

Mahtab's Story is based on true events in the life of a young Afghani girl and her family, fleeing from the Taliban, and ending up as asylum seekers in Australia. Mahtab is around 12-years-old, with a younger brother, Farhad, and much younger five-year-old-sister, Soraya. The story would appeal to upper primary/lower secondary readers and would be accessible to readers aged 10 years+, including older readers and adults. It is a book well worth reading for those wondering if our country holds a place for all of us, or just some of us. Gleeson's skill lies in illuminating the extraordinary events and emotions in people's lives by focusing on simple, ordinary experiences – experiences we can all identify with. We can probably all remember a time of putting freezing fingers to our mouth for warmth, but only some of us have done so as we've left everything we've known and loved for a fearful journey and uncertain future. Many of us have been at the mercy of motion sickness, but not in the hidden floor compartment of an escape truck. We've all brooked intense disappointment, but the anguished, constant powerlessness experienced by Mahtab and her family takes us beyond our own lives and enables us to walk in another's shoes.

This is a book which allows us to ask, 'What would I do about that?', or 'What if that were me, it easily could be...?'. Importantly, Gleeson enables us to feel not only empathy for Mahtab and her family, but to see that adversity can be addressed by personal resilience and the power of close family relationships, courage, compassion, and the genuine support of others.

In an upper primary setting, this would be an easy book to read aloud, as the writing style is gentle, fluid and accessible. The issues uncovered are weighty ones – including corruption, political contempt for refugees, and family separation trauma and displacement – but they are touched with a very deft hand, with some issues only hinted at. Common objects like sugar cubes, a paper bag and bracelet take on a new meaning when we see what they meant in the life of Mahtab, Farhad and Soraya. The power of story and imagination in helping the characters live with trauma is also another thread running through the story.

In secondary schools, themes are often explored through a variety of books which give personal choice and access to multi-ability classes and student interests. Thus, books covering a reading age from Grade 3 level up to upper secondary level, may be offered as a 'tub' or collection for a Yr. 7-10 class. The themes of *Mahtab's Story* include refugees, immigration, detention centres, social cohesion and justice, our nation's multi-cultural identity, personal story/identity, new arrivals/new places, family and resilience.

Reading lists which cover the multi-ability reading-level spectrum required in many Yr. 7-10 classes can generously be found on the Internet, often with non-fiction as well as fiction titles. These lists are often annotated, which is a great resource for teachers/librarians, but pre-reading as many books on offer to your class as possible is highly recommended!

Refugees Reading List

http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/student/lem/Refugee_resource_list_05.doc
from the LMERC [Languages and Multi-Cultural Education Resource Centre] Resource Lists page at
<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/lem/lmerc/lcollect.htm>

New Places

http://k10syllabus.det.wa.edu.au/associated/Resources/backpack/resources/docs/new_places.doc

Global Education resources on EdNA

<http://www.globaleducation.edna.edu.au/globaled/page1.html>

Click on Refugees > Refugees Links & Resources > Books :

<http://www.globaleducation.edna.edu.au/globaled/go/pid/1707#Books>

CMIS Resource Bank –Which Book?

<http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/cmisis/eval/fiction/whichbook/index.htm>

Click on 'Fiction to Support Themes'

Recent publications may not yet be on some of these lists, including *Mahtab's Story*; *The Arrival* – Tan; *All of Us* – M. Lawrence; *The Island* – Greder; and for older readers: *Diego, Run!* – Ellis (resilience/survival); *Ten Things I Hate About Me* – Abdel-Fattah; *The Glory Garage: Growing up Lebanese Muslim in Australia* – Jamal & Chandab; *What is the What* – Eggers; *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* – Beah; and more. Students, adults, children, teachers and *politicians* – wouldn't it be wonderful if we could all read, share and understand the implications of *Mahtab's Story* and many others like it ...

Lynda Santolin, Samaritan Catholic College, VIC

In the middle of the night, Mahtab's parents wake her with her clothes ready at the end of her bed. She must dress quickly and quietly if they are to escape from their Taliban controlled city. So begins a hectic and heart

stopping journey across the mountains into Pakistan where they wait for 8 months for news of their father who had gone ahead. Taking a plane to Malaysia and then Indonesia they then board a boat heading for Darwin. The journey is perilous and they hesitate to think of what may lie ahead.

In its bare bones, the story is one of many such stories: escaping a hated ruling junta, putting their lives into the hands of others, separation, hunger and even death, that make up the history of Australia. But this story is very recent, these people, vilified by a former government, now make up a growing part of our population and their stories, part of our consciousness and history, must be told. Gleeson interviewed a number of girls whose experiences mirror that of Mahtab, to get the story right, and she has succeeded brilliantly. The emotions evoked in this reading will stay with the reader, encouraging sympathy, acceptance and tolerance.

Along with Rosanne Hawke's vivid story, *Soraya the Storyteller*, and Morris Gelitzman's *Boy Overboard*, and Deborah Ellis' wonderful series about *Parvana* and her friends, these novels give our students an opening into another world, far apart from their own, and reflect the stories of some of our students' lives, enabling us to develop understanding and empathy.

Fran Knight, SA

Mahtab and her family escape to Australia as refugees from Afghanistan. Her grandfather has been taken from them by the Taliban, her father savagely beaten. Their only hope is a new life in another country. Their journey takes them from Herat to Pakistan and then by boat to Australia. Along the way they separate from the father and decide to make the journey alone. When they arrive in Australia they are put into a detention camp to face a long and agonizing wait for freedom and news of their father.

This story provides us with another view of life as a refugee, especially while living in a detention camp. We are given a picture of the overpowering boredom and fear experienced by a family as their lives are determined by things outside their control. The characters still retain a certain innocence and naivety, while showing how adaptable we all can be when the situation demands it. Good reading level for ESL students.

Ideas for the classroom:

- Creative writing:
 - Relate Mahtab's father's journey
- Read: Alwyn Evans: *Walk in my shoes*
Deborah Ellis: *Parvana*
- Draw a map of the journey
- Research
 - Refugees
 - Detention Centres
 - Life in Afghanistan

Use higher order thinking technique: the SCAMPER model. [A model used for developing creative, divergent and original thinking.]

S Substitute to have another person or thing act in the place of another

e.g. What might have happened if the children had gone with their father?

C Combine to bring together

e.g. Would it have made a difference if Mahtab's family had joined Leila's family in Iran?

A Adapt to adjust for the purpose of suiting a condition of purpose.

e.g. Life for a refugee in Australia who had not "jumped the queue"?

M Modify to alter, change

e.g. if Mahtab was a boy of 16 would this have changed their journey?

P Put to other uses to use for purpose other than originally intended

e.g. Mahtab's coin bracelet. What else could she have done with it?

E Eliminate to remove, omit

e.g. What would life had been like for Mahtab's family if the Taliban had not come to Afghanistan?

R Rearrange to change order or adjust

e.g. What might have happened if they had stayed in Pakistan?

Lynne Moller, Eumemmerring College, VIC

This book takes you on a journey with Mahtab and her family as they leave Taliban effected Herat and travel to Australia. Mahtab's father has been told that the people of Australia are free. They start their journey hiding in the back of a truck to arrive in Pakistan were they are hidden in a shed. Mahtab's father leaves to continue the journey without the rest of the family. It is arranged that he will make contact when he has settled in Australia.

Time passes and when the family hear nothing they leave Pakistan to complete the journey alone. They travel by plane to Malaysia and then board a boat to arrive in Darwin. They find that Australia is not the free country they hoped for as they are placed in a camp awaiting either a visa or a return trip to Herat. Mahtab's father is finally found in Sydney. Visas are organised and they are reunited.

I would have liked to have seen more detail and description within this book. It leaves a lot open for the reader to assume or picture in their own mind from the information they know on the issues. This may be difficult for readers with little knowledge and would be difficult when using the book with children in a classroom setting as their knowledge varies. The teacher may need to introduce the Taliban and background cultural information before reading the book. Due to the lack of description I found it hard at times to be at one with Mahtab and actually understand her, feel her struggles, her joys and heartache.

My fourteen year old daughter recently read *Parvana* by Deborah Ellis. This book provided a follow up and an insight into the life and experiences of another girl. When used in the classroom this book opens up the study of Taliban, politics, culture and religion. Family unit, feelings, fears and cultural identity of immigrants and their reasons for struggling to settle could also be studied. Australia's immigration laws and our new Australian Citizenship test could be used within this topic.

Jennifer Deaves, Homeschooler, SA

Mahtab's Story is an engaging and eye-opening novel, depicting the difficult journey of a family from Taliban controlled Afghanistan to Australia. The story is written through Mahtab's eyes, a young girl whose heart is torn apart when her Grandfather is killed by the Taliban. With fear of further persecution, Mahtab's family leave all that they know and begin their dangerous journey across the world in search of safety and freedom. Mahtab dreams of studying to become a doctor, a dream that was quashed in Afghanistan when the Taliban banned education for girls. The book captures the fear of Mahtab, her siblings and her mother as they contemplate the fate of their father and husband who left earlier for Australia. They also fear for their own lives throughout the journey after hearing of the horror of others. The author goes on to effectively portray the frustration, isolation and boredom experienced within the refugee camps of this strange, new, 'free' land. This book puts a face to the story of many refugee families that to me until this point, have only been a news story. This book would be an excellent choice for use within the classroom for stage 3-4 students and perhaps beyond. It will encourage students to take a new perspective of their freedom in Australia and also to be more open and aware of the plights of other children and teens all around the world.

Meredith Phillips, St Philip's Christian College, NSW

This is an inspiring and emotional story based on real life events.

Mahtab and her family live in Afghanistan. Life is no longer free and fun as the Taliban increase their power over the Afghani people. One night when Mahtab's granddad does not return home, Mahtab's parents make the decision to flee Afghanistan and try to make it all the way to the far off and much dreamed about Australia. A nail-biting, long and difficult journey faces the family. Mahtab, her mother and her brother and sister must remain hidden in the truck that is their escape vehicle. Bribes for border guards are only part of the frightening journey. Each time the truck stops, there is the fear that they truck may be searched; the children must be silent and still.

On arrival in Pakistan, Mahtab's father goes on ahead to Australia. But after almost a year without word of his safe arrival, Mahtab convinces her mother that they must follow him to Australia immediately. A nightmare journey including false passports, leaky overloaded boats and detention centres follows. Will it be a happy ending for Mahtab and her family? Will they be reunited with her father or will they be deported from Australia as they have been labeled 'queue jumpers'?

A wonderfully engaging and moving novel that grips the reader from the first page to the last. *Mahtab's* story would be excellent as an English class text as it gives such insight into the conditions that refugees have and still face. Students could write their own diary from Mahtab's point of view, or that of Leila, Mahtab's friend who migrated to Iran with her family. How different is life in Australia for Mahtab? Will she be accepted at school? What would life be like for Leila? An intensive research assignment of life in Iran could form the basis of the work.

Judith Way, Preston Girls' Secondary College, VIC

Despite the fact that there is an increasing number of books of a similar style to this one, Libby Gleeson's offering is not a redundant addition. The foreword by Deborah Ellis, doyenne of this genre, seems to vindicate

the arrival on the scene of yet another story of children in difficult circumstances, facing critical danger and conflict and yet triumphing in the end despite the problems they encounter.

The big difference here, perhaps, is that *Mahtab* is based on a real girl who has struggled to survive the vicissitudes of leaving Afghanistan, crossing unwelcoming continents and oceans, and made a successful transition through the refugee process to life in Australia. While this is not a biography in the strict sense, Gleeson has interviewed the girl whose story she presents here and the account with which we are confronted is an accurate and harrowing one — because we know it to be genuine and current.

If *Mahtab's Story* helps even in some small way to awaken contemporary readers to the realities of life for so many of our fellow world citizens, then it has performed a valuable task.

With well-paced action, accessible dialogue and a clear, generously sized font, *Mahtab's Story* should have wide appeal to students in Years 7-10 with possibilities as a “Belonging” HSC background text as well.

Highly recommended, and don't miss out on the useful teachers' notes on the publisher's website.

Julie Davies, Sutherland Shire Christian School, NSW

Twelve-year-old Mahtab and her family are forced to flee Afghanistan because of the atrocities imposed by the Taliban. With the male members of her family subjected to beatings, the disappearance of her grandfather and the increasing restrictions on all that the family do, Mahtab's father decides it is time to go – to go to Australia, a free country where they can live a free and happy life.

This sets the scene for this story of fear, as Mahtab and her family are haunted by the past yet fearful of an unknown future. However, Libby Gleeson has skillfully presented this story to interweave a strong sense of hope for a better future within the traumatic events that pervade the family as their travels are beset with problems and challenges. Told in the first person, Mahtab's thoughts; her fears, her hopes and dreams; draw the reader into this personal account of the plight of refugees fleeing war torn countries and oppressive regimes. Gleeson has set her characters within their Islamic culture with subtly, introducing young readers to the more common beliefs and practices of Moslems in a natural and neutral way that sends an underlying message that it is OK to be different and that tolerance is important.

This is an emotional and poignant tale that is clearly designed to promote understanding and encourage tolerance towards refugees. As the arrival of the boat into Australian waters and the treatment of the refugees are told from Mahtab's perspective, the reader is deliberately positioned to be sympathetic and understanding. It would be interesting to compare this recount of events to those presented in the media and by politicians during the 2001 Tampa situation or other similar examples of illegal immigrants arriving in Australia.

This is a powerful and thought provoking story that is easily accessible to older primary students but would also be picked up and enjoyed by high school students, especially those that have followed similar portrayals of young refugees written by other authors.

Jennie Bales, TAS

The suffering voice of a child bordering on awareness of adult issues is heard clearly through this story. It is the story told by so many refugees who are in search of a new life and a safe home for family.

We travel with Mahtab from leaving her home in Herat secretly one night to flee the oppression of the Taliban, through her fear-filled and hazardous road journey to Pakistan, to the horrifying boat passage to Darwin. Mahtab shares with the reader her inner thoughts, fears, frustrations and questions. How is her family back in Afghanistan? Where is her father? Will the boat make it to Australia safely? What is Australia like? Libby Gleeson has written with a sympathetic view, her writing enriched by the fact she met and spoke with many refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan. *Mahtab's Story* is fictional but it tells a truthful story shared by so many refugees who have fled to Australia only to find it is not, initially the most welcoming and compassionate place to turn to.

Mahtab's Story is well written and simple yet very compelling. I recommend it to years 7-9.

Angela Anderson, St Monica's College, VIC

When I first started reading *Mahtab's Story*, it sounded a lot like *Boy Overboard* by Morris Gleitzman and I began to get a little disappointed. However after the initial chapter, I was pleased to find a different storyline emerging. Mahtab's story of struggle and escape from Afghanistan was both moving and thought provoking. Libby Gleeson's writing enables the reader to feel the fear, isolation, loneliness and finally the elation that Mahtab goes through. The feelings that this story evokes put a face and give rise to images that children in a war torn country experience everyday. The reader feels empathy for Mahtab's struggle, rather than the fear that is held in so many hearts.

This novel was quite easy to read and once started I had finished it within two to three days. Whilst reading it I was thinking about how I could use it in my class. The novel enables the reader to empathise with Mahtab and her family and realise how lucky they are to live in a country like Australia. This novel could be used to discuss the different cultures students in your class come from and the stories they bring with it. My school is very multicultural and we do have some refugee students and this would enable the other students to gain a greater understanding of the hardship people face and the reasons why they immigrate to Australia. I would also look at autobiographical stories and get the children to write their own. I did this last year with a 5/6/7 class and *Boy Overboard*. The students really got to know each other and found commonalities that they all shared. It in turn created a more cohesive and caring classroom. I could also see this book being used to look at imagery and the different perceptions readers can have of the same story.

Tracee Withers, Alawa Primary School, NT

Mahtab's world is slowly shrinking. Her best friend, Leila, has left with her family, for Iran; her father returns home one evening, beaten, and her grandfather does not return at all. Because she is a girl, Mahtab is no longer allowed to go school and her mother no longer permitted to work. This is the way it has become in Afghanistan.

And so one scary night, Mahtab, her mother, brother and sister hide in a truck laden with furniture and bags of grain. With her father and another man as the drivers, they set out on the dangerous journey to Pakistan. The plan is to make their way to Australia.

This is a story about heartbreak, frustration, persecution, corruption, fear, loss, depression and suicide; a twelve year old girl and her family flee their home, in search of safety, asylum and refuge in Australia, only to be incarcerated upon arrival and treated by the authorities with suspicion and disdain.

But throughout their ordeal we see demonstrated some remarkable examples of courage, resilience, friendship, hope, family unity and love.

After hearing the stories of a group of year eleven students from Iraq and Afghanistan, whose experiences as refugees in their own countries and Australia are so compelling, author Libby Gleeson is moved to record them in a book.

This is a significant work of fiction that is wholly based on truth. It deserves a place on every Australian young person's reading list. Suitable for late primary and early to mid secondary school students, it contains a story that needs to be told. There is a wealth of material within its pages for all teachers to draw on for discussion and class work.

Libby Gleeson has done her part – with great tenderness, and never a hint of shying away from the harshness of injustice. Now it is up to the rest of us to put such a well crafted and important work to good use.

Carole Poustie, VIC

Mahtab's Story is based on a true story: of one family's journey from terror in Afghanistan, in extreme conditions, across the mountains, through strange countries, and out to Australia, via dubious agents. Mahtab's family of three siblings and parents, spend time in detention in Australia, waiting and hoping for a new life in peace. Prior to Taliban control in Afghanistan, Mahtab's family enjoys the pleasant lifestyle of a professional family. Gradually, the killing of her grandfather, the repression of women, reaches unbearable levels. Their escape is described as a dangerous, fearful experience: hiding among furniture in a truck for days, separating from their father, and finally arriving, in a leaky boat, as unwelcome aliens in Australia, accused of "queue jumping". It's a very common story to anyone who keeps in touch with refugee help groups, and it is so often repeated (authenticated), that it's hard to believe it is not fully understood.

Libby Gleeson, without sentimentality, affirms the experiences and feelings of young people who have been displaced by war, terror, or discriminatory practices. The book gives insights into the lives of refugees: their experiences of detention, the distress and anger they feel, and the frustration of having lost control of their lives.

Mahtab, as the eldest child has a great deal of responsibility for her siblings, and her stories are a thread throughout the book: the stories she tells to the younger children to remind them of home, and to calm them and give them hope for their future lives in Australia. Mahtab, and her mother, also connect the younger children with their culture through stories, such as Sinbad.

This is a clever device and could be used by teachers to encourage creative story making with their students. It would be a good opportunity for students to discover folktales of other cultures, particularly those of the Middle East.

Maureen O'Shea, Noosa Library, QLD

Mahtab and her family flee Afghanistan through the mountains to Pakistan. While they are escaping persecution and almost certain death under the Taliban, they face perilous, life-threatening episodes in their bid for a new life in Australia. They mourn for the family, culture and traditions they leave behind and struggle to come to terms with their refugee status in detention camps in Asia and Australia. This luminous story of 12-year-old Mahtab's struggle to survive also stands for all those who have left so much behind to start again in strange lands. (Inspired by a real story.)

Activities:

- Make contact with a migrant centre and invite a recent immigrant to speak to the class.
- Children interview someone they know who was not born in Australia about their experiences as migrants.
- In pairs/groups plan and create a picture book covering an aspect of an immigrant child's experience.
- Source poems and songs from migrant groups and write a poem about belonging from a child's perspective.

Kim Kitson, Valley View Public School, NSW

Reading *Mahtab's Story* helps us learn about the loss of freedom brought by the Taliban in Afghanistan and how desperate people are to free themselves of fear and to live the life they choose. It forces us to think about what it must be like to leave everything you know behind and start on a journey to places about which you know nothing. Through exquisite writing we can imagine ourselves in Mahtab's place, tasting her fear and longing. We read about suffering, sacrifice and resilience. Students may have in their class refugees who have fled their homeland but have never had the opportunity to understand their motivations. This book will help them to discover some and to understand something about people smugglers and why refugees do everything they can to get on a boat for Australia.

Being such an easy book to read this is an excellent introduction for late primary/early secondary students to the refugee experience. The teachers' notes on this website provide a multitude of starting points for discussion and suggestions for further reading.

Jennifer Davey, TAS