
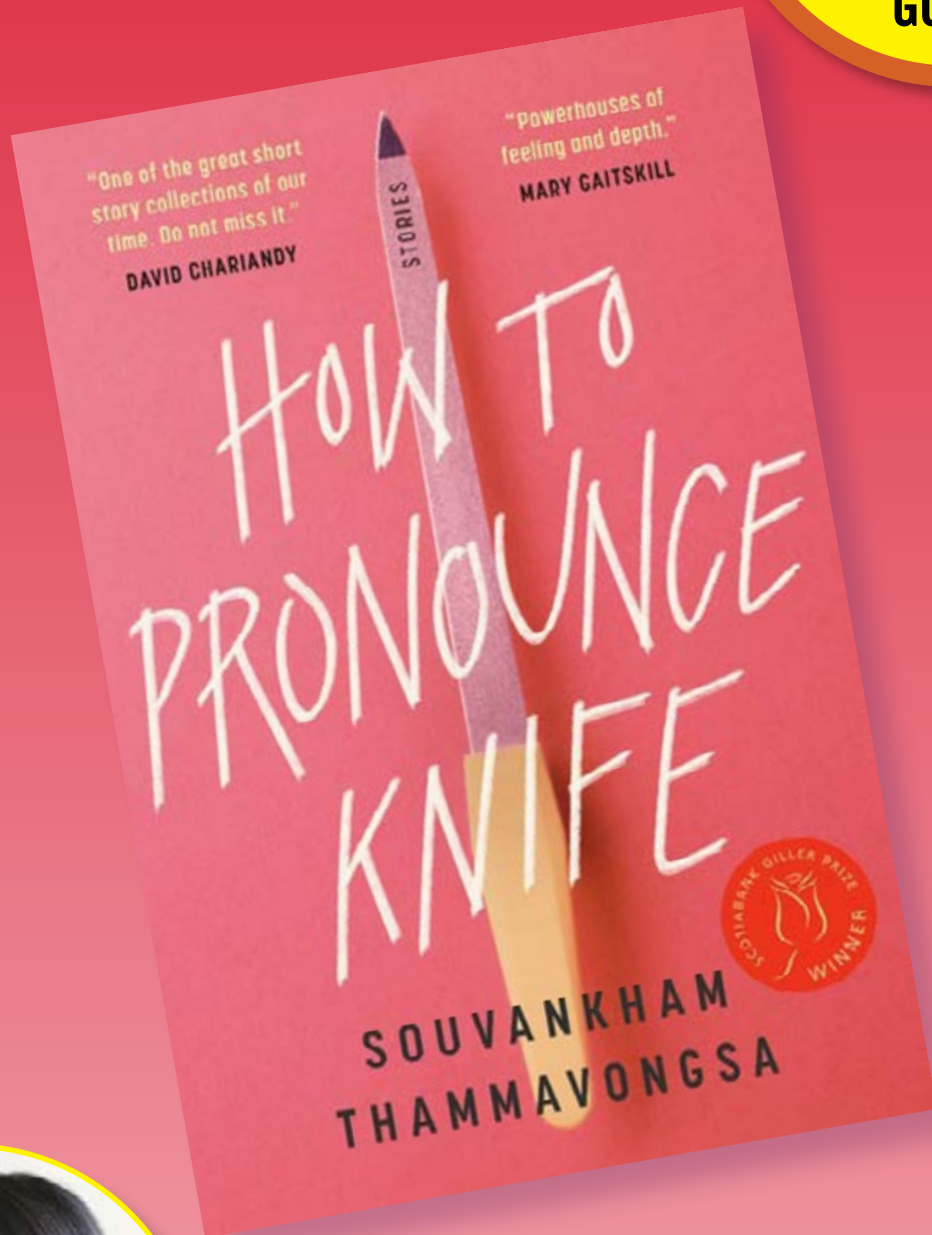


MAY/JUNE 2021

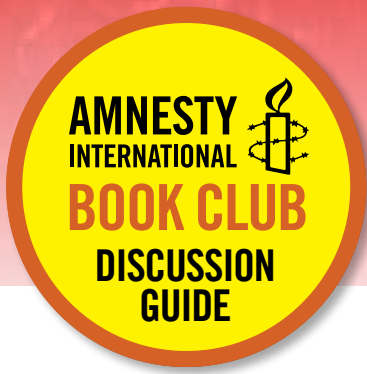
# DISCUSSION GUIDE

**AMNESTY**  
INTERNATIONAL   
**BOOK CLUB**  
**DISCUSSION**  
**GUIDE**



## HOW TO PRONOUNCE KNIFE

BY **SOUVANKHAM THAMMAVONGSA**



## WELCOME AMNESTY BOOK CLUB MEMBERS

We're back with a new selection and this month's book, *How to Pronounce Knife*, is one you do not want to miss!

A young man painting nails at the local salon. A woman plucking feathers at a chicken processing plant. A father who packs furniture to move into homes he'll never afford. A housewife learning English from daytime soap operas. In her stunning debut book of fiction, O. Henry Award winner Souvankham Thammavongsa focuses on characters struggling to make a living, illuminating their hopes, disappointments, love affairs, acts of defiance, and above all their pursuit of a place to belong. In spare, intimate prose charged with emotional power and a sly wit, she paints an indelible portrait of watchful children, wounded men, and restless women caught between cultures, languages, and values. As one of Thammavongsa's characters says, "All we wanted was to live." And in these stories, they do—brightly, ferociously, unforgettably.

A daughter becomes an unwilling accomplice in her mother's growing infatuation with country singer Randy Travis. A boxer finds an unexpected chance at redemption while working at his sister's nail salon. An older woman finds her assumptions about the limits of love unravelling when she begins a relationship with her much younger neighbour. A school bus driver must grapple with how much he's willing to give up in order to belong. And in the Commonwealth Short Story Prize-shortlisted title story, a young girl's unconditional love for her father transcends language.

Unsentimental yet tender, and fiercely alive, *How to Pronounce Knife* announces Souvankham Thammavongsa as one of the most striking voices of her generation.

Thank you for being part of the great Amnesty International Book Club community. We hope you stay safe during this pandemic, we appreciate your interest, and we welcome your questions, suggestions, and or comments. Send us an email at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

### About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than ten 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](http://www.amnesty.ca) or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

## MAY/JUNE 2021: *How to Pronounce Knife*

### ABOUT THIS MONTH'S AUTHOR, **Souvankham Thammavongsa**



Souvankham Thammavongsa is the author of four acclaimed poetry books, and the short story collection *How to Pronounce Knife*, winner of the 2020 Scotiabank Giller prize, finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and PEN/America Open Book Award, out now with McClelland & Stewart (Canada), Little, Brown (U.S.), and Bloomsbury (U.K.), available in French, with foreign rights sold in China, Korea, and Turkey. Her stories have won an O. Henry Award and appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Paris Review*, *The Atlantic*, *Granta*, and *NOON*. Thammavongsa is a judge for the 2021 Griffin Poetry Prize. She was born in the Lao refugee camp in Nong Khai, Thailand and was raised and educated in Toronto.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL BOOK CLUB

1. Many of the stories have main characters who are not named and others who are but then their names end up changing. What is the value of a name? How do you feel about a character that is not named? Why do you think the author decided to do this?
2. The title of the book is a reference to the first story in the collection, in which a Lao child is learning to read and has troubles with the word 'knife' and its silent k. Language is all about symbols and this word and story becomes a reflection for something larger. Discuss this symbolism with your group.
3. Sound is important to many of these stories. The silent letter at the front in the word knife, the voice of a mother in a dream, the way sound lasts only for a short while and disappears, or how sounds can often stand in for meaning. Why do you believe sound is a concern in these stories?
4. Love is an important feeling and theme. Love of family, romantic love, love when it's failed, and love of self. Discuss the ways in which the characters love or lose their love. Which love story in the collection were you most moved by? Discuss.
5. In the story "Paris," no one ever goes to Paris and it does not take place in Paris. Why do you think the author decided to title this story "Paris"?
6. The stories often refer to the setting as simply "here." Why do you think the author did this with the setting of a story?
7. Who would you recommend *How to Pronounce Knife* to? Why?



## BACKGROUND



**NAZIK KABALO** is the founder of the Sudanese Women Human Rights Project. She fled to Egypt in 2011 after being detained for her human rights work. There she continued to face harassment and threats for her activism, and faced years of limbo as she sought refugee resettlement in the US. During Write for Rights 2018, Amnesty activists from around the world spoke out for her safety. Nazik was finally resettled to Canada recently. Here is her story.

## BEING A REFUGEE:

### FROM A JOURNEY OF STRUGGLE TO A JOURNEY OF SURVIVAL

Being a refugee is, for me, a matter of personal identity. Being a refugee is a statement of my struggle and the struggle of millions of other people around the world forced to leave their homes. Being a refugee is a reminder of the different global crises that drove us from our homes—conflicts, poverty, inequality, injustice, climate change, or sexual violence.

People do not choose to be refugees; they are forced by the serious challenges facing humanity to leave their homes and to live either in refugee camps or in inhumane conditions in neighboring countries' slums. The refugee crisis is not a personal crisis or even a regional crisis; it is a global crisis that demands urgent fundamental change.

The reasons I left my home in Sudan to become a refugee were not unique to me. I was forced to flee nine years ago because of my advocacy against human rights atrocities and genocidal crimes. After being subjected to detention,

court trials and death threats in Sudan, I went to Egypt to safeguard my life and to continue to advocate for justice and freedom in Sudan.

I arrived in Egypt in early 2012. But I was only able to work freely in Egypt for less than two years. In 2014, the Egyptian government clamped down on human rights activists and my safety was threatened again. For the next five years I lived in hiding in Egypt as a refugee and human rights activist, moving from house to house many times.

Threatened by Sudanese government agents, I was unable to obtain a Sudanese passport from Sudan's embassy in Egypt. But I was at least able to get support from Amnesty International and other international organizations protecting human rights defenders—unlike many thousands of women and children refugees in Egypt, who are unable to find this kind of support.



Without permission to work, refugees are forced to take low wage jobs and work illegally to support themselves. This situation increases the risk that employers will abuse them. This is especially true for women who often face sexual harassment at work as well as other kinds of violence and exploitation. Refugee children are often forced to work or drop out of school. Even if they manage to enroll in school, refugee children face racial discrimination and violence inside and outside schools.

Egypt alone is hosting almost 300,000 refugees, the majority of them women and children. There are no refugee camps in Egypt, so refugees live in slums in big cities where they become victims of poverty, violence and discrimination. There are a few local organizations courageously helping refugees, but the organizations' capacity is very limited compared to the needs of so many refugees.

Hosting countries are supposed to be transitional stops with refugees eventually returning to their home countries or to a resettlement country. But the waiting can take years and sometimes even decades. Civil wars, brutal dictatorships, or climate change make it impossible for some refugees to return to their homeland. For these refugees, there is the long wait for resettlement in a third country. In my case I waited seven years for resettlement, with years lost because of President Trump's "Muslim ban", which stalled my resettlement process. For an activist refugee like myself,

a longer wait means increased danger. Living at the mercy of the unknown brings physical and psychological trauma. For some, the wait is just too much of an emotional drain.

Finally, I was lucky to be welcomed by a generous community in Kingston, Ontario. Local refugee resettlement groups in Canada play an important role in making refugees feel at home. But after defining myself as a "refugee" for eight long years, I found I was unable to remove the "refugee" tag even after I became a Canadian permanent resident a few months ago. The refugee tag for me is a personal testimony of a journey of struggle and it has now taken on a new definition by becoming a "journey of survival". Throughout my journey of struggle, the Amnesty community has been a lifeline of hope and solidarity. I'm so grateful that I'm able to write these words today because of that support.

The refugees I left behind continue their journeys of struggle, even as more countries close their borders to refugees. But if we work together and imagine a world without suffering, we can work with refugees to ease their hardships and improve their living situations. The increasing numbers of refugees are a sign of failure in our global system. The whole of humanity shares the guilt for this situation, and so it is for the whole of the international community to come together and share the responsibility for supporting refugees and begin to create a better world for everyone everywhere.



## TAKE ACTION

**PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES ONLY WORK WHEN THEY  
WORK FOR EVERYONE.**

**TELL CANADA TO END THE BAN**

REFUGEE PROTECTION IS A RIGHT



Refugee claimants can and should receive the same health screening, testing, referral and mandate to self-isolate as all others entering Canada

**On March 20, 2020, the federal government decided to shut the door to people seeking refugee protection who are entering from the US.** The government said the decision was based on the COVID-19 crisis and that it needed to take this step to limit cross-border travel to only essential travel. The measure has been renewed 16 times with no parliamentary oversight.

One year later, Canada's decision to shut the border to refugee claimants puts their lives in danger, is out of step with public health measures designed to curb the spread of COVID-19, and runs counter to our international legal obligations.

Public health measures only work by protecting everyone and fail when some populations are not

included—whether they are citizens, refugee claimants or undocumented persons. Refugee claimants can and should receive the same health screening, testing, referral and mandate to self-isolate as all others entering Canada.

Canada's ill-conceived decision to close the border as a COVID-19 public health measure will only endanger refugee claimants. Those turned away may be detained by American authorities, or they may be sent back to countries where they will face persecution. The ban also goes against Canada's international legal obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The government has lifted restrictions allowing entry to family members of citizens and permanent residents, workers, students, and others for whom compassionate entry is approved. Refugee claimants, on the other hand, remain excluded.

**TAKE ACTION TODAY** and let the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship know that refugee travel is essential travel!

***<https://www.amnesty.ca/paragraphs-pages/welcome-refugees>***

# COMING UP IN JULY/AUGUST 2021

## *We Have Always Been Here*

**By Samra Habib**

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at:

**Bookclub@amnesty.ca**



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