



Child I

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Editorial Choice:

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Media type:

Book

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A chewed apple-core, thrown away into a rubbish bin by a Guard ? that?s a present to treasure on your tenth birthday. A single white stork?s feather, saved from the sludge and stink of the Camp, is beyond price; you can tuck a feather behind your ear, tickle someone under the chin with it, dream of using it as a quill pen. If you own nothing, you make the most of what you can find. The children in Steve Tasane?s refugee camp do just that. They have no parents, no home but a rickety wooden shack, no regular food. There is no room for more than a few children each day at the Camp school, where they can?t understand the language of instruction anyway. They have no documents, no passports, no names. The Guards identify the children by letters. Child E and his sister, Child L, are the friends of our narrator, Child I ? the boy who found the apple-core. They share the hut ? until it?s bull-dozed into the mud. The new Youth Club, built by volunteers, is flattened too. ?For your own good,? they are told. Conditions are a danger to health, a threat to life. Refugees can?t fight Guards armed with clubs, rubber bullets, tear gas and water bazookas. E and L lose their only link to their past and their family ? a photo album ? as the wreckage of their shed is churned into the mud.

Tasane makes no attempt to locate his Camp in a specific place. We are not somewhere like the razor-wired reception centre on the northern coast of Australia, crowded with long-term Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in Zana Fraillon?s [The Bone Sparrow](#) [4]. We don?t witness anything like the shipwreck and drowning of refugees from Ghana as they attempt to cross the Med. to Spain in Yaba Badoe?s [A Jigsaw of Fire and Stars](#) [5]. As a consequence, **Child I** gains in universality to become more of a fable than a novel drawing directly on contemporary wars or politics; Tasane?s choice means there are losses too, for a real-world context makes for convincing and horrifying reading when we can see it echoed on TV news bulletins.

Tasane insists, though, that ?all the events described in this story are real events which have happened to real children in real camps across the world, in recent months? ? though his optimistic conclusion in which an aid worker (named Charity) drives a double-decker bus crowded with children through a gap in the Camp?s fence to take a road which is ?always going forward? sadly doesn?t read like a plausible factual event in those real-world camps. Tasane might well say that something like this did happen ? but it?s hard for an informed reader to credit. In an afterword (which is expanded in information supplied to reviewers), he tells us that his impulse to write this short book (around 20,000 words, attractively spaced on the page) was very personal. He is the son of a refugee, his father having fled from Estonia

after World War II. When Tasane was only 4, his father left his wife and their four sons. Tasane has never forgotten the sense of life being *broken* ? his home, his cultural identity. He defined himself as a boy who had free school meals, sneered at by his fellow pupils. His ?shattered upbringing? now prompts his empathy with the broken lives of young refugee children. He is clearly moved not only by the suffering, but also ? despite everything - the creativity, the need to belong, to be nurtured, the longing to laugh and play. Above all, the generosity and compassion these children show towards each other. Such are the qualities which may well remain in the thoughts of readers of **Child I**.

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