p. 26). On the third day of this trip, however, Alem wakes to find his father is gone. He soon finds out his father has returned to Ethiopia to try to find his wife, who is Eritrean. It has been over two years since the countries of Ethiopia and Eritrea have been involved in a harsh border dispute where mixed families like Alem's are persecuted and not wanted by either country. Alem's father wants his son to have a chance to grow up in a country that is not at war—to be educated and not be fearful for his life. This is an account of Alem's struggles to understand his father's motives, and to understand this new country's beliefs about refugees. The Refugee Council helps Alem obtain asylum and he begins living with the caring Fitzgerald foster family. Alem goes to school, makes friends, and eventually is reunited with his father, but he continues to be challenged by the British government's laws about granting refugees asylum.

The book has a very captivating beginning, but the rest of the book doesn't have the same flair. The poet author uses wordy sentences and British word spelling; some British expressions were confusing. However, the book emphasizes important messages: courage to stand for what is right, patience amidst turmoil, compassion of friends and family, love of learning, the love of freedom, and the place of peaceful demonstrations to bring about change. There is much ethnic turmoil in the world today. This story brings the complicated nature of these situations down to the personal level and was quite an eye-opener to the kind of challenges refugees face.