



Global crisis through the eyes of a child

Book exposes ‘utterly insufficient humanity’

In 2015, when a boat carrying Syrian refugees bound for Europe fell apart in the stormy Mediterranean Sea and most of those aboard drowned, the body of a little boy washed up on a Turkish beach. When the photo of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi’s lifeless form was flashed around the world, there was a collective gasp of horror.

But the attention was short-lived, even though the humanitarian crisis continues to this day. In the last eight years alone, according to the Missing Migrants Project, more than 21,000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean while trying to escape the conflict and poverty in their homelands in Africa and the Middle East.

Portland author Omar El Akkad is not going to let us look away. In “What Strange Paradise,” his latest novel, the central character is a Syrian kid, Amir, who at 9 years old is the age Aylan would have been today had he survived.

Amir looks younger than his years. His family had tried to resettle in Egypt, but now he appears to be the lone survivor after a boatload of refugees capsizes off the Greek island of Kos.

Like other countries along the northern Mediterranean coastline, Greece has been grappling with the influx of undocumented immigrants. The Greek army has dispatched soldiers under the command of Col. Dimitri Kethros to round up any refugees who make it to Kos.

Amir, however, eludes their grasp with the help of 15-year-old Vanna. Although island-born, Vanna is the granddaughter of Swedish immigrants in a place where — to be truly local — one’s family has to have been on

the island for several generations, so she feels like something of an outsider herself.

The story unspools in alternating chapters. One strand covers the life story of young Amir and how he winds up on that fateful voyage. The other piece focuses on the desperate maneuvers of Vanna and Amir as they try to avoid capture by Kethros and his men.

Some have likened El Akkad’s story to the Peter Pan trope. Vanna might be seen as the maternal Wendy figure and, with his prosthetic leg and relentless drive, Kethros is indeed a fearsome answer to Captain Hook.

But in his young life as a refugee, Amir has always been a follower by default, not a leader like Peter Pan.

Buffeted by the cruel blows of geopolitical happenstance, he has had little agency.

And when one cynical guide along the way spits out, “You thought away was enough. But it’s not. It never is,” who is Amir to argue?

“What Strange Paradise” is no allegory. It is the bitter truth, happening right now, not just in the Mediterranean, but also down along the Rio Grande and in so many other

border regions around the world.

El Akkad writes with heart-searing intensity. While this novel suggests that there may be embers of compassion in us all, it also exposes the utterly insufficient humanity of humanity in the systems we’ve built to deal with the global migration crisis.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbaralmcm@gmail.com.

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