

I have a dream

A. M. Dassu

Refugee Week was founded in 1998 to encourage greater understanding of why people seek safety and to celebrate the contributions of refugees. Unfortunately, over two decades later, xenophobia is still rife and the arrival of refugees and immigrants to the UK is still questioned and frequently opposed.

Politicians and the media have been peddling a false narrative to create fear for years, I wrote my novel *Boy, Everywhere* (2020) in response to their divisive rhetoric. It is a story that shows we are all one cruel twist of fate away from becoming refugees ourselves. For years we've been bombarded with images of refugees in rubber dinghies or in muddy camps or standing in front of grey rubble on the news. Images that have made it that much harder to imagine how people might have lived before. It's easy to forget that they had settled lives just like ours, and that the media's focus on refugee journeys isn't the full story.

In 2015, while watching countless news broadcasts on the global refugee crisis, it was clear to me that there is more to the lives of refugees than their current traumatic conditions. I wanted to challenge the narrative that refugees are needy and desperate by showing the reality of their lives,

along with the choices they're forced to make. I wanted to focus not only on the terrifying journey that a refugee has to take to get to safety, but also on what and who they leave behind and how difficult it is to start again. The stereotypes that have taken hold over the years from media reports are entrenched and continuing to impact refugees even after resettlement. I wanted to challenge them and show real people – people I knew, who wouldn't have left home had their lives not been upended by war, people with a wide range of occupations, backgrounds and skill sets, people who had dignified lives and were not simply victims of war with a political status reducible to their 'refugee' label. I wanted to explore people's identities before their lives were disrupted and show the determination and desire refugees have to work hard and re-establish themselves and their hopes for a better, safer life.

Refugees are ordinary, hard-working people experiencing extraordinary challenges. They are resilient, brave and hugely inspiring. There are many refugees who don't make the headlines, or aren't a global success, but whose courage to leave everything behind and start again is something to draw strength and hope from.

So many refugees I have met in England have stories of wanting to work to retain their dignity, some who are studying again so they can also use their skills in the UK, some who aren't allowed to work and so are skillfully growing vegetables while they wait for the government to decide if they can live here, some who are working in restaurants when they used to be department store buyers, some who are helping other refugees by working in refugee organisations or offering personal financial support from the little they have themselves. It's stories of kindnesses and injustices like this that stoke me to challenge stereotypes and tell truthful, re-humanising stories that portray people positively and above all realistically.

No one sets out to become a refugee. It can happen to anyone. The emphasis has been on our differences, but we have many similarities, the same basic needs, hopes and fears. We all want to be warm and in clean surroundings. We all want to be with family and friends. Where you're from or where you end up should not define you. We mustn't focus on our differences, but on our common needs. By coming together we can break down stereotypes and hopefully build a kinder society, one in which people consider what refugees have left behind.

So, let's choose words carefully when talking about a refugee crisis. Some damaging words take only seconds to utter but their impact is real and long-lasting, touching countless lives, mentally, emotionally and physically. Such words collect, take flight and swarm, reaching further and further, leaving devastation in their path. They're not just words. They are much more than that. We need to talk about how words are weaponised and how harmful they can be.

My hope is we can change perceptions by amplifying the voices of refugees and sharing their accomplishments – my hope is to see what can be achieved when people are welcomed and accepted into a new country and given the support to thrive.

My dream is for as many people as possible to lend their voices and speak up for refugees, to start talking about how hard it is for someone to leave their home. The refugee crisis is not going anywhere; with climate change it is only going to get worse. Now is the time to open conversation with everyone – refugee and settled – on what we need to do to build a more empathetic society.

For we cannot let them walk alone. And we cannot just focus on our own dreams.

A. M. Dassu

A. M. Dassu is the author of *Boy, Everywhere* (2020), which won The Little Rebels Children's Book Award 2021 and is an American Library Association Notable Book. Her acclaimed novel *Fight Back* (2022) was immediately a Book of the Month and Best New Novel in *The Guardian* as well as an Independent Bookshop's Book of the Month across all Indie bookshops in the UK, and also a finalist for the Jane Addams Children's Book Award.

She is a director at Inclusive Minds, an organisation passionate about inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in children's literature. As well as a Connecting Stories author with the National Literacy Trust, campaigning to inspire a love of reading and writing in children and young people, she is a patron of *The Other Side of Hope*, a magazine for refugee and immigrant contributors.

A. M. Dassu grew up in the Midlands and writes books that challenge stereotypes, that humanise and are full of empathy, hope and heart. Her latest book, *Boot It!* (2023) is a World Book Day novel.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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