

Book Review



MAHTAB'S STORY

Mahtab's Story

Author: Libby Gleeson

Publisher: Allen & Unwin

181 pages

\$15.95

This vivid and compelling story of a young girl fleeing Afghanistan with her family is inspired on a true story.

Mahtab and her family are forced to leave their home in Herat after her grandfather is killed by the Taliban and her father is beaten. The family feels it is no longer safe to remain in Herat so they embarked on a dangerous and arduous journey initially to Pakistan, through the mountains, hidden in the back of a truck, in the middle of winter. Their only hope is a better life in another country.

When they arrived in Pakistan her father is advised to travel to Australia by himself with the hope of bringing his family after his arrival. Mahtab is around 12 years old, and is left alone with her mother and two other young siblings, hiding in a shed for fear of being kidnapped by strange men who demand money. She is often confused and frightened.

"Mahtab was empty. She felt hungry ... for water, for her father, for her grandmother, her aunts and uncles, the trees in the back yard, the cabinet on the wall, the silver and glass objects so lovingly collected, for her mountains, the jagged peaks that cut the sky. Her father was dead. She felt sure of it. She was just

a speck of dirt on the floor, drifting through the gap between the boards, falling to the ground..."

After waiting in vain for news of her father for eight months, Mahtab convinces her mother to embark on another journey to Indonesia, and then, by boat to Australia. This is her first experience at sea. At night storms rock the crowded boat and at times it looks like they won't make it. But they do.

Finally one clear morning they arrive in Australia. Her first impressions of the new country are disappointing: "No dad. Of course he wasn't there. No leaping from the deck onto the land. No running down the gangway, smiling, welcomed. Official men in short trousers, their legs hairy for all to see, came on board and strode up and down, searching for someone who could understand their language..."

They are then put into a detention centre to face a long and agonising wait for freedom and news of their father. This story certainly provides us a fresh view of life as a refugee, especially while living in detention. We are giving an insight into the boredom, the difficult conditions, the segregation, the intense fear, isolation and despair experienced by a family living in no man's land, where their lives are determined by things outside their control. However the characters still

retain the certain innocence, naivety, and hope, while demonstrating how adaptable we can all be when the situation demands it. Slowly events begin to go well for the family and they are finally released and reunited with her father.

The issues uncovered throughout the book are corruption, political contempt for refugees and family separation, trauma and displacement. But Gleeson writes about them with a very deft hand, with some of these issues only hinted at.

This is a story of struggle, family, love and reunion but along the way it poses many questions about the nature of human beings, the potential for good and evil and the strength to be found in all of us. The emotions evoked in this reading will stay with the reader for a long time, encouraging sympathy, acceptance and tolerance. This story may appeal to primary and lower secondary school readers and it would be accessible to readers aged 10 year and more. It could be used as teaching material as it illustrates the recent experiences of many young refugees attending high school.

Libby Gleeson is one of Australia's best loved children's authors. She has published 20 books and has been short-listed for the CBCA Award. Libby's interest in this subject grew after 9/11 when she realised how difficult it must have been for Muslim kids in

Australian schools. Her visit to Holroyd High School inspired her to write this book. She met with a group of students from a Year 11 class who were refugees and had lived in detention centres. They spoke of their stories of persecution and fear in their own countries and their escape to Australia. However she was attracted by a girl who felt passionate about telling her story. Her name is Nahid Karimi. The author visited Nahid a number of times and her parents, who were also eager to tell their story. They became friends and Mahtab's Story was created. Gleeson says that this is not a biography of Nahid, since she has varied the events, added and subtracted to shape the story.

Although Nahid went to school for the first time when she was 12 years old, she managed to complete her high school. She is now studying Medical Science at the University of Western Sydney and plans to study Medicine in the future. For her life is positive now.

The book was launched by the Governor of NSW Marie Bashir. Nahid spoke at the launch about how fortunate she was to be in Australia where she was able to gain an education. "There are so many girls around the world that cannot have access to education," she said.

I feel positive that Nahid will make a great contribution to Australia.