



EMM Book Club



Discussion Guides
and Resources

The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You by Dina Nayeri

About the Book

What is it like to be a refugee? It is a question many of us do not give much thought to, and yet there are more than 25 million refugees in the world. To be a refugee is to grapple with your place in society, attempting to reconcile the life you have known with a new, unfamiliar home. All this while bearing the burden of gratitude in your host nation: the expectation that you should be forever thankful for the space you have been allowed. Aged eight, Dina Nayeri fled Iran along with her mother and brother, and lived in the crumbling shell of an Italian hotel-turned-refugee camp. Eventually she was granted asylum in America. She settled in Oklahoma, then made her way to Princeton. In this book, Nayeri weaves together her own vivid story with the stories of other refugees and asylum seekers in recent years, bringing us inside their daily lives and taking us through the different stages of their journeys, from escape to asylum to resettlement. In these pages, a couple falls in love over the phone, and women gather to prepare the noodles that remind them of home. A closeted queer man tries to make his case truthfully as he seeks asylum, and a translator attempts to help new arrivals present their stories to officials. Nothing here is flattened; nothing is simplistic. Nayeri offers a new understanding of refugee life, confronting dangers from the metaphor of the swarm to the notion of “good” immigrants. She calls attention to the harmful way in which Western governments privilege certain dangers over others. With surprising and provocative questions, *The Ungrateful Refugee* recalibrates the conversation around the refugee experience. Here are the real human stories of what it is like to be forced to flee your home, and to journey across borders in the hope of starting afresh. (Source: www.dinanayeri.com)

Suggested Opening Prayer

A Collect for Refugees and Immigrants: Heavenly Father, from whom every family on earth derives its name, have mercy on all those who sojourn in this world. As you sheltered your Son Jesus who fled from the tyranny of Herod, so now provide new homes for all those who flee the violence of this age that they may know the peace of Christ. Grace your people with hearts of welcome and lives of courage through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Discussion Questions

These are some suggested questions to get your discussion started.

- How do we form our opinions and images of what a refugee is?
- How can we, as readers, shift away from those perceptions to a space of openness and listening?
- What did you learn from this book that you didn't know before—perhaps about another culture, or about the asylum process?
- As Dina explains, officials in each country have different expectations, concerns, and sympathies. With these varying perspectives in mind, discuss the complexity of crafting the refugee narrative. What did you make of Dina's mother's conversion and the risk it put on her family? Is there anything you believe so passionately that you would risk your own life for it, considering the danger it might pose to your loved ones?
- Talk about your experience with refugees in your own community (or of being a refugee in a particular city). Do you feel your area welcomes refugees with open arms? If not, after reading the book (or from your own experience) what changes would you like to see?
- How did Dina tell the stories of those she interviewed in Greece? How did that approach affect your connection with the stories and with her own story of seeking refuge?
- Dina talks about how charity and welcome are two different things. How do you understand those two concepts and did the book change the way you think about them?
- What does Dina have to say about the difference between economic migrants and refugees? Do you agree with her or disagree with her?
- How does Dina discuss the value that migrants and refugees bring to their host countries? Did her ideas about value and dignity change the way you think about the argument's folks on both sides of the issue make about why we should or should not welcome immigrants into our countries?

About the Author

Dina Nayeri is the author of *The Ungrateful Refugee*, a finalist for the 2019 Kirkus Prize and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Her essay of the same name was one of the most widely shared 2017 Long Reads in The Guardian. A 2019 Columbia Institute for Ideas and Imagination Fellow, winner of the 2018 UNESCO City of Literature Paul Engle Prize, a National Endowment for the Arts literature grant (2015), O. Henry Prize (2015), Best American Short Stories (2018), and fellowships from the McDowell Colony, Bogliasco Foundation, and Yaddo, her stories and essays have been published by The New York Times, New York Times Magazine, The Guardian, Los Angeles Times, New Yorker, Granta New Voices, Wall Street Journal, and many others. Her debut novel, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea* (2013) was translated to 14 languages. Her second novel, *Refuge* (2017) was a New York Times editor's choice. She holds a BA from Princeton, an MBA from Harvard, and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she was a Truman Capote Fellow and Teaching Writing Fellow. She lives in Paris.

- [Listen to EMM's interview with Dina Nayeri or read the transcript.](#)
- Guernica, "[Dina Nayeri: The Craft of Writing the Truth about Refugees.](#)" by Jessica Goudeau.
- Electric Literature, "[What Do We Owe to the Refugees of the World?](#)" by Frances Nguyen.
- HooplaDigital, [12 Questions with Dina Nayeri](#)

Further Reading

Websites:

- [Welcoming America](#)
- [No Refuge: Interactive resource on global refugee crisis](#)
- [The Club, Hoopla Digital: Past Spotlights](#)

Books:

- [How to Be an Antiracist](#) by Ibram X. Kandi
- [Our Women on the Ground: Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World](#) by Zahra Hankir
- [America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States](#) by Erika Lee
- [A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves: One Family and Migration in the 21st Century](#) by Jason DeParle
- [The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives](#), edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen
- [The Good Immigrant: 26 Writers Reflect on America](#), edited by Nikesh Shukla and Chimene Suleyman
- [Citizen: An American Lyric](#) by Claudia Rankine
- [No Friend but the Mountains](#) by Behrouz Boochani