

Review of *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea: One Refugee's Incredible Story of Love, Loss, and Survival*, by Melissa Fleming (Flatiron Books, 2017), \$13.68 (hardcover), 288 pages, ISBN: 978-1250105998

Despite the recent outpouring of news on the matter, it is not easy for many individuals to comprehend the plight of Syrian refugees. In *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea: One Refugee's Incredible Story of Love, Loss, and Survival*, Melissa Fleming takes on the voice of Doaa Al Zamel, a young Syrian woman, whose story highlights the universal struggles and experiences of refugees around the world. Fleming weaves together Doaa's heartbreaking and inspiring personal experiences with relevant information on the crisis. In doing so, her reader truly begins to understand what it means to be a refugee, unable to return to one's home, and unwelcome anywhere else.

The story opens in 2001, well before the tidal wave of protests erupted in Syria. In these initial pages, Fleming provides a background on the customs and daily life of Syrians through the eyes of Doaa, a little girl growing up in Daraa, a large city in southwest Syria. Other than the drama associated with sharing one roof with a large extended family, Doaa's childhood is relatively peaceful.

"The War Begins" (chapter 2), explains the events leading up to the Syrian crisis. Inspired by the Tunisian uprising, a group of Syrian schoolboys, from Doaa's hometown, scribbled anti-government graffiti on their school wall. When the government arrested and tortured the boys "for such a minor act" (p. 24), peaceful protestors called for their release along with democratic reform. Fleming recounts the transformation and spread of these protests that eventually culminate in a violent scene during which security forces ruthlessly attack protestors and innocent bystanders, including Doaa, with tear gas and live bullets. This horrifying moment seems to be a turning point for Doaa, as she realizes that "everything she'd grown up believing about her country was wrong" (p. 35). Little does the reader know that Doaa's struggle for survival has only just begun. Fleming then goes on to chronicle the mistreatment and abuse experienced by Syrian protestors, including the rumors of girls who were arrested and beaten and raped on the street in front of their families or worse never seen from or heard from again (p. 40). Fleming does a beautiful job capturing Doaa's personal transformation and reactions to the crisis. Once a shy girl that feared change, Doaa blossoms amidst the adversity. She finds herself driven to be part of a revolution. Her conversations are no longer about boys and neighborhood gossip; they now concern only resistance and rebellion (p. 39). Doaa actively participates in the demonstrations. It is only after barely escaping arrest and facing threats from her father to lock her in the house, that Doaa stops participating in the protests. Fleming brilliantly captures the young girl's struggle to reconcile her desire to be a traditional Syrian girl and obey her parents with her love of the revolution.

In search of a better life, Doaa and her family eventually flee Syria for Egypt. Fleming depicts the common pain felt by those who chose to flee. With only a few possessions, Doaa and her family struggle to build a new life in an unfamiliar place. In Egypt, Doaa meets and falls in love with Bassem, a former Free Syrian Army fighter and together they find brief happiness.

This novel sheds important light on what drives individuals to risk their lives crossing the sea. Shortly after Doaa and Bassam's engagement, they realize that there is little hope for a bright future in Egypt. At that time, the Egyptian government is overthrown and anti-Syrian refugee sentiments begin to arise. Hoping to find a better life in Europe, the couple decides to leave behind the hardship and harassment in Egypt and seek asylum overseas. Doaa and Bassam, like

thousands of others, attempt to make the dangerous trek across the Mediterranean on an overcrowded and decrepit boat. Readers receive a glimpse into the immoral and greedy methods smugglers who take advantage of people's desire to escape.

At sea, the story reaches its climax when pirates sink the small boat. Surrounded by the corpses of the other dead passengers and unable to swim, Doaa manages to stay afloat in inflatable ring around her waist, while two small children cling to her neck. For four excruciatingly long days, Doaa struggles to stay alive for the children and not lose hope of rescue.

Flemming is a powerful storyteller. She tells Doaa's tale in a way that emotionally engages the reader while educating him or her on the necessary facts of the refugee crisis. The novel successfully humanizes the abstract data and news reports on the international dilemma. Doaa Al Zamel's story gives a strong and inspiring face to an otherwise faceless group of refugees.

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