



AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH LAIRD

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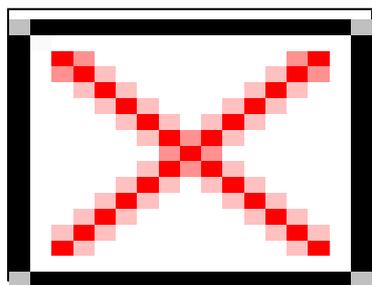
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Elizabeth Laird talks about her new book **Welcome to Nowhere**

Elizabeth Laird the award-winning author of [The Garbage King](#) [3], [The Fastest Boy in the World](#) [4], **A Little Piece of Ground**, **Kiss the Dust**, **Crusade**, and **Oranges in No Man's Land**, among others. She has been shortlisted for the **Carnegie Medal** six times. Her latest book, [Welcome to Nowhere](#) [5], follows twelve-year-old Omar and his family as they move through Syria from the ancient city of Bosra to Daraa, then, fleeing violence, to a small farming village ? and finally across the border, to a Jordanian refugee camp. **Imogen Russell Williams** interviews her about the book for **Books for Keeps**.



You've written books set all over the world; in Ethiopia, India, Kurdistan, Beirut, and many other places. What drew you this time to write about Syria?

I have a neighbour, who was following the boats arriving in Greece, backwards and forwards to the beaches. I said to him one day, 'I don't know what to do. It's just terrible, ghastly. What should we do???' And he said 'Don't send money; write.' So I began to think, 'How can I write about this?'

[Shortly afterwards], we went on holiday to Germany, and we went to Munich Station. It was the Oktoberfest, and everybody was wearing dirndl skirts and lederhosen and a bit drunk; but in amongst this huge crowd there were small groups of people; I guessed they were Syrian, because they were wearing white hijabs, which is characteristic of some parts of Syria. And there was a big room, obviously an old station café or something that had been emptied, and there were volunteers helping people, and notices written by children, saying 'Welcome to Germany?'. My heart was beating, and I thought, I must write about this. So I went home and tried to write about it - and I couldn't, because I wasn't close enough?

So I asked a family friend], who was working in Amman for the Norwegian Refugee Council, running support programmes for teachers in the schools there - 'Can you help me?', and she said 'Why don't you come and do some courses for the secondary school teachers, helping to teach writing, and writing themselves?'

Then [another family friend, also working with refugees in Amman] took me to meet a family she had been helping - she asked me to take 40 hot water bottles with me, which I did, and I can tell you, hot water bottles are much heavier than you might imagine! There were three children, a teenage girl and two boys, and one of them had cerebral palsy. I

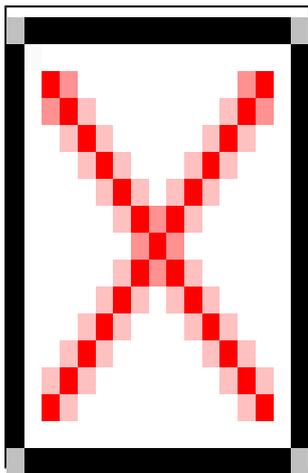
spent several hours with them in their home, and then I thought: that's it.

I wanted to ask you about the character of Musa, the narrator's older brother, who has cerebral palsy. Was that where he came from?

Well, the characters in my book are not those children at all, they're quite different. But Musa - I had a brother when I was little, who was very severely disabled - he actually died when he was four, and cerebral palsy was one of his problems. So I feel I can write about it - I've been there, in a way. It wasn't a deliberate - I must put in a disabled person - sort of thing; it was serendipity. Also, I'm fed up with the way in which people with cerebral palsy are not considered to be intelligent.

And in your book, Musa turns out to be a brilliant political activist, who drives a great deal of the story. What about Omar himself - your tremendously likeable, unsaintly, entrepreneurial main character? Where did he come from?

I spent a day up on the northern border of Jordan, in the Azraq Governate, and the guy driving us was a gorgeous chap



called Maher, from Palmyra. As a child, he had sold postcards after school in the ruins at Palmyra, and he'd saved up enough money with his cousin, and bought a camel. I don't think he was very academic, or had the chance to go far with education, but he started a fine business, taking troops of tourists into the desert and camping with them at night. He got a house; he got a car; he got things absolutely sorted out. And then the war happened.

Then I went down to Petra, and the taxi driver, Ahmed, who was a friend of a friend, was explaining to me his postcard-selling techniques, and how he made up these rhymes. And there was something about Maher and Ahmed's entrepreneurial spirit that just made me go - That's great! In the Middle East, if you say to most children, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?', they say 'I want to be a doctor' - or a pilot, or an engineer. But these kids didn't want to be anything like that - they just wanted to be businessmen, and make lots of money. I thought that was great!

Yes! But although Omar is not remotely interested in formal education, his older sister Eman is - and she's very keen to finish her education before being married off. Was she based on anyone in particular?

Eman came from the teachers in Zaatari and Azraq [refugee camps]. Early marriage is a terrible problem [in the camps]; fathers feel they can't protect their daughters, so they must marry them off quickly. Children are married off, and by the time they're eighteen they've got two kids, and that's it. The teachers in Azraq didn't tell me much about themselves, and I was working through a translator - but the whole thing about early marriage kept coming up, and also their passionate desire for education, and how proud they were, being teachers. All of the teachers in the camps are trained teachers from home - and some of them had had to really struggle to become teachers. So that was the seed of Eman.

Technology - access to information, the internet - seems key throughout the book. Was that hard to research?

Not really. One of the things you notice, if you go to any of the camps, is that after food, a mobile phone is the most important thing; sim cards, as people make their journeys through Europe, are absolutely crucial. It's fascinating, actually - going back to the 1980s, the first major Middle East revolution to be fought by technology was the Iranian toppling of the Shah, when Ayatollah Khomeini disseminated his sermons on cassette tapes, and they went all over the

world. Well, of course, all the so-called Arab Spring has been triggered by Twitter, Facebook and so on, and it's hard for somebody of my age to understand how that works ? I try to keep up, but I'm not brilliant at it. But the plot of [Welcome to Nowhere](#) [5] faithfully follows the truth, in that what triggered the civil war was schoolboys painting slogans in Daraa, in March 2011. These boys painted 'The Regime Must Fall' on the wall, and [footage of] that sparked off the whole thing. That's partly why I set it in Daraa.

Omar's family have to keep moving throughout the book, from Bosra to Daraa to a small farming village ? and, while they're in the countryside, you touch on the black-masked ?lunatic fanatics in the North?. What were the challenges of writing about ISIL?

Well, the main challenge was that they didn't exist [in Syria] back in 2011? they're an anachronism. But I did feel I had to a) hint about them, and b) absolutely divorce my key characters from them. Of course, there are hotheaded young people like everywhere else who are going to think 'oh, this is cool?', and give it the time of day ? like Jaber [Omar's cousin.] He's a teenager, he's disappointed, he thinks his life is condemned to sowing tomatoes and moving rocks ? and he hates it, he wants to get out and have a life. But he's just a teenager, really; and I don't see that he will go down that road at all, because he's got a nice stable family and a lovely mum.

When the family cross the Jordanian border and enter the camp, Omar is aware of his identity changing, being stripped away ? 'Nobody saw us as real people who had lives. We were just refugees?. Was that something that you heard a lot?

Oh yes. One of the saddest things I heard was there was from a woman in my workshop; she said 'I'm pregnant, and if I don't get out of this camp, my baby's going to have Refugee stamped on his passport, and that's going to be a stigma for the rest of his life. Place of birth: Zaatari Refugee Camp.' They all felt massively diminished by it. I try, now, not to use the word 'refugee' - it's becoming a stigma. One should really use the words 'person who's lost their home', or something ? think of better words - I don't know. But it lumps people all into one great thing, instead of being able to see them as individuals.

Was that why you wrote the book?

Yes. One of the things that worried me was the accusation of jumping on a bandwagon for career purposes ? and it's a fair point. I'm sensitive to that, but that's not how I feel about it. I just feel that if we ? writers ? don't write about the great stories of our time, then we're not doing our job.

In the camp, amid the bleakness ? mud, tents, little kids running riot ? you guide the reader, via Omar, to this amazing, brightly-coloured impromptu trading place, the 'Champs Élysées?. Is that real?

My God, it's real! It's absolutely amazing! And it is totally wonderful ? there are loads of pictures online. There's these great big satellite dishes, and it's just an amazing hive ? it just works as a focus for the whole place. You've got a bit of money in your pocket, or your vouchers ? you can maybe swap them for some money, and then you can go shopping. And if your daughter gets married, you can rent a wedding dress for twenty quid!

There's a point of transition right at the end of the book - Omar and his family have had their asylum applications accepted, and are about to leave the camp. What do you think the future looks like for them?

I think it's very bleak. I think people will say it's an unrealistically happy ending ? but it's not. I think it's a very poor ending for the family. What the hell will they do in Britain? I anticipated the question from children who might say to me 'What's going to happen next? Are you going to write a sequel?' and I'd say to them 'No, you are. What happens to the family is up to you.' That's really the point of the ending ? I wanted the reader to think 'What are we going to do about it?' It's not a wonderful dream [for them to come to Britain]. They're scared of the culture ? it's completely alien to them. They're worried about being good Muslims here, and they're worried, quite rightly, about racism and Islamophobia.

What would you suggest to readers who are moved by the book? What might they read next, and what might they do?

What you should read: some very good books are [The Wall](#) [6], by William Sutcliffe; [Burn my Heart](#) [7], by Beverley Naidoo; [Asylum](#) by Rachel Anderson ? real life books about real people in other places ? and those wonderful books by [Gill Lewis](#) [8]; [Azzi in Between](#) [9] by Sarah Garland; [The Arrival](#) by [Shaun Tan](#) [10].

What you could do?well, a woman called Catherine Ashcroft and her team have been working with small Jordanian NGOS, setting up desert schools [for Syrian refugee children]. These schools are now teaching 475 children, and the Syrian government has just agreed to give them formal accreditation, so they can take exams. If you would like to help, I've set up a [link on my website](#) [11] with the [Mandala Trust](#) [12], with some fundraising ideas.

[Welcome to Nowhere](#) [5] is published by Macmillan Children's Books, £6.99 pbk and £9.99 hbk

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