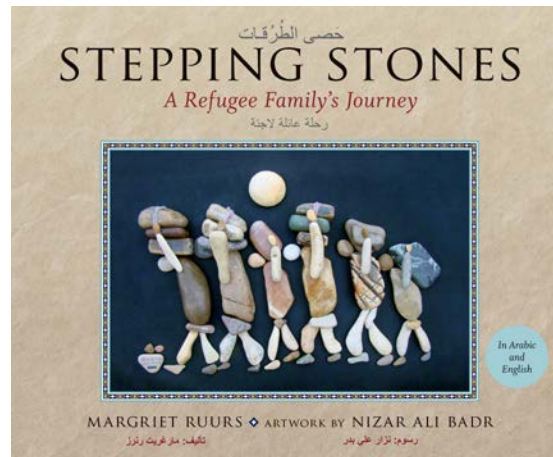


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STEPPING STONES

Margriet Ruurs/Arabic translation by Falah Raheem
Illustrated by Nizar Ali Badr



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

When civil war comes to Syria, Rama and her family are forced to flee their once-peaceful homeland, seeking refuge on foot and only able to take what they can carry on their backs. They walk a long way to the sea and board a small boat with the hope of finding a peaceful and safe place to live.

Illustrated by Syrian artist Nizar Ali Badr, *Stepping Stones* is a powerful narrative about the confusion, fear and displacement brought on by war and the importance of hope.

THEMES

Refugees:

- Rama and her family join the countless numbers who have fled war in Syria and become refugees; the anguish of such displacement is seen through the eyes of a child.

Syria:

- The impact of the Syrian Civil War is central to the text.

Hope:

- Rama clings to the hope of finding peace and being accepted in her new land.

Freedom:

- Rama recalls when she had the freedom to do things that most people take for granted. As the family flees, they too dream of regaining this freedom.

Action:

- Through the text, the author shows younger readers the power of action and offers tangible ways in which readers can learn more about and help refugees.

WRITING STYLE

Stepping Stones is written in first person, past tense. With the text set in both English and Arabic, the author uses sparse language to convey Rama's story purely and warmly. It addresses the horrors of war, yet in a delicate way that will reach children; it will instigate discussion and assist children to understand the refugee issue and offer ways in which they can help. This text is suitable for younger readers, but is also applicable to older students.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the text, take time to explore the front cover, in particular the stone artwork. Knowing that the subtitle of the book connects the

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illustration to refugees, have students share their prior knowledge of refugees including why people become refugees. Consider using the illustrations alone and asking students to compose the accompanying text before reading *Stepping Stones*.

- Using the illustration on the front cover, discuss the challenges faced by refugees.
- The conflict facing Rama and her family is unveiled in the first sentence. Discuss the way in which the author foreshadows the issue rather than telling the reader exactly what has happened to the family. Why is this a more effective way to tell a story?
- Use the foreword of *Stepping Stones* to help contextualise the text. Look up some of Nizar Ali Badr's artwork from his Facebook page to understand why Margriet Ruurs was drawn to his work.
- Discuss the author's comment that Nizar Ali Badr has the ability to 'display such emotion' through a medium as cold and emotionless as stone? Why is this book such a powerful advocate for the plight of refugees?
- Discuss the symbolism of the title of the book: *Stepping Stones*.
- Unpack Albert Einstein's quote at the start of the book: 'Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding'.
- Discuss Margriet Ruurs' use of figurative language throughout *Stepping Stones*. Some examples include:
 - I played on sunbaked soil
 - Wrapped in silk and hugs
 - We set sail on waves of hope and prayer
 - My feet felt like the rocks
 - My legs were trees, rooted to the soil
- Why does Jedo say that they weren't 'truly free'? Why is it important to him that they be free to 'dance our dances' and 'pray the prayers of our choice'?
- Discuss the metaphor of the 'trickle', 'stream' and eventually 'river of people' leaving Syria. Why is this a 'stream driven by hope' when life in Syria seems so hopeless?
- Discuss the repetition of the word 'free' throughout the text. How is this device used to create impact and emphasise the importance of freedom as a theme in *Stepping Stones*? Are there freedoms mentioned by Rama that we take for granted? Why are books such as *Stepping Stones* important in reminding us to value that our basic needs are being met? Does this prompt you to want to help those for whom this is not the case? What can you as a class do to help? See the notes at the back of the text for websites and assistance with this action.

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- How has Margriet Ruurs instigated a cycle of action to help refugees? How does her book raise awareness and assist children in developing their own ability to act for the betterment of others?
- What can be learnt about Syrian customs and traditions from *Stepping Stones*? Use examples from the text to support your response.
- Rama ponders whether the ‘moon rises the same way in other places’. In light of this, discuss the deliberate inclusion of the sun and/or moon on each page opening.
- How are your childhood memories similar to and different from Rama’s?
- Rama’s grandfather tells stories of their ancestors. How does this help the reader to understand why the family stays so long before fleeing and why Rama wonders if they will ever return?
- Discuss the author’s language choices. They are simple, yet effective. Why is this such a powerful tool in telling this story?
- How important are the messages of peace, hope and love in *Stepping Stones*? How are these conveyed?
- Do you think this ‘river of strangers’ will always feel like strangers to one another? Discuss.
- Rama comments that she cries in her Mama’s lap, ‘even though I am a big girl’. Why is Rama crying? Why is it important that she can shed these tears? Reflect on a time you cried, even though you felt too old. How does this reflection help you to empathise with Rama?
- Why does Mama plant seeds to remember those who did not survive the journey across the sea?
- Why is it difficult for Rama and her family to leave Syria?
- Rama’s family is met by accepting and gracious neighbours in their new land. Is this always the case? Why has the author decided to have Rama encounter positive neighbours, rather than hostile ones? What message is she sending to her audience?
- What examples of action are evident in the story?
- What challenges face refugees? Use Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* to help explore these challenges.
- Why does the world see people like Rama and her family as ‘the lucky ones’? Are they the ‘lucky ones’? Discuss.
- Discuss the artist’s ability to convey emotion through his artwork. How has he achieved this?
- Create your own stone artwork to depict the emotions encountered in *Stepping Stones*.
- View the following clips from Behind the News and YouTube to help contextualise the war in Syria (for older students):
 - <http://www.abc.net.au/btn/story/s3525259.htm>
 - <http://www.abc.net.au/btn/story/s3720534.htm>

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- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_88DhYEAzU

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I was inspired to write *Stepping Stones* by Nizar Ali Badr's amazing art. The plight of refugees from Syria is very much in the news right now. Many countries welcome refugees with support organisations offering them a safe place to live. I wondered how I could contribute to the hard work of many volunteers and decided that writing a picture book might help to bring awareness and understanding but perhaps also help to raise funds for refugee causes.

Rama's story is a specific one, of a child and her family having to flee war. But it is, unfortunately, also a universal story of many living in times of war. My parents lived through WWII in The Netherlands; their stories formed the backdrop of my happy, post-war childhood.

Having emigrated to Canada, I was also able to add my own experiences of leaving home and loved ones. But I also wanted this story to have a happy ending – I believe that it is important for children to understand the refugee crisis but also to know how we can help others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margriet Ruurs is the author of many award-winning books for children. She was inspired to write *Stepping Stones* after she stumbled across the amazing stone artwork of Nizar Ali Badr on the Internet and saw the opportunity to both raise funds to help Syrian refugees and bring the work of Nizar Ali Badr to a wider audience. Margriet enjoys speaking about reading and writing to students at schools around the world. Her adventures have taken her to such countries as Myanmar, Pakistan, Laos, Tanzania and many others. Margriet was born in The Netherlands but has been a Canadian for most of her life. She lives with her family on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nizar Ali Badr was born and still resides in Latakia, Syria. Living in one of the oldest civilizations on Earth, he has always been inspired to paint, sculpt and draw. In his walks along the seashore near the ancient port city of Ugarit, he always admired the stones on the beach and in the clear blue water. Now he gathers these stones and brings them home to his rooftop studio, where they become the medium for his art. These works in stone display a remarkable narrative quality, some based on the legends and tales told to him by his grandmother, others more contemporary in nature. An experienced sculptor, Nizar has never left his hometown or his country, though in his heart he



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accompanies the many Syrians who have been forced to flee their homeland because of ongoing violence.