

Nurturing a sense of fairness and humanity

Boy Overboard by Morris Gleitzman, Puffin Books

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Before the US-led attack on Afghanistan in 2001, many Afghan families made hazardous journeys to Australia, clinging to the hope that they would find a country willing to give them political asylum and shelter. Rather than welcome and charity, the refugees were met with callous indifference or outright hostility from the Australian government.

This approach reached new levels in August 2001 when MV Tampa, a Norwegian cargo ship, rescued 433 refugees, mainly Afghan, from a sinking fishing vessel and sought permission to land them on Australia's Christmas Island. The Howard government refused, instead mobilising SAS troops and the navy to transport the refugees to detention centres in Papua New Guinea's Manus Island and Nauru. It resolved to do everything possible to stop any more refugee boats reaching Australia.

A few weeks later, the government ordered the navy to fire across the bows of another sinking refugee vessel and falsely claimed that the boat's occupants had thrown their children overboard in a bid to force the navy to take them to Australia. These lies were taken as good coin by the mass media and widely publicised. Then on October 19, another overcrowded and unseaworthy fishing boat on its way from Indonesia to Australia—later called the SIEV X—tragically sank. More than 350 refugees drowned, including nearly 150 children. The government had detailed knowledge about the boat's departure date and movement, but refused to mount any rescue operation, demonstrating that it was prepared to go to any lengths to prevent refugees reaching the country's shores.

Of those poor souls who have managed to gain entry to Australia, many remain incarcerated in isolated immigration detention centres, some for years. Others granted Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs), live in a

state of perpetual anxiety, not knowing when they may face immediate deportation.

This deplorable situation is the background to *Boy Overboard*, a children's novel by the Australian writer Morris Gleitzman. The story is a fictional account of the journey of Afghan child refugees, as seen through the eyes of the central character, Jamal, a young boy who, along with his younger sister Bibi, has a passion for soccer.

Shaped by his experiences growing up in a war-torn land where makeshift soccer fields are littered with the mudguards of wrecked troop carriers, and a good day is when, "there's no smoke, or nerve gas or sandstorms", Jamal dreams of becoming an international soccer star. But before he can begin to realise his dream, disaster strikes. His mother, a teacher, runs a small co-educational school for children in the family home. This practice, however, is illegal under Taliban law and she is discovered. As a result, unknown government agents blow up the house and take Jamal's mother to the city.

"Overboard," says the grandfather of Jamal's best friend, "is an English word meaning to do something that is bold, wild, dangerous and crazy". And this thought spurs Jamal to devise a plan to save his family. "If I can become the star of the Afghanistan national soccer team, perhaps that'll make all of us more popular, not just me and Mum and Dad and Bibi. Perhaps none of us will ever be threatened or bullied or killed again, not by the government or anybody."

But soon after Jamal devises his plan, it is shot to pieces. He and his sister travel to the city with their father to search for their mother. By accident, the two children make their way to what was the old soccer ground, thinking that the crowds filing through the entrance are going to watch a game. But instead of

soccer, a public execution is being prepared. Imagine the children's horror when they realise that one of the women dragged into the centre of the stadium is their mother. When the guards put a gun to her head, Jamal and Bibi are horrified, but their father's quick actions and clever planning save her. From then on the family knows they have no choice but to quickly escape or they will all die.

Jamal's parents decide on Australia as the country where they will seek refuge, and the family risks everything to get there. Their journey—first hidden in a truck as they travel across the mountains; as passengers on a hair-raising plane flight; and then smuggled onto rickety old wooden boats for the long trip to Australia—is the stuff of great adventure novels. Add to that the perspective of a young boy facing the unknown and dealing with incredible adversity ensures that *Boy Overboard* keeps readers on the edge of their seats.

Beginning with the frightening separation of the children from their parents, encounters with smugglers and pirates, and finally the collapse of the children's naïve belief that the Australian government will welcome them with open arms, Gleitzman's story exudes warmth and empathy for the plight of his characters.

Boy Overboard is a welcome antidote to the unrelenting government dehumanisation and vilification of refugees. As the book shows, far from being of the disposition to “throw their children overboard”, these are people, driven by extreme conditions, who are forced to risk everything to protect their families. It is to Gleitzman's credit that he is prepared to take this principled stand and to cultivate, within his young audience, a humane and caring response to the plight of refugees.

In the introduction to the book, Gleitzman explains that *Boy Overboard* is based on real accounts, “... I couldn't have written it without help from the people who so kindly told me about their own incredible journeys... I wrote this story to express my sympathy for children everywhere who have to flee to survive, and my admiration for the adults who embrace them at the end of their journey.”

Gleitzman is a seasoned writer of children's literature with a comic style that has endeared him to adults and children alike. Born in 1953 in England, he immigrated to Australia in 1969. His books, which have won many

awards and been published internationally, include: *The Other Facts of Life*, *Second Childhood*, *Two Weeks with the Queen*, *Misery Guts*, *Worry Warts*, *Puppy Fat*, *Blabber Mouth*, *Sticky Beak*, *Belly Flop*, *Water Wings*, *Bumface*, *Gift of the Gab*, *Toad Rage*, *Adults Only* and *Toad Heaven*. He has also co-written two successful six-part serial novels—*Wicked!* and *Deadly!*—in collaboration with Paul Jennings.

Much of Gleitzman's success lies in his ability to bring to bear, often in a humorous way, the peculiar and delightful perspective of children on serious social questions.

In *The Other Facts of Life*, his first book, a concerned father tells his son about the “birds and the bees”, a little nervous about his son's reaction. But when his son, Ben, is more concerned about the other “facts of life”—that he lives in a society plagued by poverty and inequality—the father is even more unsure of how to proceed. When out trying on a pair of shoes, the son is asked by a shop assistant, “Comfortable?” Ben replies, “With forty thousand kids starving to death every day? Are you?”

Gleitzman's books provide an example of how important social and political issues can be raised in a meaningful way for children. Rather than protect them from the complexities of contemporary life, Gleitzman makes these issues accessible and comprehensible—in the case of *Boy Overboard* by presenting his story through the fears and aspirations of a young boy. His skill is to create characters and situations, moods and feelings to which a child can relate easily.

While many children's authors possess this ability, Gleitzman's work is set apart by his commitment to nurturing a sense of fairness and humanity in his young readers. In a world where so much presented to children teaches them to be cynical about life, it is refreshing to find an author who encourages them to take a stand against injustice.



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