

DISCUSSION GUIDE

READ

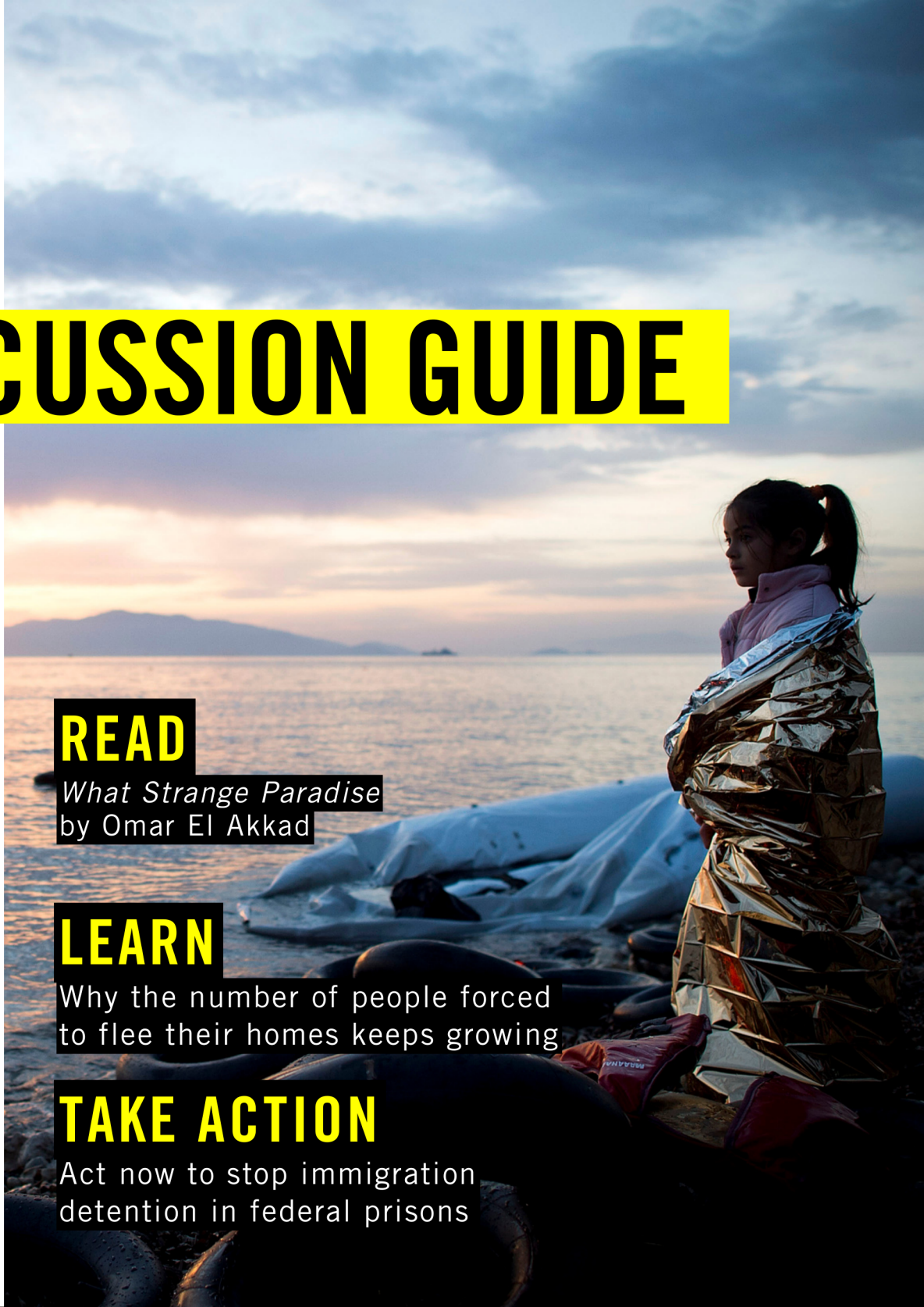
What Strange Paradise
by Omar El Akkad

LEARN

Why the number of people forced to flee their homes keeps growing

TAKE ACTION

Act now to stop immigration detention in federal prisons



**MAY/JUN
2024**

A Syrian girl looks on during sunrise after arriving on an inflatable boat with other refugees, crossing the sea from Turkey to Lesbos. At the height of the influx of people in 2015, thousands of refugees and migrants were arriving daily.

Photo by Alexander Koerner/Getty Images

AMNESTYBOOKCLUB.CA

A COMMUNITY THAT READS, LEARNS & ACTS TOGETHER



Ketty Nivyabandi
Photo by Dave Chan

Amnesty International is a human rights organization and global movement of more than 10 million people in over 170 countries and territories who campaign for human rights.

SAVE THE DATE



World Refugee Day on June 20th honours those who have been forced to flee their homes.

Ketty Nivyabandi

Secretary General
Amnesty International Canada

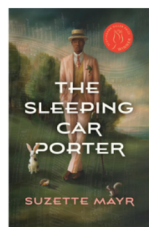
Welcome to Amnesty International Canada's Book Club. You are a critical part of this community that reads, learns and acts together for a better world. This discussion guide is intended to help spark conversations about the major human rights issues of our time, as we explore recent notable works of fiction.

In May and June, more than 12 thousand Book Club members will discuss the 2021 Scotiabank Giller Prize-winner *What Strange Paradise* by Omar El Akkad. This profound and dramatic story explores the global refugee crisis through the eyes of a nine-year-old child.

Amir's story is the story of more than 114 million people in the world today who are forcibly displaced from their homes—like those fleeing due to war in Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan. It's also my story. Almost ten years later, my voice still breaks when I talk about the experience of refuge and exile. I will never get over not being home.

Join me in shining a light on the rights, needs and dreams of refugees. Together, we can champion the human right to seek safety.

Previous
in 2024



JAN/FEB

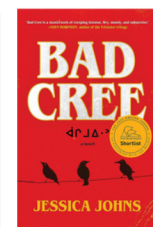


MAR/APR

Upcoming
in 2024



JUL/AUG



SEPT/OCT



NOV/DEC



THE BOOK

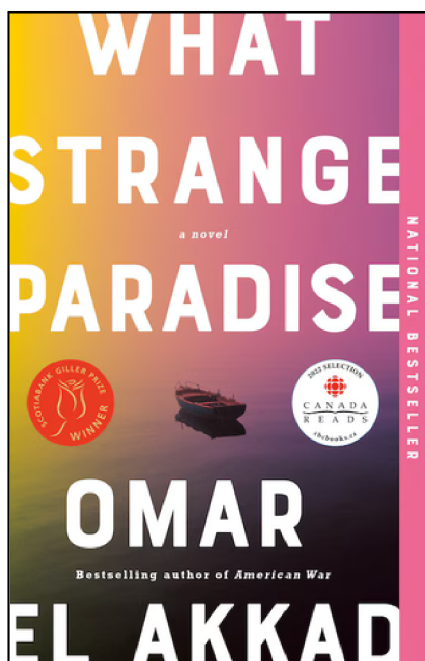


Photo by Jeremy Chan/Getty Images

Omar El Akkad

Author & Journalist

LEARN MORE



Omar El Akkad on CBC Radio's *The Next Chapter*
<https://cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter>

What Strange Paradise

By Omar El Akkad
 McClelland and Stewart, 2021

What Strange Paradise interweaves the stories of Amir, a young Syrian boy shipwrecked on a small Greek island, and Vanna, a teenage islander. Amir's harrowing flight from the war in Syria contrasts sharply with Vanna's sheltered island life. As Vanna becomes entangled in Amir's fate, they both confront the hostility, indifference, and inhumanity of a system and culture grappling with the migrant crisis.

Themes of identity, belonging, resilience, and the desire for a better future run through the book. El Akkad poignantly depicts the hostility and prejudice that greet Amir upon his arrival, reflecting broader societal attitudes toward migrants.

What Strange Paradise also shines a light on critical human rights issues, including the right to seek asylum, the right to live free from fear and persecution, and the right to dignity.

El Akkad's depiction of Amir's perilous journey underscores the desperation that drives individuals to flee their homelands, often risking their lives in search of safety. The novel also depicts the way governments and social structures marginalize vulnerable people, highlighting the systemic injustices and human rights violations that migrants and refugees endure. By focusing on the personal stories of Amir and Vanna, El Akkad humanizes the refugee crisis, urging readers to consider the moral and ethical responsibilities they hold towards those seeking refuge.

El Akkad is an Egyptian-born Canadian novelist and journalist who lives in Portland, Oregon. His fiction and non-fiction writing has appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Guernica*, *GQ* and many other publications.

Sources: OmarElAkkad.com, Penguin Random House



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A GLOBAL DISPLACEMENT CRISIS

Fueled by the international community's indifference



Above: Refugees and migrants arrive on the Greek island Lesbos after crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey on November 7, 2015.



Above: A man gestures to his family outside a train to Poland at Lviv Railway station on March 15, 2022, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

At the end of 2023, 117.2 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced from their homes or stateless. They fled because of persecution, war, violence, and human rights violations. This marks the largest ever single-year increase in forced displacement since World War II, propelled by war in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and other deadly conflicts.

Each year, one in every 78 people is forced to flee their home.

There are also millions of stateless people in the world who are denied nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment, and freedom of movement each year. In the 2021 census, 3,560 persons in Canada reported being stateless or lacking any citizenship.

Sources: UNHCR, Human Rights Watch and Statistics Canada

Over the past decade, only 1% of displaced people were able to return home per year. In 2023, the top six places of origin for refugees and people needing international protection were Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Palestine, Venezuela, and South Sudan.

Regardless of their status in a country, both regular and irregular migrants have human rights, including the right to freedom from slavery and servitude, freedom from arbitrary detention, freedom from exploitation and forced labour, the right to freedom of assembly, the right to education for their children, equal access to courts and rights at work.



Photos above: (top left) by Aris Messinis/AFP via Getty Images, (top right) by Mykola Tys/SOPA Images/Light Rocket via Getty Images

IMMIGRATION DETENTION IN CANADIAN FEDERAL PRISONS

Since the launch of Amnesty and Human Rights Watch's #WelcomeToCanada campaign in 2021, every single province has committed to ending its immigration detention agreements with the Canada Border Services Agency by April 2025.

Thousands of people are incarcerated on administrative immigration-related grounds every year, including people fleeing violence, those seeking a better life, and people who have lived in Canada since childhood.

TAKE ACTION



Learn more about Amnesty/Human Rights Watch's campaign #WelcomeToCanada [amnesty.ca/activism-guide/welcometocanada](https://www.amnesty.ca/activism-guide/welcometocanada)



Interact with *Shadows of the North*, an Amnesty/Supernova Arts Collective online, immersive experience about immigration detention: shadowsofthenorth.com



Read Amnesty's report "*I Didn't Feel Like a Human in There*": *Immigration Detention in Canada and its Impact on Mental Health* [PDF]: [amnesty.ca/immigration-detention-report/](https://www.amnesty.ca/immigration-detention-report/)

Above: Refugees who crossed the Canada/US border wait in a detention centre in Quebec on August 5, 2017.



“Refugees represent the very best of the human spirit. They need and deserve support and solidarity — not closed borders and pushbacks.”

UN Secretary-General António Guterres

People in immigration detention are subjected to solitary confinement, indefinite detention, maximum-security jails, and handcuffs and shackles.

Instead of following the provinces' lead and working to end immigration detention, the federal government plans to use federal prisons for immigration detention. It also aims to codify this human rights-violating practice into legislation.

Photo above by Geoff Robins/AFP via Getty Images



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions are intended to spark thoughtful discussions and reflections on the book:

- Why do you think the author chose to tell this story through the eyes of two children?
- How does the novel employ the image of the island as both a potential haven and a place of isolation? Discuss how it mirrors the experiences of both migrants and the communities they encounter.
- What does the Xenios Resort represent?
- How does the alternating viewpoint structure (Amir and Vänna) shape your understanding of the migrant experience and the dilemmas surrounding it?
- Amir's father says, "People live—what else is there to do?" Amid war and displacement, what are some examples of people living their ordinary lives in *What Strange Paradise*?
- Vänna's father says, "Who's asking you to take sides? I'm just telling you the truth. The truth doesn't take sides." Discuss the nature of truth and whom it privileges.
- The book is full of choices, either to be kind or to act in fearful, self-interest. Highlight a few examples and discuss what would have happened differently if the characters had made other choices.

“

“But somewhere deep in her mind an idea had begun to fester – perhaps the longing for safety was itself just another kind of violence – a violence of cowardice, silence, submission. What was safety, anyway, but the sound of a bomb falling on someone else’s home?”

Omar El Akkad, Author and Journalist

Source: What Strange Paradise

- How do intersecting identities of class, gender, age, skin colour, place of origin, religion, and language result in unique combinations of discrimination and privilege for the characters in the book?
- Can you identify parallels between the novel's themes and current events in Canada?
- How does the book force us to look at ourselves and how we look at each other?
- Is this a hopeful story? Why or why not?
- What do you think the ending of the book means? Why do you think the author chose to begin and end the story in this way?

TAKE ACTION



Write to the Prime Minister urging him to stop jailing people for seeking safety or a better life in Canada.
[amnesty.ca/welcometocanada/](https://www.amnesty.ca/welcometocanada/)



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