



STORY SUMMARY

When Sami's home is destroyed in the Syrian Civil War, he has to flee with his family. On the long, hard walk to the refugee camp, all he can think of is the pet pigeons he had to leave behind. Did they escape, too? While those around Sami work to build new lives in the camp, he cannot seem to move forward. Then, when new birds find their way into his life, Sami's journey toward healing can begin at last.

Suzanne Del Rizzo has always loved getting her hands messy. She traded her job in scientific research for a career in children's illustration with her first picture book, *Skink on the Brink*, which won the SCBWI Crystal Kite Award and was a finalist for the Rainforest of Reading Award. Known for her dimensional illustrations that use Plasticine, polymer clay, and other mixed media to bring rich texture and imagination to her books, Suzanne is adding "author" to her resumé with *My Beautiful Birds*. Her most recent picture book is *Sky Pig*, written by Jan L. Coates. Suzanne lives in Oakville, Ontario.

ABOUT THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Since 2011, millions of people in Syria have had to leave their homes because of an ongoing civil war. They leave to escape violence or because the normal systems that keep a country running—healthcare, schools, agriculture, water and electricity—have collapsed.

Many of these displaced people have fled to other parts of Syria where there is less fighting. Others have gone to other countries, especially the nearby nations of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. While some are lucky enough to find places to live on their own or with family members, huge numbers of them take shelter in crowded refugee camps. A smaller number of Syrian refugees have traveled as refugees to Europe or other continents.

FURTHER RESOURCES:

<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

The Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal provides up-to-date statistics, maps, and reports about Syrian refugees registered by the UNHCR and refugee camps in various places.

<http://syrianrefugees.eu/>

The Syrian Refugees website, maintained by the European University Institute until 2014, offers easy-to-understand maps, timelines, videos, and other resources about the first four years of the crisis

<http://america.aljazeera.com/topics/topic/issue/syrian-refugees.html>

Aljazeera America provides a compilation of all Aljazeera news stories about the Syrian war and refugee crisis as well as interactive maps and slideshows

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/jordan/11782854/Inside-the-largest-Syrian-refugee-camp-Zaatari-camp-three-years-on.html?frame=3397373>

The Telegraph shares a series of 19 photos showing life inside Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan. This camp is so large that by 2012 it held more people than all but three of Jordan's cities.

<https://youtu.be/n2178SPJCKw>

Young adult author and YouTube personality John Green shares his experience of visiting Za'atari Refugee Camp, where he watched pigeons trained by the children who live there.

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THEMES

Refugees, Syria, Birds, Grief, Mental Wellness

BISAC CODES

JUV002040 JUVENILE FICTION / Animals / Birds

JUV030110 JUVENILE FICTION / People & Places / Middle East

JUV039050 JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Emotions & Feelings

JUV039070 JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Homelessness & Poverty

JUV039240 JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Depression & Mental Illness

BEFORE READING

Discuss

- What do you know about the Syrian Refugee Crisis?
- Why do you think a family might have to leave their home suddenly?
- Imagine you are getting ready for bed, and you suddenly have to stop what you are doing and run from danger. What are you wearing? What are you carrying? Are they enough to keep you safe? Why or why not?
- If you had to leave home suddenly, what would be the hardest thing to leave behind?

AFTER READING

Discuss:

- Why did Sami and his family have to leave home? Where did they go?
- What is a refugee camp?
- Sami's family does not plan to stay in the refugee camp forever. Where do you think they might go when they are able to leave one day?
- Why did Sami have trouble participating in life at the refugee camp? What kinds of feelings make it hard for you to participate at school or at home?
- Why do you think Sami found himself painting all of his pictures black?
- On page 18, Sami thinks about how the sky he sees in the refugee camp is the same sky he saw at home. What other familiar things could you find to comfort you when you are far from home?
- What helped Sami start to feel better again?
- Several of the pages in this book have illustrations split into small panels. Why do you think the author-illustrator chose to split them? What do the small panels communicate that one large picture could not?

HELPING FRIENDS LIKE SAMI

If students in your class have experienced trauma, you may wish to seek a specialist's advice when introducing topics that might trigger difficult memories. For other students, here is a possible introduction to discussing empathetic ways of welcoming new friends who may be coping with trauma:

When a person has gone through a very sad or frightening experience, they can sometimes feel scared, or angry, or empty, or even sick for a long time after. This can make it hard for them to act the way other people do, especially if they are just starting at a new school. For some, it might be the first school they have gone to in years, or maybe ever. Here are some ways we can help them:

- Help them learn the schedule so that they know what to expect every day.
- If you see someone teasing them, speak up. Don't be a bystander.
- Explain routines, games, and foods that might be new to them.
- Respect their right not to talk about their difficult experience if they choose not to.
- If they come from a different country, learn what you can about their language and culture. Help them learn about yours.
- Practice some Arabic phrases to make them feel welcome. You can learn a few common words and phrases here: www.ahmadandshezeen.com

ACTIVITIES

- Have students create their own Plasticine art to illustrate a scene. Photograph the art from above. You can change the visual depth of the piece by placing a light source at different angles.
- Using the resources listed in this guide, show your students age-appropriate photos or videos about life in a refugee camp. Brainstorm ways in which their lives are similar and different from those of children in a refugee camp. Organize the items using a Venn diagram or other graphic organizer.

- Collect plastic bags, string, and other recycled scraps to make kites. Have your students predict which designs will fly the best. Test them and record the results.
- Discuss the characteristics of fiction and non-fiction with your class. Model for them how to identify which characteristics indicate that *My Beautiful Birds* is realistic fiction. Have them try the exercise with other classroom books.
- Even though *My Beautiful Birds* is fiction, readers who are unfamiliar with Syria can learn a bit about the country from it. Invite students to study the book closely and list everything they discover about Sami's neighborhood; the countryside his family walks through; and the foods, clothing, and activities the refugees bring to the camp with them.
- As a class, research the history of pigeons being kept as pets. Have students write a persuasive letter to a caregiver about why they should or should not be permitted to have a pet pigeon. For a lighthearted pairing, read one of Mo Willems' pigeon books and discuss its merits as a persuasive text.
- Find an age-appropriate news story about Syrian refugee camps from a local paper or the online resources listed in this guide. Share it with your class and discuss:
 - How is reading a news story different from reading a picture book?
 - What can a news story tell you that a picture book does not?
 - What can a picture book tell you that a news story does not?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY: CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

Briefly explain the origins of the Syrian Civil War to your students: In 2011, citizens in many Arab countries decided to protest the way their governments ruled (the "Arab Spring"). Many countries were successful in changing their governments, but Syria's refused to step down. It began a war against several groups of people trying to overthrow it, and ordinary citizens were caught in the middle. Many have since had to flee the violence, leading to the Syrian Refugee Crisis.

Discuss with your class how they might show the effects of conflict in a way that has meaning to them. Through guided discussion, write a short drama in which an argument between some members of the class leads to others being caught in the middle.

Discuss:

- When you have a conflict with another student, how might it affect other people?
- How can you make sure your conflicts don't hurt others?
- If you need help resolving a conflict, whom can you ask?
- When countries have conflicts, whom can they ask to help resolve them?

Briefly explain that after World War II, many countries got together to form the United Nations, a group that tries to solve problems before they turn into wars. They also help people who suffer when wars do start. The members of the UN wrote and signed a charter that explains all the things they agreed to do to solve conflicts.

As a class, brainstorm things that all students can do to resolve or avoid conflict amongst themselves. Compile the suggestions into a "class charter" on a large piece of paper and have each student sign it. Hang it in the class as a reminder of strategies they can use when problems arise.

EXTENDED AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author's note in *My Beautiful Birds* includes useful information about the Syrian Refugee Conflict, but author-illustrator Suzanne Del Rizzo wanted to share more. You can find her Extended Author's Note at this link:

http://pajamapress.ca/syrian_conflict_resources