

TEACHING GUIDE

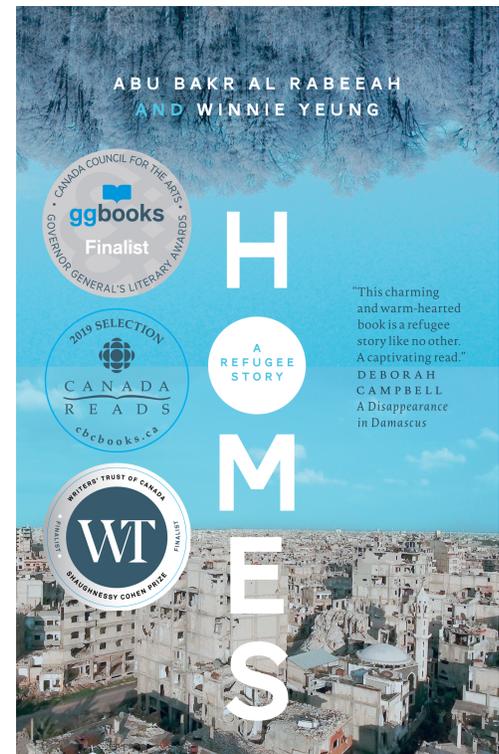
HOMES: A REFUGEE STORY

Winnie Yeung

About the Book

Homes: A Refugee Story, written by Winnie Yeung, chronicles the life of her former student, Abu Bakr al Rabeeah. In 2010, the al Rabeeah family left their home in Iraq in hopes of a safer life. In a strange twist of fate, they moved to Homs, Syria. Abu Bakr, one of eight children, was just ten years old when violence broke out in the streets around him. *Homes* is his remarkable true story of growing up in a war zone and ultimately finding safety in Edmonton, Canada.

Based on interviews with Abu Bakr and his relatives, Winnie Yeung has woven their stories into a heart-breaking and hopeful book about one family's journey to find a new home.



Setting: Baserah, Iraq; Homs, Syria; Damascus, Syria; Edmonton, Canada

Genre: Creative nonfiction

Main Characters:

Abu Bakr: the main storyteller and interviewee in the book. The story is centered around Abu Bakr's memories of growing up in Iraq and Syria and finally arriving in Canada as refugees.

Hafedh: Abu Bakr's father and the gentle grounding force of the Al Rabeeah family.

Topics: family; resiliency; humour in the face of adversity; civil war and violence; isolation; refugees; adaptation

Homes was originally self-published by Yeung as a novel based on Abu Bakr's stories in 2016. Following the success of the self-published novel, Freehand Books signed with Al Rabeeah and Yeung to publish the story. Yeung spent months re-interviewing the Al Rabeeah family, re-writing, and editing the manuscript. *Homes: a Refugee Story* was published in its new form as creative non-fiction in May 2018. It is not a memoir. For further details, check out WinnieYeung.ca.

About the Storyteller

Abu Bakr al Rabeeah is an ESL student currently working on completing high school in Edmonton. After years of living in Canada, he enjoys his life here but he also dreams of a future where he can return to help rebuild Iraq and Syria.



About the Writer



Winnie has been an English teacher for over ten years. *Homes* is her first book and received extensive critical acclaim.

When she is not teaching, writing, or reading, Winnie likes to spend her days cooking, baking, and playing with her black pug, Zoe.



How is the distinction between “storyteller” and “writer” an important one? Who has the right to tell a person’s story and how have Al Rabeeah and Yeung managed this question?

Al Rabeeah and Yeung at the awards gala for the Shaughnessy Cohen Award for Political Writing, 2019

Historical and Cultural Context

Although the story explains some of the historical and cultural context so that the reader may understand Abu Bakr's world, there are opportunities for deeper understanding. The following topics can be discussed as pre-reading primers, led by the teacher, or given as potential research project topics.

- Sunni and Shia Muslims
 - the role religious sectarian clashes have in displacing people in the Middle East and around the world
- The Syrian conflict
- The global refugee crisis

Teachers may invite community leaders, local resettlement volunteers, or members of inter-faith friendship groups to answer student questions about these topics.

Book Club Discussion Questions

1. In three words or less, what is this book about?
2. What surprised you about the descriptions of growing up in a warzone?
3. Which any characters—other than Abu Bakr—did you relate to the most?
4. What were some of the images from the book that stick in your mind?
5. Were you frustrated by any of the decisions that the Abu Bakr's immediate or extended family made?
6. As Abu Bakr and his family began to settle into their new life Canada they faced lots of challenges, including many conflicting emotions. What parts of this journey were predictable or surprising to you?
7. It seems like many countries and communities are dealing with political controversy over welcoming immigrants and refugees into their society. How has this book affected the way you view this issue?
8. What questions does this book raise about newcomers in a society? Do you think this book will change your impression of the people in your own community?
9. One of the main reasons this book was written was to build empathy. What parts of Abu Bakr's journey connects to a life story of your own?
10. While this is Bakr's story, written from his point of view, it is authored by Winnie Yeung. What responsibilities does Winnie have, as an author of creative non-fiction, to honour Bakr's voice?



Literary Analysis

1. Voice is a critical part of this book. Although Yeung wrote it, it was important to her that the book sounded like Abu Bakr was speaking directly to the reader. How did she create the teenaged narrative voice of Abu Bakr? Consider the rhythm of the writing, specific use of sentence structure, diction, cultural idiosyncracies, and use of hesitators and slang.
2. Discuss the importance of imagery in the text. How does Yeung use imagery differently at different points in the narrative: when Bakr is talking about moments with his family or friends, as compared to moments of violence?
3. Who is the hero of this story?
4. Discuss Abu Bakr's development over the course of the book. How have his various moves to different cities and countries affected him?
5. Analyze "The Night of Power" chapter and discuss the narrative techniques Yeung uses for this scene. Visit <http://winnieyeung.ca/behind-the-scenes/> to read the same chapter in the original self-published version of the book. Compare and contrast the two different accounts of the same scene.
6. Upon arriving in Canada, Abu Bakr and his family struggle in different ways. In particular, Abu Bakr struggles with his sense of isolation from his new Canadian classmates. Compare and contrast his quality of life in Syria and Canada.
7. What does this book say about loneliness and isolation?
8. Consider the role of women in the book. People often wonder why we hear so little of the female family members' stories. What do you think this reflects of Abu Bakr's reality?

Creative Connections

While writing Abu Bakr's story, Yeung inserted a lot of imagery in order to bring a sense of immediacy and intimacy to the narrative. Although Abu Bakr couldn't remember most of these details, Yeung used her research and imagination to bring the writing to life. For example, Yeung knew Abu Bakr feared the sound of the fighter jets the most, but she couldn't describe it from her own life experiences. So, she watched many videos and listened to audio clips cranked to the highest possible volume on her home theatre system to get a sense of what fighter jets flying overhead was like. Yeung was fascinated by the family's bakery and in order to describe the bread the Al Rabeeahs made, they baked bread together so that she could describe the process in lively detail.

Think about a memorable moment in your life. Write a short story about this moment, focusing on the details that appeal to all five senses.

Select your favourite passage. What is the mood of the passage?

Write a found poem that emphasizes that mood, using words and phrases from that passage.

If you were to create the score or soundtrack to Abu Bakr's story, what genre of music would you use and why? What specific songs would you use to highlight the mood of certain passages?

This book was written as a result of months of interviews with Abu Bakr and his relatives. Interview a family member or a friend about a pivotal moment in their lives. However, rather than writing from your personal point of view, write the story as if you were the subject telling his own story, just as Yeung did with Al Rabeeah.

Pay careful attention to the way your interview subject speaks. How will you take those speech patterns and mannerisms and use them in your writing to sound authentic? How do write in the voice of your subject? **Write a short story of this memorable moment using your interview subject's voice.**

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How do you define the term “moral obligation”? What moral obligations, if any, do individuals, communities, and nations have to reduce suffering and protect vulnerable people around the world?
2. Throughout history, governments have denied refugees entry into their country. What internal and external pressures do countries face in the issue of accepting people seeking asylum? Which of these arguments do you find persuasive?
3. Among the biggest factors causing mass migrations of people are: poverty, environmental degradation, threat of war or violence, persecution, and pursuing opportunity. Which of these factors, in your mind, is the most pressing cause of mass migrations today? What about 20 years from now?
4. According to the UN, Canada resettled more refugees than any other country in 2018. Within Canadian society, there are people who support welcoming refugees and others who raise many concerns. What is your position on the government’s policy of accepting refugees? If you were in charge of admitting refugees to Canada, what characteristics would you prioritize among prospective settlers?