

*Reflections on Reading: Elizabeth Laird

I like to make my readers cry. I'm not talking about drenched handkerchiefs and wrenching sobs, but a wobbly lip, perhaps, and a moist eye. If that still sounds too harsh, perhaps it would be better to say that I like to encourage my readers to feel, to care about the characters who have taken possession of my story, to believe that they are walking alongside them, facing the same dangers and hoping the same hopes.

It's stories about real situations that interest me, things that are happening in the world today, (though events in history sometimes tug at my heartstrings too). And to find those stories, I have to go and look for them.

The flight of millions of people from the war in Syria is one of the great stories of our time. Ordinary people doing ordinary things have suddenly been wrenched away not only from their homes and schools, but from the towns they have always lived in, and even their country. I couldn't just sit down in my comfortable house in Britain and imagine what it was like for them. I had to go to the Middle East to find out.

Jordan is right next door to Syria, and millions of Syrians have crossed the border, leaving everything behind except the clothes they are wearing and the few things they can manage to carry. They look like strange, perhaps even threatening, people in TV news clips. It's easy to think that they're nothing to do with us. But they could be us. They could be you, or me.

I met many Syrians in Jordan who had had to run away from fearful dangers, who had lost parents or brothers or sisters. As I watched and listened, visited the refugee camps and drank tea with the families who kindly welcomed me, the story I wanted to tell began to emerge. My characters – Omar, Musa and Eman – walked towards me out of the shadows and began to play their parts. Soon they were as real to me as the people I'd met. The fragments of all those true stories shook themselves down into a new pattern, which I just had to write down on the page.

I cried a bit while I was writing *Welcome to Nowhere*. I laughed sometimes too. I was enraged when my characters suffered injustice, or were pushed into wretched situations.

What I felt, I wanted my readers to feel. And what I hope most of all is that when a reader looks at a crowd of desperate people struggling out of a ruined city, or trying to pass through a narrow gate in a high fence, they won't see hundreds of anonymous faces, but people like Omar and his family. And, even more importantly, people like you and me.



Elizabeth Laird is the multi-award-winning author of several much-loved children's books including *The Garbage King*, *The Fastest Boy in the World* and *Dindy and the Elephant*. She has been shortlisted for the prestigious Carnegie Medal six times. She lives in Britain now, but still likes to travel as much as she can.

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