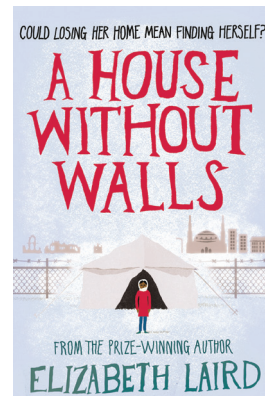


TEACHING NOTES

A HOUSE WITHOUT WALLS

ELIZABETH LAIRD



“People often ask me where I get my ideas from. ‘They come from the same place as my dreams,’ I say. So where do we get our dreams from? They come from the people we meet, the places we know, the things that have happened to us, and, above all, the feelings we experience. *A House Without Walls* was born out of that mixture of people and places and events. It just needed a flash of inspiration to tie it all together into a story...” - Elizabeth Laird

About A House Without Walls

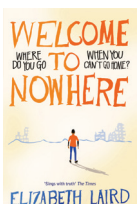
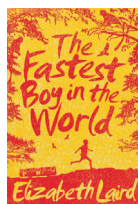
Thirteen-year-old Safiya and her family have been driven out of Syria by civil war. Safiya knows how lucky she is – lucky not to be living in a refugee camp, lucky to be alive. But it’s hard to feel grateful when she’s forced to look after her father and brother rather than go back to school, and now that she’s lost her home, she’s lonelier than ever.

As they struggle to rebuild their lives, Safiya realizes that her family has always been incomplete and, with her own future in the balance, it’s time to uncover the secrets that war has kept buried.

About Me

Here's a picture of me, just in case you're wondering what I look like. I've been writing novels for more than 30 years now. A lot of them are still in print, and you can find out more about them on my website www.elizabethlaird.co.uk.

I've travelled all over the world in pursuit of adventures and stories, so take a look at my other books if you'd like to know more.

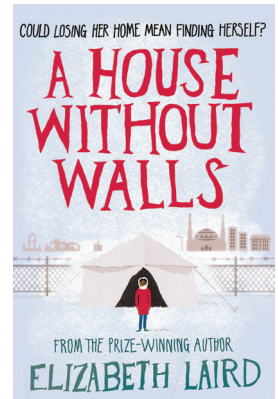



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A HOUSE WITHOUT WALLS
ELIZABETH LAIRD



About Syria and Jordan



This map shows Syria and Jordan. The red dots show the places mentioned in the story: Damascus, where Safiya and her family have always lived, Azraq, a small town in Jordan not far from the Syrian border, and Amman, Jordan's capital city.

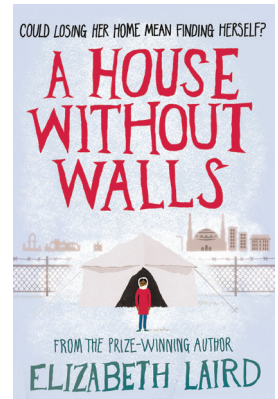
SYRIA is a large and beautiful country in the Middle East, with an ancient history and culture. There are remains of Roman temples, stadiums and villas all over the country, while in age-old cities like Aleppo and Damascus there are lovely old houses, mosques and covered marketplaces called 'souks'.

- Before 2011 the population of Syria was about 21,000,000, but since the war began nearly 7,000,000 people have been forced to flee to other countries.
- The capital city of Syria is Damascus.
- Most Syrian people are Muslim, but about 10% of the population is Christian.
- The language spoken in Syria is Arabic.

JORDAN shares a border with Syria. It's a smaller, less powerful country, it doesn't have a coast, and much of the land is desert with very little water. This means that Jordan can't grow many crops and is a poorer country than Syria, but because it is peaceful with a good government, life is easier in Jordan at present than it is in Syria.

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A HOUSE WITHOUT WALLS ELIZABETH LAIRD



- The population of Jordan is about 11,000,000. That includes 2,000,000 Palestinians, who fled from Palestine when Israel was founded in 1948, and nearly 2,000,000 Syrian refugees, escaping from the civil war in Syria. There are also thousands of Iraqi refugees in Jordan. This means that more than one third of the people living in Jordan are refugees from other countries.
- The capital city of Jordan is Amman.
- Nearly all Jordanian people are Muslim, but there is a small Christian community too.
- Arabic is the national language of Jordan.

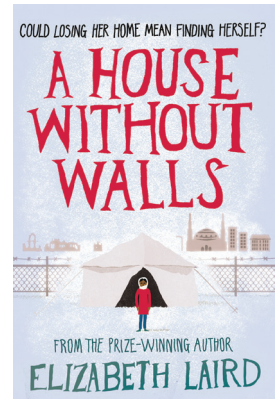
There are wonderful ancient Roman sites in both Syria and Jordan, as well as beautiful mosques, old churches, houses and souks (covered markets).



This picture shows a view of the ancient Roman city at Jerash, in Jordan

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A HOUSE WITHOUT WALLS
ELIZABETH LAIRD



How I Came To Write *A House Without Walls*

In 2016 I went to Jordan to work in two of the vast, sprawling camps that had been set up for Syrian refugees. My novel, *Welcome to Nowhere*, was based on the experiences of the people I'd met in those camps. But I realised that there was another, bigger story to be told. Only two out of ten Syrian refugees in Jordan live in the camps. The rest have to get by as best they can, supporting themselves on their own. Some manage to move into cheap rented accommodation and somehow find enough work to pay for it. Others have to live in shacks and tents on the edges of town. Their story was one I wanted to tell too.

This time, I wanted to write about a girl. Unlike Omar in *Welcome to Nowhere*, Safiya comes from a wealthy Syrian family. Her father is a well-known lawyer, and although their mother is dead, Safiya and her brother, Tariq, have always lived in a modern, comfortable flat. They go to good schools and both hope to go on to university. For them, the shock of losing everything is very hard. They're used to having computers, smart phones, video games and a big TV, as well as a clean, modern bathroom with plenty of hot water and all the soaps and shampoos they want. Their aunt looks after them, cooking delicious meals and washing their clothes. They never have to think about money.



Safiya's flat in Damascus might have looked like this.



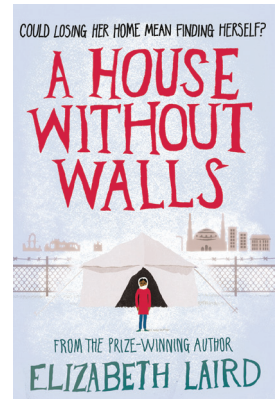
A cool courtyard in an old Syrian house


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But that good, comfortable life vanishes overnight when Safiya's father has to run for his life from Syria's secret police, taking Safiya and Tariq with him, but leaving their aunt behind to look after their grandfather. Safiya loses everything she has ever known. How would she manage, living in a tent, unable to go to school, having to cook and clean for her family? How could she bear not having a bathroom, with hot water for a shower? How would she manage without her best friend, Farah?

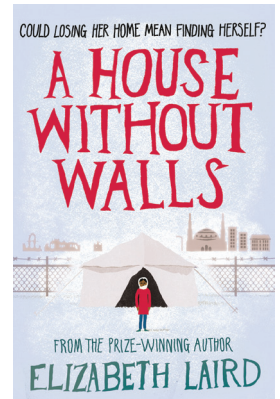
I went back to Azraq in Jordan to research *A House Without Walls*. Azraq is not a big, modern city like Damascus, with parks, cinemas, grand buildings and attractive shops. It's a dusty desert town, a stop for trucks on the high road between Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.



During my visit to Azraq, I met families who were not living in the camps. Some manage to find small, cheap houses to rent, but others have to live in tents, like this one in the picture.

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A HOUSE WITHOUT WALLS
ELIZABETH LAIRD



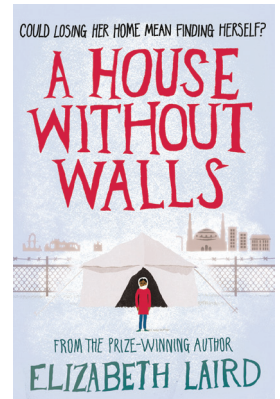
Even though I met and talked to many people who had had to flee from Syria, I found it hard to imagine my way into Safiya and her life. Something was missing from my story. And then it came to me. There was nothing that Safiya could do to solve her family's problems. She couldn't change the political situation in Syria, or magic enough money out the air to make her family comfortable, but what if there was something she could put right, something or someone she could find, who would help to heal her family? And so I realised that this girl, who was coming into my mind out of the mists, had a twin, a girl just like her, but completely different, too, and that Safiya's story would be a quest to find her long-lost sister, and in the process heal the sadness and divisions in her family. Once Saba, the lost twin, began to take shape in my mind, the story raced away to its conclusion.

Politics in Syria



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It's difficult for us to imagine what it can be like to live in a country with a government as cruel and repressive as Syria's. Even before the civil war started, there were many people who had to flee the country because they stood up to the regime. The secret police are everywhere, listening to every conversation, recruiting spies in schools, offices and shops. The slightest criticism of the government can lead to arrest, torture and imprisonment.

There are many good people like Safiya's father – journalists, lawyers and writers – who have tried to stand up for justice, and have suffered a cruel fate. In my story, Safiya's father has no choice but to flee the country. And once the war began, many others had to leave their ruined homes to make a new life abroad. The picture on the previous page shows a barricade made from oil drums and sandbags in a district of an old city that was devastated by street fighting during the civil war.

In Syria and Jordan

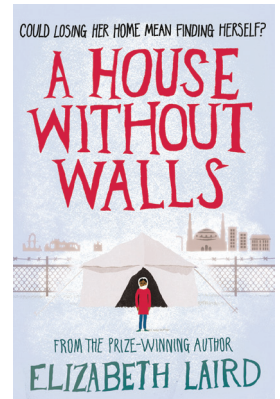
Until a hundred years ago, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine were all part of one big country. Syrians, Jordanians, the Lebanese and Palestinians are similar in many ways. They enjoy the same kinds of food, read the same books and magazines, and watch the same films at the cinema or on TV.



This picture shows me in a food store in Beirut, Lebanon. It's not in Jordan, but it's similar to how I imagined Abu Ali's shop in the story, though his would have been much smaller.

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ELIZABETH LAIRD



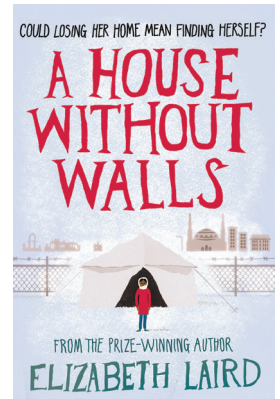
The picture on the left is taken through the window of an antiques shop in Amman, Jordan, showing the kinds of things people traditionally had in their homes. On the right is a typical Syrian meal, with delicious dishes of salads, vegetables, nuts and chick peas.

The Characters in the Book

I didn't base the characters in *A House Without Walls* on any particular people, but made them up as I thought about the people I'd met in Syria and Jordan (and in Lebanon and Palestine too) and the stories they'd told me about their lives. It's sadly easy to find examples throughout the Middle East of families who have been torn apart by war and political troubles. It's also possible to find many families who have bravely struggled to overcome their difficulties and stay united in spite of everything, as Safiya and her family do.

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Illustrations from the Book

A House Without Walls is illustrated by Lucy Eldridge, whose wonderful drawings bring the story to life.

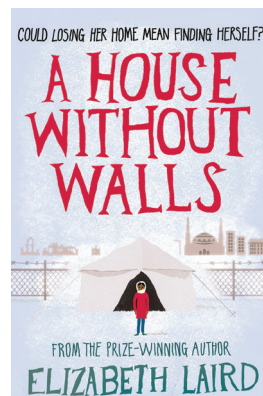


Discussion Notes

1. When Safiya has to leave home in Syria, she has to leave school behind. Now she's worried that she'll never finish her education. How would you feel if you couldn't go to school anymore? Would you be worried about it?
2. Jordan is a poor country, but it has accepted millions of refugees from Palestine, Iraq and Syria. Now, refugees make up nearly a third of the Jordanian population. How welcoming is Britain to refugees? What do you think our country should do about the refugees who want to come and live here?
3. If you had to leave home suddenly and live in a tent without heating and running water, how well do you think you would manage? What would you miss most about your old home?

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4. Safiya lives through many scary experiences. Have you ever been in real danger? How did you feel?
5. Syrian families stay close to each other and everyone tries to help those in need. Uncle Yasser and Aunt Zainab are not close relatives, but they still feel obliged to help Safiya's family, and Safiya's father takes in Malik, his brother-in-law, even though the family don't have enough money for themselves. How does this compare with British families?
6. How are Safiya and her brother Tariq treated within the family? In what ways are their experiences different? Do you think their father is too strict with them?

Keyword Glossary

Civil war: Most wars are fought between different countries. A civil war is when different groups of people in the same country fight each other.

Middle East: A geographical area that encompasses Turkey, Iran, Egypt, the Levant (Israel, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria) and the Arabian Peninsula (Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Yemen).

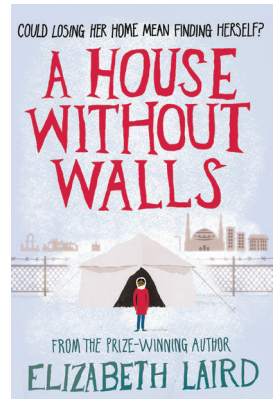
Refugees: People forced to flee their homeland because of war, violence or persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political leanings or belonging to a particular social group. Refugees require international protection.

Refugee camps: Temporary (though often not) accommodation for people displaced from their country, usually in a neighbouring country, close to the border. Camps provide basic shelter, food, water, medical treatment and, sometimes, education, but often lack sanitation and cleaning/hygiene supplies and, given the cramped conditions, diseases can spread easily.

Repressive government: This is a government that doesn't allow people any freedom to express their own thoughts and opinions. People who dare to criticise a repressive government can be imprisoned, sometimes for years, tortured, or even executed.

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A HOUSE WITHOUT WALLS
ELIZABETH LAIRD



Curriculum Links

Upper KS2 - years 5 and 6:

- Reading
- Writing
- History
- Geography:
 - Locational Knowledge
 - Human Geography

KS3:

- Reading
- Writing
- History
- Citizenship
- Geography:
 - Locational Knowledge
 - Place Knowledge
 - Human Geography

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