



A House Without Walls: an interview with Elizabeth Laird

Article Author:

[Nicholas Tucker](#) [1]

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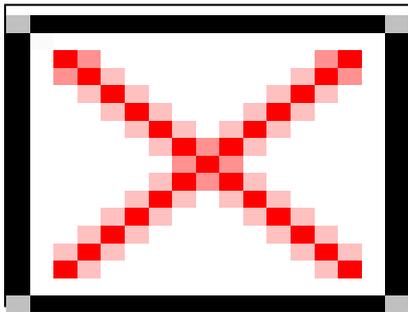
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An interview with **Elizabeth Laird**

Elizabeth Laird is known for writing stories set in the third world where children's lives can sometimes be extremely tough and their futures uncertain. [A House Without Walls](#) [3], published last year but now out in paperback, is no exception. It follows the life of twelve-year-old Safiya after she is forced from her comfortable home in Syria to end up living in a refugee tent-city in neighbouring Jordan. **Nicholas Tucker** discussed the book with Elizabeth for **Books for Keeps**.

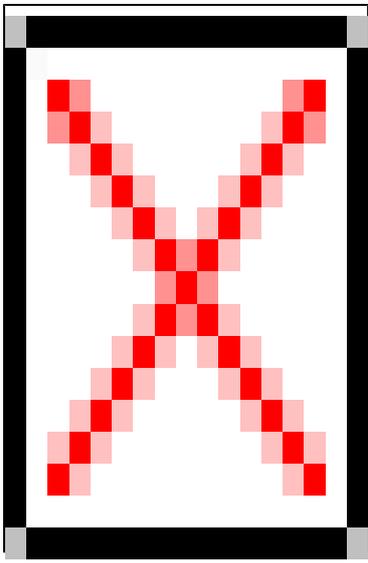


When I spoke to her I told the author that I approached this novel with some trepidation, fearing it might turn out to be almost unbearably tragic.

?But I approached it with trepidation too! It's the hardest thing I have ever written. I have met many refugee families in Jordan and have always been struck by their hospitality and general niceness. For me, they are an example of the human spirit at its best in the way they retain their sense of family and all the mutual bonds within it. And how they manage to make the best of what could otherwise seem a terrible situation. But trying to get this across to young readers lacking this sort of first-hand knowledge was not easy.

Safiya has no mother and while Baba, her father, is a nice enough man he is still an unquestioning believer in women staying at home and doing all the domestic work. His daughter is therefore unable to go to school, but she loves her father all the same. How did you feel about him?

Well, he wasn't an easy character, having to operate within the patriarchal norms of his own society. But I respected him deeply for preserving his humanity and by the end found that I loved him too.



Safiya, who tells this story, describes her normal adolescent highs and lows so vividly it is sometimes possible to forget about the challenging physical problems she also has to cope with.

When I was at the Azraq refugee camp in Jordan I spoke to the teachers there, who were also Syrian refugees, on what they thought were the main preoccupations of their students. I expected them to say something like 'They are frightened of the bombs?'. And indeed there were sometimes bombers going overhead as we spoke. But they said their pupils were most worried about their body images, plus the usual business of making and sometimes breaking friendships. They also hated bullies in the classroom and quarrels within the family. And I thought, these are typical kids! And a teenage girl is a teenage girl! This gave me the confidence to make Safiya a recognisable teenager despite living in a tent and having to survive rain, mud and cold. There is also a sub-plot involving her finally meeting a long-lost twin sister Saba, who now lives with a rich family and initially looks down on her refugee sister. But perhaps readers might wonder whether they too would have felt the same way suddenly faced by a new relative coming from a very deprived background and think about that.

What were you doing out in those refugee camps?

I was in Germany for a holiday and one night I visited Munich railway station. When the train came in I saw a small refugee family get out, looking completely exhausted. The German police, who were wonderful, shepherded them into an enclosure where there was warmth and food. And on the walls were slogans written by German children welcoming them to their country! It was so moving it made me cry. And also made me determined to do something myself while the rest of Britain was doing absolutely nothing. I soon got to hear that the Norwegian Refugee Council was looking for a British author to do courses involving stories for refugees so of I went!

Victorian books about waifs and strays sometimes ended up asking their readers to send a donation to a suitable charity. You do the same here, picking out the charity **Helping Refugees** in Jordan. What sort of response have you had?

I've had sponsored walks, bake sales, even pocket money! It's been very heart-warming.

Any more books about refugee children to come?

*I've written two based on my experience in Jordan with **Welcome to Nowhere** and now this one. But I have found writing them very taxing and I feel I have gone to that particular well with my bucket often enough. So I'm going to have a pause before I decide what to do next.*

There are no signs of exhaustion in either of these fine novels, both so well written they practically read themselves. Liz is now four years away from eighty but youthful in every other way. Already a multiple prize-winner, whatever she does next will be worth waiting for. Meanwhile [A House Without Walls](#) [3] should be on every reading list, young or older. It's that good.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

[A House Without Walls](#) [3], Elizabeth Laird, Macmillan Children's Books 978-150982824, £6.99 pbk

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