



The Boat People

by Sharon Bala

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The Boat People is Canadian writer, Sharon Bala's, debut novel. It is a fictional response to real events, and is structured via three parallel stories. The central story belongs to Mahindan, a Tamil Sri Lankan, who arrives in Canada by boat with his son Sellian and over 500 other refugees in 2009. Priya is a Tamil-Canadian law student who's been plucked from corporate law to assist the refugees' defense. Grace is a Japanese-Canadian whose new government job is to adjudicate refugee status.

Bala tries to humanise these characters by revealing their personal and inner lives, ultimately showing how refugee status is determined less by facts, than by the arbitrary collision of the law with the refugees', lawyers', journalists', politicians' and bureaucrats' stories. Grace realizes she's been given an impossible role as 'judge, jury and executioner.' How can she apply black and white rules to people who've come from a chaos of grey?

Bala's novel is elegantly written, beautifully paced and well-researched. Her finely observed details bring each character's world to sensual life. Importantly, she resists indulging in the gore of war, instead focusing on the torture of the refugees' limbo-like processing experience. She also takes time to evoke Mahindan's past life, showing us how no-one would abandon a beloved homeland, and risk their life, without reason.

This novel's overt agenda to give sympathetic voice to 'illegals' puts it at risk of 'preaching to the converted.' This agenda somewhat flattens the characters of Priya and Grace: their specific migrant backgrounds seem too convenient, over-determined by the writer's plotting and politics. Nevertheless, their professional perspectives are essential for Bala to expose the cruelty of an otherwise hidden system.

Ultimately, **The Boat People** shows us how, when the powerful brutalise the powerless—with guns or laws—tidy notions of 'right/wrong', 'legal/illegal,' and 'truth/lies' become useless. A humane attitude must begin with kindness and compassion.

Reviewed by: hcgildfind.com

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