

TEACHER'S NOTES

ZANA FRAILLON

*the bone
sparrow*



the bone sparrow by Zana Fraillon

Teachers' Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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introduction

'There's only one place Jimmie hasn't explored. Down the hill. Down near the Centre. Jonah and Jimmie had headed down there once, but stopped. There was a feeling down there. A sort of sadness in the air, and they'd both turned back without saying a thing about it.' (p 43)

Subhi lives in an Australian immigration detention centre. He has known no other life, as he was born there. Rohingya refugees are said to be one of the most persecuted people in the world. Subhi's mother and sister escaped by boat, but their Ba is still imprisoned in Myanmar, and Subhi dreams one day of meeting him. His Maá hardly eats or speaks, and his sister is always cross with him. Eli is older but acts like a brother to him which makes it all the harder when Eli is transferred to a men's camp nearby. Nasir is an elderly inmate who is another great support to Subhi for he tells him the stories he craves. The only guard who is kind to them is Harvey, but woe betide you if you cross one of the most vicious of the other guards, Beaver. Food in the camp is diabolical and there is little to look forward to, but Subhi finds some solace in his drawing and storytelling, and in his 'Night Sea'. For every night Subhi hears the 'Night Sea' outside in the desert, and finds treasures mysteriously left for him by the waves each morning.

Then he meets Jimmie, a scruffy girl who appears from the other side of the wire, and who asks him to read her dead mother's story. Together they find comfort in the tale, and in each other. But this is a dangerous place, and theirs is a dangerous friendship.

This is a powerful story of the despair caused by such incarceration, and the hope engendered by dreams, by stories, by friendship, and by love.

before & after reading the novel

- Examine the cover of the novel. What does it suggest about the novel's themes?
- After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?
- After you have read the novel, read about Zana Fraillon in reviews and articles and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

themes & curriculum topics

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Studies of Society and History, and English Language and Literacy) might be identified in this novel:

studies of society and history (SOSÉ)

• Refugees and Detention

ACTIVITY: Research the issue of children in Australian detention facilities.

Visit sites such as:

ChilOut Children out of Immigration Detention

<<http://www.chilout.org/>> and End Immigration Detention of Children

<<http://endchilddetention.org/australia/>> and 'Information about Children in Immigration Detention' Australian Human Rights Commission

<<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/information-about-children-immigration-detention>>

ACTIVITY: Subhi's family in this novel are from Myanmar (Burma) and are an ethnic group known as Rohingya refugees. Research their historical plight by visiting sites such as: 2015 Rohingya Refugee Crisis.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_Rohingya_refugee_crisis> and Hamling, Amie 'Rohingya people: the most persecuted refugees in the world' Amnesty International, 7 October, 2015 <<http://www.amnesty.org.au/refugees/comments/35290/>>

ACTIVITY: Read the following passage which describes Rohingya experiences and discuss in relation to those who criticise so-called 'boat people'. 'Some were Rohingya stories, passed down from maás to their kids since forever back. And some weren't so happy. They were stories we had to hear though. About being told the Rohingya don't exist. About having their houses burnt down, and their animals killed. About not being allowed to go to school or to work or to the hospital. About being arrested and made to build roads and dig holes for no money. About running from the police and soldiers. Lots of running. About people disappearing and people dying. About my ba being arrested for writing his poems, and not coming back. About soldiers finding Maá and Queeny and putting them on a boat with other Rohingya. About being told if they come back to Burma they'd be killed. About coming here. About every country in the world saying we don't belong. Not in this place. Not in any place.' (p 36)

DISCUSSION POINT: Dehumanising people by giving them 'numbers' rather than using their names is a controlling tactic used in prisons, detention camps and extreme situations such as concentration camps. Discuss in relation to the following quote: 'The first thing Harvey does when new kids arrive is to learn their names so that he can talk with us for real, instead of talking to us by our numbers. Most people have their Boat ID as their number. Maá is NAP-24 and Queeny is NAP-23. But I was born in here, so I have a different ID. DAR-1, that's me. The 1 is because I was the first baby ever born here. But Harvey, he won't use those numbers, not even when he's supposed to.' (p 11)

DISCUSSION POINT: Denial of one's language and history is a strategy used often by dispossessed people to cope with trauma and to assimilate in a new place. In contrast to this, Subhi wants to reclaim his culture, its stories and its language: 'Someday I'll learn Rohingya for myself so I'll be able to talk it without even trying to think how. Someday Maá will see that looking back is just as important as looking forward, no matter how much sad it carries.' (p 37) Which approach is most productive in your opinion?

DISCUSSION POINT: Community attitudes to refugees in detention are often fuelled, not simply by prejudiced or racist fear of potential violence amongst those in detention, but also by a sense of injustice or jealousy. The establishment of detention centres has been the subject of community unrest in many places. 'And then today at school, some of the kids had been talking. Saying how lucky those people were in the Centre. How they had everything. Good clothes and thousands of toys and books and computers and teachers and doctors who lived right there in the Centre so you didn't have to drive for two days if you were sick.' (p 43) Generally, they are situated in isolated communities such as Jimmie's small town. The remoteness and lack of services (such as medical facilities and schools) contribute not only to disadvantage for inmates, but also to community resentment about the perceived services offered nearby, and what local residents are lacking. Offshore detention centres are also situated in countries which are disadvantaged (eg Nauru, PNG) and which have little suitable infrastructure. Why would a government choose to build a detention centre in such places, where services are so limited?

DISCUSSION POINT: One of the problems is that little benefit flows back to the community from these centres. Stocks of food and other necessary products are generally supplied by contractors, as is staffing, which is generally managed by large companies (such as Transfield or Serco). What is the government's responsibility to a local community in this regard? What do such policies say about government attitudes to regional communities?

ACTIVITY: How do detention centres or refugees impact upon local communities either in Australia or offshore? Research and discuss some of the positive and negative stories available. [See Regional Social Disadvantage below.]

ACTIVITY: Conduct research to discover refugee 'success' stories in Australia.

DISCUSSION POINT: Secrecy about detention centres leads to a lack of community knowledge and is a government tactic sometimes used to hide the harsh treatment meted out. Governments like to present a positive face to the world, but without transparency it is hard to know whether the following quote presents an accurate picture or not: 'Government people,' Queeny says, her mouth open and the egg flying in spits on to the table. But I reckon it's the Human Rightsers. The food is always the tastiest when they come, and this is just about the best I can remember.' (p 85)

DISCUSSION POINT: 'There are boxes of them,' he smiles. 'I heard them talking, the Jackets. They're sending them all back because of the wrappers.' I can't see anything wrong with the wrappers. Eli points to the name of the bars - Freedom Bars. 'I guess they don't want us getting any ideas, hey?' (pp 55-6) Truth is often stranger than fiction. This story seems far-fetched, but it actually happened in the Manus Island Australian detention centre. [See Bibliography.]

DISCUSSION POINT: This novel presents an honest picture of how refugees are sometimes corrupted by their trauma and become capable of violent actions. 'And something happens to those men when they live all together like that, without their families, without being able to work or learn or do anything, having to listen to the Jackets and their jangling keys all the time. It changes a person, Eli says. Some of those men can be real mean to a kid when they want to be.' (p 58)

DISCUSSION POINT: Bureaucratic assessment processes determine the lives of these people; and often they are frustratingly contradictory: 'The Jackets say he has an "adverse risk assessment". But the Jackets also say they can't send him back to where he came from because he's been given refugee status. So he's stuck. Stuck in the camp until they decide he's not a risk any more. They don't even say why he's a risk, or what he's supposed to have done.' (p 86)

DISCUSSION POINT: Games and jokes help people deal with trauma, for example, read pp 92-4 and discuss.

DISCUSSION POINT: Incarceration means that real life, outside, becomes a mystery to those inside: 'But no one has a story from just Outside. None of us knows what it is like just the other side of the fences. But Jimmie does.' (p 96) What does Subhi discover from Jimmie about the world outside?

DISCUSSION POINT: The lack of education offered in detention is discussed in the novel (p 109). Invite students to research what educational facilities are offered to children in Australia's detention centres.

DISCUSSION POINT: The story of HRAT Watch and the refugee named Saleem (p 136) gives readers insight into why and how people come to use 'people smugglers' in an attempt to reach Australia. Older students might read Robin de Crespigny's *The People Smuggler* (2012) as a further insight.

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Offshore detention' has become a controversial topic in the refugee debate, for as Eli explains to Subhi: 'They say they're moving a whole lot of us from Alpha. They reckon it's getting too full in here, so we have to go to a Transit Centre. In another country, Subh. Because this country won't have us. Not ever. They're sending us to a country that can't even look after its own people. Where people die of starvation and disease. A country whose people don't want us.' (p 139) Research and discuss the options for offshore detention currently used by, and proposed by Australia.

DISCUSSION POINT: Desperation has driven some, like the men in Alpha, to stitch their lips together in order to stage a protest (p 142). Unfortunately media coverage often presents such situations as acts of provocation, rather than desperation.

DISCUSSION POINT: 'With the passing of a new law in the Australian parliament it is now a criminal offence to disclose the mistreatment of refugees in detention.' (p 231) Discuss the legitimacy of such a law.

[See **Bibliography** for resources.)

• Memory, History and the Power of Story

DISCUSSION POINT: Both Subhi and Jimmie thrive on memories: his are of their old life and the Rohingya stories of Myanmar; hers are of her mum before she died, and of the places she explores which harbour other people's memories. How do memories serve to support each of these characters?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Do you know that there are seven different types of dirt? You can tell a whole lot about a place by that dirt under your feet. All about people and animals and the history of a place, just by—' (p 53) Discuss this in relation to the landscape and history of Australia.

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Many years, no rain. Then you be born, Subhi, and that rain fall from sky. Just like this. Just like it be waiting to flood on you head. Just like whole country waiting. Just for you.' Maá looks at me again, her smile big and wide this time, so I can see it for sure, even through the tired. I've never heard that story before.' (p 91) This memory of rain relates to the metaphorical dreams of water which Subhi has. Might his dreams be related in some way to this submerged memory of his birth?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Jimmie keeps going. "And it looks like storyteller is a job, because that's what it says you will be. You'd better get some good stories then." I don't tell Jimmie that that's what I've been trying to do ever since I can remember. It's just that the one who has the stories I want isn't here yet, is all.' ' (p 129) Ba was a poet and writer, and Subhi is an artist, writer and collector of stories. How important are these skills in his survival, and how important will they be in supporting his people in the future?

DISCUSSION POINT: Jimmie's mother's book contains the story of Anka and Oto's love, which is akin to a parable. How does it relate to the rest of the themes in the novel?

• Hope

DISCUSSION POINT: 'I always told myself that Someday Queeny will remember how to look forward again. And sitting back in the tent I realise that she is. All her talk about soon this and soon that. It's just not the way I thought it would happen. This isn't the Someday I imagined.' (p 110) How important is looking forward, and hope, in keeping a person healthy - physically and mentally?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'No, Subhi, you're wrong. A sparrow in the house doesn't mean death. It means change. Waking up new and starting again. Subhi, a sparrow in the house is a sign of hope.' (p 220) Discuss the appearances of the sparrow in this book and how they relate to this statement.

• Grief

DISCUSSION POINT: Subhi's mother suffers a depressive illness caused by grief over the loss of her husband, home and country; her children Subhi and Queeny respond to their own grief via storytelling/fantasy and anger/rebellion respectively. Jimmie, her brother Jonah, and father also suffer grief over the loss of their mother/wife, and respond to it in individual ways. Discuss the theme of grief in this novel and the various responses to such feelings.

• Moral Dilemmas

DISCUSSION POINT: Harvey protects Beaver because he once saved his life. Subhi knows that in confessing to Beaver having murdered Eli, he is implicating his friend, Harvey. Is keeping a secret justified when you are trying to protect others?

DISCUSSION POINT: Subhi tells Eli where the gap in the fence is in case he ever needs a back-up plan. But Eli refuses to escape and leave his friends behind. What sort of strength would this take; to ignore the possibility of escape in order to remain faithful to your comrades?

DISCUSSION POINT: Subhi hides the knife believing it to be a good thing, to prevent a dangerous incident, but later his decision proves fatal to Eli. How do we reconcile good intentions with bad outcomes?

DISCUSSION POINT: What other moral dilemmas do the characters face?

• Regional Social Disadvantage

DISCUSSION POINT: Although this is primarily Subhi's story, it is also Jimmie's. For hers is one of disadvantage too. Her unskilled worker dad has had to frequently uproot his family in order to find work. Since the death of her mother, his shiftwork has meant that Jimmie is frequently left unattended unless Jonah, her older brother, is at home. They reside in a regional town which has few services. Jimmie has not learned to read due to this combination of circumstances, and yet none of her teachers have noticed. Is there a regional underclass in Australia? How closely linked is this to a lack of government support for regional infrastructure?

DISCUSSION POINT: How does Jimmie's background contribute to her empathy with Subhi? She and her dad seem remarkably sensitive to the feelings of local refugees, presenting alternative views to those of the disgruntled and jealous wider community? How has the loss of a mother also contributed to Jimmie's empathy?

[Any of the topics above might be researched online, so only sample references have been included in the **Bibliography.**]

english language & literacy

Study the writing style employed in this narrative, and examine the following sub-topics:

• Narrative Person and Tense

DISCUSSION POINT: Two alternate stories are told about Subhi in first person, present tense and Jimmie in third person, present tense. Then, Jimmie's mother's story (p 78) begins in third person, past tense. It is a parable or fairy tale about Jimmie's great-great-great grandmother Anka. Discuss the use of these three narratives in the novel and how they work together to tell the story.

• Literary Devices

DISCUSSION POINT: The title of this book is metaphorical. Invite students to explore the meaning of this title.

ACTIVITY: Find other examples of the use of these devices in this novel, using the table below to identify examples.

SIMILE	
METAPHORS	'splinters of light' (p 10)
PERSONIFICATION	
OTHER	

• Symbolism

DISCUSSION POINT: 'There are several symbols employed in this novel. For example, water is a central symbolic metaphor used to describe the barren landscape around the camp. The 'Night Sea' is what initially offers Subhi comfort at night, but as the story progresses it, too, becomes a harrowing reminder of their captivity. 'It's storming. The Night Sea crashes and slams at the tent, making the walls lean over sideways. I can hear Eli's whale thrashing about and bellowing long howls into the wind.' (p 143) Discuss the significance of the Night Sea in this narrative.

DISCUSSION POINT: Discuss some of the following symbolic quotes:

'Subhi, a sparrow in the house, that's a sign of death.' (p 18) or 'Mum said it gives us luck and protection. She said all the souls of everyone in our family, all our stories and everything, rub right into that bone and he keeps us together.' (p 76).

'But when I see that girl, my brain jumps to thinking about our guardian angel, and for a moment, a long moment, I get to thinking that maybe that girl is our guardian angel.' (p 49)

'I know right off what the stone is. It's a Pebble of Happy.' (p 80)

'And there he is. Eli's whale, as old as the universe and as big as a whole country, singing his song to the moon.' (p 228)

Discussion Point: Fences are also used symbolically and physically in this novel: 'It was Jonah who taught Jimmie to explore. Nothing could ever stop them. Especially not a fence. "A fence just means there's something interesting inside," Jonah used to say.' (p 45) What purpose do fences really serve?

• Mirroring in Parallel Plots/Characters

ACTIVITY: Subhi and Jimmie's worlds are very different, with one being inside and one outside, but also have many similarities: several things are mirrored in each story, eg. sparrow; rats; missing/dead father/mother; one sibling; grief-stricken parent. Discuss these aspects of the plots and how they work to support the themes of the novel.

• Humour

ACTIVITY: Identify incidents which are humorous.

ACTIVITY: Identify techniques by which humour is provoked. Add quotes to the following table:

SARCASM	'I tell the Shakespeare duck that I rescued from Harvey, and he looks me up and down with his little duck eyes and says that clearly I'm done for and could I please arrange for someone nice to take him when I'm dead.' (p 23)
IRONY	
EXAGGERATION	
BLACK HUMOUR	

• Structure

The structure of the story can be analysed in terms of the key narrative features used to engage the reader's attention:

a) Strong beginnings and endings to chapters are one way of structuring a narrative, for example:

Beginning: 'Nasir died today.' (Ch 17, p 112)

Ending: 'All I can think is, I'm about to die.' (Ch 4, p 30)

b) Suspense is the key to any narrative's structure. How is it created in this text?

c) Using a 'framing story or idea' makes a narrative more cohesive. In what ways is Anka and Oto's story related to both Jimmie's and Subhi's?

• Setting

DISCUSSION POINT: Choose a passage which really describes the locale vividly for you. Discuss the passage with the class.

• Characters

These include **Major characters** and **Minor characters**.

ACTIVITY: Draw up a character chart and find key quotes which give a clear picture of any of these characters, and isolate events which demonstrate their natures. Then write a brief character study of the person using the quotes and events to illustrate the points made in your summary.

QUESTION: Which character was most intriguing and why? Which character would you like to have heard more about?

• Writing Tasks

ACTIVITY: Write an acrostic poem using the letters DETENTION.

ACTIVITY: Write a diary entry by Queeny describing the riot.

ACTIVITY: Write a letter as if it was written by Jimmie to the authorities requesting Subhi's release from detention.

• Visual Literacy

ACTIVITY: Create a graphic novel interpretation of an incident in the novel.
(See **Bibliography** for resources.)

ACTIVITY: Design a new cover for this book.

ACTIVITY: Create a book trailer for this novel. (See **Bibliography** for resources.)



further quotes for discussion

1. 'I have to ask for a story. Every night. That's the rule. There are some rules that no one has to say. There are some rules you just know.' (p 46)
2. 'Writing does lie. It lies all the time.' (p 58)
3. 'But I could see straight off where the Outside men had built it all wrong. They always use Outside men to build stuff even though people in here want to help. We're not allowed to use tools.' (p 74)
4. 'You don't get it, Subhi,' Queeny says. 'It's so the Outside will remember us.' When I don't answer, she shakes her head at me. 'That's why we're all dumped out here in the bum end of nowhere, Subhi. So everyone forgets us. Don't you see? This way, we don't even exist.' (p 107)
5. 'Like sometimes, some of the oldies call me Aussie Boy. They say the way I talk sounds just like Harvey, and that even the way I walk is more Australian than Rohingya. They say it to make me feel good, but it doesn't.' (p 113)
6. 'One day everything will be covered in one gigantic blanket big enough to warm everyone. A blanket full of every story there ever was, and strong enough for every single person to hear.' (p 158)
7. 'Queeny says nothing is worse than that. Queeny says that not having a future is the worst thing of all, worse even than being sent back. But I've seen what people do when they're told they are being sent back. Maybe that's what this knife is for.' (p 163)
8. 'We're the dead rats, Harvey. Just like Queeny said. Left out to rot so no one else bothers to try. There's no keeping safe for us.' (p 209)
9. 'Of course,' he goes on, not paying any attention to my snarling at him, 'if you say what happened, Harvey's done for. Food for the fishes and all that. Because if you say what happened then they'll have to ask why Harvey didn't say anything straight off. And they'll have to ask why Harvey didn't come back to help Eli. They'll say he is as guilty as Beaver.' (p 210)
10. 'My treasures didn't come from the Night Sea at all. Or from my ba. My treasures came from Queeny. Somehow that makes them even more special.' (p 214)



further activities

1. **Compare to other fiction and non-fiction texts** which deal with refugees and detention. (See **Bibliography** for resources.)
2. **Design a poster to advertise this book.**
3. The **title of this book** is discussed above under **Literary Devices**. What other title might it have had?
4. **Debate any of the topics covered in these notes, or suggested by the novel.**
5. **Read and discuss Benjamin Zephaniah's poem 'We Refugees'**.
<<http://benjaminzephaniah.com/rhyming/we-refugees/>>
Read other poems and discuss. [See **Bibliography**.] Write some poetry of your own.

conclusion

This is a lyrical, poetic text and a very significant work of social and political commentary. It combines the skills of a creative fiction writer with the insights of an investigative reporter to create an original story drawing on actual incidents and situations. Subhi's story is enhanced by his interaction with Jimmie from outside; her empathy with him makes the lack of empathy evinced by so many all the more stark.

Readers will hopefully take from this text a strong message that caring for others extends to those who are unfamiliar to us; to those from other cultures and other countries; and that sometimes trusting one's life to the treacherous open sea is the only recourse people in dire situations have.



about the author

ZANA FRAILLON was born in Melbourne, but spent her early childhood in San Francisco. As a child Zana always had her head in a book. This could have been because she was 8 years-old before anyone realised that she was incredibly near-sighted and probably couldn't see anything further away than the words in a book. But regardless of its origins, her love of reading has remained central to her life and work. 'I grew up in a house that had a whole room full of books and comfy chairs and this was my favourite place to be.'

Zana studied history at university before training to be a primary school teacher and both these passions influence her approach to writing. Through meticulous research she has also discovered that it is essential to eat copious amounts of chocolate in order to write anything at all.

Zana has written two picture books for young children, a series for middle readers, and a novel for older readers based on research and recounts of survivors of the Forgotten Generation.

She lives in Melbourne, with her three sons, husband and two dogs, and still always has her head in a book, despite now using glasses to see anything further away. When Zana isn't reading or writing, she likes to explore the museums and hidden passageways scattered across Melbourne. They provide the same excitement as that moment before opening a new book - preparing to step into the unknown where a whole world of possibilities awaits.

See also: '12 Curly Questions with author Zana Fraillon'
<<http://www.kids-bookreview.com/2014/05/12-curly-questions-with-author-zana.html>>



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