



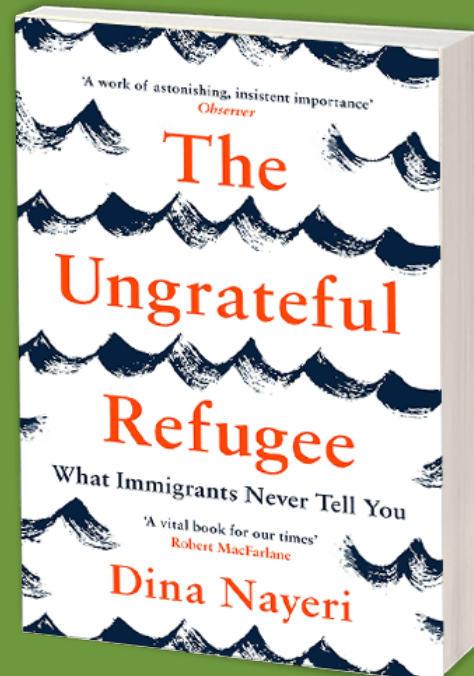
JIM'S READING CORNER

This is a very disturbing book, forcing you to look at migration from the angle of the migrant. It is also a provocative and thought-provoking book, as the title indicates, and a severe indictment of Western insensitivity and a misplaced feeling of superiority. Americans and Europeans feel that partaking even of crumbs of the Western civilisation should make refugees eternally grateful, hence the title of the book. And finally, it is an honest book, with the author analysing her own dreams, errors, and weaknesses.

Dina Nayeri tells human stories about what it is like to flee your home and to leave everything behind, what it is like to face cold officials, what it is like to be treated in a way that takes away your dignity. As a Western reader you cannot but feel uncomfortable. It is not as though it invalidated everything we believe about the need to manage migration and to ensure control of our internal borders. It should also be said that Nayeri uses figures in a one-sided way when she compares asylum seeker figures with the total population of Western Europe and concludes that Europe's "lack of generosity" is not justified by the figures. She forgets to mention that in 2015 1.8 million people entered the EU illegally, a situation which simply became untenable. She also focuses exclusively on people who are true victims and who do not in any way threaten the host communities. But again, having said all of that, it remains true that she forces you to see the individuals behind the figures and the slogans, to try and understand how difficult it is for the people who arrive in a society that is "dominant".

Dina Nayeri is the daughter of a wealthy dentist and a mother who is a doctor and has a PhD. As a child, she lives a privileged life; she does not suffer from the darker sides of the Iranian regime, even though, like all the Iranian children of her time she is traumatised by the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s; that is when she first experiences this constant "itch in her brain". But it is only after her mother, during a visit to London, converts to Christianity and starts militating for her new creed that things turn ugly. Life becomes unbearable for the family.

THE UNGRATEFUL REFUGEE WHAT IMMIGRANTS NEVER TELL YOU BY DINA NAYERI





The little girl must mount on the stage at school and to lead the chant about "Death to America"; she does it, even though her mother told her not to obey, regardless of the consequences. When the physical integrity of the mother is threatened, she decides to flee the country, with her two children. The father gets them a tourist visa to the UAE; Dina is 8 years old.

After three months, their visa expires, and they become illegals. 2 years later, they at last find a country that is ready to take them in temporarily, Italy. They arrive in a former hotel transformed into a refugee camp. They discover the boredom of the camps, the endless waiting, the storytelling of fellow asylum seekers. Later, they are given a visa for the USA and end up in Oklahoma, where they become Americans.

The arrival in Oklahoma is both a huge relief and a let-down. The family is hosted by right-wing evangelists who provide them shelter. They are grateful for this but when the hosts interfere with whom they can meet and frequent, the mother decides to find their own place. *"How come' asks Nayeri, that any country lout in Oklahoma thinks he is more refined than an educated Iranian?"* People simply do not understand that while the regime in Iran is appalling and despicable, Iranian culture is age-old and very refined. She is not ready to walk out on her civilisation (this is what she means by 'cultural repatriation', see below). People would often say to her: *"You came her for a better life, we understand that"*. Well, no, they did not, they left a comfortable life because they risked being arrested or even killed because of their beliefs. She describes how tiring it is to always must justify yourself for not being an "opportunist". *"Is it opportunistic to crave a small taste of a decent life?"* she asks. And she adds: *"When Western parents have hopes for their children, this is called 'motivation' or 'drive'; in the case of a refugee, it is called 'opportunism'"*.

Dina is strong-willed, tough, and uncompromising. She dreams of Harvard and works relentlessly towards that goal. Her philosophy is inspired by Emerson's Self-Reliance message. *"If I spend my time now 'treating myself' to useless one-off versions of those things whose quality I can't even assess,... am I not wasting my time and life?...The key is to have a wide range of those things and to have them for good, regularly; you do not become*

refined because you drink a good Merlot one time." Instead of taking it easy and enjoying the small treats of life, she works like mad, and she trains brutally to become a taekwondo expert. Eventually this helps her get into Princeton, then later Harvard.

The success does not erase the suffering nor the self-doubt she experienced. A first marriage founders before she meets Sam with whom she has a daughter. She starts writing; after two novels she decides to write about refugees and her own experience. She also inserts the stories of other Iranian refugees. The *Ungrateful Refugee* is structured along five parts (1- Escape; 2- Camp; 3- Asylum; 4- Assimilation; 5- Cultural Repatriation). These are in fact the stages the (successful) asylum seeker goes through. Many of course never make it to stage 3.

Before authoring the book, she returns to the camp in Italy, which has again become a hotel. She also travels to Greece to visit the notorious camp of Moria, filthy, over-crowded, bleak. She cannot do much for the migrants parked there, but she talks to them, listens to their stories, and tries to make them feel respected. She has long conversations with an aid-worker, Paul, who tells her about life in the camp. He quotes Roland Barthes when talking about the waiting imposed on the refugees: *"They rob you of your sense of proportion and of your dignity."* and he adds: *"This is the prerogative of all power."* He also says: *"It would be nice if you could give people food and clothing without taking away their dignity. Accepting charity is an ugly business for the spirit, it rubs you raw."* And this: *"The complicated thing is that dignity changes as different needs are met. When you come from Lesbos, dignity is that pre-package of shampoo, deodorant, eggs, and coffee. Then the package becomes humiliating."*

Nayeri spends time in the Netherlands, where she meets migrants, lawyers, officials, and NGOs. One of her interlocutors is Ahmad Pouri, "the refugee whisperer", who spends days and nights helping refugees. He tells her about his experiences with desperate people and indifferent officials. He introduces her to the techniques of the officials interrogating the refugees. *"They look to reject, not to rescue, they are mostly looking for inconsistencies and reasons to say 'no'"*. He quotes this official who after a long interview with a refugee is overheard telling a colleague: *"Today I had a*



real and true political dissident. It was hard work, but after three hours of pressing, I got a contradiction out of him, and I sent him packing." Nayeri learns about the 'sexual orientations test', or the 'religious devotion test', depending on the latest trend concerning asylum seekers in the host country. Strangely enough, he hardly ever hears again from the refugees he has helped; it is as though they want to forget about the time when they were totally dependent on people like Pouri.

It is also in the Netherlands where Nayeri hears about the tragic end of an Iranian refugee called Kambiz. He had left Iran in the same circumstances as another Iranian boy, Kahweh. Both experience hardship, but one of them makes it in the end, while the other commits suicide by self-immolation after years of hardship, illegality, and no possibility of working nor studying.

Towards the end of the book, Nayeri refers to the recent decision of France to grant citizenship to an African who had saved a baby. *"Suddenly he belonged to France. If he had committed a crime, he would of course still be an African."* This is an angle I had not seen at the time. Nayeri's reaction, when you think about it, is perfectly understandable. The immense value of this book is to challenge the Western reader and to question the wide-spread sense of superiority and complacency that go with belonging to the "dominant" culture. I would, however, add, that we should not either fall into the opposite trap, that of systematically denigrating our own culture and making it responsible for all the evil in the world.