

# The Boy on the Beach: My Family's Escape from Syria and Our Hope for a New Home. By Tima Kurdi

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## *The Boy on the Beach: My Family's Escape from Syria and Our Hope for a New Home*



Tima Kurdi

Toronto: Simon & Schuster Canada, 2018, pp. 241.

**T**he *Boy on the Beach* is a heart-wrenching memoir, where Tima Kurdi details her family's harrowing experiences as a refugee during the Syrian civil war. At the same time, the book is a scathing critique of global geopolitical dynamics and their impact on the resettlement provisions offered to asylum seekers. The author dispels dominant discourses of the "dangerous refugee" by offering a complex, relatable story of her family's journey. Kurdi, a Syrian-Canadian, is a hairdresser-turned-social-activist, public speaker, and advocate of human rights worldwide. Her entrance into advocacy was incumbent upon the death of her nephew Alan Kurdi, as her brother's family were attempting to flee their war-torn home in Syria.

Between 2011 and 2017, during the onset of Syria's instability, armed conflict, and displacement of innocent civilians, the Kurdi family, along with millions of other Syrians, sought the safety and refuge of a land without threats of violence. By sharing her family's tribulations, Kurdi gives the readers a personalized perspective into the lives of political refugees. Her tale dispels the biased reports that refugees fleeing war are terrorists. As Kurdi explains, refugees are "victims of terrorism and global geopolitics, yet they [are] increasingly viewed with the same suspicion and hostility as the terrorists that they had barely managed to escape" (112). The narratives in this memoir are rife with passion, love, and above all, humanity.

The story begins with Tima Kurdi recanting her idyllic upbringing in Syria, surrounded by a loving, inseparable family. By retelling her childhood, she exposes the commonalities between Westerners and ordinary people in the Middle East; the tender embrace of loved ones; their successes and tragedies; and the minutiae of a modern upbringing mingled with the dreams and aspirations of prepubescence. Tima goes on to explain: "I have shared this to show you that all during my childhood, we were a regular middle-class family, perhaps not so different from yours" (9).

Then we see the author navigating homesickness and integration into her host community in Canada, while being physically separated from her birthplace, and from her family and friends who become caught in the midst of a full-blown war. Kurdi became a helpless bystander, forced to witness the massacres and bombings, wondering if her family was safe, and longing to help them reach safety. Many of her attempts to bring her family to Canada were halted

by bureaucracy, and she became increasingly consumed by anger and guilt. The stories of her family's struggles became a vehicle for her advocacy, and the Canadian government's exaggerated claims of being a global saviour further fuelled her desire to vie for the rights of all asylum seekers.

Although Kurdi migrated to Vancouver in the early 1990s, her perspective on forced migration is current, direct, and inspiring. As a Syrian who immigrated to Canada well before the war, she was unequipped to understand the hardships of refugee life. Then she learned of the conditions that her family had to endure. As an outsider looking in, Kurdi's involvement gained momentum when her nephew, Alan Kurdi, "the boy on the beach," was found dead after his family attempted to cross the waters between Turkey and Greece. After learning of Alan's death, and of the media's simple representation of him as "the boy on the beach," she made it her objective to help refugees around the world. She sought to share their real stories and real names, rather than watching them presented as faceless statistics in the news.

Only after the tragic death of Kurdi's sister-in-law and two infant nephews did the Canadian government and the international media listen to her pleas for granting asylum to her family. Regarding her brother Abdullah, the father of Alan Kurdi, Tima reports that suddenly "his expired passport and lack of UN card were no longer obstacles. The authorities treated him with the dignity and humanity that he and his wife and children had been denied for so many years—dignity that millions of refugees were still being denied" (156). After media attention had stained their reputations, the Western immigration authorities sought to evade their complicity in these deaths, adopting the roles of impartial caregivers who had suddenly made refugees their priority. As Canada's former immigration minister Chris Alexander explained, "People called me a 'child killer'" (222), and the Kurdi family's tragedy "caused his party to lose the election" (222).

*The Boy on the Beach* is an insightful, informative account of the refugee crisis. It conveys the actualities of refugee lives, which have been largely distorted by popular culture and media accounts through a one-sided view that refugees pose security threats to Western nations. By telling her family's own story, the author provides a rich account of the throngs of refugees. She invites us to hear their voices, regardless of whether they speak English or have been silenced by fear or by death. Kurdi captures the plight of those displaced by

violence and warfare. She opens a dialogue, allowing others to speak and share their own experiences of seeking refuge. After reading this memoir, others will sympathize not only with the Kurdi family, but also with other refugees who have been portrayed as threats to society. This is an awe-inspiring story of survival and perseverance, one that has the potential to promote change in the public's understanding of forced migration. *The Boy on the Beach* reminds us of the complexities and commonalities of human suffering. The Kurdi family's story contains a message about how the traumatic experiences of refugees do not define their entire existence, nor are their pleas for assistance inherent flaws, but rather testaments of an oppressive humanity determined to ruin their livelihood.

For researchers, scholars, educators, policy-makers, and immigration officials, this memoir offers an in-depth narrative of forced migration in the modern world. Tima Kurdi's

story has power to inform the international community about the dire need to support refugees. Her voice is a potent instrument for social change. The Kurdi family's experiences have already affected settlement policies worldwide. Organizations dealing with forced migration can benefit from further disseminating this story, as a means to shift public perceptions of refugees, and to begin developing strategies to overcome the stigmas attached to them.

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