

A Conversation with Author, Refugee and Mom Dina Nayeri on the Power of Stories

Recently, we caught up with critically acclaimed author Dina Nayeri, who moved to the United States at the age of 10 with her brother and mother as they fled Iran. Dina has published three books, won many literary awards, and written countless essays, including her contribution to "The Gifts of Reading," an essay collection on the joys of giving and receiving books, published in support of Room to Read. Dina reflected on her own experience as a child refugee, the power of stories, and a new children's book she has authored, called "The Waiting Place," which comes out next spring.



Q: Can you tell us about the book you have coming out for children?

A. It's called "The Waiting Place," and it is a nonfiction children's book about one of the refugee camps in Greece. It's this big field of shipping crates and that's where people have settled. I took a photographer and spent about a week with a group of Afghan and Iranian children in the camp, following them through their world -- their imagined world, their internal and external world, their surroundings at the camp. The antagonist is 'the waiting place,' this kind of almost living, breathing thing that wants to suck out your joy.

I made this book because I wanted children, specifically the native-born children of Europe and America, to be prepared to receive these kids, to understand that it's only through an accident of birth that they have things these kids don't have. With "The Waiting Place," I share pictures and faces and tell a little story, all to just show what these kids have been going through and hopefully help native-born kids be more welcoming and empathetic. It gives them some context of what is going on in the world and where they are in relation to other kids.

Q: As a young child in Iran, you had limited access to books; in fact, you cite three that you can recall in your essay for "The Gifts of Reading," and you reflect on how your family was trying to shape you with these books. Is that a common thing for parents to do, and do you do it with your own daughter?

A. Now, more and more, I feel like I have so many choices and so many potential influences for my daughter.

I remember when she was first conscious and able to listen to these stories, I was so careful to pick out these innovative, new, exciting feminist books -- books that teach you how to be creative, how to be analytical, how to be a powerful girl in the world, or about a vocation. I agonized over it so much but then I realized at the end of the day that my daughter is a fully formed person, and she has come into her own so very quickly. She has such strong tastes and things that she likes. If she doesn't get into a story, that's it for that lesson. So, I try to listen to her about what stories interest her, and sometimes it's not what I want her to read, but I try to find something in it that can be valuable, whether it's really fantastic rhyme, or great descriptions or words, or a powerful girl character, or something like that.

Looking back, there's a lot to learn from having been a kid in 1980s Iran, and we didn't have a lot of book choices. Those three books are all I remember. And I still devoured them -- I just read each one 20 times and sucked every last bit of learning out of them! The imagination wants to be nourished, and it finds a way to be nourished.

Q. You also share how shortly after arriving in Oklahoma from Iran at the age of 10, you were given a library card, and you checked out so many books. It was this big gift of permission and trust. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

A. I came from two sorts of cultures. The first was the Iranian culture where there was a lot that was not permitted to read, a lot of books that were banned. Most of what we read were textbooks, a lot of math and science. There were the old Iranian tales, but a lot of them were oral and in an old Farsi.

The second cultural influence, up until then in my life, was that my mother was a very strict and religious Christian. So even if there had been this huge availability and permission by the state, my mother would have absolutely gone through and curated everything that I could read.

In Oklahoma, there was a woman named Mary-Jean, and she took me and my brother to the library to get library cards, and she kind of let us loose in the library. And the letting us loose part was the trust -- I could go and pick out my own books. Suddenly, what made me interested mattered, rather than just, well, here's the book you're allowed to read.

Q. I want to ask you about the current refugee crisis as people flee Afghanistan. I know it must bring up so much.

A. It's been really sobering and harrowing and heartbreaking. But you know, I'm a writer. So at the end of the day, everything that happens, I process slowly and think about in terms of long-term writing: What do I need to say about this moment in our history? I have to just double down on a lot of the things that I said in "An Ungrateful Refugee." We need to think about the accident of birth more, and we need to think about what we are owed, and what we owe to our fellow humans.

Q. Lastly, why do you think it's important to read and understand the voices of outsiders?

A. Because those are the interesting stories! Crashing into other people and all the unknowns about them, all the mysteries about them, that's how we create drama. Every great story has an element of outsider-ness and of a power dynamic, doesn't it?

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