In his memoir *Homes*, 15-year-old Abu Bakr al Rabeeah recounts what it was like to spend his childhood surviving a civil war with his big tight-knit family. Al Rabeeah arrived in Canada as a refugee in 2014. When he told his ESL teacher Winnie Yeung that he wanted to share his story to help others, she agreed to help. Over a series of interviews, the two created a book together.

Visit [www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads) to read an excerpt from *Homes* and watch Abu Bakr al Rabeeah and Winnie Yeung discuss the book.

**Note to teachers:**

*This document contains spoilers!*

If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on curio.ca with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.
Book Description

In 2010, the al Rabeeah family left their home in Iraq in pursuit of a safer life. In a turn of events they could never have anticipated, they ended up moving to Homs, Syria just months before violence began to escalate there as well. Abu Bakr, one of eight children, was 10 years old when shootings and explosions began to rock Homs — car bombings, attacks on his mosque and school, firebombs late at night.

*Homes: A Refugee Story* tells the tale of the strange juxtapositions of growing up in a war zone: horrific, unimaginable events on the one hand, punctuated by the normalcy of soccer, time spent with friends and cousins, playing video games, etc. on the other. It’s also as much the story of a family as it is the story of a war. Abu Bakr’s admiration for his siblings and parents (his father in particular) is apparent. Through all of the upheaval the family endured, his parents’ love meant they were able to experience a sense of home despite often lacking any kind of physically secure residence.

Ultimately, Abu Bakr’s family makes a new home in Edmonton and this brief portion of the book captures the challenge of feeling at ease in such an utterly
foreign landscape, even if one’s physical safety is finally secure. It’s in Edmonton where Abu Bakr meets his English language teacher Winnie Yeung, however, and first begins to share his story. With time, he begins to feel more comfortable, and Winnie decides to help him fulfil his “secret wish,” by writing a book based on her interviews with Abu Bakr.

Primary Characters

Abu Bakr al Rabeeah – A ten-year-old boy when violence in Syria breaks out, Abu Bakr loves soccer, video games and spending time with his cousins and closest friends, Amro and Ali. He also especially enjoys hanging out in the bakery where his father and other family members work before conflict makes that impossible — surrounded by the smell of baking bread and the sounds of his older male relatives at work. That is, until conflict makes it impossible for his family to continue running the bakery.

Hafedh – Abu Bakr’s father and a great role model in Abu Bakr’s life. In one of may powerful exchanges depicted in the book, Hafedh urges Bakr to think more critically about the meaning of the shotgun casings that he and a friend have been collecting for fun, and the fact that each one might signify a death.

Nihad – Abu Bakr’s mother. A steady presence in her children’s lives, she remains stoic in the face of the upheaval that faces her family, and urges her children to do the same.
Naser – Abu Bakr’s older brother by a full ten years. Naser often bosses his younger brother around and acts like one of the adults in the family.

Maryam, Abeer, Aiesha and Asmaa – Abu Bakr’s older sisters. At one point, when the family is questioned in their home by Bashar al-Assad supporters, Aiesha is transformed “from a young, shrinking girl to a calm, assertive woman,” in a shift that mirrors the changes so many of the family members undergo in the face of war.

Abrar and Alush – Abu Bakr’s younger sister and brother.

Mohammed and Ateka – Abu Bakr’s aunt and uncle.

Yousef, Abdil Aziz, Ibrahim, Dilal – Some of Abu Bakr’s cousins (Mohammed and Ateka’s children), with whom Abu Bakr’s family lives while they are briefly in Damascus. He is devastated to leave them behind after his family gains passage to Canada.

Grandmother Maryam – Abu Bakr’s grandmother, who dies shortly before the conflict truly escalates. Just two months after her death, a car bomb explodes just outside the family’s house and Abu Bakr discovers and buries a human jawbone. It is deemed a mercy that she is not forced to move again, due to the violence.

Amro – Abu Bakr’s best friend.

Ali – Another close friend of Abu Bakr and Amro.
Key Themes

🌟 CHILDHOOD – Without school to keep them occupied, children in Abu Bakr’s world make kites to help pass the time spent confined to a house in Damascus or play soccer in fields hit by bombs not long before. Much of this book centres around the unique ability of children to adjust to change and create a new sense of normal, even finding fun in the most horrifying of circumstances.

🌟 FAMILY – In Winnie Yeung’s words, “The book isn't just about the war. The book is about family. What I was so inspired by is how this family held together, their resiliency. That's what I wanted to highlight was love and this sense of togetherness that I was so touched by.”

🌟 WAR – *Homes* is, in many ways, a study of war and how tensions that start small can descend into extremism and armed conflict.

Born into a Shi’a Muslim family, Abu Bakr’s father raises his own children to be Sunni. While living in Iraq, where Sunni Muslims are the minority, Abu Bakr is mocked for having a “Sunni name in a Shi’a world.” But that mockery becomes more serious when the Sunni community begin to be the targets of violence. Abu Bakr’s father decides that to protect his family he should move them to Syria. It isn’t long before similar tensions become an issue in their new home country, all of which seems absurd to the young narrator.

See the following page for more details on Shia and Sunni.
hated parts of my life. Sometimes, I even hated my family. I questioned my faith and my religion. I questioned my father. Sometimes, I was so angry that I just wanted to hit someone, anyone. No, my heart was not clean.”

**DISPLACEMENT** – The story of Abu Bakr’s family is, of course, the story of millions of people displaced by conflict in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The al Rabeeah family’s good fortune is that they are able to immigrate to Canada as refugees, but the book underscores the fact that many families that manage to escape parts of the world affected by conflict are leaving behind dozens of other family members who aren’t so fortunate, or who are displaced to significantly less secure environments.

**SHIA AND SUNNI MUSLIMS**
Shia and the Sunni are the two main branches of the Islamic religion. The split dates back to the death of the prophet Mohammed in 632, when his companions disagreed over who is qualified to inherit his religious and political status. Tensions and conflicts between Shias and Sunnis are very similar to those that have at times existed between Catholics and Protestants. Sunnis make up over 80 per cent of the Muslim population. Shia are estimated at around 10-15 per cent.

**FAITH** – Abu Bakr’s faith is important to him. At one point, he reflects, “The sad truth was, you could not live in Syria and have a clean heart. How could you, when you live in a place where you’re randomly shot at and car bombs explode outside your home? I wanted my heart to be pure, but already I hated people and I
About the Author

Abu Bakr al Rabeeah is a high school student in Edmonton, Alta. He published his first book, *Homes*, in 2018, co-written by his ESL teacher Winnie Yeung. A first book for both authors, *Homes* was a finalist for the 2018 Governor General's Literary Award for nonfiction.

Notable Quotes from Reviews

“The western gaze reduces Syria to an abstraction of civil war, hunger, violence, and conflicting political and religious factions. But these books force the reader to face the complexities of place. In addition to war and suffering, Syria is also a home, a locus of family and memory.” — Quill & Quire

“Abu Bakr dreamed of sharing his story. Winnie Yeung can rest assured that she deserved the trust that Abu Bakr and his family placed in her ability to tell his story to an English language readership. At a time when many refugee children and families are settling in all parts of Canada, Abu Bakr’s story will build empathy and understanding. — University of Manitoba
CBC Links

- Book Page: www.cbc.ca/1.4843360
- Abu Bakr al Rabeeah’s Author Page: www.cbc.ca/1.4843439
- Winnie Yeung’s Author Page: www.cbc.ca/1.4843387
- Abu Bakr al Rabeeah, teenage refugee from Syria, tells his story with help from his teacher Winnie Yeung: www.cbc.ca/1.4867358
- 12 Canadian books to read to commemorate Remembrance Day: www.cbc.ca/1.4895736
- The Candy Palmater Show (CBC Radio): How one teacher helped a teenage refugee tell his story: www.cbc.ca/player/play/2691227903/

Other Links


Watch the co-authors discuss their book Homes: www.curio.ca/canadareads
Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from Homes found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. Look at the title of the book. Why do you think Abu Bakr al Rabeeah and Winnie Yeung chose Homes as the title?

2. Homes was written by Abu Bakr al Rabeeah, an English Language Learner, and Winnie Yeung, his ESL teacher. What steps would you take to ensure that your ideas were communicated clearly to a person who does not share your language?

3. How do you define the term obligation? What obligations, if any, do individuals, communities, and nations have to reduce suffering and protect vulnerable people around the world?

4. Why might governments deny refugees entry to their country? Which of these arguments do you find persuasive?

5. Among the biggest factors causing mass migrations of people are: poverty, environmental degradation, threat of war or violence, persecution, and pursuing opportunity. Which of these factors, in your mind, is the most pressing cause of mass migrations today? What about 20 years from now?
6. Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read the excerpt describing Abu Bakr’s day on April 18, 2014. Which details from the day are mundane? Which are exceptional? What is the impact of this tension on you as a reader?

7. The Syrian civil war caused more than 5 million Syrians to flee the country as refugees. Canada, by 2018, had taken in roughly 51,000 Syrian refugees. If you were in charge of admitting Syrian refugees to Canada, what characteristics would you prioritize among prospective settlers?

8. Winnie Yeung writes ““The book isn't just about the war. The book is about family. What I was so inspired by is how [the al Rabeeah] family held together, their resiliency. That's what I wanted to highlight was love and this sense of togetherness that I was so touched by.” What roles do your family and those close to you play in your everyday life?

Inquiry Activities

1. Students can research how the Canadian government has responded to the Syrian refugee crisis and then compare/contrast this response to that of other governments.

2. Students might investigate what resources are available in their communities to support refugees.
3. Teachers can invite a local settlement worker for immigrants and refugees into the classroom to discuss the challenges that newcomers face upon arriving in Canada. Some schools have a school-based settlement worker who could serve as a ready resource.

4. Students can watch video clips about global mass migrations, particularly those focusing on Syrian refugees. Video clips can be found on websites such as www.cbc.ca and www.curio.ca. They can organize their ideas and learning about what they are seeing according to a Think-Pair-Share.