

# Book Backgrounder: **THE BOAT PEOPLE** by SHARON BALA

## Note for teachers

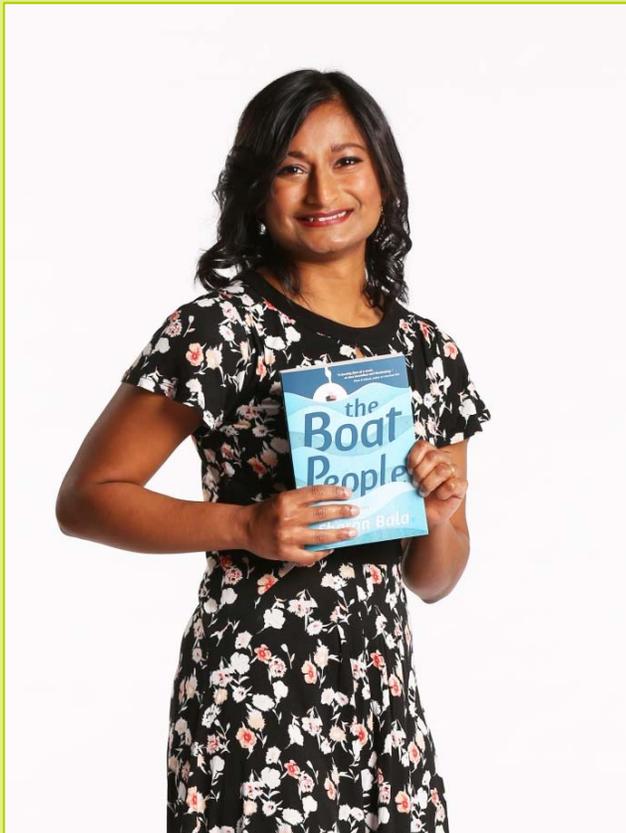
### **PLEASE NOTE: This document contains spoilers!**

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.

## Literacy strategy

If you are using this book backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words they find and research their meaning.



Watch Sharon Bala discuss her book:  
[www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads)

## Book Description

*The Boat People* is a novel about what happens to 500 Tamil refugees who flee civil war in Sri Lanka and arrive in Canada. Mahindan and his son Sellian are among them — and spend most of the book held up in the bureaucratic limbo of admissibility hearings and detention reviews, amidst fears of violence by Tamil Tigers believed to be on board their boat. During this time spent in detention and separated from his son, Mahindan remembers his life as a mechanic in Sri Lanka before and during the war.

Meanwhile, Japanese-Canadian Grace Nakamura leads the admissibility hearings, while grappling with her own family history of having been interned during WWII. And second-generation Tamil Canadian lawyer, Priya, has to decide how involved she wants to be in advocating for Mahindan and his fellow refugee claimants.

### **Admissibility Hearings**

The government immigration process used to decide if you are allowed to come into or stay in Canada.

### **Detention Reviews**

The government immigration process used to decide if you should or shouldn't remain in detention.

### **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)**

A military and political rebel group commonly referred to as the Tamil Tigers.

Attitudes shift when Ranga, a detained refugee, commits suicide. Grace, contrite, reviews the deliberations she made that led to Ranga's death after he was accused of being an LTTE member. The hearings come under public scrutiny through media coverage and judges confer a significant number of refugees their official status in Canada, along with some deportation orders (p. 345). Mahindan finally receives a date for his admissibility hearing and briefly reunites with his son who, under the care of his adoptive family, now speaks English and appears to be in good health. The novel ends as Mahindan's hearing begins, nearly a year after his arrival in Canada.

## Structure

While the novel unfolds over the course of a year, the narrative alternates between the **2002-2003** episode of Mahindan and Chithra's lives as an expectant couple, the lead up to Mahindan's **2008** migration by boat, and the **2009-2010** hearings in Vancouver.

Both Grace and Priya's narratives run parallel to the 2009-2010 hearings. There are subtle flashbacks such as Priya's uncle account of his time fighting along with the LTTE or Grace's discussion of the government's documented attitude towards Japanese-Canadians.



## Primary Characters

**Mahindan.** Protagonist who flees the Sri Lankan civil war in Kilinochchi with his son and arrives on a cargo ship in Vancouver. His job as a mechanic who provided services to the LTTE under duress implicates him. The novel ends with Mahindan entering his final hearing to plead his case.

**Sellian.** Mahindan and Chithra's six-year-old son (he turns seven by the end of the novel). Mahindan's sole companion, from whom he is separated shortly after their arrival in Canada.

**Priya Rajasekaran.** An articling student and Mahindan's legal representative, she does not speak her family's language. Nevertheless, out of curiosity or a growing allegiance to the Tamil community after what her uncle reveals, she decides to see Mahindan's case through to the end, and to work exclusively in the field of refugee law.

**Grace Nakamura.** Adjudicator for the refugee hearings working on behalf of the Immigration and Refugee Board. Throughout the book, Grace is grappling with the vast ramifications of her decisions. Fueled by her mother's growing preoccupation with Canada's history of interning Japanese Canadians, she has an unshakable feeling that history may be repeating itself.

## Secondary Characters

**Chithra.** Sellian's mother and Mahindan's wife, who died in labour.

**Sam Nadarajah.** Delivers the news that Sellian must be separated from Mahindan. He has established a life in Canada and becomes an emblem of a successful migration from Sri Lanka.

**Prasad.** Sri Lankan journalist and "model migrant."

**Ranga.** Refugee suspected of taking part in LTTE activities. After confronting these allegations in his hearing, Ranga hangs himself in his detention cell. His death essentially halts the proceedings as media coverage brings attention to the way refugee cases are being handled.

**Gigovaz.** Mahindan’s legal representative and Priya’s boss. He seconds her for Mahindan’s hearings and tries to convince Priya to pursue a career in refugee law.

**Charlika ‘Charlie’ Jones.** Tamil Alliance interpreter and a confidant for Priya throughout the novel.

**Brianne and Meg.** Grace’s twin daughters. Both teens develop an affinity for their grandmother and her quest for reparation from the government.

**Kumi.** Grace’s mother, who is becoming more indignant about the injustice of internment as she ages.

**Mitchell Hurst.** Grace’s colleague, who takes a more compassionate towards the refugee claimants than Grace is inclined to.

## The Ending

The novel ends with Mahindan walking into his admissibility hearing. Despite more than 13 failed detention reviews, he remains cautiously hopeful. Charlie and Priya escort Sellian to the hearing where he reunites with his father before it begins. Sellian demonstrates his English skills and his athleticism by running around before Mahindan. Satisfied with his child’s development and witnessing how well he has adjusted to life in Canada, he enters the hearing with the voice of his deceased wife murmuring in his mind. *“It is time, she whispered. You must go. I’m ready, Mahindan said, and stepped over the threshold”* (p. 388).



## Key Themes



### PARENTHOOD

Sharon Bala hides the novel’s true ending in the novel’s central child. While Bala does not reveal the verdict of Mahindan’s hearing, her final chapter features a well-adjusted Sellian, adapting to life in Canada. Melancholy seeps through Mahindan’s thoughts, but he understands that his detention and Sellian’s liberty are part of “the arrangements for our future” (p. 384). In many ways, *The Boat People* is Sellian’s story. The narrative ends, but the story continues through Sellian on the path paved by his father’s travails — a future which allows Sellian to become another member of Canadian society with a storied past.



### CANADIAN KINDNESS

Bala is critical of the attitudes many believe to be quintessentially Canadian. For instance, when Mahindan and his fellow refugees are handcuffed at the beginning of the novel, he notices the way guards are “careful not to pinch skin” and that “the task was performed with regret” (p. 14). These considerations contrast with the true reception the Sri Lankan refugees receive. As detainees, Mahindan and his peers only know the indifference of Canadian bureaucracy. This informs the way Mahindan views the support and advice of his lawyers and the adoption and acculturation of his son, and his son’s adjustment to Canada. To him, these gestures seem generous but disguise the fact that Mahindan has been made helpless in his situation. He has been put in this subordinate position in the name of national security.

 **RACISM**

It's clear throughout *The Boat People* that racism is a huge part of what permits a character like Fred Blair — and the larger Canadian public — to paint the Tamil refugee claimants with the same brush as the very LTTE fighters many of them came to Canada to escape. Likewise, race is front of mind for Grace, who is grappling with the ways racism influenced the state's historical behaviour towards her own ancestors.

 **DOUBT**

The novel begins with resolute characters but concludes with uncertainty. Mahindan has hope for a new life in Canada, only to find himself awaiting a verdict on his case at the novel's close. Priyah envisioned herself as a corporate lawyer, only to find herself questioning her vocation after discovering her uncle's ties to the LTTE. Grace eventually feels less secure in the the efficiency of the Immigration and Refugee Board's practices after Ranga's suicide. Doubt creeps into the lives of all three central characters when they stop to realize what they are part of. When the larger narrative behind each life comes into view, the realities of displacement, political ideologies, and a country's policies towards newcomers alter the way Mahindan, Priyah and Grace understand their stories. How much change they can bring about remains a pressing question well after the novel ends.

 **NAMING**

Sharon Bala says she likes playing around with names. She is curious about the fact that people change their names or are embarrassed by their names. She argues that how you feel about your name is central to your identity, and that the ways people pronounce our names can influence our sense of self dramatically.

## Contextual information

- Published in 2018, this is Bala's debut as a novelist.
- It won the 2015 Percy Janes First Novel Award.
- Bala's short story "Butter Tea at Starbucks" received the 2017 Writers' Trust / McClelland & Stewart Journey Prize.



## Notable Quotes from Reviews

"Skillfully braiding Grace's and Mahindan's perspectives, Bala manages wrings drama from the endless bureaucratic delays that make up the story. Hope only arrives once Grace's mother begins sharing stories of their Japanese-Canadian family's internment during World War II, leading Grace to reassess the ruthless approach expected of her; conversely, Bala's gradual reveal of the nastiness Mahindan engaged in to escape Sri Lanka complicates his otherwise sympathetic portrayal. This is a powerful debut."

– Publisher's Weekly

"*The Boat People* succeeds not because it has answers, but because of how it foregrounds the questions: who are we as individuals? Who are we as a culture, as a society? How do our beliefs, our empathy, survive in the face of confusion and the threat of deception and violence? It may not be a perfect book, but *The Boat People* is a book perfect for our times, essential reading to bring context to questions which we are, perhaps, more inclined to ignore."

– Robert Wiersema, Toronto Star



## CBC / Other Links

Why Sharon Bala believes being a writer is about giving in (CBC Books: Magic 8 questionnaire):

[www.cbc.ca/1.4479865](http://www.cbc.ca/1.4479865)

Jael Richardson's book pick: *The Boat People* by Sharon Bala (Q interview)

[www.cbc.ca/1.4489851](http://www.cbc.ca/1.4489851)

24 works of Canadian fiction to watch for in the first half of 2018 (CBC Books):

[www.cbc.ca/1.4481582](http://www.cbc.ca/1.4481582)

New novel about Tamil asylum-seekers reveals Canada's 'split personality' about refugees (The Sunday Edition)

[www.cbc.ca/1.4484756](http://www.cbc.ca/1.4484756)

How a news headline inspired Sharon Bala's debut novel, *The Boat People* (The Next Chapter Interview): [www.cbc.ca/1.4528895](http://www.cbc.ca/1.4528895)

## Critical Thinking Questions

Students may need to do some research to help them create and organize an answer.

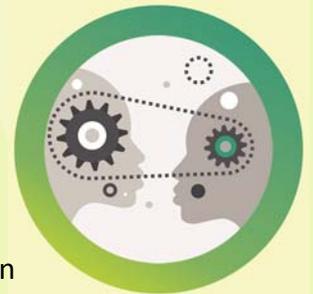


1. Look at the title of the novel. What could the story be about?
2. Canada has been described as a nation of immigrants. Why do people come to Canada? What may prevent *some* immigrants or refugees from having the same experience as others?
3. Who are the boat people in the world we live in today?

4. In what ways do immigrant parents impact the growth of their children in the new country?
5. Does Canada rightfully deserve and earn its positive descriptions when it comes to the kindness of Canadian citizens and cultural diversity?
6. What does it mean to live in Canada? By living in Canada, what rights and freedoms do you enjoy? If public safety and security were an issue, how would you feel if the rights of individuals living in Canada were interfered with or threatened in ways that did not seem in keeping with the values of the country?

## Activities

1. Students can create a KWL (i.e. **K**now, **W**ant to Know, **L**earn) chart on the subject of immigrants and refugees in Canada.
2. Students can interview a family member or a friend about their experiences of coming to Canada as an immigrant or refugee. Students can also talk to someone who works with immigrants and refugees (e.g. a social worker or a settlement worker). Teachers should be prepared to offer alternatives in case students have difficulties finding someone to interview.
3. Students should be introduced to the following terms: refugees, immigrants, boat people, Tamil Tigers, LTTE, Tamil Alliance.



4. Students can watch video clips on the subject of boat people. These clips can be found on websites such as [CBC.ca](http://CBC.ca) and [Curio.ca](http://Curio.ca). Students can organize their ideas and learning about what they are seeing in *Think-Pair-Share*.
5. Students can create a traditional or a digital survey or poll on the subject of racism for their class, for an entire grade, or for the school. Teachers will make the necessary arrangements with the school administration and colleagues to allow students the opportunity to conduct a survey outside of the classroom setting. If students create digital surveys or polls, then it will be done in accordance with school board policies, and filtered and monitored by the teacher.
6. Students can create a T-Chart outlining positive and negative impressions of the content in the backgrounder, as well as any questions the backgrounder inspires them to ask.