
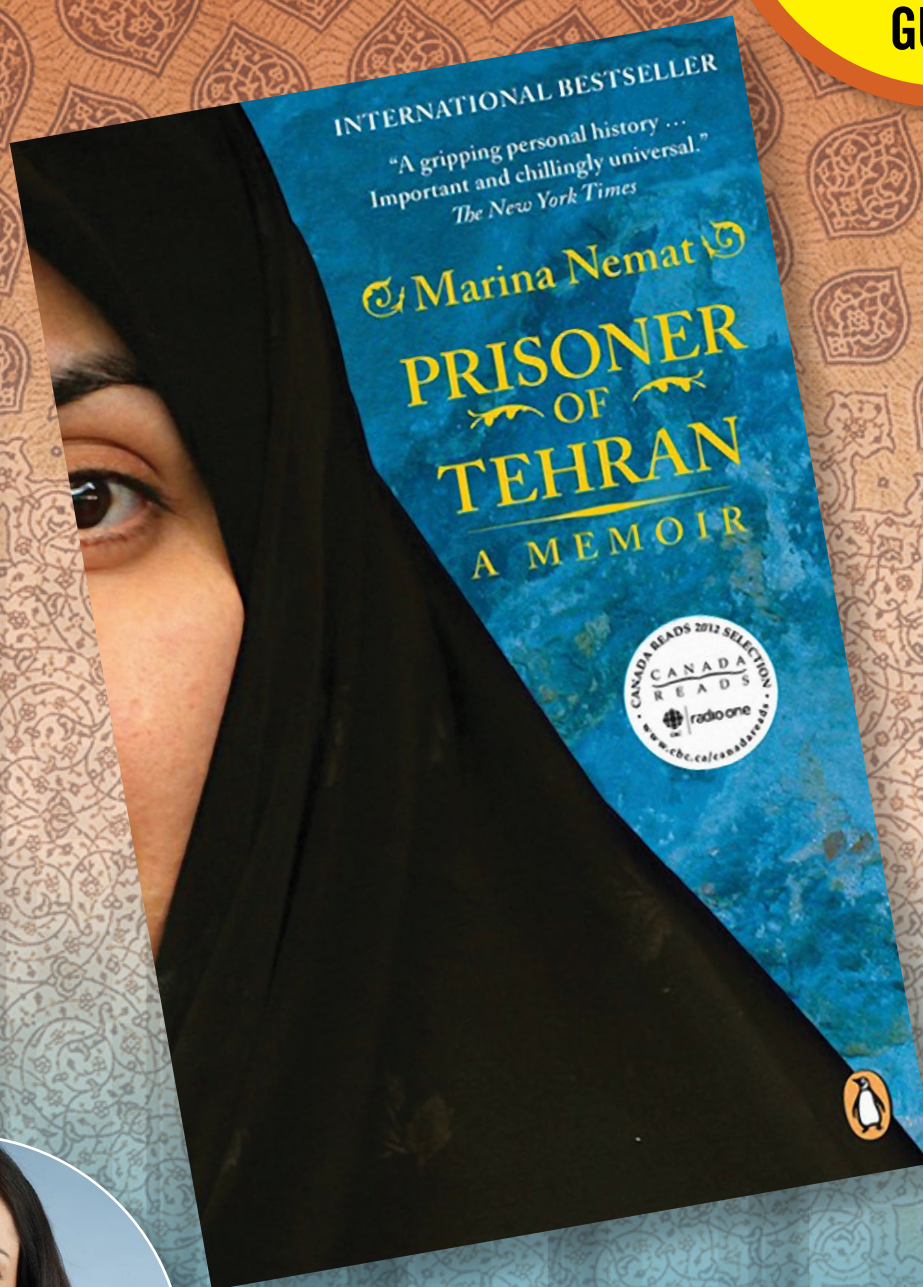


JULY / AUGUST 2019

DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL 
BOOK CLUB
DISCUSSION
GUIDE



THE PRISONER OF TEHRAN

BY MARINA NEMAT

RECOMMENDED BY MARTHA BATIZ

WELCOME

Amnesty Book Club members

Welcome back to the Amnesty International Book Club! We are pleased to announce our July/August 2019 title *The Prisoner of Tehran* by Marina Nemat. This bestselling international memoir has been recommended by guest reader Martha Batiz, with whom you will explore the memoir and read beyond the book to learn more about some of the pressing human rights violations that Marina experienced as a sixteen-year-old girl in Iran, which mirror the rights abuses experienced by other people, including women human rights defenders, in Iran.

In this guide, you will find Batiz's reflection on the book, as well as discussion questions, an Amnesty Background section, and an action you can take to help free world renowned Iranian women human rights defender Nasrin Sotoudeh from prison.

In 1982, sixteen-year-old Marina Nemat was arrested on false charges by Iranian Revolutionary Guards and tortured in Tehran's notorious Evin prison. At a time when most Western teenaged girls are choosing their prom dresses, Nemat was having her feet beaten by men with cables and listening to gunshots as her friends were being executed. She survived only because one of the guards fell in love with her and threatened to arrest her parents if she refused to marry him. Soon after her forced conversion to Islam and marriage, her husband was assassinated by rival factions. Nemat was returned to prison but, ironically, it was her captor's family who eventually secured her release. An extraordinary tale of faith and survival, *Prisoner of Tehran* is a testament to the power of love in the face of evil and injustice. In *After Tehran: A Life Reclaimed*, her powerful second memoir, Marina Nemat tells of her battle to regain her voice and recounts how much her life has changed since the publication of her internationally bestselling memoir, *Prisoner of Tehran*. Settling into a new life as immigrants in Canada, Nemat and her husband find jobs, raise their two children, and seemingly adapt. But

inwardly, she is struggling with the effects of the torture and imprisonment she endured in Iran as a teenager. Haunted by survivor's guilt, she feels compelled to speak out about what happened to her in prison, but no one seems willing to listen, not even her family. As her account becomes a bestselling book, Nemat's life begins to change again. A story of courage and recovery, *After Tehran: A Life Reclaimed* chronicles Nemat's confrontation with her past, telling how she re-engages with her distant father, and how she ultimately emerges from the emotional ravages of post-traumatic stress.

Thank you very much for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

We, at Amnesty Book Club, believe you will find this book to be an eye-opening, informative and insightful read. We are pleased to be able to be part of this conversation.

About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit www.amnesty.ca or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

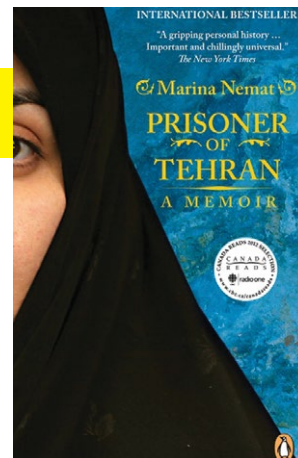
About this month's author, **Marina Nemat**



Marina Nemat was born in 1965 in Tehran, Iran. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, she was arrested at the age of sixteen and spent more than two years in Evin, a political prison in Tehran, where she was tortured and came very close to execution. She came to Canada in 1991 and has called it home ever since.

Her memoir of her life in Iran, *Prisoner of Tehran*, was published in Canada by Penguin Canada in 2007, has been published in 28 other countries, and has been an international bestseller. In 2007, Marina received the inaugural Human Dignity Award from the European Parliament and, in 2008, the Grinzane Prize in Italy. She was the recipient of the Morris Abram Human Rights Award from UN Watch in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2014. In February 2017, she received Premio Ceppo Pistoia, a prestigious award given every year in Tuscany, Italy. In 2008/2009, she was an Aurea Fellow at University of Toronto's Massey College, where she wrote her second book, *After Tehran: A Life Reclaimed*, published in

2010. Marina regularly speaks at high schools, universities, and conferences around the world, including University of Milan, Oxford University, Yale, Tufts, Berkeley, and Stanford. She was a member of the Board of Directors at the CCVT (Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture) from 2012 to 2019 and is a member of the Board at Vigdis, a Norwegian charitable organization that provides legal and other forms of assistance to female political prisoners around the world. In addition, she is the chair of Writers in Exile at PEN Canada, and a member of the International Council of the Human Rights Foundation in the U.S. She has a Certificate in Creative Writing from the School of Continuing Studies at University of Toronto and currently teaches memoir writing at the SCS. In 2014, she was a recipient of the Excellence in Teaching Award at the School. She's also a senior fellow at the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights. Occasionally, she writes book reviews and opinion pieces for various publications.



About this month's reader, **Martha Batiz**



Martha Batiz was born and raised in Mexico City, but has been living in Toronto since 2003. Her articles, chronicles, reviews and short stories have appeared in diverse newspapers and magazines not only in her homeland, but also in Spain, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Peru, Ireland, England, the United

States, and Canada. She's the author of two short-story collections in Spanish: *A todos los voy a matar (I'm Going To Kill Them All)*, Castillo Press, Mexico, (2000), and *De tránsito (In Transit)*, Terranova Editores, Puerto Rico, (2014). Her award-winning novella *The Wolf's Mouth* (Exile Editions, 2009) was originally published in Spanish both in the Dominican Republic and in Mexico (*Boca de lobo*, in 2007 and 2008, respectively), later it was launched as an e-book by INK Press (2015) and

most recently, a new print edition was launched by Lugar Común Editorial (2019). *Boca de lobo* appeared in the spring of 2018 in French translation as *La Gueule du Loup* (Lugar Común Editorial), and was released again in its English version in November 2018 as *Damiana's Reprieve* (Exile Editions). In total, this novella has had seven different editions, in three different languages. Martha's latest short-story collection, titled *Plaza Requiem: Stories at the Edge of Ordinary Lives* (Exile Editions, 2017), was the sole nominee for the 2018 International Latino Book Award in the category of "Best Popular Fiction: English." In 2014, Martha was featured in *Latinos Magazine* among the *Top Ten Most Successful Mexicans in Canada*. In 2015, she was chosen as one of the *Top Ten Most Influential Hispanic-Canadians*.



Martha Batiz's Reflection on *The Prisoner of Tehran*

Prisoner of Tehran, Marina Nemat's brave and insightful memoir, was published over ten years ago, but it continues to amaze me. I never miss the chance to recommend it, as the author's example of resilience and unbreakable spirit is truly inspiring. In this book, Nemat shares her life as a child and teenager in Iran, focusing on how the Islamic Revolution that overthrew the Shah, and brought Ayatolla Khomeini into power, shattered her life. At 16 years old, she was arrested, tortured, jailed, condemned to death, and then saved by her torturer only to be forced to convert to Islam, marry him under duress, and suffer even more before she was finally freed a little over two years later.

When I read *Prisoner of Tehran* for the first time I remember thinking, in shame, what a carefree 16-year-old I had been, indifferent to politics and blissfully free to express my views and enjoy myself (like most adolescents in countries that enjoy the luxury of peace). Marina Nemat, in contrast, was painfully aware of the changes taking over her country, and decided to fight back without realizing the terrible consequences she would face. Nemat was imprisoned in the infamous Evin prison, from which few people come out alive to tell their story. It actually took her eighteen long years of silence, nightmares, guilt, and pain to be ready to share hers with the world.

Marina Nemat's grandparents first arrived in Tehran from Russia in the early 20th century to escape communism. The Russian Revolution erupted while they were in Tehran and they decided to make that new country their home. Thus, Marina grew up speaking Russian with her grandmother, Persian with her parents, and reading books in English for fun—and to escape her loneliness. Her childhood transpired between her family's apartment in Tehran and their cottage by the Caspian Sea. In her book, the chapters where she talks about those days by the shore offer some very necessary respite from the stress and tension related to her life immediately before and during Evin.

Marina's fate changed when, after the Islamic Revolution, Revolutionary Guards replaced the teachers at her high school (a school for the local Zoroastrian minority). The Guards had instructions to teach the Koran instead of the regular academic subjects. Marina, however, wanted to attend university and have a career.

She demanded to be taught what she was supposed to be taught, according to the curriculum. The "teacher" asked her to leave the classroom. She did, and her classmates followed her. This had not been her plan, but her actions unleashed a school-wide student strike, which landed her on a governmental black list. A few days later, her nightmare began.

I grasped the immensity of Marina Nemat's tragedy when my own twin daughters turned 16. I looked at them and thought, in horror, *Marina was just like them when she was imprisoned, tortured, raped, almost killed, and when she watched so many of her friends die. How can someone survive all that and not be resentful and bitter?* *Prisoner of Tehran* holds the answer, which is one of the book's most valuable lessons. In spite of her suffering, Marina speaks about her past with forgiveness, and grace. If she learned something from her time in prison, she has said, is that no one is completely evil, not even the man who was in charge the evening the soles of her feet were torn apart by the force of endless lashing, and who later coerced her into marrying him—in the end, she owes her life to him.

Because I grew up in Mexico and, until only a few years ago, Iran never had a huge presence in Latin American news, there were many things about life in that country that I did not know until I read *Prisoner of Tehran*. For example, the fact that women can be jailed or even beaten to death for having a streak of hair showing from underneath their hijab or chador. Or that male jail guards may marry a prisoner, under Sharia Law, in order to have "lawful sex" with her (which is, of course, a euphemism for rape), and then get a divorce the next morning. I agree with Marina Nemat, now a renowned activist: the human rights abuses that take place in Iran deserve continuous attention and condemnation. They must end.

Prisoner of Tehran was written not only because Marina felt the personal need to let her painful memories flow, but because she is concerned—as we, as readers and citizens of the world, should be—that this brutality keeps on happening. Evin is still fully operational and people are killed within its walls every single day. The book is actually dedicated to Zahra Kazemi, the talented Iranian-Canadian journalist who was murdered in Evin.

One of the most poignant moments in the book is when Marina introduces us to Sarah who, as a way of coping with the loss of her brother, starts writing down her memories of their childhood by the Caspian Sea... on her own body. Her desire to capture the past, to hold on to the joy they once knew, proves stronger than the lack of paper. And because that desperate action is now forever captured within the pages of *Prisoner of Tehran*, Sarah and her brother will no longer be forgotten.

Prisoner of Tehran is a fair and moving tribute to all those brave young Persians who fought injustice and were murdered by what is still one of the most violent regimes in the world. Every time *Prisoner of Tehran* is read, the memory of these innocent victims is brought to life; their sacrifice no longer feels to have been made in vain. Through Marina's painful, yet beautifully written testimony, we are reminded that peace, justice, and liberty are precious, yet fragile. And that we must never take them for granted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM GUEST READER MARTHA BATIZ

1. Marina Nemat found it excruciatingly hard to share her story not only with the world, but especially with her own family. Before she wrote about it, her husband had not asked for details about her time in prison. When she was set free and returned home, her parents talked about the weather instead of asking questions about what she went through. Why do people find it so hard to face facts that so deeply affect and change a loved one? How can a memoir such as *Prisoner of Tehran* open the door towards more honest, open talks about realities that frequently go unspoken but that need to be discussed out loud?
2. The written word has always been at risk under oppressive regimes. Why did Marina's mother have to destroy Marina's childhood books? How did she destroy them and why is this important, both at a personal and at a political level?
3. At the beginning of the book, Marina narrates her encounter with an angel. Do you believe in the power of faith? How did Marina's faith help her cope with the suffering she had to endure? What role do faith and religion play in *Prisoner of Tehran*? How do they define or help the events?
4. Marina Nemat was forced to marry the man who was in charge of her torturing. The book details the wedding day. How does the man's family react to Marina as a new family member, and how does this open the door to her future liberation?
5. In spite of being a widow, in marrying her previous boyfriend, a Catholic, Marina was putting her life at risk. Why is this so, and why did she choose to go ahead regardless?

6. The book alternates between narrating Marina's life in Evin, and her previously happy, carefree life in Tehran and at the cottage by the Caspian Sea. What is the importance of the rock where Marina often goes to find peace and refuge?
7. Marina Nemat had a special connection with her grandmother. How is her relationship with her grandmother different from the one she has with her parents, and why? And how did these relationships, or lack thereof, pave the way for Marina to engage in political activism at such a young age?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL BOOK CLUB

1. What aspect(s) of the book was your favorite? Why did it resonate with you?
2. What did you find particularly interesting, shocking, or moving about Marina's story? Why did you have this reaction?
3. Thinking of yourself, would you have the courage to speak out in support of human rights when the risk is torture and prison, as women human rights defenders in Iran continue to do?
4. Reflecting on Marina's identity as a teenaged girl and a human rights defender, how did the book change your understanding of the ways in which a person's different identities affect the protection and enjoyment of their human rights?
5. After reading Marina's story, do you feel more inspired to take action to defend of those who are unjustly silenced behind prison bars?

Women on the frontlines of protecting human rights in Iran



Supporters of Amnesty International gather in front of Iran Embassy in The Hague to demand justice for human rights defenders in Iran

Amidst an ongoing government crackdown on the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly in Iran, peacefully advocating for human rights all too often results in activists being threatened, banned from traveling abroad, and sentenced to long prison sentences based on bogus charges. Many activists are held in the notorious Evin Prison, where torture and other forms of ill-treatment are rife. Women human rights defenders are specifically targeted and repressed by authorities because they are women, and because they are advocating for women's rights.

Despite the ever-shrinking space to advocate for human rights, Iran has a thriving and active community of women human rights defenders who, despite grave risks to their safety, continue to courageously advocate for justice and equality.

Women human rights defenders continue to call on Iranian authorities to end discrimination against women in law and practice, including in access to divorce, employment, equal inheritance and political office, and in family and criminal law. They speak out against acts of violence against women and girls, including domestic violence and early and forced marriage, which are widespread and committed with impunity. They call

for women to be allowed to run for president, and to sit at the cabinet table in government. They advocate for women to be allowed full access to public spaces including football stadiums. They press for access to sexual health education and contraception. They call for women to have the right to choose what they wear and not be subject to compulsory veiling (hijab).

Marina Nemat is one of these courageous women human rights defenders, and she, like so many other activists with, spent time in Evin Prison because of her student activism.

Women human rights defender Maryam Shafipour was barred from continuing her education because of her student activism in support of women's rights, and spent time in Evin Prison. Amnesty International advocated for her release. Maryam now lives in Canada and continues her activism in support of her fellow women's rights activists in Iran including Narges Mohammadi.

Iran's law mandating that women wear the hijab allows police and paramilitary forces to harass and detain women...

Amnesty International continues to advocate for the release of Narges Mohammadi, who has been sentenced to 16 years in prison for advocating for gender equality and against the death penalty.

We continue to press Iranian authorities to release Atena Daemi, who was sentenced to seven years in prison, also for her peaceful advocacy in support of women's rights and against the death penalty.

Most recently, Amnesty International has been advocating for world renowned women human rights defender and human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh to be released from prison. Nasrin has been sentenced to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes for defending the right for women in Iran to choose whether or not to wear the hijab (veil), and for serving as the lawyer for other women who peacefully protest Iran's law on compulsory wearing of the hijab.

Iran's law mandating that women wear the hijab allows police and paramilitary forces to harass and detain women for showing strands of hair under their headscarves or for wearing heavy make-up or tight clothing. State-sanctioned smear campaigns have been conducted against women who campaign against the compulsory hijab. "Iran's authorities appear to be lashing out in response to the increased defiance displayed by Iranian women and the growing peaceful popular movement against forced veiling laws in a bid to intimidate them into silence and submission," said Magdalena Mughrabi, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

Amnesty International has confirmed that two women's rights defenders, Yasmin Aryani and Monireh Arabshahi, have been detained recently and that a third activist, Vida Movahedi, who has been detained since October 2018, was sentenced to one year in prison last month for peacefully protesting against forced veiling.

Iran's intelligence and security bodies have also subjected several other women human rights defenders to threatening telephone calls, warning them that they will be arrested if they continue to campaign against forced wearing of the hijab. Some have been summoned for questioning and fear imminent arrest.

The criminalization of women and girls for not wearing the veil is an extreme form of gender-based discrimination and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment that deeply damages women's dignity. Instead of persecuting and jailing women who are standing up to this outrageous injustice Iran's authorities should immediately and unconditionally release all women's rights defenders detained for their peaceful activism.

Iranian authorities must allow women to choose whether or not to wear the hijab. They must stop harassing, arresting, and imprisoning women human rights defenders who are peacefully protecting compulsory veiling, and release all those detained on this basis, including Nasrin, immediately and unconditionally.

Amnesty International firmly opposes all forms of Islamophobia and condemns any and all acts of white supremacist racism and violence against Muslim communities.

ACT NOW!



Demonstration in Iran Embassy in the Netherlands by Amnesty supporters to free Nasrin Sotoudeh.

After two grossly unfair trials, world renowned Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh has been sentenced to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes for defending women's rights.

Nasrin has dedicated her life to peaceful human rights work, including defending women who peacefully protest against an Iranian law which compels women to wear hijab (headscarf) and loose clothing.

Nasrin has been jailed for defending the right of women to choose whether or not they wear hijab. Amnesty International supports the rights to freedom of religion and freedom of expression, including the right of Muslim women to decide whether to wear the hijab or other forms of Islamic dress.

For her advocacy in support of women's rights Nasrin has received the harshest sentence recorded against a human rights defender in Iran in recent years, suggesting that the authorities are stepping up their repression. These sentences keep Nasrin separated from her husband and two children and stop her from being able to carry out her important work as a human rights lawyer.

Call on Iranian authorities to release Nasrin Sotoudeh immediately and unconditionally and for her sentences to be quashed without delay.

Please send a letter to the Supreme Leader.

- Start with Dear Mr. Khamenei and a sentence about yourself to make your message unique.
- Urge him to release Nasrin Sotoudeh immediately and unconditionally as she is a prisoner of conscience, jailed solely for her peaceful human rights work.
- Until she is free, seek assurances that she has regular contact with her family and a lawyer of her choosing.
- Urge his government to stop criminalizing the work of women human rights defenders, including those who peacefully protest against forced hijab and to abolish forced hijab laws.

Write to:

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei
C/o Permanent Mission of Iran to the UN
Chemin du Petit-Saconnex 28
1209 Geneva, Switzerland

Amnesty International firmly opposes all forms of Islamophobia and condemns any and all acts of white supremacist racism and violence against Muslim communities.

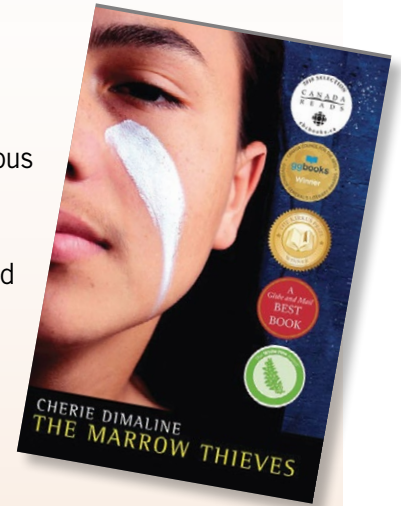


COMING UP IN AUGUST 2019

The Marrow Thieves by Cherie Dimaline

Recommended by Rina Mapa

Humanity has nearly destroyed its world through global warming, but now an even greater evil lurks. The indigenous people of North America are being hunted and harvested for their bone marrow, which carries the key to recovering something the rest of the population has lost: the ability to dream. In this dark world, Frenchie and his companions struggle to survive as they make their way up north to the old lands. For now, survival means staying hidden—but what they don't know is that one of them holds the secret to defeating the marrow thieves.



The discussion guide will be sent out August 2019.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

Share the Amnesty International Book Club online    

- Check us out on Facebook at **Amnesty International Book Club**, Twitter at **@AmnestyReads**, Instagram at **@AmnestyBookClub** and join our discussion group on **Goodreads.com**