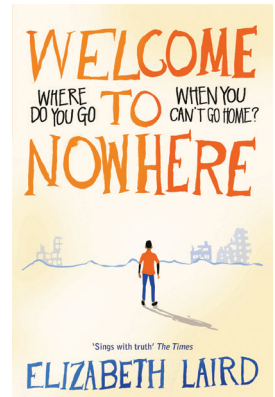


# TEACHING NOTES

## WELCOME TO NOWHERE

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. *Welcome to Nowhere* 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 *Welcome to Nowhere*

*Welcome to Nowhere* is Omar's story. He's a thirteen year old boy who lives with his family in Bosra in Syria. Omar is in the middle of the family. He has an older brother called Musa, an older sister called Eman, and a little brother and sister as well.

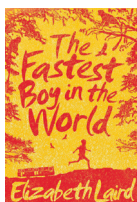
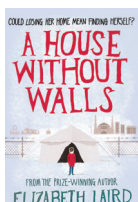
Omar doesn't like school much. His great ambition is to be a businessman: to possess his own camels and take tourists on trips around the world famous Roman ruins in Bosra. He wants to be like his smart older cousin, Rasoul.

But just when things seem to be going well, serious trouble breaks out in Syria. There are riots and demonstrations, and the government starts to fight against its own people. Soon, the whole country is engaged in a civil war. Omar and his family have to flee, first to the countryside, and then out of Syria altogether, across the border and into Jordan, where they will have to start a whole new life.

### 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](http://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.

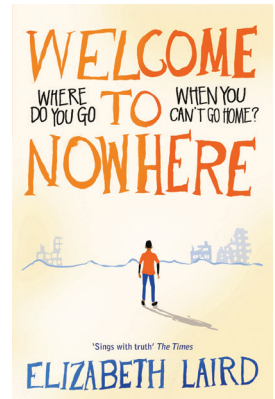


  
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# TEACHING NOTES

WELCOME TO NOWHERE  
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## About Syria

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 in Syria, while ancient cities like Aleppo and Damascus have 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, and about 10% of the population is Christian.
- The language spoken in Syria is Arabic.

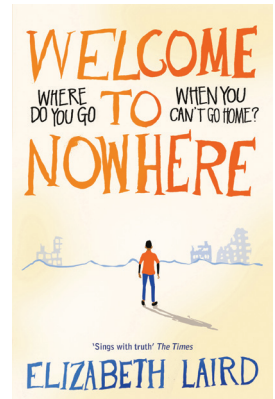


This map shows Syria and Jordan. The red dots represent Daraa, where Omar's family lived, and Za'atari camp where they had to stay when they ran away from Syria. As you can see, it's just across the Jordanian border.



# TEACHING NOTES

## WELCOME TO NOWHERE ELIZABETH LAIRD



An ancient mosque in the old city of Aleppo and an old street with pillars still standing from Roman times alongside modern shops.



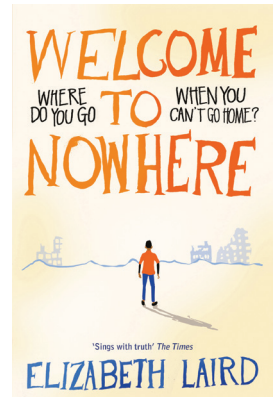
The civil war has brought terrible damage to the lovely old cities of Syria. Whole areas have been badly damaged, like the blocks of flats and shops in this city street. A terrible earthquake in February 2023 destroyed even more of Syria's towns in the north of the country.

In the Syrian countryside, farmers live in villages on the tops of hills, and old olive trees flourish in the fields. This village house is like the farm where Omar and his family lived after they fled from Daraa. Sadly, many villages have been destroyed during the war.



# TEACHING NOTES

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## The Syrian Civil War

The civil war in Syria, which has ruined that ancient and beautiful country, began in March 2011 when a few schoolboys in the southern city of Daraa wrote a slogan on the wall of their school. It read: *The people want the regime to change.*

The government reacted brutally. The boys were arrested and tortured in prison. This made people angry with their harsh government. They went on marches and demonstrations. The police responded with bullets and arrests. People began to die. Trouble spread to other cities and soon the whole country was engulfed in a civil war. As things got worse, foreign armies joined in, and with their help the Syrian government launched a brutal bombing campaign against Syrian towns and cities.

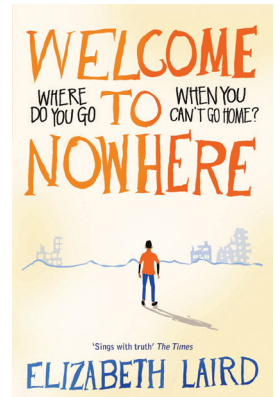
The unrest helped to spark off ISIS, a fanatical movement which soon conquered parts of Syria and Iraq and which has led to acts of terrorism all over the world. ISIS didn't appear until after the events described in *Welcome to Nowhere*. Its cruel ideology is rejected by almost all Muslims, and would have appalled Musa, Omar and their friends in this book.

As a result of the war in Syria, millions of people have had to leave their homes. Half the entire population of Syria has fled to other parts of their homeland, or into neighbouring countries. In Jordan, for example, one person in five is a refugee from Syria, many of them living in vast refugee camps like Za'atari, the camp shown in the aerial view below.



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## WELCOME TO NOWHERE ELIZABETH LAIRD



Some Syrian people decided to leave the Middle East altogether and undertake a dangerous journey to find peace and safety in Europe. Some were successful and are now trying to make better lives for their families and children. Others have sadly died on the way, or have been turned back by increasingly anxious European countries.

### About Jordan

Look at the map on page 1 again. You'll see that Jordan shares a border with Syria. Jordan is smaller than Syria, it doesn't have a coast, and much of the country 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 much easier in Jordan at present than it is in Syria.

- The population of Jordan is about 11,000,000. That includes 2,000,000 Palestinians, who were forced to leave Palestine when Israel was founded in 1948, and nearly 2,000,000 Syrian refugees, fleeing from the civil war in Syria. There are also thousands of Iraqi refugees in Jordan.
- 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.

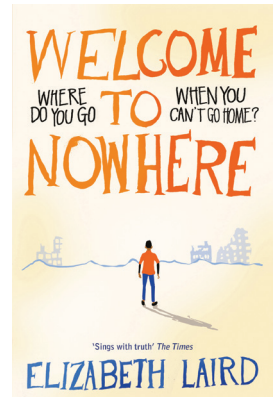


Although Jordan is not a rich country, it has world famous ancient monuments and some spectacular landscapes. This picture shows Petra, an ancient city with temples carved into the solid rock. You have to walk through a deep rocky gorge to get to it.



# TEACHING NOTES

WELCOME TO NOWHERE  
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## How I Came to Write the Book

A few years ago, when so many refugees fled from the fighting in Syria and started on the long trek to Europe, I realised that this was one of the most important stories of our time. I knew I had to write about it. I was on holiday in Munich that year, and one night, at the main station, I watched as trains came in from the east. Among the crowds of Germans returning home after the weekend, there were small groups of exhausted refugees, clutching their few possessions. They were gently greeted by waiting police and taken to a centre where they received food, water and instructions on where to go.

I decided to write about what was happening, but once back home, settled in my armchair, pencil in hand and pad of paper on my knee, the words wouldn't come. I realised that before I could write anything I'd have to go to the Middle East and see for myself what was happening to the people who had had to flee from Syria.

I asked around until I found a way to be useful, and a few weeks later I was in Jordan, running courses for teachers on storytelling and writing in two refugee camps, Za'atari and Azraq. The teachers themselves were refugees and all of them had been through hard times. They welcomed me very warmly and I was amazed by their courage and determination.



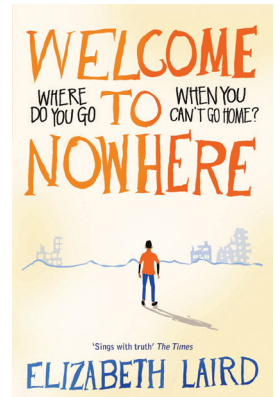
"What are your students' main worries?" I asked them.

Back came the answers in a flood.

"Body image," they said. "The kids are worried about how they look, if their hair's OK or their noses are too big. They're stressed about friendships, and whether or not they're popular. They're worried about bullies and their dads being too strict. They hate it when there's quarrelling at home, and they're anxious about exams and doing well at school."

# TEACHING NOTES

## WELCOME TO NOWHERE ELIZABETH LAIRD



None of them mentioned the bombers flying overhead, or the bereavement so many children had suffered, or the stress of fleeing from their country, though all these concerns were present too. And I realised that those young Syrians were teenagers first and refugees second. They had the same worries as young people all over the world.

The teachers encouraged me to write. They were thrilled at the thought of stories coming out of their experience. And everything they said gave me the confidence to get started. So I went back home, and once settled in my armchair with my pencil in my hand, the story of Omar and his family flowed down on to the paper.



Syrian children in a school for refugees in Jordan

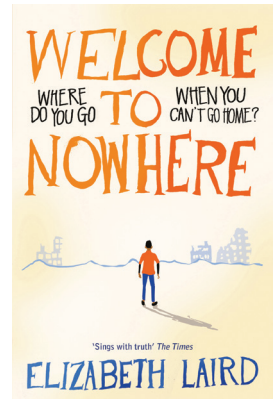
## *The Characters in the Book*

I'm often asked if I put 'real' people in my stories. No, I don't. Creating a character is like making a mosaic. I take a whole collection of little coloured pieces – this person's shyness or boldness, that person's way of talking, another person's appearance – and arrange them in different ways to make my own picture.



# TEACHING NOTES

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## The Ending of the Book

Sometimes people ask me what will happen next to Omar and his family. Will I write a sequel? I can't. I don't know how refugees like Omar will get on in Britain. It's up to us, to you, and me, and all of us, to write the rest of the story. How welcoming are we to refugees in our country? Do we try to understand what's happened to them? Would you make friends with a new person at your school who might be nervous of settling in our country?

## The Illustrations in the Book



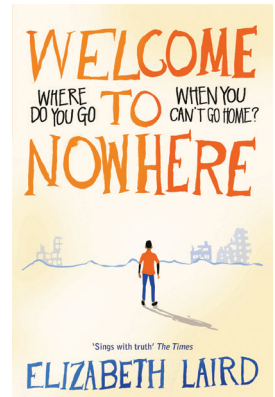
*Welcome to Nowhere* is illustrated with wonderfully evocative drawings by Lucy Eldridge. This one shows Omar and his family hurrying to the border as they escape from Syria into Jordan.



# TEACHING NOTES

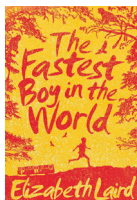
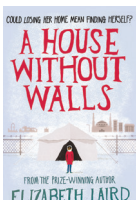
## WELCOME TO NOWHERE

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### Discussion Notes

1. Did you know anything about Syria before reading this book? What have you learned about the war and the effect it's had on Syria's citizens?
2. *'How could I know what was going to happen? Nobody saw the disaster coming, especially not me. I wasn't quite thirteen, after all.'* How does Omar's understanding of what is going on around him change throughout the story? Do you think he grows up more quickly than if there hadn't been a war on?
3. *'Musa, my skinny brother, shaky on his legs, his tongue stuck in his mouth – Musa was the most unlikely revolutionary I could possibly have imagined.'* What does Omar mean when he says this? Do you think Musa is right to stand up for his beliefs, even if this puts his family at risk?
4. Due to the war, Omar's family is forced to flee several places – first their home in Bosra, then Daraa, then the village in the country. Discuss how they adapt each time, and what effects this constant moving has on the family relationships. How do you think your family would cope in a similar situation?
5. *'Education's a waste of time for girls. Eman's sixteen already. It's high time she was married.'* (Baba) What do you think of this point of view? Discuss the different ways in which girls and women are viewed by the characters in *Welcome to Nowhere*, and how Eman's prospects change throughout the book.
6. *'Do you think we'll be all right in Britain?'* I whispered. *'Do you think they'll like us?'* What kind of future can you imagine for Omar and his family at the end of the book? Discuss the challenges and opportunities they might face in Britain.
7. Before reading *Welcome to Nowhere*, what did you think about refugees entering Britain? Has Omar's story made you think differently about people seeking refuge?
8. *'How will history view us, and our treatment of today's refugees?'* (Foreword) Discuss the author's reasons for writing a book about the Syrian refugee crisis.

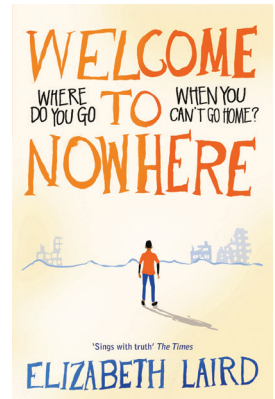


  
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## Keyword Glossary

**Ambition:** Something you really want to achieve. Determination to get something done.

**Civil war:** A war between groups of people in the same country.

**Fanatical:** A word to describe the state of wanting something to the point of obsession, often stopping at nothing until it is achieved.

**Ideology:** A system of ideas/ideals that provide the basis for something like a political, religious or economic framework.

**Middle East:** A geographical area that includes Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan, as well as the Arabian Peninsula (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and 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.

**Regime:** A system/way of doing things. Often used to describe a government if they are strict and seek to limit people's freedom.

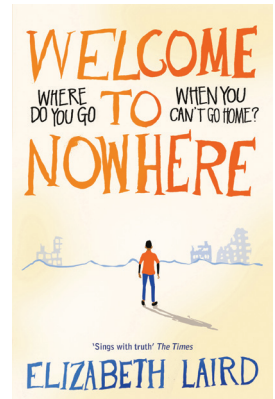
**Revolution:** Causing/involving total change from the current state. A person can be referred to as a 'revolutionary' if they are engaged in this change.

**Terrorism:** The use of violence and intimidation to create fear amongst civilians in order to get a message across.



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## 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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