



# Stories of Displacement: An ALIRP Book Club Reading Guide

## *Narratives of Seeking Safety and Belonging*

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## Welcome to the ALIRP Book Club Reading Guide

The Alabama Interfaith Refugee Partnership (ALIRP) is a nonprofit organization in Birmingham, Alabama. We are a diverse group of community members, religious leaders from many faiths, and volunteers who work together to help those who are displaced and seeking a humanitarian status such as refugees and asylum seekers through direct assistance, education, and advocacy. Seeking safety is a human right; we envision a world where all find safety and dignity.

Originally founded as a Refugee Interest Group in 2016 by the Justice Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Birmingham, Alabama, ALIRP became a 501(c)(3) organization in 2019 to welcome refugees and people seeking asylum in Birmingham. In 2020, ALIRP provided letters of support to establish a Birmingham office with Inspiritus, a refugee resettlement agency with World Refugee, formerly the Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services (LIRS). The Inspiritus office opened in 2021 and began resettling Afghan refugees on Humanitarian Parole to Birmingham. ALIRP works closely with Inspiritus, and remains the only organization that provides direct support to people seeking asylum in Central Alabama.

As part of our educational and outreach programs, ALIRP has hosted several book club events to share the stories of those who have been displaced and live every day as a refugee or asylum seeker. We reflect on what this means for our community and current issues. The books are chosen to spark conversation, build empathy, and bring attention to important issues.

In the past, we have hosted book clubs at libraries, coffee shops, and even online.

### ALIRP Book Club Highlights

- **November 1, 2020** – *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You*  
*Online · Virtual Discussion*
- **October 12, 2021** – *Somewhere in the Unknown World: A Collective Refugee Memoir*  
*Online · [Watch recording](#)*
- **June 1, 2022** – *When Stars Are Scattered* (Graphic Novel)  
*Online · International Children's Day Special · [Watch recording](#)*
- **May 16, 2023** – *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference*  
*Domestique Coffee Shop, Homewood, AL · In-person · Featuring author Warren St. John*
- **April 6, 2024** – *Inside Out and Back Again*  
*Domestique Coffee Shop, Homewood, AL · In-person · Spring Book Club*
- **October 23, 2024** – *When Stars Are Scattered*  
*Hoover Public Library, Hoover, AL · In-person · Fall Book Club*

In 2025, we started creating this reading guide to go accompany those books. Our goal is to help more people engage with these powerful stories and to challenge common myths about what it means to be displaced and seeking Humanitarian Protection as a refugee or an asylum seeker. We hope this guide helps you reflect on the human side of migration and what it means for our community here in Alabama and beyond.

## Key Words and Terms to Know

While reading the books in this guide, you will come across terms related to immigration, international protection, and legal status. Some of these terms are legal classifications under international and U.S. law and shape what protections a person can access and receive. Other terms may be prominent in public discussion but hold no formal legal classifications.

**Refugee:** A **refugee** is someone who must leave their home country because they are in danger due to persecution based on: race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. They cannot return safely and need protection in another country. This definition comes from the **1951 Refugee Convention** and is also used by the U.S. government. Refugees are officially recognized after a government or the United Nations determines that they meet these criteria. — *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 1951 Refugee Convention; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services*

**Asylum Seeker:** An **asylum seeker** is a person who is asking another country for protection as a refugee but is still waiting for a decision. Asylum seekers often flee the same dangers as refugees, but their legal case has not yet been resolved. They may have different rights compared to people who already have refugee status. — *UNHCR*

**Humanitarian Parole:** **Humanitarian Parole** allows someone who is not typically allowed to enter the U.S. to enter temporarily because of an urgent humanitarian need, such as escaping war, needing medical care, or facing immediate harm. This is **not** permanent legal status, but it provides short-term safety. — *U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP); U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)*

**“Migrant” and “Illegal Alien”:** These terms often appear in public discussion, but they are not legal immigration categories under U.S. law.

- **Migrant** is a general term for someone who moves to another country for work, safety, or better living conditions.
- **“Illegal alien”** is a term that is considered outdated and dehumanizing. Many organizations, legal experts, and journalists encourage using terms like undocumented immigrant or noncitizen.

**Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs):** People forced to leave their homes but who remain within their own country. — *UNHCR Global Trends Reports*

**Resettlement:** The process by which refugees are moved to a third country that agrees to offer long-term safety. — *UNHCR*

**Host Country:** The country where a refugee or asylum seeker seeks protection. — *UNHCR*

**Forced Migration:** Movement caused by conflict, persecution, disasters, or human rights violations. This migration is not by choice. — *International Organization for Migration (IOM)*

Understanding these terms will help readers engage more deeply with the personal stories and global issues explored in the book selections. The references and citations for these Key words and terms are located at the end of this reading guide.

## Reflection Questions to Think About While You Read

Each of the books in this guide, *The Ungrateful Refugee*, *Solito*, *Outcasts United*, and *When Stars Are Scattered* tells a powerful, personal story of someone who has had to leave home and start over somewhere new. You can read any one of these books on its own, or read them together to explore different perspectives and experiences.

The questions below are meant to help spark conversations, encourage empathy, and help us think more deeply about the realities that displaced persons face. Feel free to come back to these questions before, during, or after reading.

**Before reading:** What came to mind when you thought about displaced populations (refugees, asylum seekers, etc.)? Did this book change how you think about people who have been forced to leave their homes?

**Did anything surprise you?:** Was there a moment you had while reading that made you realize you had misunderstood something about displaced persons or their experiences?

**Fitting in:** How do the main characters adjust to life in a new country or culture? (In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, for example, the author talks about learning to blend in “like a chameleon.” What does that mean to you?)

**Living between two worlds:** Do any of the characters feel caught between their old life and their new one? How does that affect who they are and how they see themselves?

**What does “home” mean?:** Is home a place, a person, a feeling? What does it mean to the people in these stories?

**More than just a journey:** Many of these stories are not just about moving from one country to another. They are also about emotional or spiritual journeys. What changes did you notice in how the characters think or feel?

**Not all stories have happy endings:** Some books mention people who didn’t survive the journey or who are still waiting for safety. Why is it important to remember and honor their stories?

**What did you learn?:** After reading, how would you explain what it means to be a displaced person to someone else? What parts of the stories stayed with you?

**What now?** Did these stories change how you might treat or talk to displaced persons in your own community?

These questions aren’t about having the “right” answers. They’re about growing in awareness, compassion, and understanding. Feel free to use them during book club discussion, journaling, or just personal reflection.

**Book Title: *The Ungrateful Refugee***

Author: Dina Nayeri

Publisher: Catapult

Date of Publication: September 3, 2019

About this book: *The Ungrateful Refugee* by Dina Nayeri is a powerful blend of memoir and reportage that explores the refugee experience through the lens of Nayeri's own life and the stories of others who have fled persecution. Born in Iran, Nayeri recounts her family's escape to the U.S. and the emotional toll of displacement, identity loss, and cultural assimilation. She challenges the expectation that refugees must constantly show gratitude to their host countries, examining how this demand can dehumanize and silence those who have already endured so much. Through vivid storytelling and sharp critique, Nayeri sheds light on the resilience, dignity, and complexity of the refugee journey.

Why ALIRP likes this book: *The Ungrateful Refugee* weaves together countless stories from refugees at all stages of their journey, providing a clear and powerful mosaic of the refugee experience. Nayeri's personal stories, coupled with those of others she has encountered, demonstrate that no two experiences are the same, and the challenging reality refugees face follows them throughout their lives.

Questions:

Why does Nayeri reject the label of the "grateful refugee"? What expectations are imposed on refugees in host countries? What are the challenges with these expectations?

How might we change the narrative from "refugee as burden" to "refugee as human"?

What does Nayeri mean by "am I a real refugee?"

The author describes storytelling as both a weapon and a shield. In what ways was this seen in the stories Nayeri shared?

What is the impact of sharing lived experiences? Does it break down dehumanizing stereotypes?

**Book Title: *Solito***

Author: Javier Zamora

Publisher: Hogarth

Date of Publication: June 6, 2023

About this book: *Solito*, by Javier Zamora, is the true story of a nine-year-old boy's harrowing journey from El Salvador to the U.S. to reunite with his parents. What was supposed to be a two-week trip becomes a nine-week ordeal across thousands of miles, filled with danger, fear, and unexpected bonds. Told from a child's perspective, the memoir captures the vulnerability, courage, and hope of a young migrant navigating a treacherous path to safety and belonging.

Why ALIRP likes this book: Javier's journey as such a young child traveling to the U.S. alone provides a unique look into what many refugee children endure. The thoughts and experiences of being a refugee through the eyes of a nine-year-old are a different story than those of an adult, adding another layer of complexity to understanding the lived experiences of refugees.

Questions:

Did Javier's age impact your understanding/perception of the events in the book? Why or why not? Did it impact how you perceived the importance of his journey?

How did Javier's relationship with Patricia and Carla impact his journey? What is the importance of community for refugees?

How were many of the adults in the book treated differently from Javier on his journey? Why do you think this is?

Why was Javier's family so desperate for him to leave his home in El Salvador to get to his parents in the U.S.? Discuss what "home" means in this book.

Consider the circumstances under which a parent might make the choice to leave their child and send for them in another country. How would you feel in this scenario?

**Book Title: *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference***

Author: Warren St. John

Publisher: Random House

Date of Publication: December 1, 2009

About this book: *Outcasts United* by Warren St. John is the true story of a youth soccer team in Clarkston, Georgia, made up of refugee boys from around the world. Led by Jordanian-American coach Luma Mufleh, the Fugees face not only challenges on the field but also the struggles of adapting to a new life in a town uneasy with its growing immigrant population. As Luma instills discipline and unity, the team becomes a powerful example of resilience, cross-cultural connection, and the transformative impact of sport and community.

Why ALIRP likes this book: Clarkston is much like the communities readers live in, and the themes of prejudice, as well as those of love and acceptance, are echoed in many neighborhoods across Alabama. We hope that this book will prompt reflection about local efforts surrounding refugees, including their treatment and belonging.

Questions:

How does the town of Clarkston respond to its refugee population? What fears or hopes arise?

Have you seen similar fears in your own community? How have you or others responded?

How can individual citizens contribute to welcoming newcomers, as Luma did?

In what ways did the theme of "home" appear in the book, both physically and socially?

How did the author's choice to include historical context that led to displacement impact your understanding of the families' situations?

Did understanding the various pushes and pulls that cause people to leave their homes change your perspective on refugees? Why or why not?

How do the refugee players balance the expectations of their American lives with the values and responsibilities of their home cultures? Discuss this conflict of identity.

The town of Clarkston undergoes a major demographic shift. How do long-time residents respond, and what does that reveal about fear of the "other"?

**Book Title: *When Stars are Scattered***

Author: Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed

Publisher: Faber & Faber

Date of Publication: January 1, 2020

About this book: *When Stars Are Scattered* is a graphic memoir by Omar Mohamed and Victoria Jamieson about two Somali brothers, Omar and Hassan, growing up in a Kenyan refugee camp. Omar dreams of a better future through education while caring for his nonverbal brother. The story follows their struggles, hopes, and eventual resettlement in the U.S., highlighting the resilience of refugees and the power of family and perseverance.

Why ALIRP likes this book: This graphic memoir is an impactful medium through which to tell the tragic and inspiring story of children in a refugee camp, using illustrations to tell their story. The use of images brings their experience to life in ways a traditional memoir cannot, and allows readers of all ages to partake in learning about their journey.

Questions:

What choices does Omar face in the camp, and what do they reveal about the limitations and hopes of camp life?

How does this story challenge assumptions about refugee camps?

How does the art style communicate emotions that words alone might not? How does this impact your understanding of the refugee experience in camps?

As a child, Omar had to decide between staying with his nonverbal brother and pursuing education. What does this moral dilemma reveal about refugee life?

For much of the book, Omar did not dream of going to America; he just wanted to return to Somalia. Why is this? What changed?

Does this challenge any preconceptions you have about refugees' desires for resettlement?



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