

Lock down library

This week is refugee week: a nationwide festival which celebrates the contribution of refugees to the UK, aims to promote understanding of why people seek sanctuary and encourage a better understanding between communities.

Below are some Q & As from Refugee Action (<https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/about/facts-about-refugees/>) which gives facts about refugees and asylum seekers.

Q. *What is a refugee?*

A. *According to the UN Refugee Convention, the definition of a refugee is someone who...‘Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country’ (Article 1, 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees)*

Q. *What is an asylum seeker?*

A. *The definition of an asylum seeker is someone who has arrived in a country and asked for asylum. Until they receive a decision as to whether or not they are a refugee, they are known as an asylum seeker. In the UK, this means they do not have the same rights as a refugee or a British citizen would. For example, asylum seekers aren’t allowed to work.*

The right to seek asylum is a legal right we all share. It isn’t illegal to seek asylum, because seeking asylum is a legal process. It also isn’t illegal to be refused asylum – it just means you haven’t been able to meet the very strict criteria to prove your need for protection as a refugee.

Q. *Are there many refugees and asylum seekers in the UK?*

A. *No. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2018 there were 126,720 refugees, 45,244 pending asylum cases and 125 stateless persons in the UK. That’s around one quarter of a percent (0.26%) of the UK’s total population.*

Q. *Is the number of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK increasing?*

A. *Asylum applications to the UK are relatively low – 35,566 in the year to December 2019. This is significantly lower than the peak of 84,000 applications back in 2002.*

Q. *Can asylum seekers work or claim benefits?*

A. *Asylum seekers are not allowed to claim benefits or work in the UK. If they are destitute and have no other means of supporting themselves, they can apply to receive asylum support. This is set at around £5.39 per day.*

Q. *What happens to someone when they get refugee status?*

A. *When a person is given refugee status, they have just 28 days to find accommodation and apply for mainstream benefits before they are evicted from asylum accommodation. Many refugees become homeless at this stage.*

This year the theme for Refugee week is ‘Imagine’ and the organisers are encouraging people to take part in one or more ‘Simple Acts.’ These are simple acts that anyone can do in order to stand with refugees, make new connections in communities and provide inspiration to imagine a better world. For full details of the acts see the Refugee week website - <https://refugeeweek.org.uk/simple-acts/>

One of the suggested acts is to read a book about ‘exile’. The act of reading helps us empathise with others by transporting us into their experiences and emotions.

Empathy Lab (<https://www.empathylab.uk/>) who promote reading to build empathy, recently commissioned eight short stories to promote empathy. The author Bali Rai has written a wonderful story called *I Am* which is a timely reminder that everyone deserves to be treated in the same way - as a human being. (attached as separate document)

Booktrust have put together a list of books about refugee and asylum seekers. You can find the list for older children here - <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/booklists/b/books-about-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/> and for teenagers here <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/booklists/b/books-about-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-teens/>

Finally, below is a story by Edmund de Waal called 'Books' which is available in the online anthology *Imagine* on the Refugee Week website (<http://www.imagineanthology.com/>).

This story particularly struck me because it shows the importance of libraries as a safe space, as a source of information and a place to find your own community and to explore other communities.

Books by Edmund de Waal

You are in a library.

It is quiet with the warm hum of people talking softly, laughter. People are alone, or with families, friends. There are gusts and eddies of children. Some are sitting wrapped around books. Others are drawing, writing

There are books everywhere

You try and work out how they have been arranged, re-arranged, put back

And you look up and you find

The book that your mother read to you

The book that you grandfather talked about

The book that is in your language that you want to share

The book that you didn't know had been translated

The book that you know needs to be translated

The cookery book that has pictures of the food, the smell, the weight of the food you love

You find

The poets

The storytellers

The artists

And you know that you are valued, that others have come here before you

You know that however far you have come this is a place where your voice sounds amongst all the dictionaries and thesaurus and encyclopaedias, the runs of classics,

You find books that take you home and bring you here

And you open your book and find that hundreds of people have written their names in it before you, have read your story

You know you belong