



*Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey*

Written by Margriet Ruurs

Illustrated by Nizar Ali Badr

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*Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey* captures the emotions involved in the experience of leaving home and changing countries. The stone illustrations shout out the happiness of home, the danger of war, the fear of running and fleeing, and the uncertainty of starting over in a new place. *Stepping Stones* is a bilingual book written in English and Arabic. With sparse poetic prose, the author and illustrator tell the story of Rama and her family, who live in a Syrian village along with their animals, garden, extended family, and neighbors. As the civil war draws closer to their home, neighbors pack up their belongings and flee. Rama and her family finally have to make the same hard decision and quickly leave with only what they can carry. Rama, along with her parents, grandfather and little brother, Sami, set out on a walk to freedom and peace. They walk for miles, finally arriving at a port where they cross the sea "on waves of hope and prayer" and arrive in a European country where they begin to build a new home.

Nizar Ali Badr's stunning stone images illustrate the story. Using small rocks, stones, and pebbles found on the seashore at the foot of Mt. Zaphon, he uses different shapes, sizes and colors to express human emotions: tragedy, love, sorrow, hope, and happiness. His images are paired with Rama's first-person narrative of the journey. Using a typical plot line of introduction / rising tension / climax / descending tension / resolution, the author and illustrator introduce young readers to the political tension that has been a part of Syrian history for years. Rama comes to understand the reason her family is considering fleeing from the political turmoil of their country. This is beautifully illustrated when she quotes her Grandfather Jedo's definition of freedom as being able to "sing our songs, dance our dances, and pray the prayers of our choice."

When war arrives, the events are narrated through Rama's eyes. Even though she realizes that Mama goes hungry when she gives Sami her food, what stands out to the young girl is that war does not impact Mama's hugs. However, fear and uncertainty are also communicated in the story. When bombs fall close to their house, Rama cries even though she is "a big girl." Then comes the announcement from Grandpa Jedo that they need to join "the river of people" and flee. She describes what she will miss in word pictures; it is the normality of life and the familiar feeling of home that she will grieve: "That night I lay in bed and cried because I knew I would never again hear the crow of the rooster, the creak of the gate, the bleat of our goat." She also voices her fear of the unknown: "I lay awake and listened to the wind, wondering if the moon rises the same way in other places."

Even though the events are seen through a child's eyes, the story does not shy away from hard realities. Nizar's illustration of crossing the Mediterranean shows people in a boat, but others lost at sea. Both the words and the stones reflect the sadness of

losing people. When Rama and her family arrive in their new home, they plant a garden with flowers to remember those lost on the journey.

The story behind the creation of this book is as striking as the illustrations. The book was inspired by the stone artwork of Nizar Ali Badr, discovered by chance by Canadian children's writer Margriet Ruurs when she saw examples on his Facebook page. She was immediately impressed by the strong narrative and emotional quality of Badr's work. She wrote in the foreword, "In his art I saw people changing—from happy, carefree children into people burdened and fleeing. There was hurt and sorrow. But ultimately there was also love and caring. And, amazingly, all of this told with stones."

Ruurs contacted Badr to see if she could write a story using many of his artistic creations. However, contacting him proved to be a challenge because he lived in Latakia, a port city of Syria, which was caught up in the Syrian civil war. After months of trying Facebook messages in English and Arabic, a friend of a friend made contact, and Badr agreed. Badr's art, however, is created with stones and he did not have the resources to make his images permanent, so he had to recreate them before they could be photographed and used in the story. The second challenge was funding the book, because they wanted part of the profit to go towards supporting refugees. Ruurs approached Bob Tyrrell, the founder and president of Orca Books, about the project, and he readily agreed to publish the book and donate part of the sales to refugee resettlement organizations.

Books that pair well with *Stepping Stones* evoke the emotions of changing homes and adapting to a new place and language when the heart is still anchored in the old place. *Inside Out & Back Again* (Thanhha Lai, 2011) is a novel in verse that portrays a ten-year-old girl's move from war-torn Vietnam to Alabama. She transitions from being a confident school-girl to being frustrated by a new culture and language until she develops relationships with a neighbor and friends. In *The Color of Home* (Mary Hoffman, 2002), Hassan grieves for his old home in Somalia as he adapts to school-life in the U.K. In *My Two Blankets* (Irena Kobald, 2015), a young Sudanese girl describes the comfortable "coziness" of a known language, and the slow process of becoming comfortable in the language of her new country.

Margriet Ruurs is a Canadian author who has lived in many places. Her book titles reflect her curiosity about the world. She has introduced readers to diverse ways of living and knowing, including the well-known *My Librarian is a Camel*. She currently runs a booklovers B&B on an island near Vancouver, BC.

Nizar Ali Badr is a Syrian sculptor who has created several thousand pictures with stones. He lives in the port city of Latakia (ancient Laodicea). "My dream [is] to reach people's hearts and deliver a message . . . The sole purpose of my art is to serve humanity. I am interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, love, doom, sorrow, hope, happiness." His work can be explored at <https://syriancreativehavens.com/>.

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