

What Strange Paradise

Omar El Akkad's knows about the cultural, historical, and political forces that drive countless people to migrate illegally, but in *What Strange Paradise*, he leaves those things aside and focuses instead on telling the stories of the people at the core of the migrant crisis. This book is hard to read because it brings to the page the fear, suffering, language barriers, injustices, and risk of death that come with leaving home for some other hostile place, but it's also a pleasure to read, because hope and kindness light the story in unexpected ways.

The Calypso, a small old fishing boat, overloaded with people, has sunk. The bodies of those onboard have been lost at sea, or litter the beach of an unnamed island struggling to cope with the throngs of undocumented migrants who reach its shores with increasing frequency. The only survivor is a nine-year-old Syrian boy named Amir. Amir wakes up on the beach scared and alone, his face down in the sand, and runs away from the men who approach him yelling in a language he's never heard before. Luckily for Amir, he runs into Vänna — a local teenage girl who lives with her stern parents. She helps Amir to hide, feeds him, and eventually takes him to a local refugee camp. But conditions in the camp are terrible, so the woman who runs the place opts to send Amir to see someone on the other end of the island who might be able to get him back home on another boat. Vänna, despite being so young, becomes Amir's guardian and guide in this perilous journey.

Told in alternating chapters that chronicle Amir and his family's life until — and during — the disastrous trip, and everything that happens to him after reaching the shores of the island, *What Strange Paradise* is the story of two children pushed together by a random encounter, and the ways they manage overcome fear and the language barrier that separates them.

El Akkad's precise prose allows him to inject heartfelt observations throughout the novel. For example, Amir always keeps in mind his father's saying that people persist through poverty and war, because "What else is there to do?" He also considers "aspirational Westernness," the idea that the West is the ultimate goal, which allows him to put the thoughts of non-Westerners at the center of the story. In *What Strange Paradise*, Eritreans, Egyptians, Syrians, Palestinians, Ethiopians, and Lebanese people all share a dream: To escape their lives and find a better place to live, a nicer future for their children, and an existence away from poverty and the chaos of war and political persecution.

This dream pushes them forward and permeates every aspect of their lives. It also makes them do illegal things like procuring false documentation and paying a lot of money to human traffickers in order to reach new shores. In other cases, migrating is something they think about constantly but don't actively pursue. For Amir's mother, for example, watching bland soap operas is like going to school:

He knew the reason his mother watched these shows had nothing to do with the storylines. Instead she focused on mouthing and reciting the actors' words, bending and flattening the vowels just so. And he knew the accents of the actors sounded common and vulgar to her, but if she ever hoped to avoid the immigrants' markup, every last trace of home in her voice had to be wiped clean. She needed to sound like the place in which she hoped to restart her life.

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While Amir is the main character, Vänna shares the spotlight, emerging as a hero who embodies the best humanity has to offer, even as her stern home life leaves her feeling homeless and abandoned. And she's not the only compelling side character — there are people who show up only occasionally, yet become powerful ghosts who haunt the narrative until the last page. For example, there is a pregnant woman named Umm Ibrahim on the boat. Umm forms a bond with Amir, and the fact that she's pregnant and that her state is what pushes her to migrate under dangerous conditions make her special. Umm has a plea in English she's memorized, and she repeats it time and again during the trip: "Hello. I am pregnant. I will have a baby on April twenty-eight. I need hospital and doctor to have safe baby. Please help." Amir makes it, and our hearts rejoice at that, but the ghosts of Umm and her unborn child keep whispering her plea — a plea that's painfully real — to us, long after we've turned the last page.

What Strange Paradise is a book of extreme opposites. On one side there are men from the island's military forces looking for Amir, and on the other there is Vänna, who will do whatever it takes to get a strange boy she just met, and with whom she can't communicate, to safety. And the opposites don't stop there; hope and despair, past and present, possibility and unlikelihood, kindheartedness and cruelty — they all fill the pages of this book with an exploration of all the sides of humanity. While this constant contrast is interesting, perhaps El Akkad's biggest accomplishment with *What Strange Paradise* is that it manages to push past political talking points and shocking statistics to rehumanize the discussion about migration on a global scale, and it does so with enough heart to be memorable.