

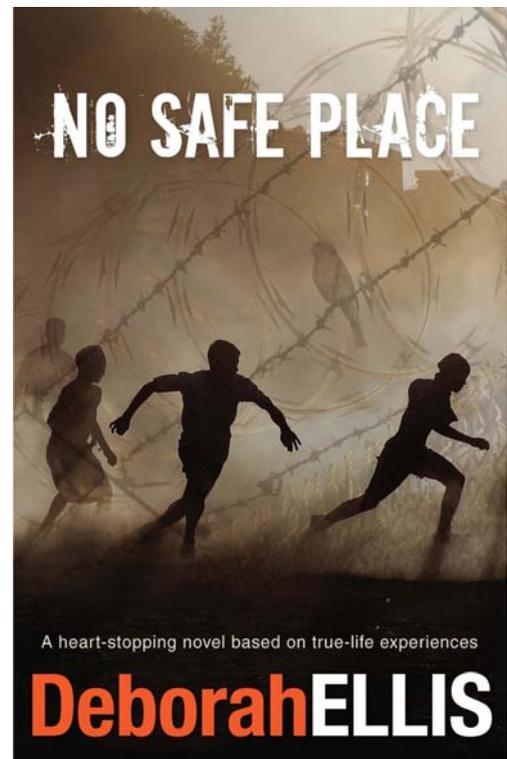
Teachers' Notes
by
Bec Kavanagh

No Safe Place
by
Deborah Ellis

ISBN 9781742374109
Recommended for ages 11-14+ yrs

These notes may be reproduced free of charge for use and study within schools but they may not be reproduced (either in whole or in part) and offered for commercial sale.

Introduction.....	2
Plot summary	2
In the classroom	3
Character study.....	3
Themes	4
Journeys and home	4
Racism/Attitudes to refugees	5
Desperation and hope	6
Friendship	6
The rights of the child	7
Activities	7
Related reading	9
About the writers.....	10



83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest, Sydney
NSW 2065
Australia

PO Box 8500
St Leonards
NSW 1590
Australia

ph: (61 2) 8425 0100
fax: (61 2) 9906 2218

info@allenandunwin.com
www.allenandunwin.com

Allen & Unwin PTY LTD
ABN 79 003 994 278

INTRODUCTION

PLOT SUMMARY

No Safe Place follows the journey of Abdul, who we first meet down an alleyway in Calais, France, as he tries to trade all of his savings for a seat on a smuggler's boat.

From the outset, it is clear that the stakes are high in this book, and that each choice is a shaky step towards an uncertain future. Abdul is a complex character who has left his war-torn home in Baghdad for the opportunities that he believes await him in England.

His journey has been long and difficult, and by the time we meet him, he is distrustful of other people and becoming desperate to take the next step in his journey. After a run-in with the smuggler who he is trying to buy passage with, he nearly decides to risk everything to escape through the Chunnel, but an incident during a riot closes this path to him. Out of options and desperate to escape, he finally manages to sneak onto the smuggler's boat, unseen until they are sailing into the stormy seas. It is here that the next leg of his journey begins, and his story merges with the stories of the other refugees, who are also seeking the shelter of a new land.

The tension in this part of the book is heightened by the dramatic and unreliable backdrop of the rough sea. The reader shares the uncertainty of the boat's passengers as Abdul's presence is discovered, and a violent outburst from the smuggler puts all of their lives at stake. There is a fight, and the smuggler is killed and tossed overboard, where he is swallowed by the sea. In the relative calm that follows, the children who remain on the boat drift into an uneasy sleep and the story is broken up by the first of several flashbacks.

Each of the flashbacks takes the reader deeper into the past of three characters whose stories we see through to the end. They are heartbreaking and poignant and explain the events that put each character on the path that sees them riding with Abdul in the boat to freedom.

Upon waking, Abdul and his new companions, Jonah, Rosalia and Cheslav, discover that the fifth passenger, a boy from Uzbek, has died. In a touching scene that brings them all together, they each say goodbye to him with a prayer, a song, or a lullaby. This scene is important, because it sees a connection begin to form between these remaining children, who have each fought viciously for their place on the boat. It is a connection that sees them through the rest of their journey, as they hijack a yacht, and finally land on the shores of England.

When they arrive, Abdul and his friends find refuge in a cave that is the hideout of a young local girl. She and her mother host the final scenes in the novel and mark the first steps in the new lives of the travellers. As they rest, Abdul, Rosalie and Cheslav share the final details from their past. There is a cathartic moment when all of the characters have unburdened themselves, and a sense of hope that things will now change for the better.

No Safe Place has some big themes for young readers to deal with, but is not a struggle to read or comprehend. The desperation of the characters to start something new, and the hope they share that there is something better to come, pushes the novel forward quickly. Ellis weaves the important themes that make up this book seamlessly into the text, and there is a lot of material that can be used as a starting point for further discussions.

IN THE CLASSROOM

No Safe Place comes at an ideal time, as the national curriculum and recent political and cultural shifts have seen an increased focus on refugees and immigrants.

One of the focuses of literature in the national curriculum is on the way that a study of literature can shape personal, cultural and national identities.

‘Engaging with literary texts is worthwhile in its own right, but, importantly, it is also valuable in developing the imaginative application of ideas, flexibility of thought, ethical and critical reflection, and motivation to learn.’

It is recommended for 11-14 year old students. The themes and opportunities to pair this text with other work make it ideal for study in years 7-9.

CHARACTER STUDY

The characters in *No Safe Place* have experienced things that will be unfamiliar to most readers of the book. Ellis’s writing is so vivid, and the characters so real, that students will nevertheless feel a strong connection to their struggles and empathise with their situation.

Although at the outset of the book, it seems as though the focus is on Abdul’s journey, ultimately the story is about the journey of all three refugee children. They are significantly affected by the actions of the secondary characters, however the four main characters are the focus of these notes.

ABDUL

Abdul is the first of the refugees that we meet, and when the story begins to incorporate their past, it is his that we hear first.

Although he is generally the character who is most willing to be friendly with others, there are moments in the text when his desperation shows, and you can see that he will do anything to reach his destination.

- Why is Abdul so desperate to reach England?
- What does he plan to do when he gets there?
- How does Abdul manage to bring the other characters together on the yacht?

Each of the refugees carries something that is precious to them, almost like a totem.

- What does Abdul carry?
- Why is it so meaningful to him?

At the beginning of the book, Abdul divides the world as follows. ‘Some people can get on the ferry. And some people can’t.’ (p10)

- How does Abdul see himself?
- How do you suppose he draws the line between the two groups of people?

CHESLAV

Cheslav has come from a military background. He has found joy in music, but like Rosalia and Abdul, has had that joy taken away from him and had no choice but to flee his country.

- How does Cheslav's character change when he discovers music?
- How does it change when it is taken away from him?
- How do Cheslav's reactions to their situation differ from those of Rosalia and Abdul?

Cheslav's 'totem' is his trumpet, although he does not have one with him until the end of the book.

- Why is the trumpet so important to Cheslav?
- How did he lose his first trumpet and how does he replace it?

ROSALIA

Rosalia is quite an introverted character from the beginning. Her experiences have been especially harrowing, and she wants nothing more than to get as far away from them as possible.

When Abdul first sees Rosalia he describes her as follows.

'There was a teenaged girl, downplaying that she was a girl by tucking her long braid inside the back of her jacket. She wore a big hat pulled down around her face, and men's clothes that were loose and big around her. Clearly, though, she was a girl.' (p22)

- Why does Rosalia want people to think that she is a boy?
- How does Rosalia's attitude towards Abdul and Cheslav change over the course of the book?
- Where does she find the strength to escape her past, and what does she carry with her as a reminder?

JONAH

Jonah is the nephew of the smuggler that takes Rosalia, Abdul and Cheslav out to sea. Left with his uncle after the death of his mother, he has been turned into a slave, and is constantly beaten and ridiculed.

- What does Jonah's name remind his uncle of? Why does he think that this is a curse?
- How is Jonah the catalyst for his uncle's death?
- Why does he turn to Abdul for support instead of one of the other characters?
- What do you think happens to Jonah after the story has ended?

THEMES

JOURNEYS AND HOME

Each of the characters is on a personal and physical journey as they travel away from the horrors of their past and towards the hope of a new land.

- How does each character see their journey?
- What do they hope to find in England?

As they travel, they leave their childhood homes behind in the hope of finding something more secure in a new land. See the examples of the descriptions of home below:

'We carry our home in our hearts.' —Rosalia (p73)

'At least it was somewhere,' the Mosul man said, as if he was reading Abdul's thoughts. 'It was a place where a man could say, "I'm going home."' (p18)

- Can you find more quotes or instances in the text that could be used to describe the characters' views on home?

Another famous reference to 'home' is in the Robert Frost poem *Death of the Hired Hand* (<http://www.bartleby.com/118.3.html>)

*"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in."*

"I should have called it

Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

- Do the characters in this poem share the same views on home as the characters in the book?
- How is home portrayed in other books that you have read recently?
- What does 'home' mean to you?
- Do you think that the characters have found a home at the end? Why?

RACISM / ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Each of the characters is judged at many times on their journey based on their background or nationality.

- In the text, find examples where this judgement is used in a negative way.
- In a positive way?
- Describe how language is used differently by other characters to show their attitudes towards immigrants.

Gemma shows no fear when four new friends arrive in her cave. Abdul and the others are worried about what her mother might think when she finds them.

- What are Abdul and the others worried she might think or do?
- What does she actually do?
- What is Gemma's mother afraid of?

What is Australia's attitude towards refugees?

- Consult the websites below and discuss the political and ethical obligations of Australia to refugees.
- How would Abdul and his friends have been treated if they had come to Australia instead?
- Do you think the outcome would have been better or worse?

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/human_rights/immigration/asylum_seekers.html

(website of the Australian Human Rights Commission)

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/media_releases/2010/103_10.html

(media release on children in detention centres put out by the Australian Human Rights Commission)

<http://www.amnesty.org.au/refugees/comments/24019/>

(Amnesty International article on refugees)

<http://www.amnesty.org.au/refugees/comments/24037>

(Amnesty International article on children in detention centres)

DESPERATION AND HOPE

Each of the characters is desperate to get to England and start a new life. But without the hope that there would be a better life for them there they would not have had the courage to make the journey.

- Discuss the different ways that hope drives the characters on their journey.
- What are they hoping for?

If there wasn't hope that things could get better, people might not be so desperate to survive.

Read the poem 'Refugee Blues' by W H Auden

http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/poetry/poetry_against1.html

- Is there any hope in this poem?
- In *No Safe Place* and 'Refugee Blues' there is a desperation in the characters to survive. Could that exist without hope? What do the two texts have in common?

Read some of the stories on the Amnesty International website from refugees.

<http://www.amnesty.org.au/refugees/archive/C12/>

- Compare their hope to that of the characters in the book.

FRIENDSHIP

Abdul, Rosalia and Cheslav each begin their journeys on their own, but by the end of the book they have become friends and, ultimately, each other's family.

- Get into groups and discuss the qualities that you look for in a friend.
- Can you find these qualities in Abdul, Rosalia and Cheslav?
- If you and your friends were put in the same circumstances as Abdul and his friends, how do you think your friendships would change?

'They had all come to the end of the land without arriving at a safe place. England was their last hope, but they could go no farther on their own.' (p25)

- Who are the characters who help them further on their journey?
- How do they help each other?

THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Many of the things that happen to Abdul, Rosalia, Cheslav and Jonah are illegal.

Look at articles 13, 19, 20, 34, 37 & 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art>

- Which characters are the articles relevant to?
- How are the rights outlined in the convention being violated.

Make a list of people that you would approach if your rights were being violated.

- Was there anyone in the story that Abdul and his friends could have asked for help?

The following article was released in April 2010 by Amnesty International regarding Australia's protection of human rights:

<http://www.amnesty.org.au/news/comments/22903/>

After reading this, discuss the earlier questions again. Do you think the rights of the characters would have been protected? How have your opinions changed?

When they are on the yacht, Abdul is able to wash his clothes, and he is thinking about how important this is before Rosalia interrupts him.

'Clean clothes are so important, he thought, remembering how badly he'd smelled when he walked through the library. When we wear clean clothes, we feel like we belong. We feel like we have a right to—' (p66)

- In your own words, finish this sentence for Abdul.
- According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>) what are some basic human rights? What are the things we take for granted that less advantaged kids might not have?
- Which of Abdul's rights are being violated, and by whom?

ACTIVITIES

ASSIGNMENT 1

Cut out newspaper articles relating to refugees. Are there similarities between these articles and the book?

How are things presented differently in news articles from fiction? Choose an article that speaks most to you and try to turn it into a piece of fiction. What techniques do you use to make this happen?

ASSIGNMENT 2



On the map, mark the points where the journeys of Abdul, Rosalia, Cheslav and Jonah begin. Mark the point that they meet. Mark the point where they arrive in the United Kingdom.

At each of these points, supply a quote from the text that supports the placement.

Now on a separate piece of paper, write a list of the decisive moments in their journey that led them to each of the points that you have marked on the map.

For example:

When Abdul is in Calais, he could either try to go through the Chunnel to England, or he can hope that a smuggler will give him relatively safe passage. At one point it looks as though he will have to try his luck in the Chunnel when the smuggler refuses him a seat (p5), but a riot which ends in the accidental stabbing of a police officer (p16) forces him to try to sneak onto the boat, which is where his journey merges with the other characters.

What does the exercise show? How drastically would the character's journeys have changed if they had made different decisions? Would they have still ended up in the same place? To what extent are our lives dictated by fate or external events?

ASSIGNMENT 3

Abdul, Cheslav and Rosalia have all been the victims in some way of violence or abuse. Their characters can show great compassion, at times violence or fear. Find examples in the text for each of the listed behaviours, and write a brief description with the page number in the chart below.

	COMPASSION	FEAR	AGGRESSION	SADNESS	JOY
JONAH					
CHESLAV					
ROSALIA					
ABDUL					

Do any of the characters show more of a particular behaviour than the others? Does this affect the way they interact with each other?

ASSIGNMENT 4

Cheslav, Abdul and Rosalia are younger than most of the readers when they set out on their journeys. They are alone, because their parents have either died or left them. Add to the following list of things that we rely on our parents for at this age:

- Money
- Clothing
- Shelter
- Transport
- Food
- Protection
- Love

What would happen if we didn't have someone to provide these things? How would the rules that we live by change?

RELATED READING

Important: Teachers should note that *No Safe Place* carries a recommendation for children 11 to 14 yrs (and will certainly appeal also to older readers). The books listed below provide comparative and extension reading for students across a range of reading abilities and maturity levels. Consequently, teachers and parents are strongly advised to preview these novels before recommending them to specific children.

***The Rugmaker of Mazar-E-Sharif* by Najaf Mazari & Robert Hillman**

Robert Hillman pens the story of Najaf Mazari, who arrived in Australia as a refugee, and after finally being released from the refugee camp, was able to set up a successful shop in Prahran and bring his family to safety.

***Growing up Asian in Australia* by Alice Pung**

Alice Pung collects the stories of Asian-Australia 'outsiders'. New and recognised voices share their stories of growing up with two cultural identities.

Q&A by Vikas Swarup

Made into the award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* which is also recommended as extension material.

A young boy is arrested and accused of cheating when he wins the Indian version of the 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' TV quiz show. The story that follows, as he explains how he came to know each of the answers, is both a touching and enlightening cultural journey.

***Boy Overboard* by Morris Gleitzman**

Two children who grow up in Afghanistan during the war just want to play world cup soccer. But their parents are all too aware that living in this society could put all of their lives in danger and decide to make the dangerous journey to Australia as refugees.

***Jameela* by Rukhsana Khan**

Jameela follows the life of an Islamic girl whose village is uprooted by the merciless reign of the Taliban. When her mother is killed, she and her father decide to flee to Kabul, where they leave their old lives behind and encounter a brand new set of problems.

***We Are All Born Free* by Amnesty International**

A picture book containing a simplified version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

DEBORAH ELLIS

Internationally acclaimed author, humanitarian and peace activist, Deborah Ellis has travelled the world to meet with and hear the stories of children affected by poverty, war, racism and illness. Her fiction and non-fiction books give us a glimpse into the lives of children from Afghanistan (*The Parvana Trilogy*), Bolivia (*Diego, Run!, Diego's Pride*), the Middle East (*Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*) and Southern Africa (*The Heaven Shop*). *Off to War: Soldiers' Children Speak* and *Children of War* are collections of interviews with children of Canadian and American soldiers serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. Her companion book is *Children of War: Iraqi Children Speak*.

An interview with Deborah Ellis can be found at www.allenandunwin.com/_uploads/documents/DeborahEllis.pdf

BEC KAVANAGH

Bec Kavanagh is a reviewer, freelance writer & YA fiction specialist. She is the founder of *A Thousand Words Festival*, which celebrates and encourages the reading and writing of young adult fiction. In 2010 she appeared at the Melbourne Writers Festival and AussieCon4 (the 68th World Science Fiction Convention).