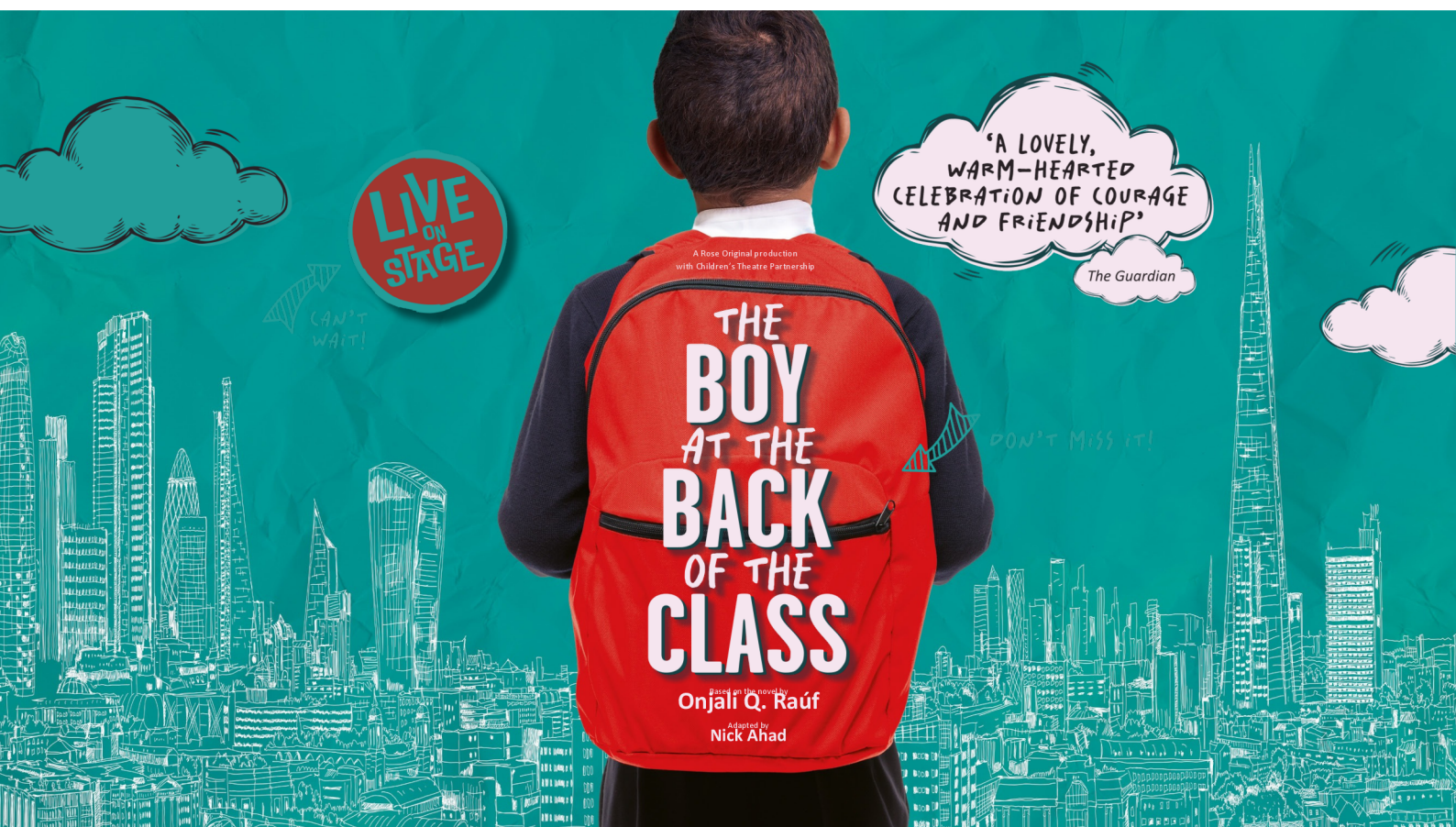


Teaching and Learning Prompts



**CHILDREN'S
THEATRE
PARTNERSHIP**

INTRODUCTION

This resource pack has been designed to support teachers in bringing *The Boy at the Back of the Class* by Onjali Q. Raúf to life in the classroom. The novel offers a powerful and accessible way for children to explore important themes, including friendship and migration, whilst promoting empathy and critical thinking across the curriculum.

The materials are designed to be practical and adaptable, supporting a wide range of teaching approaches. There is key information for teachers about the text - including the themes, characters and a focus on language, alongside some suggestions for teaching activities. Whether used in part or as a whole, this pack aims to help pupils engage more deeply with the text, reflect on its messages, and connect them to their own lives and the wider world.

This is one of a series of learning resources being developed by Children's Theatre Partnership. Look out for more on the CTP website at:
<https://childrenstheatrepartnership.co.uk>

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SYNOPSIS

There used to be an empty chair at the back of the class, but now a new boy called Ahmet is sitting in it. He's nine years old (just like me), but he's very strange. He never talks and never smiles and doesn't like sweets – not even lemon sherbets, which are my favourite!

After learning that he has fled his own war-torn country, Ahmet's classmates have 'The Greatest Idea in the World' – a magnificent plan to reunite Ahmet with his family.

An unexpected and often hilarious adventure follows, all topped off with a terrific twist.

Told from a child's perspective, balancing heart and humour, *The Boy at the Back of the Class* highlights the power of friendship and kindness in a world that doesn't always make sense and reminds us that everyone needs a place to call home.

The play focuses on refugee rights and is an important opportunity to open discussions with young audiences about the challenges facing refugees, the need to develop empathy to understand their plight and the power in social and collective action to help effect change.



THE AUTHOR

**Onjali Q. Raúf MBE is a
bestselling children's author
and human rights activist.**

Onjali is the founder and CEO of two NGO's: Making Herstory, an organisation working to end all forms of domestic violence, abuse and trafficking crimes perpetrated against women and children; and O's Refugee Aid Team, through which she mobilises aid convoys and funds to help refugees surviving across northern France and beyond.

She is the author of *The Boy at the Back of the Class* (Orion Children's Books, 2018), which won the 2019 Blue Peter Award and the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, *The Star Outside My Window* (Orion Children's Books, 2019), *The Day We Met The Queen* (World Book Day, 2020), *The Night Bus Hero* (Orion Children's Books, 2020), *The Great (Food) Bank Heist* (Barrington Stoke, 2021), *The Lion Above the Door* (Orion Children's Books, 2021), *Hope on the Horizon* (Wren & Rook, 2022), *Where Magic Grows: Unique Tales of Wonder and Enchantment* (Orion Children's Books, 2023).

Onjali is also a Patron of VIP Reading, Facefront Theatre, and NIA, and was listed as one of BBC's 100 inspiring and influential women from around the world for 2019.

Raúf was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the 2022 New Year Honours for services to literature and women's rights.

KEY THEMES OF THE STORY

Friendship

The story centres on a group of children who welcome Ahmet, a refugee boy, into their class. Their willingness to befriend and help him drives much of the plot.

Standing up for Your Beliefs and Social Activism

The children within the novel demonstrate great courage, determination and creativity in putting into action plans to help Ahmet and make their voices heard, demonstrating that anyone young or old can make a difference and force change.

Empathy and Compassion

The main characters show deep empathy for Ahmet's situation and go to great lengths to understand and support him, highlighting the importance of compassion for others' struggles.

Refugee Experience and Displacement

Ahmet's story of his journey as a refugee from Syria gives insight into the trauma and challenges faced by children fleeing war and the difficult realities of trying to start over in a new country.

Loss and Bereavement

Ahmet's separation from his family highlights the pain of loss and the deep human need for family and belonging, whilst the narrator also has had to come to terms with the death of her own father and the readjustment of family life without him.

Prejudice and Bullying

The story contrasts the kindness of the main characters with the prejudice and bullying behaviours of some adults and children, showing how biases can hurt — but also how acceptance can heal.

INTERROGATING THE THEMES:

DISCUSSION POINTS



Friendship

"She's my mum's best friend because they like laughing at the same things." (p.75)

General Questions to consider:

- What does being a friend mean to you?
- How can you show friendship without words?
- How does it make you feel when you have a good friend?
- What makes someone a best friend?

Text Related Questions:

- What led Ahmet to trust Alexa, Tom, Josie and Michael as friends?
- What makes Alexa decide to make a secret promise to be friends with Ahmet?

Debate:

- Can people with different backgrounds and beliefs be friends?
- What threatens a friendship?



Empathy and Compassion

I thought about the new boy and felt sorry for him. Maybe he had been forced to leave behind lots of things that he loved most in the world.....I tried to think of what I would leave behind if I had to run away from lots of bullies." (p.44)

General Questions to consider:

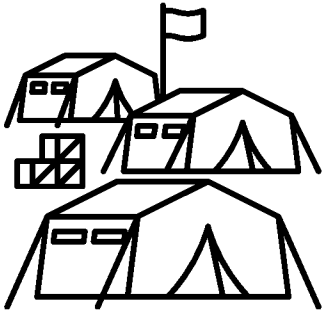
- What can you do or say to help someone feel better?
- Can someone feel more than one feeling at once?
- What can you tell about someone by just looking at them or observing their body language?

Text Related Questions:

- How do you think everyone felt when Ahmet told his story to the class? What were their emotions?
- Do you think Alexa feels more empathy for Ahmet than her friends?
- Give a reason for your answer?

Debate:

- When two people have different experiences, how can we begin to understand each other's true feelings?



Refugee Experience and Displacement

*"...the bullies refugees are running away from are a lot bigger and far more horrible. They force people to leave everything they ever had behind. Even the people they love most in the world."
(p.44)*

General Questions to consider:

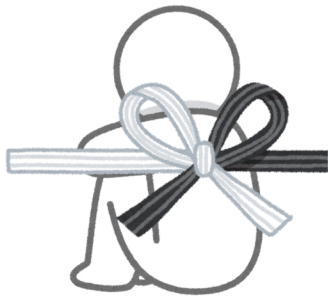
How do you think you would feel if you moved to a new place, where you didn't know anyone, didn't speak the language and were separated from everyone you knew and loved?
What would you take with you if you had to leave home quickly? Why?

Text Related Questions:

What do the comments and opinions of the adults in the story tell us about how people feel and act towards refugees?
What difference do you think it made to Ahmet when he heard that his family had been granted 'permanent asylum'?

Debate:

What makes a refugee different to someone choosing to leave the country they live to move to somewhere new?
How does being displaced from your home, affect your sense of identity and belonging?



Loss and Bereavement

"Sometimes I worry that I am forgetting him, even though I miss him every day. But when I think hard and dive right down into the deepest part of my brain, he's still there." (p.35/36)

General Questions to consider:

Can you think of different losses that people might experience?
Have you ever lost something or someone important to you?
How did it make you feel?
How do friendship and kindness help us when we have suffered a loss or are grieving?

Text Related Questions:

What kinds of grief might Ahmet be experiencing after leaving his home and family?
What does the story teach us about how to treat people who have gone through painful experiences?

Debate:

Are Ahmet's feelings of loss and grief different to Alexa's?
How might learning about Ahmet's experience of loss, change the way we think about people moving to our country as refugees?



Prejudice and Bullying

“There are lots of silly people in the world darling, people who are afraid of anyone who doesn’t look like them or dress like them or eat the same food as them that they call other people - even children like you - all sorts of silly names.” (p.230)



Standing up for your Beliefs and Social Activism

“Thanks to you - and to Josie and Michael and Tom of course - there have been thousands of people writing in and signing petitions and calling our offices, just to ask how they could help Ahmet and lots of other refugee children like him.” (p.293)

General Questions to consider:

Why do you think some people treat others badly because they see them as “different”?
How do you think being bullied makes you feel?
How does friendship help when someone is being treated unfairly?

Text Related Questions:

What does Mrs Khan mean when she says “some people just can’t see past the end of their own nose!”? What do you think she says to Mr Irons about giving Ahmet detention?
What kinds of prejudice does Ahmet face because he is a refugee?
Why does Brendan the Bully start doing devious things to Ahmet and not fighting him anymore?

Debate:

Do you agree with mum’s statement that “...you should never be horrible to someone who’s being horrible to you....Otherwise they win by making you just as bad as them.”?
What can schools and communities do to make sure everyone is safe and made to feel welcome?

General Questions to consider:

What does it mean to stand up for your beliefs? Can you think of an example?
Why can it sometimes be difficult to voice what you really think or believe?
Why does it make a difference if lots of people work together to argue for something to change, rather than just one person?

Text Related Questions:

How do the narrator and friends stand up for Ahmet throughout the story?
Why do you think the children think to write to the Prime Minister or the Queen to help Ahmet?
What made the ‘Great Plan’ work?

Debate:

Why is it important to listen to different people’s points of view before making up your own mind about what you believe?
Can children and young people really make a difference in the world? How?

MEET THE CHARACTERS

The characters within the story are well-defined and multi-layered. They have distinct roles to play within the storytelling process, each displaying key attributes that aid the reader's understanding of the complexities of the situation and challenges that Ahmet faces.

Alexa

The narrator; A nine-year-old child who tells the story. Unnamed and of ambiguous gender until the end, Alexa is the story's heart and guide.

She has suffered the loss of her father and has a close relationship with her mother and uncle and a strong group of friends.

She is the driver in befriending Ahmet and taking action to ensure he gets reunited with his family.

Key Attributes:

- Kind-hearted, Empathetic and Compassionate
- Curious, always asking questions about the world
- Good Imagination and Problem-Solving Skills
- Brave and Determined
- A Natural Leader
- Strong sense of right and wrong

Ahmet

A Syrian refugee boy who joins the narrator's class. The story revolves around him and how others react to his presence. He's separated from his parents, doesn't yet speak English fluently and initially remains silent and withdrawn. His emotional story unfolds as he opens up to Alexa and her friends. He has a love for pomegranates and amazing football skills. He stands up to the school bully.

Key Attributes:

- Quiet and Shy at first, due to trauma and language barriers
- Brave - survived a dangerous journey
- Resilient: huge challenges in his life, but he's finding a way through
- Kind and Polite
- Gradually becomes more open and trusting



Alexa's Mum

Mum is a supportive and loving figure in the narrator's life. She works very hard in a library and as a carer and is full of knowledge. They struggle financially, but she works imaginatively to give Alexa exciting experiences.

Key Attributes:

- Caring, Supportive and Understanding
- Teaches about kindness and standing up for others
- Emotional Support and Encouragement

Tom

One of the narrator's closest friends. He is key in rallying around Ahmet and executing the plan to help him. He moved quite recently from America. He loves collecting stickers. He sometimes gets nervous about breaking the rules, but stands by what he believes is right.

Key Attributes:

- Fun-loving, often tells funny jokes
- Loyal to his friends
- Works well as part of a team

Josie

Josie has been in the Alexa's life since she was three and is one of her best friends. She is sporty, full of energy and very good at football. She is compassionate to Ahmet and his situation, even though her parents hold negative views about refugees.

Key Attributes:

- Bold, Confident and Outspoken
- Determined - has a bit of a fiery disposition, especially when protecting her friends

Michael

Michael is a little quieter than the others and a bit clumsy, but very clever. He comes from a wealthy, professional family. He gets made fun of at school, but is a key member of Alexa's friendship group and very kind to Ahmet.

Key Attributes:

- Thoughtful, asks questions to understand Ahmet's situation
- Creative - comes up with imaginative ideas to help
- Loyal and Dependable

Uncle Lenny

Uncle Lenny is key in Alexa's life and has provided loving support to her and her mum, since her father's death. He is a taxi driver, who loves playing scrabble. He shows warmth and empathy for Ahmet's situation and provides a voice of reason.

Key Attributes:

- Provides stability and guidance
- Caring, Dependable and Supportive
- Kind and Understanding



Mrs Khan

Mrs Khan is the class teacher. She encourages the children's questions and curiosity. She provides a safe and welcoming environment for Ahmet and encourages all the children to care for him and show compassion. She stands up to Mr Irons, when she sees him acting unfairly.

Key Attributes:

- Warm and Compassionate
- Driven by a belief in inclusion and fairness
- Patient and Understanding

Brendan the Bully

Brendan is the school bully. He picks on Ahmet and creates conflict and tension. His behaviour highlights the difference between friendship and acceptance and hostility and prejudice.

Key Attributes:

- Cruel and Aggressive
- Narrow-minded and Intolerant
- Underhand

Mr Irons

A teacher at the school; he is the contrast to Mrs Khan. He is cold and dismissive of the children, ignoring the behaviour of the bully and punishes instead Ahmet, Alexa and friends. He reminds the reader that not all adults act with compassion and some hold prejudices which negatively guide their actions.

Key Attributes:

- Cold, lacking in empathy
- Unwelcoming
- Unfair and Discouraging

Ms Hemsli

The teaching assistant who supports Ahmet. She speaks Kurdish, the same language as Ahmet. She helps to give him a safe, supportive space to begin to face the traumas and challenges he is dealing with and is an important bridge in understanding between the class and Ahmet.

Key Attributes:

- Calm, Reassuring and Gentle
- Patient and Understanding
- Kind, Thoughtful and Empathetic



CHARACTER DETECTIVES

What do these quotes from the story tell you about each character?

“Mrs. Khan had smiled at me with her whole face and had given me a wink too— just like my dad used to do whenever he thought I had done something good.”
(p.21)



“Even Mr Banik, who owned the newsagent’s near the school bus stop and was famous for hating children, ran out whenever he saw us and gave us each a chocolate egg. For free. And not just for a day, but for a whole week.”
(p.279/80)

“I didn’t get that impression because that wasn’t what happened. You can ask me another five times though - if you like!”
(Stan the Taxi Man - p.233)

“He gave Josie her football back and didn’t say anything else to us, but from that day on, whenever he saw any of us, his eyes would narrow, and his nose would whistle ever so quietly.”
(Mr Irons - p.69)



“Just like Josie, Uncle Lenny is in all of my memories too. When dad died, I remember him being at the hospital with us and hugging Mum and me a lot.....he was the only person who stayed behind and helped Mum sort everything out.” (p.124)

LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY

The use of language within *Boy at the Back of the Class* is powerful and well crafted, resulting in multiple effects on the audience.

**Below are some of the techniques and their effects to discuss with pupils.
Can they find examples of each in the text?**

Childlike Narrative Voice

The whole story is told through the eyes of a 9-year-old narrator.

Technique: Simple vocabulary and innocent observations.

Effect: Creates authenticity, helps readers see complex issues (like war and refugees) in a way children can understand, and makes the story more relatable to young readers.

Humour and Imagination

The narrator often uses humour and fanciful ideas (e.g., wondering if Ahmet is a secret agent).

Technique: Playful exaggeration, and imaginative comparisons.

Effect: Lightens serious themes, shows how children try to make sense of confusing or frightening situations, and keeps the tone engaging.

Dialogue

Dialogue is used to show different perspectives, e.g. kindness, prejudice, confusion.

Technique: Distinct character voices (e.g. friends, bullies).

Effect: Shows how society has mixed opinions about refugees; encourages audience to think critically about words and attitudes.



Contrast

Ahmet's traumatic journey is set alongside the everyday lives of the schoolchildren.

Technique: Juxtaposition of ordinary playground problems with war and migration.

Effect: Highlights the extraordinary challenges refugees face and makes readers reflect on fairness and privilege.

Imagery and Metaphors

The author uses descriptive language to capture emotions and experiences.

Technique: Similes and metaphors, often linked to nature or simple objects children know.

Effect: Makes feelings easier to visualise and understand.

Example:

Ahmet's "eyes like dark clouds" symbolise sadness and mystery, while "seeds" are used as a metaphor for hope and growth.

Symbolism

Everyday objects carry deeper meaning in the story.

Examples:

Pomegranate = Ahmet's culture and memories of home.

Backpack = the weight of his journey and loss.

Gates/fences = physical and emotional barriers refugees face.

Effect: Helps readers grasp big themes through simple, child-friendly symbols.



GLOSSARY



Within the story, Ahmet arrives not speaking any English, so he has to learn an entirely new language. However, even in your first language, there are always new words to learn and traditional sayings and phrases to understand.

Below is a list of some words and phrases from 'Boy at the Back of the Class'. Each one has a short explanation with it.

Are there any other words or phrases from the book, that you want to check the meaning of? Add them to the list.

Word or Saying	Meaning
Refugee	A person who has to leave their home country because it is not safe
Immigrant	Someone who moves to a new country to live there
Asylum	Safety and protection in a new country
War-torn	A place badly damaged because of fighting and war
Immigration Office	The place where people go to get permission to live in a new country
Dictator	A leader who has all the power and doesn't let people disagree
Suspicious	Not trusting someone; thinking that they might do something wrong.
Empathy	Understanding how someone else feels, as if you were them
Prejudice	An unfair feeling of dislike for a person or group of people, even if you don't know them, based on perhaps how they look, or where they come from or what they believe



GLOSSARY



Word or Saying	Meaning
Bigotry	Treating people unfairly or unkindly just because they are different – for example, because of their skin colour or where they come from – and refusing to listen or accept others' views on the subject
Foster Mum	Someone who looks after a child when their own parents cannot do so
Keeping on your toes	Pay attention and be ready to act if something unexpected happens
See past the end of your nose	Only thinking about yourself or what is happening right now, and not noticing how other people feel or what might happen in the future
Forty Winks	A short sleep, or nap, usually during the day

DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS



The different voices and characters' viewpoints on refugees in *The Boy at the Back of the Class* add layers to the story and help readers see the refugee experience from different perspectives.

By including such a range of voices — kind, cruel, silent, supportive, and indifferent — from both children and adults within the story - Onjali Q. Raúf helps unravel and lay bare the complex picture of society's attitudes toward refugees. This helps readers think critically about the subject and consider how viewpoints and opinions might both be challenged and perhaps changed.

To help pupils consider this, try the activity below:

Choose three characters from the story, consider their views about refugees Can you find some quotes to back up your thoughts? Can you think what might be influencing them? Do any characters change their opinion by the end of the book?

“You were so brave. Now the Queen herself can’t ignore what’s happening to those families! I haven’t slept for months, thinking about it. Months! It makes me so angry. All those poor people with their little babies, trying to just...live...!”
(Mrs Rashid - p. 224)

“Those pesky refugees are only here because they want a piece of our benefits pie! She ought to know better - and you ought to have taught her better!”
(Mr Greggs - p. 226)



The Role of the Media in influencing people's viewpoints

The way in which the media represents a subject or a story can influence or sway public opinion. There are many different techniques and strategies they use, for example:

Negative Framing of a Story - For example, representing refugees as a threat or a burden

Sympathetic Framing of a Subject - For example, focusing on refugees being victims of a conflict and suffering trauma in being displaced

Agenda Setting - the media can decide what stories are shared and which are ignored

Amplifying Certain Voices - they can choose whose voice they give a platform to

Activity: Ask pupils to consider the headlines of the newspaper reports that are shared throughout the story. What tactics are being used? What is the effect likely to be?

SOCIAL ACTION

At the heart of the story of *The Boy at the Back of the Class* is a strong and powerful message about social action and having the courage to stand up for your beliefs, even when others disagree. It demonstrates that courage, resilience, fairness and compassion should always guide our actions.

The audience sees this through the perspective of the children who refuse to accept unfairness and act on their instincts to try and make change. They instigate an emergency plan. Instead of staying quiet, they write letters to the Queen and even go to Buckingham Palace themselves.

It also shows, however, that social action doesn't always start big – it can begin with small acts of kindness, like offering Ahmet food or including him in games.

The story urges us to remember that kindness is powerful, that we shouldn't ignore unfair treatment of others and that ordinary people, including young people, can use their voices to effect change, when they stand up for what they believe in.



“Even if the Queen can't do as much as she'd like to, there is a whole world of people who are whispering Ahmet's name and trying to think of how to help instead.” (p.253)

BE AN ACTIVE CITIZEN - ACTIVITY IDEAS:

School Action Campaign

Ask pupils to consider what might make a positive difference to people at school. What have they noticed that they think could be improved or an issue that they feel needs highlighting to others? What can they do to start to make a change? Maybe design posters, deliver an Assembly, write to school governors, set up an activity day.

Voices Changing the World

Research people that have stood up for their beliefs and made their voices heard, e.g. Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks., Greta Thunberg.

Design a poster for one person, depicting their actions and how they link to the ideas of fairness and courage in the novel. To complete, add in an action they themselves can take to support the cause.

Take Inspiration and Act

Take inspiration from The Key's 'Spring into Action' campaign, highlighting the positive practical actions young people have taken to make their communities a better place - from fund raising to starting a poster competition to making up hampers.

Ask pupils to think of an idea - however big or small - and put it into action.
<https://thekeyuk.org/latest/spring-into-action-12-key-social-action-ideas/>

EXTENDING LEARNING: CROSS CURRICULAR SUGGESTIONS



Geography

Mapping Journeys: Understanding migration routes and physical barrier in geography

Plot Ahmet's journey from Syria to the UK on a world map. Add key features (mountains, seas, borders).

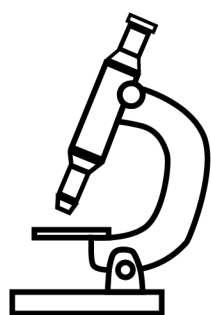
Comparing Countries: Recognising similarities and differences between countries

Research Syria and the UK – climate, population, land use, food. Pupils create comparison posters or fact files.

Push and Pull Factors of Migration

Pose the question: Why might someone leave their home and move to another country? Collect ideas and introduce the terms: **push factors** (war, danger, poverty) and **pull factors** (safety, education, opportunities).

In groups, pupils categorise cards with different migration factors into “push” and “pull.” Then rank factors from most to least important.



Science

Plants and Growing: Plant lifecycles and Conditions of Growth

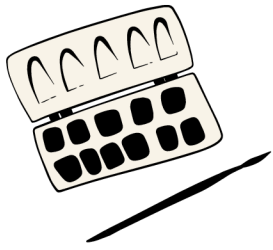
Within the story, seeds and gardens are mentioned as symbols of hope. Engage pupils in growing seeds from foods Ahmet might have known (e.g. chickpeas or pomegranate) and compare them with familiar UK plants.

Emotional and Physical Health Links: Focus on the nervous system and the effects of stress on the body

Ahmet experiences trauma from war and moving country. Consider how the body responds to stress. What signs might we see in the body? Discuss what can help? Why are routines like play, rest, and friendship important to support well-being?

Climate and Resources: Renewable vs Non-Renewable Resources and the impact of climate on human survival

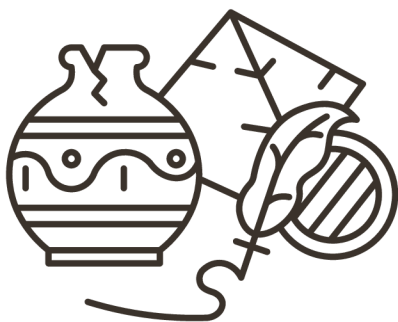
Conflict and migration are sometimes worsened by lack of resources. Ask pupils to investigate how water scarcity or changes in climate could drive migration, exploring the link between scientific data and human stories.



Art

Artist Diala Brisly fled Syria in 2013. She creates art that explores the desperate challenges of war and being a refugee, but also with the aims of exploring how to be human and instilling hope. Research her pictures, the techniques she uses and consider the messages she is portraying.

Consider the illustrations in the book. What do they add? Why are they drawn in the style that they are?
Pick another part of the plot and draw some illustrations to tell that part of the story.



History

Famous Refugees in History

Study notable refugees (e.g., Albert Einstein, Rita Ora). Pupils research one historical refugee and present how they contributed to their new society.

Helpful resource: <https://refugeeweek.org.uk>

Journeys and Migration Through Time

Explore how Ahmet's migration echoes earlier patterns, i.e. Romans, Vikings, Anglo-Saxons and discuss why people have moved to and from Britain throughout history.

Create a class timeline of different migrations to Britain, ending with refugees today.

Writing from the Viewpoint of a Refugee

Combine History and English. Ask pupils to write a diary entry or newspaper article from the viewpoint of a refugee in a past era (e.g., a WWII evacuee) and compare it with Ahmet's fictional voice from the story.



Music

Call and Response Songs: Connecting through Music

Communication is difficult for Ahmet at first. Use music to demonstrate that people can connect even if they don't share the same language.

Demonstrate a couple of simple call-and-response songs (e.g., clapping or vocal patterns). Next ask the pupils to work in small teams to develop their own. They must then teach it to another group by engaging them in the pattern.

Character Motifs - exploring sound as narrative

Different characters show different traits throughout the story, e.g. kindness, aggression, fear.

Ask pupils to compose short musical motifs for each character — e.g., a gentle sound for Ahmet, harsh sounds for bullies. Then perform them in sequence to retell a scene.

CHILDREN'S THEATRE PARTNERSHIP

Home of imaginative and bold theatre,
The Children's Theatre Partnership (CTP) was established in 2010 to produce and tour bold, ambitious and imaginative theatre for young people.

Our aim is to excite and engage new and diverse audiences, often introducing them to the theatre for the first time, bringing communities to their local theatres, inspiring a life-long love of theatre and supporting the UK's most talented artists.

To discover more information and keep up-to-date about upcoming shows and resources, sign up to the CTP newsletter at:

<https://childrenstheatrepartnership.co.uk/sign-up/>