

## Zenobia: A Game of Hide and Seek

The sea is vast and empty,  
Here, no one will find me  
Here, neither my mom nor my dad will find me

Here is an image that stops the reader in their tracks, for the reader is occupied with young girl's game that allows her to escape and hide in an image we have seen become familiar in childhood and on TV screens. Here is an image that jumps from the cover of the illustrated book *Zenobia*, a book we are proud to publish in Arabic here at the Tamer Institute. The book is written by the Danish author Morton Dur and illustrated by the Danish artist Lars Hornman, and translated into Arabic by Duna Ghali. *Zenobia* deals with the journey of the girl Amina, as she searches for a safe home land away from her war-torn country and as others search for her. So, will she find a new home and will others find her?

From the outset of the book, the readers finds him/herself in the middle of a what seems to be a cinematic scene: a wooden boat steering aimlessly in a never-ending blue medium, not quite grasping the role of Palmyra's queen, Zenobia, in the narrative. The reader is first confronted with the color blue, a cold gloomy color, after which they see Amina, a child of no more than six years of age, curled up between two men. The text does not offer an explanation for the setting, yet the reader understands. Amina, the Syrian child, is the protagonist of the book and the shadow of Zenobia in the narrative. For Amina, like Zenobia, is a reflection of the current, grim state of Syria and the children fleeing the war. Zenobia of Palmyra, despite establishing a kingdom, beat the Romans only to lose her kingdom and get banished to Rome. Amina is similar to Zenobia, the hero who matches her strength and perseverance, and who like Zenobia also loses Syria after an adventure at sea leaving behind a destroyed kingdom. Amina flees the war in Syria with a vivid memory and the strength of Zenobia on her mind, and the queen visits her in the direst moments of the book.

The reader cannot help but feel overwhelmingly worried while reading, as the text gradually decreases and the illustrations become the basis of the narrative. Page after page, the story unfolds to reflect the reality of Syrian children in their journey of seeking refuge, while small surprises in the illustrations leave a lasting impression on the readers. This small act reflects the humanitarian nature of the narrative and attracts the reader to explore the facets of the book. Thus, the book is a singular attempt at tackling the collective burden of the conflict and the humanitarian viewpoint of the suffering. From Amina's viewpoint, the reader senses a dull, grey evening, and in her mind sees an image of the world she lived in prior to landing at sea. This is what constitutes the success of illustrated books. There is no need for text to accompany the illustrations, for this narrative style facilitates an interaction between the text and the reader. What is interesting to note in *Zenobia* is that the narrative of the book, despite dealing with refuge by sea and the difficulty of presenting such a topic, is strongly familiar and close to the Arab reader. The author does not perceive the reader as a stranger, and does not leave him/her feeling distant from the tale at hand. Trivial details, such as Amina helping her

mother prepare Dolma, summons a familiar image in the reader's mind, an image that s/he perhaps experienced him/herself one day. In addition, the presence of Zenobia as a protagonist and a symbolic legend of Syrian descent, the growing number of refugee stories in the news, and the brilliance of the illustrations all work hand in hand to catapult the Arabic reader into the heart of the narrative. There is no doubt that the most common presentation of natural and humanitarian disasters to youth, such as death and earthquakes, is counter-productively complex in the narrative. *Zenobia* is different in this regard, as its narrative can be likened to a game of hide and seek. It is more fun for kids to be found after hiding, and just like so, Amina played hide and seek with her mother and found her, but now, her mother cannot find Amina. Amina resorts to hiding from the reality of her war-torn country, and it is as if she is requesting the reader throughout the book to “come and find [her]”. The weight of the narrative is certainly heavy, posing a number of difficult questions on how to best communicate the experience of refuge to children. How could we explain to a child what drives someone to board a boat into the unknown, without his/her parents or loved ones? How could we explain to a child the consequential tragedies of war, and the humanitarian aspect of it?

The creativity of Dur and Hornman, manifested in the form of the book at hand, begins to answer some of the aforementioned questions. The reader views the war from a simple, cinematic, and humanitarian lens, without the need for blood and violence. The war, despite its gore, is presented in the most simplistic manner in the book. As the viewpoint of the reader mirrors that of Amina's, s/he does not see violence and its repulsiveness, but rather the value of loss as a humanitarian value, painted by both the author and illustrator. Through the illustrations, the reader sees Amina's parents' disappearance, their heading “towards the city”, and their saying goodbye. The reader also sees Amina's reluctance to leave, and then the image of a malnourished dog, and so the author does not describe in detail the effects of the war on the child herself, but rather the aftermath: refuge. As the reader explores the relationship of other characters to Amina, such as the elder who tell her to sleep when she is frightened, and the mother who gives her a biscuit in the darkness of the night, the reader understands the humanitarian aspect of the narrative as a crucial component of the overarching theme. All these images pave the way for the biggest tragedy and the turning point of the book, which is the disappearance of Amina.

Both the author and the illustrator incorporate illustrations of empty, vast spaces void of people as well as colors to go beyond the surface meaning of the text. The alternation between using words and illustrations completes the picture for the reader. The color scheme also serves a purpose in the book, and it increases the tension of Amina's disappearance in the cold, blue medium. The sea is perfect for hiding, but is Amina voluntarily hiding in the water? Certainly not. The illustrations and the accompanying text are predominated by blue and black colors, mirroring the shift between day and night. As tension build up, the reader finds him/herself inside Amina's imaginative memory, just in time to relieve the worries of the reader. The colors yellow and brown are also used in conjunction to create old photographic images, where the reader sees the past in its moments of happiness and bitterness. In the story, we see Zenobia of Palmyra as an example of a fearless woman who fears no enemy, present as a

symbol for Syria and heroism in Amina's mind. Despite the color brown, the color of the earth and dirt, being Amina's source of safety and relief, it still brings her to the darkness of the sea later. As the illustrations change, the brown color scheme blends in with the blue one and reaches the present, where the rules of the hiding game are introduced. Zenobia returns in the form of a shipwreck, which may be allegory to the Swedish ship, Zenobia, which drowned in the 80s near Cyprus, on its maiden voyage that was headed to Syria. Thus, Amina becomes the protagonist and Zenobia of Palmyra and the ship become a reflection of the darkness of the Mediterranean that has swallowed hundreds of refugees and their dreams, daily, since the outset of the civil war. So, the blue becomes more than just a sea, and gains a meaning of loss, as if Amina has only had hope in queen Zenobia. Drowning in the Mediterranean, this is how the book opens up and concludes, for there is no difference between the sky and the water. They appear as one, representing a continuance of loss of hope, and a continuance of human pain. It is as if the book ends the game of hide and seek with the conclusion that for one to gain a homeland, one must lose everything s/he has. This whirlpool of loss strips the event from any illogical explanations, as if what starts on the first day ends in the next morning. The tragedy carried within the narrative ends with the start of a new day, leaving the reader with Amina's request to come and find her.

Perhaps here lies the secret behind the book's success and its winning multiple national awards. The secret of literature is to trigger imagination yet mirror reality. The humanitarian scope of the refugees crisis as a national and humanitarian case, and the fate of the main character touch the adult reader with the intimacy and sensitivity of the situation at hand. In one of his interviews, the author reveals that his work was meant to shake loose the desensitization of the readers, which has developed from seeing the Arab world in a constant state of war and tragedy. Perhaps the book can pull the reader out of the mental state of helplessness, instilled in him/her by the magnitude of war. Perhaps we will start looking for Zenobia, and most importantly, we will start looking for Amina in our children and ourselves.

**Translated by Tareq Habash**