

Text:

The Boy at the Back of the Class

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Plot: (to support the teaching sequence)

In London sometime in the 2010s, nine-year-old Alexa is excited for the new school year to start. She's most looking forward to spending time with her best friends, Tom, Josie, and Michael. During the third week of term, their teacher, Mrs. Khan, and Headteacher, Mrs. Sanders, introduce a new student to the class. His name is Ahmet. As he settles into the empty seat at the back of the classroom, Alexa notices that he looks sad and frightened. She resolves to become his friend. Throughout the rest of the week, Alexa tries to get Ahmet's attention, talk to him, and cheer him up. But he doesn't speak to anyone, and he seems to disappear at every break. Rumors spread that Ahmet can't go to lunch or recess with everyone else because he's dangerous, diseased, or hiding some other big secret. Alexa and her friends don't believe there's anything wrong with Ahmet, though. They're determined to befriend him.

One day, Alexa hears two teachers at school calling Ahmet the "new refugee kid." Curious, Alexa asks her mum what a refugee is. Her mum explains that refugees are people who have run away from their homes because bad people have made their homes unsafe. Alexa feels sorry for Ahmet, imagining how hard it must have been for him to leave his home behind and come to a new place. She wants to learn even more about him now, so she brainstorms a list of questions to ask him. Luckily, some of her questions are answered the next day. Ms. Hemsi, the new class assistant, tells her that Ahmet is from Syria and speaks Kurdish. As a Syrian woman who speaks Kurdish herself, Ms. Hemsi helps translate for Ahmet. Now that he has Ms. Hemsi by his side, Ahmet seems more confident. He calls Alexa, Josie, Michael, and Tom his friends.

Alexa formulates a plan to make Ahmet happy: she wants to buy him a fruit that will remind him of home. So, she and her mum spend a whole Sunday searching for pomegranates. In the last shop they try, the owner—a kind, generous man in a red turban—gives Alexa two pomegranates for free. The next day at school, Alexa gives Ahmet a pomegranate during recess. Presented with the thoughtful gift, Ahmet smiles. But then Brendan the Bully, the meanest kid in Alexa's class, steals the pomegranate. Alexa tries to stand up to Brendan, and Ahmet fights back fiercely. In the end, both boys get punished for fighting, even though Brendan started the conflict. Over the next few weeks, Brendan continues to bully Ahmet, and he never gets caught. He goes so far as to ruin Ahmet's backpack, which makes Ahmet cry. A few weeks later, Ahmet gives a special presentation to the class. He tells the story of how he came to London. He and his family had to run away from their home in Syria because of a war. They sailed across a sea on a raft to Greece, where they stayed in a camp full of tents. Then Ahmet and his father walked all the way to France. From there, Ahmet traveled by himself to England. Now, Ahmet says he likes being in London, where he's safe from bombs and soldiers with guns. After hearing Ahmet's story, Alexa feels afraid for him but also proud of him for surviving.

Some days later, Alexa overhears two adults on the bus discussing how the UK's borders will soon close, and England won't accept any more refugees. This news horrifies Alexa because it means Ahmet won't be able to reunite with his family, who got separated from him during their long journey from Syria. Alexa tells her friends about this emergency, and together they decide to help Ahmet find his family before it's too late. To do so, Alexa comes up with the "Greatest Idea in the World": they'll write a letter to the Queen of England asking her to locate Ahmet's family and allow them into the country. Alexa and her friends write a letter to the Queen, but when they don't receive a response, Alexa develops the "Emergency Plan." She and Tom will go to Buckingham Palace themselves, deliver the note and ask her to help Ahmet's family. Even though this plan will likely get them into trouble, Alexa believes helping her friend is worth the risk. When they arrive, the Changing of the Guard ceremony is taking place, and Alexa desperately rushes up to a parade of soldiers to hand them her note. But the pressure of the moment causes her to faint. Alexa wakes up near an ambulance, still focused on her goal of passing on a note to the Queen. Two guards, Lieutenant Taylor and Second Lieutenant Kungu, step forward and promise to give her message to the Queen. Then a police officer drives Tom and Alexa home.

Back in her apartment, Alexa realizes she's all over the news because of what happened at Buckingham Palace. Some aspects of the media attention are positive—for instance, a few of her neighbors stop by to praise her efforts to help her refugee friend. But other aspects are negative—some news stories accuse Alexa of an "attack," and one neighbor, Mr. Greggs, rudely argues that Alexa shouldn't help refugees because they don't belong in the country. The next morning, Alexa discovers yet another unpleasant aspect of sudden fame: being hounded by reporters, who almost block her way to school. But the reporters' presence also has an unexpected benefit for Alexa and her friends. Reporters hanging around their school catch Brendan the Bully taunting Ahmet again, as well as the cruel teacher Mr. Irons standing by and allowing this harassment to happen. After Brendan and Mr. Irons show up on the news, Brendan publicly apologizes to Ahmet, and Mr. Irons doesn't return to the school again. A week later, Alexa and her friends harness the power of the media to tell their own story about why it's so important to them to help Ahmet. Their interview with a reporter rallies support for Ahmet, his family, and refugees in general. Another week passes, and Alexa and her friends start to face the disappointing possibility that the Queen might not be able to help Ahmet at all. But then Lieutenant Taylor and Second Lieutenant Kungu arrive at their school with a letter from the Queen. Although the Queen has not found Ahmet's family, she promises that many people are searching diligently. She also invites Alexa, Ahmet, and the rest of their friends to Buckingham Palace for tea.

Two weeks later, on Alexa's 10th birthday, her class throws a surprise party. The celebration is for both Alexa and Ahmet, who has just received the news that his parents have been located and granted asylum in the UK. He'll be able to reunite with his family in London now. Everyone is overjoyed. Ahmet tells Alexa that she's his best friend, and Alexa can't wait to go on more adventures with him.

Genre:

Realistic fiction

Tense:

The main narration of events generally uses the past tense, though the dialogue is in the present tense.

Structure:	<p>Realistic fiction is a genre of storytelling that presents narratives grounded in plausible events and relatable characters, lacking elements of fantasy, science fiction, or the supernatural. While these stories are not necessarily based on true events, they could occur in the real world, making them accessible and identifiable to readers. Typically, realistic fiction zeroes in on the personal growth of individuals or small groups rather than grand, world-altering conflicts. This genre encompasses various forms, including novels, short stories, television shows, movies, and graphic novels. Common themes explored within this genre include character development and relatable human experiences, often exemplified in coming-of-age stories or bildungsromans.</p> <p>Contemporary literature refers to written works produced from the mid-20th century to the present. Most timelines mark the start of contemporary literature around 1945, at the end of WWII. Contemporary works often reflect the world we live in. Some common features include: Realistic, well-developed characters; Modern or recent settings; Character-driven stories over plot-heavy ones; Exploration of social issues, identity, and personal struggles; A sense of emotional complexity, especially rooted in post-war realities. While the writing style is modern, it often carries emotional weight. The emotions are often shaped by historical, cultural, and personal upheavals of the 20th and 21st centuries.</p>	Theme/s:	<p>Friendship and Empathy: The story highlights the power of friendship and the importance of understanding and supporting one another, especially in difficult times.</p> <p>The Refugee Experience: It sheds light on the struggles faced by refugees particularly children and encourages readers to empathise with their situations</p> <p>Courage and Activism: The children's determination to help Ahmet and their efforts to reunite him with his family demonstrate the impact of collective action and the innocence of youth in addressing serious issues.</p> <p>Adventure: The friends embark on a 'daring plan' which involves an adventure to try to reunite Ahmet with his family.</p> <p>Social Commentary: The narrative gently explores complex issues such as the refugee crisis, war, prejudice, and the importance of kindness, compassion and empathy.</p>
Perspective:	First person narrative told through the eyes of Alexa, a nine-year old girl who befriends a Syrian refugee named Ahmet. Alexa's narrative provides a child's perspective on the refugee crisis, highlighting the importance of friendship and kindness in a world that doesn't always make sense. The child's first person point of view, allowing readers to relate to the 'adult' concepts and consider the views of others, promoting empathy and compassion. The narrative is a blend of innocence and wisdom, focusing on the subtle nuances of the classroom community learning the true meaning of compassion and acceptance.	Familiarity of content:	The Syrian refugee crisis is the result of the Syrian civil war that began March 15th, 2011. This is the story about how a nine-year-old child and three classmates are full of empathy for Ahmet, a boy that comes to their school as a refugee from Syria (he is the boy at the back of the class). Set in London where Ahmet moves to after fleeing from Syria.
Other language choices:	<p>First-person child narrative – allows for 'child friendly language' that makes heavy themes like war and displacement relatable to young readers.</p> <p>Juxtaposition – contrast of 'ordinary playground problems' (like bullies and missing sweets) with the 'extraordinary' gravity of war and migration.</p> <p>Symbolism – simple, everyday objects are used to represent deep emotional concepts (pomegranate = Ahmet's culture and memories of home; backpack = the weight of his journey and the things he lost).</p> <p>Distinct character dialogue – shows the varied societal attitudes, using distinct voices for friends, teachers, and bullies to illustrate perspectives ranging from kindness to prejudice.</p> <p>Humour and misquotation – maintains a light tone despite the serious subject matter (e.g. 'I've said my peas' instead of 'piece').</p> <p>Sensory language – brings the setting to life through vivid descriptions of shops, markets, and fruits to help readers visualise the environments described.</p> <p>Anonymity of the narrator – intentionally withholding the narrator's gender or name until the end, allowing the readers to project themselves more easily into the character.</p>	Background Knowledge:	<p>Immigrant: a person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country.</p> <p>Asylum Seeker: when a government accepts that your home country is unable or unwilling to ensure your protection and allows you to remain in their country temporarily.</p> <p>Refugee: a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.</p> <p>Carer: a family member or paid helper who regularly looks after a child or a sick, elderly, or disabled person.</p>
Tier 2 & 3 Vocabulary:	<p>Ingenious: Clever, creative, and resourceful (for characters with smart solutions or ideas).</p> <p>Rascal: A mischievous or dishonest person, often used in a playful context to describe a child who is a bit naughty but endearing.</p> <p>Gangly: Describing a person, especially a young one, who is tall and thin with long limbs, often used to depict awkwardness in movement.</p> <p>Intolerance: Lack of acceptance for different opinions or beliefs, a theme that may arise in the context of the story's exploration of friendship and understanding.</p> <p>Gadgets: Small electronic devices or tools that can be useful, often representing innovation or creativity in the narrative.</p>	Diversity:	Onjali Q. Rauf is a bestselling children's author and human rights activist. The story is based upon her own experience of helping refugee families surviving in Calais and Dunkirk and it is inspired by a Syrian mother and baby she encountered in a Calais refugee camp.
Media & other links:	Novel Study SEL Guides (Jan 2020).pdf	Links to previous texts:	Firework Maker's Daughter (Y3)