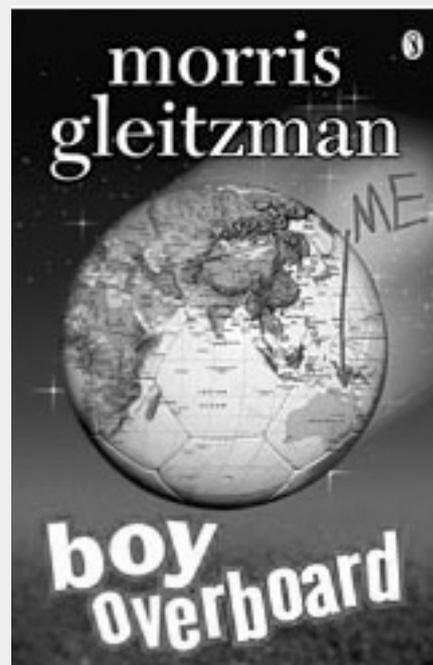




Reviews



Reviewed by David Findlay

BOY OVERBOARD

MORRIS GLEITZMAN

(PUFFIN, 181pp. \$14.95 r.r.p.)

While the effects of war and other traumatising events on children has been well documented I find myself wondering what the effects have been, on Australian children, of the rhetoric, propaganda and outright lies arising from the Tampa and “children not overboard” affairs, and mandatory detention.. Have they accepted the suggestions of some of our politicians that the asylum seekers are “not like us, not the sort of people we would want in this country”, that self-mutilation and violence are “part of their culture”?

Hopefully, Morris Gleitzman’s book will go part way to dispel this racism. Gleitzman is well known for his novels dealing with children’s misperceptions of adults’ utterances and behaviour. His books gently satirise both the adults and children. His intent in Boy overboard is, necessarily, more serious. That is not to say that the book lacks humour. It is, like his earlier work, Two weeks with the queen (1990) which dealt sensitively with cancer, AIDS and a gay couple both an answer to the current hysteria and an enjoyable adventure story.

The narrative in Boy overboard concerns an Afghan boy Jamal, his soccer playing sister Bibi and their parents. First we are shown

the position of females, both young and old, under the Taliban regime- Bibi must disguise herself as a boy to play soccer with Jamal and his friends; her mother must operate her school for girls underground. Of course, the secret school is discovered and the family must flee, first to Pakistan, then Indonesia, then Australia (Christmas Island) by overcrowded and unseaworthy boats.

Despite the horrors of the family’s situation there is humour in the book arising not only from the typically Gleitzman misunderstandings but also from the children’s marvelous resilience. All the characters in the novel exhibit strengths and weaknesses that not only drive the action but show us people who are human in their faults. Similarly, Andrew (a member of the Australian Navy who picks up the children from their sinking boat) embodies all that is positive and endearing about those Australians who still believe in the fair go.

While one might criticise the author for presenting the baddies (Taliban officials, “people smugglers”, and so on) as one dimensionally evil, we need to bear in mind that this book is aimed at children. This book is important not only for its enjoyable story but also because it raises questions of gender discrimination, human rights, cultural difference - concluding that we are basically the same. Jamal and Bibi may eat different food, speak a different language, wear different clothes, but in the end, like us, they want a happy,

unhassled life – to play soccer if that is your bent- in other words to use a term much abused by politicians and commentators “a fair go”.

More information about the novel and characters, as well as teacher aids can be found at: http://www.penguin.com.au/puffin/spotlight/f_spotlight.cfm

People interested in similar books for children/young adults might like to look at:

- Jumping to heaven: stories about refugee children (edited by Katharine Goode. Wakefield Press, 1997)
- One day we had to run: refugee children tell their stories in words and paintings (edited by Sybella Wilkes. Evans Bros.)
- Parvana: a young girl’s fight to survive in Afghanistan (Deborah Ellis. Allen & Unwin, 2002)- pub. in U.K. as The Breadwinner.
- More than gold (John Heffernan. Scholastic, 2000.)
- The other side of the truth (Beverly Naidoo. Puffin, 2000.)