

HOME Book Discussion Group, Lynden Sculpture Garden

<https://www.home-at-lynden.org/home-book-discussion-group>

The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives, edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen
September-December 2021

READING GUIDE & DISCUSSION

The reading guide below is based on book group meetings over four sessions. Please adapt accordingly to your needs, as some of the guiding points are intentionally repeated for clarity of discussion, or to connect old and new discussion points brought up at different points of the book and by different authors.

1) Opening up the discussion, Introduction to p. 43

- **Theme and message:** What is Nguyen's message in his introduction? What are the themes that stand out? How does this set the tone of the stories to come?
- **Comparing literature:** For those who have read with us Kao Kalia Yang's edited work, *Somewhere in the Unknown World*, how do you sense the stories or modes of storytelling differing? Who are the writers in Nguyen's vs Yang's collection of stories?

2) Discussion for pp. 43-98 (Bezmozgis to Hadero)

- **Theme and message:** In *Common Story* by Bezmozgis, he ends his observation of a fellow refugee writer's hanging verdict after depicting his own: "credibility, identity, delay, objective risk, and subjective fear". What is the 'common story' of refugees that Bezmozgis is portraying? What are other themes throughout the current reading section?
- **Writing and the refugee experience:** Viet Thanh Nguyen (from his introduction) and Reyna Grande draw parallels to being a writer and a refugee. What are they, and how, or why, according to these writers, do these identities (or these ways of being) coincide?
- **Perspectives:** What are notions that these writers challenge, or are challenged by? For example, Meron Hadero quotes a sign in a shelter in West Berlin, "A refugee is a person without a country". Bezmozgis writes, "Those are other refugees--particularly brown and Muslim--are not like them". Bhutto writes about the East being *maya*, an illusion, and the West having "clear, certain terms".

3) Hemon to Megiste, pp. 99-144:

Writing styles and the refugee viewpoint: What are advantages and disadvantages of narrating another refugee's story being a refugee oneself? What are the peculiarities of being 'close enough' to the story, e.g. for Hemon (p. 99) and Mengiste (p. 137). How can this be successfully used in fiction?

- **Writing and the refugee experience:** Nguyen and Grande in previous chapters talk about the writer as a refugee. Hemon touches on this in p. 100 when he states, "Migration generates narratives". Why do these writers observe these relationships and identities, i.e. the connection between writer and refugee, or storytelling and migration?
- **Narrative/creative nonfiction:** To these writers, does art imitate life, or life imitate art? How would either notion be questioned in narrative nonfiction? Do these hanging, unfinished (short) stories reinforce either?

4) Final segment

- **Definitions:** What is *a* refugee, as opposed to *the* Refugee that is referred to by Shehadah (p. 166)?
- **Themes, Resettled vs. Unsettled:** What are replacements or reconsiderations that refugees may make when they go through the process of resettlement? What are the obligations on refugees that come with the investments that sponsoring countries make? How might the negotiation of identity and belonging change over time? (Nayeri, p. 149; Tshuma, p. 182)
- **Perspective:** What is the time and space that Yang may be referring to in her perspective as an adult/writer versus as a child/refugee (p. 196), and how may those two perspectives differ and why?