

Refugee



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALAN GRATZ

Gratz was born in Knoxville, Tennessee and attended the University of Tennessee to study creative writing. Ten years after graduating, Gratz published his first novel for young readers, *Samurai Shortstop*. Since then, he has published 15 books for young readers, including several historical fiction works. *Refugee* spent more than a year on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Gratz also spent a period of time teaching historical fiction writing in Tokyo and Jakarta. He has written plays, magazine articles, a few television articles, and more than 6,000 radio commercials. Gratz currently lives with his wife and daughter in Asheville, North Carolina.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gratz's book is deeply rooted in three periods of crisis: Nazi Germany just before World War II, the fallout of the Cold War in Cuba, and the Syrian Civil War following the Arab Spring. The MS *St. Louis*, on which Josef is a passenger in the novel, was a real ship that set sail from Nazi Germany to Cuba in 1939. When they arrived, they were told they would not be allowed to land, and were sent back to Europe. Only the Jews who were allowed to enter Britain were able to escape the Holocaust. Of the 620 Jewish refugees on the ship who returned to continental Europe, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates that 254 of them were killed in the Holocaust. In Cuba in 1994, due to the recent collapse of the Soviet Union and the U.S. embargo on trade with Cuba, hungry citizens rioted in Havana. In response, Cuban president Fidel Castro announced that anyone who wanted to leave Cuba could do so without being thrown in jail—the lifting of this policy is what allows Isabel's to flee the country in *Refugee*. In the five weeks following this policy announcement, an estimated 35,000 people fled the island for the United States. U.S. president Bill Clinton announced that any Cuban refugees caught at sea would be sent to Guantanamo Bay, while any Cuban refugees who made it to America could remain there (the "Wet Foot, Dry Foot" policy). Thousands of Cuban people continue to flood the United States every year. Following the Arab Spring (a series of anti-government protests and revolutions in the Middle East) in 2011, Syria has experienced a brutal civil war, leaving the city of Aleppo in ruins. According to the United Nations, as of 2017, more than 470,000 people have been killed. More than 10 million Syrians have been displaced from their homes, and an estimated 4.8 million Syrians have left their country as refugees. Many have settled in other Middle Eastern countries, and millions more (like

Mahmoud and his family in the novel) try to reach Europe, which has accepted hundreds of thousands of refugees. By contrast, between 2011 and 2016, the United States admitted only 18,007 Syrian refugees. On January 27, 2017, President Donald Trump signed an executive order suspending the entry of all Syrian refugees into the United States. The executive order has been altered slightly, but remains upheld as of 2019.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

There are many examples of contemporary young adult fiction that follow the journeys of child refugees analogous to Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud. Other works that focus on Syrian refugees include N. H. Senzai's *Escape From Aleppo*, which centers on a 12-year-old Syrian girl just as the Arab Spring is beginning, and her family's subsequent flight from Aleppo. *Nowhere Boy* by Katherine Marsh is about a 14-year-old Syrian refugee who is newly arrived in Brussels, Belgium. Atia Abawi's *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* tracks one child's journey from Syria to Turkey to Greece, just like the path Mahmoud takes in *Refugee*. Like Josef and his family, Lois Lowry's [Number the Stars](#) similarly focuses on a young Jewish girl fleeing Nazi Germany in hope of safety in Denmark. For another work focusing on Cuban refugees, *The Red Umbrella* follows a young Cuban girl who flees with other children to find a new life in the United States following the Communist Revolution. For a non-fiction look at refugee children, [Outcasts United](#) explores the lives of refugee children from a variety of countries who have all been relocated to a small town in Georgia. Gratz himself has written several other young adult books that focus on children in times of war: *Grenade*, *Projekt 1065*, and *Prisoner B-3087*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Refugee
- **When Written:** 2015-2017
- **Where Written:** North Carolina
- **When Published:** July 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult fiction; Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Germany, Cuba, Syria, Turkey, United States, France, Hungary, Austria
- **Climax:** Mahmoud and his family reach Germany and are taken in by Ruthie and her husband.
- **Antagonist:** War; indifference; Nazis
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Good Cause. Gratz donates a portion of the proceeds for each book sold to UNICEF to support refugee children worldwide.

Lightbulb Moment. Gratz was initially inspired to write the book by the story of the MS *St. Louis*, until he took a vacation to the Florida Keys and found a raft that likely came from Cuba. At the same time, he was seeing news stories about the Syrian refugees, and when he couldn't decide which story to write about, he integrated all three together.



PLOT SUMMARY

Refugee follows the stories of three refugee children fleeing conflicts in their home countries. The first protagonist, Josef, is a 12-year-old Jewish boy living in Germany in 1938, during the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party. On Kristallnacht, Josef's home is ransacked by Nazi soldiers and his father Aaron is taken to a concentration camp. Six months later, Aaron is allowed to leave the camp on the condition that he immediately leaves the country, and so he; Josef; Josef's mother, Rachel; and Josef's sister, Ruthie, all plan to board the MS *Saint Louis*, which is bringing Jewish refugees to Cuba.

When Josef, Rachel, and Ruthie meet up with Aaron at the [ship](#), Josef notices that his father is paranoid and terrified following his experience at the concentration camp. Aaron is so terrified that he refuses to go to the synagogue on board the ship to attend Josef's bar mitzvah, fearing that the synagogue is a trap that the Nazis have set for the Jewish passengers.

Two weeks after leaving Germany, the ship approaches Cuba and the passengers must undergo a medical inspection. Aaron is reminded of the roll calls at the concentration camp, and he starts to whimper while standing in line for the inspection. Josef worries that the doctor will declare Aaron mentally unstable and won't let him in, and so Josef slaps his father to get him to snap out of it and lies that the Nazis will get Aaron if he doesn't stay quiet. Josef realizes upon doing this that he has traded places with his father and has become the adult in the family. After the medical inspection, the passengers ask when they'll be allowed into Cuba. The Cuban officers say, "*mañana*," meaning "tomorrow."

A few days later, a Nazi official named Schiendick and two other officers raid Josef's family's cabin, destroying all of their possessions and frightening Aaron once more. Later that day, Aaron attempts to commit suicide by jumping off the ship, but he is rescued and taken to the mainland by a Cuban police officer named Mariano Padron. A week passes, and each day the Cuban police continue to tell the passengers that they will be able to disembark "tomorrow." At the end of the week, two young girls, Renata and Evelyne, are allowed to leave with their father, who already lives in Cuba. But the rest of the passengers

are not allowed to disembark. Josef finds Officer Padron to ask if they can join Aaron in Cuba, but Padron informs him that Aaron is not fit enough to board the ship, nor can the rest of the family disembark. Padron tells Josef that he is simply "doing his job."

The *St. Louis* then sails north to make a plea to the U.S. to let them in. On the way, Josef and a group of men try to overtake the ship by taking the crew hostage, but Captain Schroeder talks them down. Once they reach the U.S., the American government refuses the ship, they are forced to go back to Europe. Josef, Rachel, and Ruthie are assigned to be resettled in France, but eight months later Germany invades France and they are forced to go on the run once more. Nazis catch them in a small French town, and though Rachel offers them all of the money and jewelry they have, the Nazis tell her that she can choose one child to set free, and one child to go to the concentration camps.

The second main character, Isabel, is an 11-year-old girl living in Havana, Cuba, in 1994, during Fidel Castro's tenure. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had been giving aid to Cuba, Cuba experiences a severe food shortage and many people are starving and unemployed. Some try to escape Cuba, but Castro has a policy wherein people who try to leave are imprisoned. Isabel's father, Geraldo, tried to escape and was thrown in jail for a year. Now, when riots break out in Havana and a policeman threatens to jail Geraldo again, Geraldo resolves to escape the country the next day. That evening, Castro lifts his policy, allowing people to leave the country. Isabel rallies the rest of her family—her mother, Teresa, who is pregnant and due in a week, and her grandfather Lito—to go with Geraldo to the United States. She enlists the help of her neighbors, the Castillos, who are building a boat and planning to leave as well. Isabel trades her most prized possession, her [trumpet](#), for gasoline so that they can leave that night.

Isabel, Teresa, Geraldo, Lito, Señor Castillo, Señora Castillo, and their son Iván (who is Isabel's best friend) all load into the boat. Policemen are on the shore watching them leave, but don't do anything to stop them. Then the Castillos' other son, Luis, and his girlfriend Amara, who are police officers, desert the force and jump into the boat as they are leaving for Miami. Because they are deserting, the other police officers start to shoot, and a bullet pierces the side of the boat. [Water](#) starts to fill the boat, and they attempt to plug the hole as they navigate towards Miami. They continue to navigate until the motor stops working, and the water starts to flow in more rapidly. They bail as much as they can; meanwhile, Isabel starts to worry about how she will no longer be connected to her Cuban heritage in the U.S. She had never been able to count a Cuban rhythm called *clave* and wonders how she will learn how to do this in Miami.

Later that evening, a tanker surges toward their boat. They are able to avoid it, but the water rushing into their boat carries

away their medicine, bandages, and matches into the sea. Additionally, Señor Castillo is thrown from the boat, and Isabel dives into the water to save him. The next day, a storm forms, and they are hit with a driving rain. During the storm, Isabel remembers her grandmother Lita, who died two years earlier after she was swept out to sea during a cyclone. The day after the storm, the sun breaks through with a blazing heat, and Teresa starts to get a fever. Suddenly, they spot the shore, and grow excited that they have reached Miami. But they are directed to a dock, where an officer tells them that they are in the Bahamas and are not allowed to dock. Before they turn back, some tourists give them food, water, and aspirin to take on their journey, for which Isabel is immensely grateful.

As they continue on their journey, more and more cracks appear in the boat. They decide to take turns floating alongside the boat, to lessen the weight inside. But then, when Iván is in the water, he is attacked by sharks. His leg is bitten and mangled, and he dies when they aren't able to stop the bleeding. Isabel grieves for her friend, particularly when, the next day, they are able to see Miami in the distance. As they start to row toward the shore, a Coast Guard boat starts to steer toward them. Lito then confesses that he had been the Cuban police officer who turned Josef and the other Jewish people away in Havana in 1939. Due to his guilt, he decides to sacrifice himself to allow the others to continue on to Miami. He jumps off of their boat and distracts the Coast Guard so that the others can reach the shore. Meanwhile, Teresa goes into labor and has the baby as they approach the shore. Isabel carries her new baby brother, and the Fernandezes and Castillos are able to arrive in Miami.

Isabel and her family stay with her uncle Guillermo (Lito's brother) until they can get on their feet. Guillermo gifts Isabel a new trumpet, and when she tries out for band by playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" in a salsa style, she realizes that she is finally able to count *clave*.

Mahmoud, the third main character, is a 13-year-old boy living in Aleppo, Syria, in 2015. Syria has been experiencing a civil war since the Arab Spring of 2011, and Aleppo is constantly being bombed. Mahmoud has learned to blend in and be invisible in order to survive, and to protect his 10-year-old brother Waleed. One day, their apartment is hit with bombs. After this, Mahmoud; Waleed; their mother, Fatima; their father, Youssef; and their infant sister, Hana, all set off to try and seek refuge in Germany.

As Mahmoud's family drives to Turkey, Syrian soldiers get into their car but are quickly attacked, forcing Mahmoud and his family to evacuate their car and walk eight hours over two days to the Turkish border. Following this, they wait in Turkey for a boat that will take them to Greece. People constantly try to take advantage of them: a boy makes them pay to be escorted to a place where they can sleep, then sells them fake life vests. Each day, Mahmoud and his family are told that the boat to

Greece will be ready for them "tomorrow," but this continues for seven days, leaving them exhausted and dejected. Finally, they are able to take a dinghy to Greece, but when a storm hits, they are thrown into the water. Mahmoud, Fatima, and Hana become separated from Youssef and Waleed, and they tread water for hours. Another dinghy passes them, but there is no room on the boat for Mahmoud or Fatima. Mahmoud asks them to take Hana, worried that she won't be able to survive if they had to remain in the water. They agree and take his baby sister, a loss that utterly traumatizes Fatima.

Hours later, Mahmoud and Fatima are finally rescued by the Greek Coast Guard, and they reunite with Waleed and Youssef. They continue on to Athens, Greece, but are unable to find Hana. The family travels without stopping through Macedonia, then take a taxi to Serbia. But the taxi driver holds them at gunpoint, demanding their money. They then walk the rest of the way to Serbia before continuing on to Hungary. At the Hungarian border, soldiers throw tear gas at them and take them to a detention center, where soldiers beat Youssef and call the Syrian refugees "parasites" and "filth." They are then relocated to a refugee camp. Mahmoud tries to be invisible to avoid more trouble, but then recognizes that only by being visible can he receive help. He decides simply to walk out of the refugee camp, and the other refugees follow suit. They walk 12 hours to Austria, gaining the attention of the news. When they reach the border, they are greeted by many Austrians and are given food, clothes, and medical attention. Still, they are unable to find Hana.

Mahmoud and his family continue to Germany and receive asylum there. After a month, they are placed with a host family while they start to build their new lives. The host family turns out to be Ruthie, now an old woman, and her husband, Saul. When she hears Mahmoud's story, and how they had to give up Hana, she assures him they will find her. Ruthie tells him her own story: how, when the Nazis had caught her, Josef, and Rachel in France, Josef made the choice to go to the concentration camps so that Ruthie could go free. Rachel and Josef then died in the camps. Ruthie comforts Mahmoud, telling him that they died so that she could live. Mahmoud is sad, but he is grateful that Ruthie lived, so that then she could help Mahmoud and his family. He is glad to have found a home in Germany.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Josef Landau – One of the three protagonists of the book, alongside Isabel and Mahmoud. Josef is 12 years old at the beginning of the book, living in Nazi Germany in 1938, where Jewish people like Josef are treated as "subhuman" and second-class citizens. His father, Aaron, is taken away by the

Nazis on Kristallnacht and is sent to the Dachau concentration camp. When Aaron is released six months later, Josef, his mother Rachel, his sister Ruthie, and Aaron all board the *St. Louis*, which is set to take them to Cuba. A week into their stay on the *St. Louis*, Josef has his bar mitzvah—but it is not this ceremony that makes him a man. Instead, it is the many responsibilities that Josef is forced to take on by the trauma of their journey that turns Josef into an adult. When his father's mental health deteriorates, Josef slaps and threatens him to ensure that he can pass the medical inspection to get into Cuba, effectively reversing their roles as father and son. While the passengers wait to be allowed to disembark, Josef encounters Isabel's grandfather, Mariano Padron, who is a Cuban government officer bound by duty not to let the Jewish refugees in despite feeling sorry for them. Josef's maturation continues as their situation worsens: after Aaron attempts suicide and is separated from the family, Rachel is stricken with grief, so Josef makes sure that Ruthie is being cared for and protected. When the Jewish refugees are rejected from entering Cuba and it seems likely that the **ship** is going to take them back to Germany, Josef works with Pozner and other passengers to try to take the ship hostage so that they can avoid this fate. But perhaps Josef's heaviest decision is the one he must make at the end of the novel: when Nazis give Rachel the choice of setting only one of her children free, Josef sacrifices himself in order to relieve Rachel from the burden of this choice and to spare Ruthie from the concentration camps. Josef later dies in the camps, along with Rachel. Thus, Josef's tale emphasizes how the trauma of being a refugee often forces a child to grow up far sooner than they should have to, expediting their coming of age. And because in Josef's case, his life is considerably shortened as a result, Gratz demonstrates the often tragic consequences of growing up in times of war.

Isabel Fernandez – One of the three protagonists of the book, alongside Josef and Mahmoud. Isabel is 11 years old in 1994, growing up in Havana, Cuba, under Fidel Castro's regime. Isabel is deeply tied to her Cuban heritage, particularly through her music. She plays the **trumpet** on the streets of Cuba and especially loves salsa music and other Cuban styles. One issue she experiences, however, is that she is unable to count a Cuban rhythm called *clave*, which she thinks is supposed to come naturally to Cubans. Like the other two protagonists, Isabel takes on a great deal of responsibility for her family due to the upheaval in which she lives. When her father, Geraldo, is worried that the police are coming after him, Isabel rallies her own family and another family, the Castillos, to take a **boat** to Miami and escape the oppression of Cuba. She trades her trumpet for gasoline in order to get the boat to run, demonstrating how she prioritizes her family over her connection to her music and her roots. Among the people who join Isabel on the journey is her grandfather Lito, who is eventually revealed to be Mariano Padron, the Cuban officer who decades ago prevented Josef from entering Havana. Isabel

spends much of the dangerous trip acting as an adult: she takes care of her eight-and-a-half-months pregnant mother, Teresa; she saves Señor Castillo when he is tossed overboard; and she spends much of the trip relentlessly bailing out **water** from their boat so that they can continue their journey. Isabel also deals with a fair share of trauma that expedites this maturity: two years prior, her grandmother Lita drowned during a cyclone in Havana, and on this boat trip Isabel's best friend, Iván, is killed in the water by sharks. Despite her grief, Isabel is able to persevere and guide her family to reach the shores of Miami. At the end of the book, Isabel is able to reconnect with her heritage when her uncle Guillermo gives her a new trumpet, and Isabel is finally able to count *clave*. This development proves how Isabel does not need to live in Cuba to be connected to it; family allows Isabel to overcome that displacement and find her roots.

Mahmoud Bishara – One of the three protagonists of the book, alongside Josef and Isabel. Mahmoud is 13 years old in 2015, and lives in Aleppo, Syria with his father Youssef, his mother Fatima, his 10-year-old brother Waleed, and his infant sister Hana. Mahmoud has already had a lot of experience dealing with the trauma of war, as the Syrian Civil War has already been raging for four years at the beginning of Mahmoud's story. Mahmoud learns to cope with these conditions by assuming a protective role over Waleed, and by learning to be "invisible," keeping his head down to survive. Mahmoud grapples with this question of whether it is better to be invisible or visible over the course of the novel as his family travels from Syria to Germany. He understands that being unnoticed helps him avoid trouble, but he also begins to see the problems with remaining invisible, because it prevents good people from taking notice of them and providing aid. Mahmoud finally sees the power of visibility when he decides to walk out of the Hungarian detention center and lead the other refugees on a 12-hour march to Austria. This gains a large amount of media attention, and Austrians greet them at the border with food, water, and medicine. Thus, Mahmoud recognizes the importance of being visible, and his story also raises visibility for the many Syrian refugees who continue to need aid in the present. Like Josef, Mahmoud is also forced to make a difficult choice that shows his maturity and the weight of his responsibility. As Mahmoud and his family travel from Syria to Germany, they become stranded in the Mediterranean sea when their **boat** capsizes in the **water**. When another dinghy passes by that doesn't have space for his family, he offers up Hana to them in order to ensure that she can survive. This is a decision that no 13-year-old should have to make, but Mahmoud's difficult journey requires him to take on this burden. Eventually, Mahmoud and his family make it safely to Germany and are taken in by a host family, the elderly Saul Rosenberg and his wife, Ruthie—Josef's little sister, who survived the Holocaust decades prior thanks to Josef's self-sacrifice.

Ruthie Landau/Rosenberg – Josef’s younger sister, who is six years old when they board the *St. Louis* to escape Nazi Germany. Throughout Ruthie’s experiences on the *St. Louis*, she is able to retain her innocence largely through Josef’s protection. He takes on the responsibility of caring for her so that she can remain carefree. She is upset by many of the things that happen to her father, Aaron, and mother, Rachel, but as she explains as an old woman at the end of the novel, she has very little memory of her time with her family. After Josef chooses to sacrifice himself to allow Ruthie to go free when they are caught by the Nazis, Ruthie is taken in and raised by a kind French woman who treats her like family. When Ruthie later tries to search for Josef and Rachel, she finds that both died in concentration camps. Ruthie returns to Germany, marries a fellow Holocaust survivor named Saul Rosenberg, and has a large family. In 2015, she and her husband choose to be a host family for Syrian refugees, and Mahmoud and his family are placed in her home while they get back on their feet. Hearing Mahmoud’s story, Ruthie tells him her own story, and explains that Josef died so that she could live. Ruthie’s kindness toward Mahmoud and the Syrian refugees contrasts with Lito’s treatment of the Jewish refugees in 1939—it emphasizes again the importance of empathy and the need for all people to help those who are most vulnerable and who are trying to rebuild their lives.

Lito/Mariano Padron – Isabel’s grandfather and Teresa’s father. (“Lito” is short for *abuelito*, meaning “grandfather.”) Lito is skeptical of leaving Cuba, but Isabel convinces him to join the rest of the family on the **boat** to Miami in order to keep the family together and help Teresa as she prepares to give birth to a new baby boy. Lito often gets into fights with Geraldo, whom he believes is prioritizing himself over the rest of his family. At the end of the story, it is revealed that Lito was Mariano Padron, the Cuban officer who decades prior saved Josef’s father, Aaron, when he dove into the **water**. Lito is haunted by the fact that he told the Jewish passengers on board the *St. Louis* that they would be able to disembark and arrive in Cuba “*mañana*,” but never let them in. He turned Josef and the others away and sent them back to Europe (many of them to their deaths), despite the fact that he could have let them in to Cuba. Driven by this guilt, Lito saves Isabel and the others at the end of the book by jumping off of their boat and pretending to drown so that the Coast Guard boat that is following them becomes distracted. He is then deported back to Cuba. Lito’s story highlights the importance of empathy, as he realizes that he had a responsibility to save the Jewish people on the *St. Louis* but chose to ignore their plight.

Aaron Landau – Josef and Ruthie’s father, and Rachel’s husband. At the beginning of the book, Aaron is taken away to the Dachau concentration camp on Kristallnacht. Aaron is released six months later on the condition that he leave Germany immediately, prompting the Landaus to book passage

to Cuba on the *St. Louis*. Despite the fact that Aaron is free, he is completely changed by his experience at the concentration camp. He is thin and frail, and is constantly paranoid that the Nazis are going to find him. He reveals some of the horrors that he experienced, such as watching the Nazis hang a man upside down in a barrel and slowly filling it with water until he drowned. Aaron’s mental health deteriorates over the course of the novel, to the point where he is in danger of not passing the medical inspection to get into Cuba. Fearing this, Josef slaps Aaron and threatens him in order to get Aaron to calm down, prompting Josef to observe how he has become the adult in the family, while Aaron is now acting like a child. Aaron attempts to commit suicide by jumping off of the **ship** into the **water**, but he is rescued by Mariano Padron and is taken to mainland Cuba. He remains there even as the ship is forced to leave, and at the end of the novel Ruthie explains that he lived there the rest of his life, and died before she could reconnect with him.

Geraldo Fernandez – Isabel’s father and Teresa’s husband. Prior to the beginning of the novel, Geraldo tried several times to escape Cuba and take a **boat** to Miami. But when he was caught, he was jailed for a year due to Castro’s policies. At the beginning of the story, Geraldo becomes involved with riots in Havana and a policeman threatens to find him and jail him. After Castro announces that he is lifting the ban on people leaving Cuba, Geraldo is adamant that he must leave the very next day. This resolution is what prompts Isabel to assemble the Castillos and the Fernandezes and take a boat to Miami together. Geraldo often gets into arguments with Isabel’s grandfather Lito, who believes that Geraldo is prioritizing himself over his family. But Geraldo proves his devotion to Teresa and Isabel by refusing to leave her side, even when a Coast Guard boat threatens to take them back to Cuba. Ultimately, they are able to make it to Miami together and start a new life as a family.

Rachel Landau – Josef and Ruthie’s mother, and Aaron’s wife. After Aaron is taken away to the Dachau concentration camp following Kristallnacht, Rachel becomes the primary caretaker in the family. But when they meet up with Aaron again six months later and board the *St. Louis*, Rachel starts to care primarily for the traumatized Aaron, while Josef takes responsibility for Ruthie and is forced into increasingly mature situations. When Aaron dives into the **water** to try to commit suicide and is taken to mainland Cuba, Rachel is distraught and Josef must become the adult in the family. When the *St. Louis* leaves Cuba, Rachel tries to become hopeful again and spends much of her time in the **ship**’s dance hall, but this too becomes a shirking of her responsibilities and only makes Josef’s burden heavier. At the end of the book, when the Nazis force Rachel to choose one of her children to set free and one to be sent into the concentration camps, Josef completely assumes the role of adult in her place, and chooses to sacrifice himself to save

Ruthie.

Teresa Fernandez – Isabel’s mother, Geraldo’s wife, and Lito’s daughter. At the beginning of the story, Teresa is eight and a half months pregnant with Isabel’s little brother. Still, she is adamant about joining her family on their journey to Miami because she wants to keep the family together. This holds true even when Teresa grows sick along the trip and is given the opportunity to receive medical attention in the Bahamas, but knowing that this would result in her deportation back to Cuba, she refuses. Teresa’s condition, however, requires Isabel to take care of her, again emphasizing how the dangerous circumstances that refugee children are put in forces them to grow up much sooner than an average child. At the end of the journey, Teresa gives birth to a baby boy, whom they name Mariano after Lito (Mariano Padron).

Iván Castillo – Isabel’s best friend. Iván is the son of Señor Castillo and Señora Castillo, and is Luis’s younger brother. Iván and his father are the ones who build the **boat** to go to Miami, but it is only with Isabel’s help that they are able to get the gasoline for the Fernandezes and Castillos to go. Iván is excited by the opportunity that the United States brings, but his dreams are never fulfilled, as he is attacked by sharks while swimming alongside the boat and dies a day before the reach Miami. Iván’s fate demonstrates the dangers of being a refugee, and how the government’s failure to help those like the Castillos and the Fernandezes can have dire consequences. His death also serves as another grief and trauma that Isabel undergoes, and which prompts her to have to grow up early.

Fatima Bishara – Mahmoud, Waleed, and Hana’s mother. Fatima, like her husband Youssef, tries to keep her children’s spirits up and care for Hana as they take their long journey from Syria to Germany. Fatima becomes completely devastated, however, when Mahmoud has to make the decision to give Hana away to another rescue boat in the hopes of saving her from drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. Fatima spends the rest of the novel grieving and desperately searching for her daughter in all of the refugee camps they can find. Her grief becomes another way in which Mahmoud is forced to grow up early, as he becomes a caretaker for his parents and feels guilty over the burden of the decision that he made.

Youssef Bishara – Mahmoud, Waleed, and Hana’s father, and Fatima’s husband. Youssef is characterized as a caring father and husband, trying to shepherd his family to safety in Germany. He is constantly making jokes, trying to cheer Mahmoud, Waleed, and Fatima up as they encounter obstacle after obstacle along the way. Mahmoud understands that Youssef’s spirit is broken, however, when he is beaten senselessly in the immigrant detention center in Hungary. It is at that point that Mahmoud takes on the role of the adult in his family, helping to get them and other refugees out of the detention center.

Hana Bishara – Mahmoud’s infant sister. When Mahmoud and his family are thrown into the Mediterranean sea on their way to Greece by a storm, Mahmoud makes a quick decision and offers Hana to another passing **boat** in the hopes that they will take her to safety. Fatima spends the rest of the novel grieving over this loss, constantly searching for her daughter among the refugee camps they visit. Mahmoud also feels incredibly guilty over the decision he was forced to make, and vows that he will find her. However, at the end of the novel, Hana’s fate is left undetermined, demonstrating the high cost of war and the burden of the decision that Mahmoud had to make.

Captain Schroeder – The captain of the *St. Louis*. In contrast with Otto Schiendick, Captain Schroeder recognizes the humanity of the Jewish passengers on board his **ship** and understands his responsibility to shepherd them to safety. When the *St. Louis* is turned away by the Cuban and United States governments, Schroeder works as hard as he can to make sure that the passengers are not taken back to Germany, which would likely result in their deaths. Even when Josef, Pozner, and other passengers try to take the ship hostage, Schroeder empathizes with their desperation and assures them that he will land in other places in Europe—ultimately making good on his promise.

Otto Schiendick – The Nazi Party official on board the *St. Louis*. In contrast to Captain Schroeder, Schiendick views the Jewish passengers as subhuman, even calling the Jewish children “rats” when they take a tour of the **ship**. Schiendick is cruel, and takes pleasure in making life harder for the Jewish refugees on board the ship. When Aaron insists during a funeral on board that the man not be set adrift in the Nazi flag, Schiendick retaliates by ransacking Josef’s family’s cabin. Thus, Schiendick’s actions demonstrate how when a person dehumanizes and stereotypes another group of people, it is then easy for them to be brutal and unjust toward that group.

Samih Nasseer – A Palestinian taxi driver who gives Mahmoud and his family help in Turkey by offering to let them spend the night in his car dealership office while they wait for a **boat** to Greece. Nasseer serves as one example of the importance of empathy, and how deeply simple aid can affect refugees. Like Ruthie, Nasseer has a reason for being so empathetic: he, too, was a refugee. But his small gesture illustrates Gratz’s argument that anyone can provide a small amount of help to refugees.

Fidel Castro – The president and prime minister of Cuba during the period of Isabel’s story. Castro institutes a policy during his tenure that anyone who attempts to leave Cuba and is caught will be thrown into prison. When Geraldo tries to escape to Miami via **boat**, he is thrown in jail for a year. Castro lifts this ban on the day that Isabel’s story begins, and is what prompts her family and many other families to choose to flee Cuba by boat.

Waleed Bishara – Mahmoud’s 10-year-old brother. Mahmoud observes that Waleed is largely unfazed by most of the events of their journey, which worries him. Like Mahmoud, Waleed has grown up in traumatic war conditions and as a result, has been forced to be far more mature than the average child as the family faces the horrific trials of fleeing their home.

Guillermo – Isabel’s great-uncle and Lito’s brother. Guillermo had left Cuba in the 1970s and resettled in the United States. When Isabel arrives in Miami, Guillermo underscores the idea that family will enable Isabel to retain her Cuban roots. Guillermo gifts her a new **trumpet**, and with this new instrument Isabel is able to learn the Cuban *clave* rhythm.

Lita – Isabel’s grandmother. (“Lita” is short for *abuelita*, meaning “grandmother.”) Lita dies two years prior to the beginning of Isabel’s story. Isabel had been staying with her and Lito when an enormous cyclone hit, and their shack was swept out to sea. Lita slipped beneath the waves and drowned in the **water**.

Señor Castillo – One of the other refugees on the **boat** with Isabel and her family. Señora Castillo is Iván and Luis’s father, and Señora Castillo’s husband. When the Fernandezes and Castillos face a storm on their way to Miami, Señor Castillo is thrown into the **water** and Isabel dives in to rescue him, a selfless act that exemplifies Isabel’s extraordinary maturity.

Renata Aber – Evelyne Aber’s older sister. Evelyne and Renata are the real names of two sisters who traveled aboard the *St. Louis*, and were the only two allowed to disembark in Cuba because their father already lived there and had strong connections with the local authorities. In *Refugee*, they become friends with Josef and Ruthie.

Evelyne Aber – Renata Aber’s younger sister. Evelyne and Renata are the real names of two sisters who traveled aboard the *St. Louis*, and were the only two allowed to disembark in Cuba because their father already lived there and had strong connections with the local authorities. In *Refugee*, they become friends with Josef and Ruthie.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Herr Meier – Josef’s teacher in Germany. Herr Meier dehumanizes Josef by calling him up in front of the class and comparing his face to diagrams of other Jewish people, teaching the students how to identify Jews. Josef is humiliated by this exercise, feeling like a “subhuman” animal.

Bashar al-Assad – The leader of Syria during the period of Mahmoud’s story, who made people who criticized his government “disappear.” In response to this oppression, riots started in Damascus before spreading throughout the country and blossoming into the Syrian Civil War.

Pozner – One of the passengers on the *St. Louis*. After the *St. Louis* is turned away from both Cuba and the United States, Pozner enlists Josef and a few other passengers’ help in order

to try to take the **ship** hostage and run it aground on the U.S. coast.

Señora Castillo – One of the other refugees on the **boat** with Isabel and her family. Señora Castillo is Iván and Luis’s mother, and Señor Castillo’s wife.

Luis Castillo – Iván’s older brother. He and his girlfriend, Amara, desert the police force in Cuba and join Isabel on the **boat** to Miami.

Amara – Luis’s girlfriend. Amara joins Isabel and the other refugees on the **boat** to Miami after she and Luis desert the police force in Cuba.

Saul Rosenberg – Ruthie’s husband; a fellow Holocaust survivor. Saul and Ruthie serve as Mahmoud, Youssef, Fatima, and Waleed’s host family in Germany.

TERMS

Kristallnacht – A series of coordinated attacks on the Jewish people by the Nazi Party, carried out on the night of November 9-10, 1938, throughout Germany. The Nazis torched synagogues, vandalized homes, schools, synagogues, and businesses, and killed almost 100 Jews. **Josef**’s story opens on the night of Kristallnacht, when his home is destroyed by the Nazis and his father, **Aaron**, is taken to a concentration camp. Kristallnacht means “Crystal Night” in English, referring to the broken glass of the buildings that were demolished.

Bar mitzvah – A Jewish coming-of-age ceremony that is celebrated when a boy reaches 13 years of age. The ceremony involves reading a portion of the Torah; afterwards, a boy is viewed as an adult in the eyes of a law. **Josef** celebrates his bar mitzvah a week into his journey on the *St. Louis*, and views it as his own personal passage into adulthood.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



TRAUMA AND COMING OF AGE

Refugee centers on the stories of three children forced to flee from their homes: Josef, a 12-year-old Jewish boy fleeing Germany during World War II; Isabel, an 11-year-old Cuban girl attempting to cross the ocean to Miami in 1994; and Mahmoud, a 13-year-old Syrian boy caught in civil war in 2015. Because Gratz uses three children as the lenses through which readers experience the story, the book also tracks the coming of age of his three

protagonists. Yet the circumstances of these children are atypical as they escape oppressive and dangerous countries; their development is deeply altered by their traumatic journeys. In focusing on the difficult choices and the extra responsibilities that these children have to bear, Gratz illustrates how the trauma and hardships of being a refugee force children to become adults far sooner than they should have to.

At the book's outset, Josef exhibits a deep desire to grow up. But over the course of the novel, Josef is forced to take on far more responsibility for his parents and sister, particularly as his father, Aaron, sinks deeper into depression and anxiety following his experience at a concentration camp. Gratz demonstrates how Josef takes on the adult role in his family, assuming the burden that one would normally expect parents to take on. At the beginning of the book, Josef is eager not to be treated as a child anymore. But Josef quickly realizes the responsibility that comes with being an adult. After Aaron returns from the Dachau concentration camp on the condition that he must leave the country, Josef's family flees to Cuba on the MS *St. Louis*. Josef's father is deeply disturbed by what he saw at the concentration camp and holes himself up in their cabin. Josef consequently helps supervise his younger sister, Ruthie, on the **boat** and makes sure that she doesn't interact with the Nazi officials on board, taking over some of the responsibilities that his father should be shouldering as a parent. When a medical inspection is set to take place on the ship, Aaron starts to have a panic attack as this prospect triggers memories from Dachau. Josef then slaps his father to get him to calm down, causing Josef to note how "in the past six months, Josef and his father had traded places." The hardships that Josef and his family have faced have led him to have to take on the role of an adult, even punishing his father like a child when he is acting out. Josef faces his hardest decision near the end of the novel, after the *St. Louis* has been sent back to Europe. When Josef, Ruthie, and their mother, Rachel, are caught by a Nazi officer, the officer forces Josef's mother to choose which of her children will go free. Instead, Josef makes the decision for her, insisting that Ruthie go free and dooming himself to the concentration camps and ultimately death. When Ruthie recounts this incident as an adult, she says of him, "My brother, just a boy, becoming a man." Josef takes the responsibility of an adult onto himself, and even sacrifices his own life in order to save that of his sister. This is a decision no 13-year-old should have to make, and yet his experience as a refugee demands it.

Isabel is faced with similar burdens, making tough decisions in order to care for her family and keep them together. Her experiences prove how she, too, has been forced to grow into adulthood by the trauma of her journey. Early in Isabel's story, riots break out in Havana due to the ongoing food shortages and president Fidel Castro's oppressive regime. Isabel goes out

to search for her father and grandfather to make sure that they are not arrested. She even runs in front of a police officer about to hit her father, Geraldo, in order to protect him. It is because of her that her father is not arrested, showing how just like Josef, she is forced to take on the role of parent and protector. Isabel then recognizes that her father is in danger of being arrested for criticizing Castro. She decides to organize for her family (including her pregnant mother, Teresa) and her neighbors, the Castillos, to all flee the country by boat and take a harrowing journey from Havana to Miami. In making these plans, Isabel shows the maturity and responsibility of someone much older, but her dire situation gives her little choice.

As Mahmoud and his family flee war-torn Syria, he, too, must bear the burden of tough choices and be responsible for his family's safety. Even before Mahmoud's family is forced to flee, Mahmoud takes on a protective role over his younger brother, Waleed. Mahmoud finds a new route for them to go home from school every day, so that they can avoid running into the Syrian Army or the rebels, and find shelter from bombs if necessary. Mahmoud is thrust even further into an adult role when he and his family take a boat from Turkey to Greece, but a storm capsizes their boat and they are forced to swim for hours. A passing ship refuses to take them, but Mahmoud makes a decision and offers his infant sister, Hana, hoping to save her life even if it means they have to give her up forever. Like Josef's final decision to sacrifice himself for the sake of his sister, this is an extraordinarily heavy burden for a child to have to bear, but the trauma of what these children are experiencing necessitates such difficult and mature decisions. The refugee experience expedites this process of growing up for all three of the young protagonists, showing one of the most difficult consequences of growing up in the midst of such upheaval.



INJUSTICE AND CRUELTY VS. EMPATHY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In *Refugee*, Gratz explores how non-refugees treat those who are journeying through or landing in their home countries, weaving patterns among the people who meet Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud. Gratz employs two kinds of non-refugees in his novel: those who dehumanize or ignore the protagonists' plights, and those who are empathetic and attempt to help. Gratz demonstrates how when a group of people is dehumanized, it is easier for others to be unjust and cruel to those people. By contrast, Gratz shows how empathy and recognizing people's humanity can make an enormous difference in people's lives, and he calls on readers to share that empathy with refugees.

As a Jewish person, Josef is frequently dehumanized by the Nazis, both in Germany and as he and his family try to flee the country; this gives Nazis the license to then abuse and torture Jewish people. Thus, Gratz argues how easy it is to mistreat people when they choose not to recognize the humanity of

others. Josef describes an incident in which he is called to the front of his class and spoken of as though he is “subhuman.” Josef is humiliated, and this belittlement is what allows the Germans to mistreat Jewish people so easily, because the Germans think of them as lesser. This remains true once Josef and his family board the ship to Cuba: he and the other children on the *St. Louis* are called “Jewish rats” by one of the ship’s Nazi officers, Otto Schiendick. This overt dehumanization is what gives the Nazis the permission to be so brutal, such as when Schiendick and other Nazi soldiers later ransack Josef’s family’s cabin. In this incident, the soldiers do unnecessarily cruel things like smashing everything in sight tearing the head off of Ruthie’s stuffed bunny. Yet perhaps the worst act of injustice is when the Jews are prevented from leaving the ship and entering Cuba, despite the fact that a return to Germany will most likely result in their deaths. One of the Cuban officers, Mariano Padron, apologizes to Josef, saying, “I’m just doing my job.” The ease with which he is able to ignore the plight of the Jewish passengers, shows how he, too, is complicit in the refugees’ suffering despite exhibiting some empathy. Devaluing the Jewish people’s humanity is what enables him to look away from the injustice and cruelty toward which he is sending them.

Mahmoud also encounters similar injustice, as Gratz includes many episodes in which people try to take advantage of Mahmoud and his family. Many of the actions of the people the family encounters are truly despicable, as these people attempt to exploit refugees who are already so vulnerable. When Mahmoud’s family is trying to get a boat from Turkey to Greece, they are told day after day that the boat is delayed and will come tomorrow. They are then forced to pay merely to be taken to a shelter, and then they are told they have to pay 5,000 pounds each—including for Mahmoud’s infant sister, Hana—in order to stay at the mall. Then, the family is convinced to pay for life vests which turn out to be fake. These incidents show how little people care for their wellbeing: others are willing to endanger the refugees’ lives just to make money and improve their own situation. Later on, when Mahmoud and his family travel to Hungary, they are prevented from entering the country. The Hungarians fire tear gas canisters at the refugees, and then Mahmoud and his family are thrown in a detention center, where the soldiers call them “parasites” and “filth.” Mahmoud understands that they are not criminals, since they’ve done nothing wrong other than try to escape a country that is being bombed, and yet they are still treated as vermin. This constant dehumanization is demoralizing and only adds to the family’s misery and destitution as they go through the most difficult period of their lives.

Gratz counters these incidents with episodes in which people recognize the refugees’ humanity and empathize with them. He shows how even the smallest acts of kindness can make a huge difference to these most vulnerable populations. For example, when Isabel and her family arrive in the Bahamas, tourists start

to throw them anything they have— aspirin, bottles of water, bags of food. Isabel’s heart “ache[s] with gratitude,” as she knows that this kindness might mean the difference between “death and survival” for her pregnant mother, Teresa. Recognizing people’s most basic needs and offering a small amount of assistance, Gratz shows, can go a long way to helping them and making them feel valuable. In another instance, Mahmoud is relieved in Turkey when a man named Samih Nasser allows him and his family to sleep in his office in a car dealership. Nasseer had been a refugee himself, and thus understands the plight of these desperate people. It makes sense that a fellow refugee would want to help Mahmoud and his family, but his simple offer of a place to sleep highlights the idea that many people could offer some kind of assistance to people passing through—it just takes a small amount of empathy.

The climax of Gratz’s novel draws connections between his three main characters: Gratz reveals that Isabel’s grandfather Lito was Mariano Padron, the Cuban officer who turned the *St. Louis* away and sent Josef and the other Jewish refugees back to Europe. Lito worries, reflecting on the incident, about how many of them died because he was “just doing his job.” This contrasts with Josef’s younger sister, Ruthie, who is able to survive the Holocaust and takes in Mahmoud and his family while they are getting back on their feet in Germany. The difference between the outcomes of these two stories shows the importance of treating refugees with empathy and respect, and not looking away when people are facing injustice. This is the message Gratz aims to impart on the reader, in the hopes that they, too, might provide essential aid to refugees in need.



HOPE VS. DESPAIR

Refugee’s three storylines focus on three societies in the throes of their worst political crises, to the point where the society as a whole has succumbed to a kind of despair. Likewise, Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud face myriad obstacles, setbacks, dilemmas, and severe tragedies as a result of those conflicts. But as much as they are unable to control the conditions that they are forced to face, the novel’s three protagonists and their families are able to choose how to react to these hardships. While the characters frequently oscillate between feelings of hope and despair, Gratz shows the importance of never giving into despair completely. Only by keeping a shred of hope alive are the characters able to try to find a better life in a new country.

Gratz indicates early in each of the three narratives how the characters’ respective societies have become miserable and oppressive. Yet despite this, Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud, along with their families, all choose to seek out a better life rather than give up. For Josef, the rise of Nazism plunges German Jews into terror. Josef’s house, and many other Jewish people’s houses and businesses, are completely ransacked during

Kristallnacht. Many Jewish people are sent to and killed in concentration camps, to the point where Jewish people are afraid to be identified as such and stop congregating in public places together. Even though Josef isn't happy to leave Germany, he knows that going to Cuba represents his family's only chance for a better life. Isabel lives in Cuba in 1994, where the consequences of the Soviet Union's fall are causing steep food shortages, and Fidel Castro's oppressive regime imprisons anyone who might criticize the society, as well as anyone who tries to leave it. Isabel and her family are starving, and when Castro finally allows people to leave the country, Isabel and her family immediately jump at the opportunity to make a new home in America. In Mahmoud's narrative, Syria is locked in a brutal civil war, an outgrowth of the Arab Spring that swept the Middle East beginning in 2011. Syria is experiencing constant bombings, with soldiers from both sides threatening and killing civilians. When Mahmoud's apartment is bombed, Mahmoud recognizes that there are no ambulances or police cars coming to help them because there "[aren't] any left." In the midst of this country in severe crisis, Mahmoud's father Youssef recognizes that their only option is to find a new place to call home. In each of these cases, the country is at its lowest point, but Gratz demonstrates the necessity of preserving a sense of optimism. Even though the characters face difficult journeys ahead, their hope allows them to believe that those struggles might ultimately be worth it.

Gratz then establishes how the characters maintain that optimism along their journeys. For each storyline, Gratz uses the dangerous **ocean** to symbolize the constant threat of despair and the potential to succumb to hopelessness. At the same time, **boats** represent the desire to stay afloat even in these difficult circumstances, as the characters literally fight to keep their heads above water. For Josef and his family, the MS *St. Louis* represents a means of escaping Germany and a path to "a new life." The ship is a way of keeping their spirits aloft on their journey after so much fear and anxiety in Germany. Even though the boat is ultimately forced to turn back and leave them in France, it still serves its function as an opportunity to escape Germany and find a new beginning. The boat that Isabel and her family use to escape Cuba shows the tenuousness of their hope and their flagging optimism throughout their journey. Soon after Isabel and her family leave, police officers shoot at them from the shore, and a bullet tears a hole in the side of the boat. They are forced to bail water the entire time they are crossing the ocean, even to the point where they have to swim alongside the boat instead of riding within it to lessen the weight that the boat has to carry. Though Lito calls the boat a "sinking coffin," Isabel recognizes that it is their only path to find a better life. Like the boat, the family's hope sometimes falters, but they never abandon the belief that they can make it to Miami. Mahmoud similarly journeys by boat during the leg from Turkey to Greece—but it capsizes in a severe storm, and his whole family must tread water for hours. Mahmoud's

mother, Fatima, tries to make sure to keep his baby sister, Hana, above the water, and when another boat passes, Mahmoud insists that they take his baby sister to safety. This boat represents not only a way for Hana to have a better life, but means to survive at all.

Gratz also highlights one word in particular that captures the dual nature of hope and despair: the word "tomorrow" (or in Spanish, "*mañana*"). "Tomorrow" becomes a refrain that people often repeat to refugees in each story—when Josef wants to know when they can disembark from the *St. Louis* once they have arrived in Cuba; when Isabel wonders when they might arrive in Miami; when Mahmoud and his family attempt to catch the boat from Greece to Turkey. The word touches on both feelings of hope and despair: hope, in that tomorrow might bring them closer to their goal, and despair, in that they still have to wait, and that their fates are at the mercy of others. Even though each of them are frustrated by this refrain of "tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow," each one maintains the sense of hope that tomorrow might deliver a better life. Though not all of the characters' life stories end happily, only by maintaining this optimistic view of "tomorrow" can they even try to find that better life.



FAMILY, DISPLACEMENT, AND CULTURE

All three of *Refugee*'s protagonists are forced to flee the only culture they have ever known, but Josef and Isabel in particular fear the erasure of their personal cultural identity, or a future inability to connect to the place they once called home. Gratz refutes the idea that they will lose this sense of culture, however, due in large part to the fact that Josef and Isabel remain connected to a family that shares their cultural heritage. Even though they are removed from their countries, their families enable a transplantation of that culture, allowing Josef and Isabel to remain connected to it. Thus, Gratz illustrates how the cultural identity that a family shares has the ability to create the sense of home, even in a new society.

Gratz uses Isabel's connection to her **trumpet** and the *clave*, an irregular rhythm signature to Cuban music, to demonstrate her ability to find a new home in Miami with her family. At the beginning of the story, Isabel can't hear the *clave* rhythm, even when she listens to her own trumpet playing. When she plays on the streets of Havana, she describes how "Try as she might, she had never heard it, never felt it. She listened now, intently, trying to hear the heartbeat of Cuba in her own music." Isabel hopes and assumes that she'll be able to learn *clave* as she grows up in Havana, illustrating her yearning for a connection to her home culture. Yet Isabel makes the decision that her family is ultimately more important than her connection to her home country, symbolized in her music and her trumpet in particular. This trade-off is made explicit when Isabel exchanges her trumpet for gasoline to power the **boat** that will take her

and her family to Miami. She recognizes that family creates a sense of home more than a place ever could, and her fear of the danger in Havana—and the possibility of her father, Geraldo, being imprisoned—overshadows her desire to stay.

The anxiety over learning *clave* only amplifies, however, when Isabel and her family set off for Miami. On the boat, she worries to herself, “She had never been able to count *clave*, but she had always assumed it would come to her eventually. That the rhythm of her homeland would one day whisper its secrets to her soul. But would she ever hear it now? Like trading her trumpet, had she swapped the one thing that was really hers—her music—for the chance to keep her family together?” The fear that Isabel expresses demonstrates how important her cultural heritage is to her, as she considers it the only thing that truly belongs to her. The conclusion of Isabel’s story, however, argues that one can find one’s culture anywhere, as long as one remains connected to one’s family. When Isabel begins school at Miami, she receives a trumpet as a gift from Guillermo, a family member who already lives in Miami. Isabel tries out for the school band with a salsa version of the U.S. national anthem, and she realizes that she can finally hear the *clave* rhythm. She recognizes that she doesn’t need to be in Cuba to feel connected to her culture. In fact, being with her family has allowed her to be even more connected to her culture than she was in Havana.

Josef finds a similar sense of a transplanted home with his own family and other Jewish people aboard the MS *St. Louis*, emphasizing how one’s family, and a community at large, can preserve a culture more strongly than a homeland can. For Josef, the dissociation from his home becomes even more pronounced due to the fact that the Nazis are attempting to systematically eradicate the Jewish people and their culture. Whereas Josef always considered himself to be a German and believes that Germany is his home, he finds that his German identity is constantly being disputed, and his Jewish culture is undermined. He is made fun of in school for being Jewish, and others suggest that he is not a “real” German. Thus, Gratz shows how someone can be detached from their own culture even when one is still in the place that one calls home. Ironically, it is not until Josef leaves Germany and boards the *St. Louis* that he is able to reconnect to his Jewish culture, as the ship’s passengers are exclusively Jewish. Josef is able to attend synagogue and Rachel is able to organize his bar mitzvah, a Jewish ceremony representing his passage into adulthood. Because German Jews had been afraid to gather in public places since Kristallnacht, this represents the first time that Josef is able to connect openly with his Jewish identity in over six months. The memories of their traditions flood back to him, and Josef is able to recite from the Torah in Hebrew. With this ceremony, Gratz is able to illustrate how Josef does not need to be in Germany or even in a proper synagogue to remain connected to his culture; like Isabel, he simply needs his family.



INVISIBILITY AND THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

One of the aspects of being a refugee that is particularly difficult for Mahmoud is feeling invisible. Mahmoud is the only one of the three protagonists whose journey frequently causes him to interact with people native to the countries through which he is traveling. As he moves from Syria to Germany, he grapples with the idea of whether it is better to be seen, or better to blend in with the crowd and make as little trouble as possible. It is a painful paradox, as being invisible deprives him of being acknowledged as a person, but sometimes visibility leads him to be abused or further oppressed. Yet Mahmoud ultimately comes to the conclusion, and Gratz argues through his story, that it is important to be seen and acknowledged as a refugee so that others can offer their aid.

At the beginning of the book, Mahmoud illustrates some of the benefits of being invisible and blending into the background, and the negative aspects of being noticed, yet Gratz still hints at why doing so can be upsetting for Mahmoud. Mahmoud describes how invisibility, for him, is a form of protection—as he puts it, being invisible is “how he survives.” Mahmoud describes how “getting noticed by the Syrian army or the rebels fighting them [is] just inviting trouble.” He understands that just to be noticed represents an invitation of danger, and so remaining invisible sometimes feels safer. Mahmoud keeps this lesson in mind when he and his family are heading to Turkey. He tries to blend in with the other refugees walking with them, and when the Turkish officials confront them, he worries that if they notice something different about him, they might “pull him and his family out of line.” Mahmoud stares straight ahead, trying to make his face as blank as possible. Yet even though this is something that Mahmoud does in order to survive, Gratz hints at the pain of having to constantly render oneself invisible. Mahmoud also realizes that often, refugees are only acknowledged or seen in a negative light. When they are traveling from the Greek island of Lesbos to Athens, Mahmoud and the other Muslim refugees do one of their daily prayers on the deck of the ship. The tourists who are also on the deck start to murmur about them in disgust. Mahmoud and Gratz highlight the injustice of this assessment of them: “They only see us when we do something they don’t want us to do,” Mahmoud realizes. Being invisible might be safer, but it is also unfair to expect refugees to simply disappear because it makes other people more comfortable not to have to think about them.

Over the course of his journey, Mahmoud begins to recognize how being invisible may be more of a harm than a help for refugees, and that the benefit of being visible is that it allows for other people to help them. When Mahmoud and his mother are stranded in the **water** after their **boat** capsizes between Turkey and Greece, he feels so invisible that he thinks that if he

were to drown no one would know that he is gone. Thus, Gratz emphasizes that being invisible can offer some protection, but it also can make a person even more vulnerable because no one is able to notice and save him. Mahmoud recognizes the power of visibility on the ship to Greece. He has a revelation that “If no one saw them, no one could help them. And maybe the world needed to see what was really happening here.” Visibility thus comes with an increased awareness, and hopefully might spark empathy in those who might be willing to help them. Toward the end of Mahmoud’s journey, he and his family land in a detention center in Hungary. Mahmoud understands that they haven’t done anything wrong, but are still being treated like criminals. He wants to show the injustice of this; he no longer wants to fade into the background. Mahmoud has another realization that, “If you stayed invisible here, did everything you were supposed to and never made waves, you would disappear from the eyes and minds of all the good people out there who could help you get your life back.” With this revelation, Mahmoud simply decides to walk out the door of the detention center. No one stops him, and it is this action that allows him and the other refugees to go free. They then walk to Austria together, with enough people that Austrians take notice and come to the border to greet them with supplies and aid. Making waves and being visible, then, not only allows Mahmoud to help the other refugees, but also enables generous people to help them.

Mahmoud weighs the various advantages and disadvantages of being visible and invisible, but his conclusion delivers Gratz’s message quite clearly: visibility can be a powerful tool. This is also an idea that drove Gratz to write the book in the first place—it allows readers to recognize the humanity and bravery of all of the novel’s characters, but particularly of the Syrian refugees, many of whom still need aid outside the confines of the novel. By shedding light the story of these refugees and by referencing various organizations that aid Syrian refugees, Gratz also provides an avenue for children like Mahmoud to be visible to readers, so that readers might provide the aid that these children need.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BOATS

The boats and ships in the story represent the characters’ hope and the potential to build a new life in a new country. Each of the three protagonists and their families take a journey by boat. For Josef, the *St. Louis* gives its Jewish passengers hope that they can escape Nazi Germany and find refuge in Cuba. Even though they are eventually

turned back to Europe, they are still able to be resettled in new countries so that they can attempt to avoid death at the hands of the Nazis. For Isabel, the boat that she and her family take is the only option for them to escape Cuba, and the boat both literally and figuratively keeps their hopes afloat as they journey to Miami. Although a hole in the boat and a severe storm flood the boat with **water**, dashing their hopes and putting their lives at risk, Isabel and her companions work tirelessly to bail the water out and continue on their journey. This simple act of perseverance to save their boat embodies all of the uncontrollable obstacles they must overcome to reach the U.S. Mahmoud also takes a journey by boat from Turkey to Greece, and when his boat capsizes and he is thrown into the water, it reinforces the idea that he has lost all hope. But when another dinghy comes along and Mahmoud is able to convince the people on board to take his infant sister, Hana, it provides another spark of hope, given that this is likely Hana’s only chance to survive at all, let alone to achieve a better life. The boats in the story are continuously placed in contrast with the ocean, which often correlates to the characters’ despair.



WATER

The ocean and the water symbolize the refugees’ despair. All three of the protagonists take journeys over the water, and for each of them the water represents a faltering in hope as they worry that they will not be able to survive. In Josef’s story, his father, Aaron, chooses to commit suicide by jumping overboard and drowning because he has lost all hope in life and believes that this is a better alternative than being sent back to Germany. Thus, water represents the futility of continuing on in the midst of hardship. For Isabel, a hole in her and her family’s **boat** leads to a leak and they are forced to constantly bail water out of it in order to literally stay afloat. As the water continues to fill the boat, they become more and more afraid that they will not be able to make it to Miami. Mahmoud is thrown from a dinghy on the way from Turkey to Greece, forcing him to tread water for hours, not knowing whether someone will be able to rescue him. Many times during this episode, he and his family consider giving up, demonstrating how the water both reflects their despair in being stranded and adds to it, in that they have trouble fighting against the current and deliberate letting themselves drown. This is in direct opposition to the boats in the story, which represent hope even in the midst of despair and the opportunity for a new life.



ISABEL’S TRUMPET

Isabel’s trumpet represents her connection to her Cuban heritage. At the beginning of the book, Isabel is described as being able to play anything, and loves to play salsa and other Cuban music on the streets of Havana. But

when Isabel is forced to trade her trumpet for the gasoline that will allow them to travel to Cuba, this emphasizes that Isabel is prioritizing her family's safety and potential for a better future in the U.S. over her connection to her Cuban roots. Still, on the **boat** to Miami, Isabel worries that she will lose that connection entirely, particularly because she had never been able to learn to count a Cuban rhythm pattern called *clave* and worries that she won't be able to learn outside of Cuba. However, at the end of the book, a relative Isabel meets in Cuba named Guillermo gives her a new trumpet, and she is able to learn to count *clave*. Thus, the replacement of Isabel's trumpet in the U.S. embodies her undying connection to her family and her roots—is not living in a country that allows for Isabel's connection to her heritage; instead it is the presence of her family that enables Isabel to regain her trumpet and her culture.


countries and people to mitigate or combat this injustice and hate.


Second, the exchange highlights Josef's intense desire to grow up and become a man. The irony of this desire is that it is somewhat naïve, because Josef doesn't fully understand the weight and responsibility of being an adult yet. Over the course of the novel, however, as Josef experiences more and more of this kind of trauma, he starts to gain (far too early) the maturity and responsibility that he craves.

Isabel: Outside Havana, Cuba – 1994 (1) Quotes

☝☝ Isabel was listening for the *clave* underneath the music, the mysterious hidden beat inside Cuban music that everybody seemed to hear except her. An irregular rhythm that lay over the top of the regular beat, like a heartbeat beneath the skin. Try as she might, she had never heard it, never felt it. She listened now, intently, trying to hear the heartbeat of Cuba in her own music.

Related Characters: Lito/Mariano Padron, Geraldo Fernandez, Isabel Fernandez

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Isabel's story, she accompanies her father, Geraldo, and her grandfather, Lito, into Havana to wait in line for food. She brings her trumpet, her most prized possession, to play on the street corner, and laments the fact that she still can't hear the Cuban *clave* rhythm, which she explains here.

Isabel's frustration with not being able to hear the *clave* becomes a central tension in the book when she and her family flee Cuba to go to Miami. Isabel's trumpet, and music in general, serve as stand-ins for Isabel's connection to her heritage, because it is one of the main ways in which she engages with her culture. Leaving Cuba only exacerbates her fear that she will never be fully connected to her culture, because she is forced to sell her trumpet and she doesn't understand how she could possibly learn the rhythm in Miami. Ultimately, however, Gratz argues that family is what enables Isabel to remain connected to her heritage, and with the help of her uncle who lives in Miami, she receives a new trumpet and finally hears the *clave* rhythm.



QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scholastic edition of *Refugee* published in 2017.

Josef: Berlin, Germany – 1938 Quotes

☝☝ The Nazis laughed, and Josef's face burned hot with shame. He struggled in the men's arms, trying to break free. "I'll be a man soon enough," Josef told them. "I'll be a man in six months and eleven days."

The Nazis laughed again. "Six months and eleven days!" the Brownshirt said. "Not that he's counting." The Brownshirt suddenly turned serious. "Perhaps you're close enough that we should take you to a concentration camp too, like your father."

Related Characters: Josef Landau (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis



When Josef's home is raided by Nazis during the infamous Kristallnacht, the Nazis make fun of Josef being a child when he wets himself in fear. His protests that he will soon be a man (when he turns 13, based on Jewish law) are only met with derision. This sequence introduces two of the major themes that Gratz highlights in all three of his narratives: first, the injustice and cruelty that the three protagonists face. The Nazis view the Jewish people as subhuman, and by devaluing their humanity, they are able to enact such atrocities like ransacking their homes en masse, or throwing them into concentration camps wherein they are tortured and killed. This is why empathy becomes so key in the book, as Josef and his family look toward other

Mahmoud: Aleppo, Syria – 2015 (1) Quotes

☝☝ Mahmoud watched as these two boys attacked the boy with the bread, a boy he didn't even know. He felt the stirrings of indignation, of anger, of sympathy. His breath came quick and deep, and his hands clenched into fists. "I should do something," he whispered. But he knew better.

Head down, hoodie up, eyes on the ground. The trick was to be invisible. Blend in. Disappear.

Related Characters: Mahmoud Bishara (speaker), Waleed Bishara

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

When readers are first introduced to Mahmoud, he is walking home from school with his brother, Waleed, through the war-torn streets of Aleppo, Syria when he observes a boy being beaten for the bread he is carrying. Although Mahmoud wants to help, he instead chooses to keep his head down. This is Gratz's introduction to a theme that becomes central to Mahmoud's storyline: whether it is better to be invisible or visible in these times of danger and trauma. Although over the course of the novel Mahmoud weighs the two concepts and frequently vacillates between them, he begins his story with the belief that it is better to be invisible, because that way one can avoid trouble.

Yet even in this situation, Gratz hints that being invisible isn't actually the best solution. It forces Mahmoud to tamp down his feelings of empathy and sense of justice, both of which Gratz values highly in the rest of the novel. Mahmoud will return to this incident later when he realizes that he should have made a scene because he should have been willing to risk himself in order help the other boy—the same treatment he would have wanted for himself in that situation.

Josef: Berlin, Germany – 1939, 1 day Quotes

☝☝ Instead, Herr Meier lowered a screen with the faces and profiles of Jewish men and women on it and proceeded to use Josef as an example of how to tell a real German from a Jew. He turned Josef this way and that, pointing out the curve of his nose, the slant of his chin. Josef felt the heat of that embarrassment all over again, the humiliation of being talked about like he was an animal. A specimen. Something subhuman.

Related Characters: Herr Meier, Josef Landau

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

When Josef was still been able to attend school in Germany, his teacher called him up in front of the class in order to use him as an exhibit for other students to identify Jewish people. This incident serves as a first example of the way in which the Nazis dehumanize German Jews. Josef understands this explicitly, in the fact that he feels like he is "subhuman," being treated like an animal in a zoo. He is ripped of his own personal identity and instead treated as belonging to a group. Josef later acknowledges that the pictures Herr Meier showed look nothing like any of the Jewish people that he knows; rather, it is simply a way for the Nazis to create harmful stereotypes and ways of differentiating people they believe to be lesser than them. This belief then allows the Nazis to enact further cruelty and injustice against Jewish people, as they do to Aaron and the millions of others sent to concentration camps.

This incident also gets at the heart of some of Josef's struggle with living in Germany: Herr Meier's language implies that Jews are not "real Germans," whereas Josef never believed that these two identities were mutually exclusive. Thus, Gratz shows how Josef has been dissociated from his own heritage and culture even before he is physically displaced from it.

Mahmoud: Aleppo, Syria – 2015 (3) Quotes

☝☝ Everywhere around them, people fled into the streets, covered in gray dust and blood. No sirens rang. No ambulances came to help the wounded. No police cars or emergency crews hurried to the scene.

There weren't any left.

Related Characters: Youssef Bishara, Fatima Bishara, Hana Bishara, Waleed Bishara, Mahmoud Bishara

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

After Mahmoud's apartment building is hit by bombs, he and his siblings are able to escape down the stairs and into the street. Once there, Mahmoud sees buildings crumbling around them and chaos in the roads. What he doesn't see, however, is any attempt at aid or rescue. With Mahmoud's


realization, Gratz shows how Syria has become completely destitute and war-torn. There is very little hope left, in that there is no one there who can help rebuild what has been lost or destroyed, and no way for those who live in Aleppo to receive aid.

It is these kinds of conditions that prompt family's like Mahmoud's to flee their home country in search of a new life, as they eventually search for new opportunities in Germany. Even though Syria as a whole is in despair, Mahmoud's parents understand the necessity of staying optimistic and keeping the hope that they could rebuild their lives. Maintaining hope is the only thing that allows them to keep going and to ultimately reach Germany by the end of the novel.

Josef: On the Atlantic Ocean – 1939, 8 days Quotes

●● It all came flooding back to him now—swaying and humming along with the prayers, craning his neck to see the Torah when it was taken out of the ark and hoping to get a chance to touch it and then kiss his fingers as the scroll came around in a procession. Josef felt his skin tingle. The Nazis had taken all this from them, from him, and now he and the passengers on the ship were taking it back.

Related Characters: Aaron Landau, Rachel Landau, Josef Landau

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis


A week into Josef's journey on the *St. Louis*, the social hall is converted into a synagogue and Josef is able to have his bar mitzvah on the ship. Josef recalls how he had not been able to attend synagogue since before Kristallnacht, since after this event German Jews became afraid of gathering together in public spaces for fear of Nazi retaliation. Josef's memories of the services and his excitement at being able to revive these traditions emphasize the importance of his cultural heritage. But the fact that Josef is able to practice these traditions once more on the *St. Louis*, when he had not been able to do so in Germany, illustrates Gratz's argument that one does not need to be in one's homeland in order to retain one's cultural heritage. Instead, it is Josef's family and the community of others like him that enable his continued attachment to Judaism—Josef's mother, Rachel, is the one who takes him to the service on board the ship, and the

other Jewish passengers understand the importance of maintaining their cultural heritage in the face of displacement and potential erasure.

Isabel: Straits of Florida – 1994, 1 day (1) Quotes

●● Isabel listened as everyone listed more and more things they were looking forward to in the States. Clothes, food, sports, movies, travel, school, opportunity. It all sounded so wonderful, but when it came down to it, all Isabel really wanted was a place where she and her family could be together, and happy.

Related Characters: Isabel Fernandez

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis


Once Isabel, her family, and the Castillos are able to leave Cuba for Miami, they spend their first night discussing what they might do once they reach the United States. Isabel reveals that she has actually thought very little about what her life in the United States might be like. This also plays into Isabel's concern that she is losing a part of herself in going to the United States: she worries in later chapters that she won't be able to feel as connected to her Cuban heritage without living there. Isabel's only understanding of what she gains from going to the United States rests in her motivation for taking her family there, and which she describes here: that she simply wants a place where she and her family members can be happy together. The irony of Isabel's worry, as she later comes to understand, is that it is her family that allows to remain connected to her Cuban roots. Thus, in choosing to prioritize her family over her culture, she is ultimately able to keep both.

Josef: On the Atlantic Ocean – 1939, 10 days Quotes

●● “*Jewish rats*,” Schiendick said, sneering at Josef and the other kids. Many of them looked at their shoes, and even Josef looked away, trying not to draw the big man's attention. Josef clenched his fists, and his ears burned hot with frustration and embarrassment at his helplessness.

Related Characters: Otto Schiendick (speaker), Josef Landau

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

As the *St. Louis* speeds toward Cuba, Josef and the other children on board are invited to take a tour of the ship. On the way to the engine room, they pass a room with several crewmembers, including the Nazi Party official on board named Otto Schiendick. Upon seeing the Jewish children, Schiendick insults them and calls them rats. Josef up to this point has believed that he has been living in a kind of paradise on the ship, away from the hatred of the Nazis back in Germany. But this incident reminds Josef of their cruelty, and serves as another example of how he and the other German Jews are dehumanized by the Nazis. Following this comment, Schiendick and the others begin singing a Nazi song celebrating violence against Jewish—Gratz thus draws a correlation between this assertion that Jewish people are equivalent to pests and animals, and their justification of their cruelty toward these human beings.

By including this episode, Gratz reminds readers of the stakes of Josef’s journey and why they are so desperate for Cuban aid. If Cuba decides not to accept their responsibility to resettle the Jewish passengers on board, as Josef fears, they will be forced to face even more cruelty and death at the Nazis’ hands. Thus, indifference to the Jewish refugees’ plight can be just as harmful to them as direct cruelty.

Isabel: Straits of Florida – 1994, 1 day (2) Quotes

☹️ She had never been able to count *clave*, but she had always assumed it would come to her eventually. That the rhythm of her homeland would one day whisper its secrets to her soul. But would she ever hear it now? Like trading her trumpet, had she swapped the one thing that was really hers—her music—for the chance to keep her family together?

Related Characters: Lito/Mariano Padron, Isabel Fernandez

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

As water seep into the Fernandezes and Castillo’s boat, Lito becomes frustrated, feeling that they are doomed to sink and that they should have stayed in Cuba. He argues that Isabel will become too separated from her roots, and that she will never learn to count *clave* in Miami. This touches on a fear that Isabel herself has. Her music, as represented by her trumpet, is the largest means by which Isabel engages in her Cuban heritage. In trading her trumpet away for gasoline for their boat, she demonstrated that she was willing to prioritize her family and their future together over her primary connection to her culture.

Still, having taken this action, Isabel wonders whether this means that she has given up her Cuban heritage entirely. Gratz shows this fear to be unfounded, however. When Isabel and her family finally make it to the United States, it is her family that enables her to gain a new trumpet and learn to count the distinctive Cuban *clave* rhythm. Thus, Gratz proves how a person’s family can help keep them connected to their culture, even when they have been displaced from it.

Mahmoud: Izmir, Turkey – 2015, 11 days (1) Quotes

☹️ Mahmoud screamed.

He howled louder than a fighter jet, and his parents didn’t even tell him to hush. Lights came on in houses nearby, and curtains ruffled as people looked out at the noise. Mahmoud’s mother broke down in tears, and his father let the life jackets he carried drop to the ground.


The smuggler had just told them their boat wasn’t leaving tonight.

Again.

“No boat today. Tomorrow. Tomorrow,” he’d told Mahmoud’s father.

Related Characters: Hana Bishara, Waleed Bishara, Youssef Bishara, Fatima Bishara, Mahmoud Bishara

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

After Mahmoud and his family make it to Turkey, they are

forced to wait a week before being able to take a boat from Turkey to Greece. Each day, they are told that the boat will leave “tomorrow,” as the smuggler repeats here. This is both an exhausting and a costly prospect, as the Bisharas have very few options of where to stay and how much money they can spend. The repetition of the word “tomorrow” becomes a common thread among all three of the book’s protagonists, as they and their families are perpetually waiting to get somewhere else, uncertain of what awaits them in the immediate or distant future. “Tomorrow” thus has the dual quality of hope and despair that characterizes all of their journeys: it allows for the possibility that the next day will be better, but also means that achieving this possibility will be delayed. For Mahmoud and his family, the more they are forced to wait, the more despair they face. Still, they recognize that the boat still represents the pathway to a new life, and so they can’t help but invest hope that it will take them to Greece.

ensuring that their family can stay together. Josef acknowledges that this is the case here, understanding the necessity of his having to take on this role because of the trauma that his father has faced, and how it has been mentally debilitating for him. With this reversal, Gratz makes it clear how trauma and the experience of fleeing a war-torn country expedites the process of growing up for refugee children.

Josef: On the Atlantic Ocean – 1939, 14 days

Quotes

☛ Suddenly, Josef saw what he had to do. He slapped his father across the face. Hard.

Papa staggered in surprise, and Josef felt just as shocked as his father looked. Josef couldn’t believe what he’d just done. Six months ago, he would never have even dreamed of striking *any* adult, let alone his father. Papa would have punished him for such disrespect. But in the past six months, Josef and his father had traded places. Papa was the one acting like a child, and Josef was the adult.

Related Characters: Aaron Landau, Josef Landau

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

The day before the *St. Louis* reaches the coast of Cuba, it is announced that there will be a medical inspection of the passengers on board the ship. When Josef and his family line up, Aaron grows anxious as he is reminded of the roll calls at the Dachau concentration camp. Understanding that his father could be deemed mentally unfit to land in Cuba, Josef slaps him across the face to shock him into silence. This action is a drastic one, and becomes a turning point in Jacob’s character arc. Gratz demonstrates how Jacob has been forced to become more mature even than his father, taking on the responsibility of protecting Aaron and

Mahmoud: The Mediterranean – 2015, 11 days



(1) Quotes

☛ “Please!” Mahmoud cried. He sobbed with the effort of fighting off the man’s fingers and hanging onto the dinghy. “Please, take us with you!”

“No! No room!”

“At least take my sister!” Mahmoud begged. “She’s a baby. She won’t take up any room!”

Related Characters: Mahmoud Bishara (speaker), Isabel Fernandez, Josef Landau, Fatima Bishara, Hana Bishara

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

Mahmoud and his family are able to catch a boat from Turkey to Greece, but it capsizes along the way and he and his family are thrown into the water. After being forced to tread water for hours, they hear another dinghy approaching and Mahmoud begs to be let onto the boat. When they refuse, he offers Hana up in order to try and save her life, and the refugees accept her onto their boat. The water’s ongoing symbolic association with despair, and the boats’ association with hope perhaps become starkest here. Treading water in the middle of the ocean, Mahmoud and his family are literally trying to keep their heads above water as their situation threatens to drown them. For Hana, the boat represents not only a better way of life, but the ability to survive at all.

This also becomes a turning point for Mahmoud’s maturity and how the gravity of his situation forces him to grow up. He is required to make a quick decision here, and chooses to give up his infant sister rather than remain connected to her in order to try to make sure that she survives. This decision weighs heavily on Mahmoud throughout the rest of the story, as they are unable to find his sister—and, in addition

to his own grief over losing Hana, he must also face the grief of his mother, Fatima. This is a choice that no child should have to make, and yet their journey forces this burden upon Mahmoud, just as difficult choices are forced on Josef and Isabel.

Isabel: Caribbean Sea – 1994, 3 days Quotes

“Thank you! Thank you!” Isabel cried. Her heart ached with gratitude toward these people. Just a moment’s kindness from each of them might mean the difference between death and survival for her mother and everyone else on the little raft.

Related Characters: Isabel Fernandez (speaker), Mahmoud Bishara, Josef Landau, Teresa Fernandez

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Following a storm at sea, Isabel and the other refugees arrive at land, which at first they believe to be Miami but then realize is the Bahamas. When they pull up to a dock, the Bahamian police tell them that if they set foot on land, they will be deported back to Cuba. The family decides to turn around and set off for Miami, but before they depart, nearby tourists give them food, water, and aspirin to help them make the journey.

This is one of the primary instances in which Gratz highlights the importance of empathy and the responsibility of those who can to aid the refugees. Even something small like a bottle of water or aspirin, as Isabel notes, might make a difference in saving her pregnant mother’s life. With this statement, Gratz argues that nothing can be given that is too small, and that everyone shares the responsibility to help in some way. This contrasts with the Bahamian government, which, like the U.S. or Cuban government in Josef’s story, or the Hungarian government in Mahmoud’s story, lacks any kind of sympathy for the refugees’ plight. This lack of responsibility for the refugees also signifies the difference between life and death, as Iván does not live through the rest of the trip. Thus, Gratz also shows how governments and institutions need to have just as much empathy as the average citizen as well, because all of these refugees’ lives have value.


Mahmoud: Lesbos to Athens – 2015, 12 days (3) Quotes

“The vacationers dropped their voices, and even though Mahmoud couldn’t understand what they were saying, he could hear the disgust in their words. This wasn’t what the tourists had paid for. They were supposed to be on holiday, seeing ancient ruins and beautiful Greek beaches, not stepping over filthy, praying refugees.”

They only see us when we do something they don’t want us to do, Mahmoud realized.

Related Characters: Mahmoud Bishara

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

When Mahmoud and his family are taking a ferry from the Greek island of Lesbos, Mahmoud notices a refugee praying on the deck of the boat and joins him. As he is praying, however, he starts to hear the disgust in the voices of the tourists who are taking the ferry as well. As a result of this, Mahmoud starts to hone his thoughts about what it means to be invisible and how other people can shape how a person might be viewed as well. With Mahmoud’s realization that he and the other refugees are only visible when they do something the tourists don’t like, he starts to understand the unfairness of this: it is unreasonable to expect refugees to disappear simply because it makes others more comfortable not to think about them.

This also helps Mahmoud recognize that being invisible is not always his choice—that it is often dependent on other people. Therefore, Gratz argues, it is more helpful to make oneself visible (particularly if others are noticing the refugees anyway) because it allows good, sympathetic people to help them along their journey, as becomes the case in Austria and Germany.

Josef: Havana Harbor – 1939, 21 days Quotes

“I wish from the bottom of my heart that you will land soon, Little Man,” Officer Padron said again. “I’m sorry. I’m just doing my job.”

Josef looked deep into Officer Padron’s eyes, searching for some sign of help, some hint of sympathy. Officer Padron just looked away.

Related Characters: Lito/Mariano Padron (speaker), Mahmoud Bishara, Aaron Landau, Josef Landau

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

When *the St. Louis* is set to leave Cuba, Josef asks Officer Padron, a Cuban official, what will happen to his father. When Padron explains that Aaron isn't well enough to come back to the ship, but that Josef, Rachel, and Ruthie can't join him in Havana, Josef is shocked. Even though this isn't an overt act of cruelty, the course of the rest of the novel shows the injustice of Padron's actions in sending the Jewish passengers back to Europe. Many of them, including Josef and Rachel, are eventually killed by the Nazis—an outcome that could have been avoided if they had been allowed to land at Cuba. Thus, Gratz illustrates how indifference and a lack of empathy can be just as harmful as outright cruelty or injustice. Gratz uses Josef's storyline to implore people and governments to find their empathy and to recognize the social responsibility that they have to others—particularly Syrian refugees like Mahmoud who are still searching for a new life in the present.

Josef: Atlantic Ocean – 1939, 22 days Quotes

☝☝ For as much as he'd wanted to grow up, Josef wished now that he could join them. Be a little kid again, cheerfully oblivious to what was going on around him.

But he wasn't a kid anymore. He had responsibilities. Like keeping his sister and his mother safe.

Related Characters: Pozner, Rachel Landau, Ruthie Landau/Rosenberg, Josef Landau

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

As the *St. Louis* makes its way back to Europe after being turned away by Cuba and the U.S., Josef watches Ruthie and some of the other kids playing in the pool on the ship, despite the fact that all of the adults have become extremely mournful. Josef recognizes his own transformation from kid to adult. He recognizes the naïveté of wanting to be an adult, because adulthood comes with the heavy responsibilities that he now understands, such as caring for his mother and sister. The heaviness of

responsibility is particularly salient to Josef in this moment, as he is about to join Pozner and other fellow passengers in trying to take the ship hostage and run it aground onto the U.S. coast. This is the kind of task that no child should have to take on, but the direness of Josef's situation, and his worry over protecting the lives of his family members, makes him feel as though he has no choice but to join the revolt against the Captain. The other men, too, treat Josef as their equal despite the fact that he is the youngest among them by a wide margin. Thus, the quote shows Josef's evolution to an adult, and how the trauma he has faced has expedited the process of growing up for him.


Mahmoud: Hungary – 2015, 16 days Quotes

☝☝ “We're not criminals!” one of the other men in the cell yelled at him.

“We didn't ask for civil war! We didn't want to leave our homes!” another man yelled.

“We're refugees!” Mahmoud yelled, unable to stay silent any longer. “We need help!”

Related Characters: Mahmoud Bishara (speaker), Josef Landau, Youssef Bishara

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 265


Explanation and Analysis


When Mahmoud, along with hundreds of other refugees, arrive on the Hungarian border and try to get into the country, they are hit with tear gas canisters and taken to an immigrant detention center, where they are thrown in jail. Mahmoud and the other refugees are stunned at being treated like criminals, because all they want is to be able to pass through Hungary and be able to receive aid. Gratz exposes the injustice and the prejudice of treating the refugees as criminals. He has shown that they are not dangerous; they are simply fleeing a war-torn country and trying to make a better life for them and their families. Yet by describing them as “filth” and “parasites,” as one guard later calls them, it is easier for the government and others to treat them poorly. These statements are no different than what Josef faces with the Nazis, yet the distinction is that what Mahmoud is experiencing still happens in the present with many different groups of refugees. Thus, Gratz impels the readers to recognize the humanity of these refugees and to try to help them, both on an individual and an institutional level.

Isabel: Coast of Florida – 1994, 5 days (3) Quotes

“Don’t you see?” Lito said. “The Jewish people on the ship were seeking asylum, just like us. They needed a place to hide from Hitler. From the Nazis. *Mañana*, we told them. We’ll let you in *mañana*. But we never did.” Lito was crying now, distraught. “We sent them back to Europe and Hitler and the Holocaust. Back to their deaths. How many of them died because we turned them away? Because I was just doing my job?”

Related Characters: Lito/Mariano Padron (speaker), Mahmoud Bishara, Aaron Landau, Ruthie Landau/Rosenberg, Rachel Landau, Josef Landau, Isabel Fernandez

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

Just as Isabel and the rest of the refugees on the boat are racing a Coast Guard boat to Miami’s shore, Lito shares the confession that he was the Cuban official who saved Aaron Landau, and who turned away the rest of the *St. Louis* passengers and sent them back to Europe. By tying together Isabel and Josef’s storylines in this way, Gratz makes another point about the importance of treating refugees with empathy and respect. Josef and Rachel were sent back to their deaths in Europe, and Lito was complicit in the decision that caused this outcome. Additionally, by making Lito a refugee himself, Gratz illustrates how anyone can find themselves in circumstances where they need to escape oppression and might search for aid. Therefore, it is important to help those most in need, as one would eventually want to be treated if the positions were reversed. Lito’s storyline ultimately contrasts with Ruthie’s storyline, as she was able to receive aid and then pays this action forward by taking in Mahmoud and his family when they arrive in Germany in 2015.

Mahmoud: Hungary – 2015, 17 days Quotes

Whether you were visible or invisible, it was all about how *other people* reacted to you. Good and bad things happened either way. If you were invisible, the bad people couldn’t hurt you, that was true. But the good people couldn’t help you, either.

Related Characters: Samih Nasseer, Mahmoud Bishara

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

When Mahmoud and the rest of his family are taken to the immigrant detention center in Hungary, he once again ponders the idea of whether it is a good or bad thing to be invisible. He runs through each argument, acknowledging its complexity: sometimes it is better to be invisible because it helps a person stay out of trouble. Being invisible, however, also allows people to remain ignorant of Mahmoud’s plight, like when he is stranded in the water, with no way of receiving aid. Being visible, on the other hand, can allow people to help, like in Turkey when he and his family struggle to find a place to sleep. It is only through his decision to flag down a cab that Samih Nasseer offers up his car dealership as a temporary shelter for the family.

Mahmoud and Gratz ultimately come to the conclusion that it is better to be visible than invisible, because the benefits of help from others ultimately outweigh the potential negatives. Following this moment of recognition, Mahmoud decides simply to walk out of the detention center and continue on to Austria, and many others follow him. The visibility that he and the others gain from this action allows the Austrian and German people to that the refugees are walking to their borders, and are able to provide aid to them. Thus, in rewarding Mahmoud for his visibility, Gratz argues that it is in fact better for the refugees to be seen, and for others to see them.


Isabel: Miami, Florida – 1994, Home Quotes

“She was finally counting *clave*.”

Lito was wrong. She didn’t have to be in Havana to hear it. To feel it. She had brought Cuba with her to Miami.

Related Characters: Guillermo, Lito/Mariano Padron, Isabel Fernandez

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

One month after Isabel arrives in Miami, she tries out for her new school’s band with a new trumpet gifted to her by her uncle Guillermo. She plays the U.S. national anthem,

“The Star Spangled Banner,” but plays it with a salsa rhythm. As she plays and her new classmates clap along, she realizes that she can hear a second rhythm—that she can finally count *clave*. This is the culmination of what had been a major worry for Isabel, who thought that she would never be able to connect to her cultural heritage (represented by her ability to count *clave*) due to the fact that she would no longer be living in Cuba. But Gratz shows that Isabel does not need to be living in her homeland in order to feel connected to it; in fact, it is only after she leaves Cuba that she is able to gain this understanding of her heritage.

Additionally, Gratz reinforces how family can also help a person remain tied to their culture. It is only through a newfound family member—Guillermo—that Isabel is able to receive a new trumpet, recover her love of music, and find her culture within it. Thus, Gratz emphasizes that family provides people with just as much connection to their heritage as being directly immersed in the culture does.

Mahmoud: Berlin Germany – 2015, Home Quotes

☝ I don’t remember much about him, but I do remember he always wanted to be a grown-up. “I don’t have time for games,” he would tell me. “I’m a man now.” And when those soldiers said one of us could go free and the other would be taken to a concentration camp, Josef said, “Take me.”

My brother, just a boy, becoming a man at last.

Related Characters: Ruthie Landau/Rosenberg (speaker), Rachel Landau, Hana Bishara, Saul Rosenberg, Mahmoud Bishara, Josef Landau

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 315



Explanation and Analysis

When Mahmoud and his family find asylum in Germany, they are settled with a host family. This turns out to be Ruthie and her husband Saul. When Mahmoud tells her about how he lost Hana, Ruthie reveals the conclusion of Josef’s story: he chose to sacrifice himself and go to the concentration camps so that Ruthie could go free, and died in the camp along with Rachel. Josef’s decision serves as the conclusion of his journey from a child to a man, as Ruthie

acknowledges here. But her language also acknowledges that her brother *was* still a boy at the time when the Nazis present this choice to Rachel—but it is the trauma of war and oppression that requires him to be a man, and he rises to this obligation. No 13-year-old should ever have to make the kind of decision that the Nazis present to Josef, but having assumed the role of adult and protector in his family, he knows that he needs to ensure his sister’s safety and sacrifices himself instead. All three of the protagonists are forced to take on these difficult responsibilities, but it is Josef who bears the heaviest consequences of his expedited coming-of-age.

☝ He was filled with sadness for the boy his age. The boy who had died so Ruthie could live. But Mahmoud was also filled with gratitude. Josef had died so Ruthie could live, and one day welcome Mahmoud and his family into her house.

Related Characters: Lito/Mariano Padron, Ruthie Landau/Rosenberg, Josef Landau, Mahmoud Bishara

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

After Ruthie tells Mahmoud the details of her journey and Josef’s choice, Mahmoud contemplates how these decisions have also affected his life and survival, too. Mahmoud recognizes that Josef’s sacrifices allowed not only his sister to live, but for her descendants to continue on and for Mahmoud’s family to have a temporary home in Germany—the place where Josef’s own sense of home was stripped from him as a child. Even though Mahmoud and Ruthie’s cultures are very different, being welcomed into her house as though they are family is what allows him to feel a sense of home and belonging.

Additionally, the connections among Josef, Lito, Ruthie, and Mahmoud highlight the two different reactions that people have to refugees. Those who are indifferent, like Lito, are contrasted with those who are empathetic and attempt to help, like Ruthie. Gratz uses this final act of kindness on Josef and Ruthie’s part—and emphasizes how deeply moving it is to Mahmoud—to impart upon the reader that they, too, can and should help refugees in need of aid around the world.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

JOSEF: BERLIN, GERMANY – 1938

Twelve-year-old Josef Landau wakes up with a start as Nazi soldiers break into his family's home. He is dragged from his bed and becomes so scared that he wets himself. The soldiers grab Josef's six-year-old sister Ruthie by the hair as she screams. They then destroy everything in the room as Josef and Ruthie cling to each other.

The soldiers then drag Josef and Ruthie into the living room, where the children's mother, Rachel, and father, Aaron, are. They accuse Josef's father of practicing law, despite the fact that Jews are forbidden to do so under German law. For this "crime against the German people," he will be taken into custody.

Josef tries to fight the soldiers. The Nazis laugh at the wet spot on Josef's pajamas, mocking him for being a little boy. Josef insists he'll be a man soon, and the soldiers turn on him, saying that if he's a man, he could go to the camps as well. Rachel cries in protest. The Nazis drag Aaron away, warning Josef not to be "so quick to grow up." The Nazis then destroy the rest of the furniture and objects in the house.

The next day, Josef discovers that the Nazis raided and destroyed thousands of Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues all over Germany. They called it Kristallnacht, "the Night of Broken Glass." Josef and the others know it means that they aren't wanted in Germany. Rachel, meanwhile, tries fruitlessly to find Aaron. They do not hear about him until six months later. They receive a telegram saying that Aaron would be released from a concentration camp called Dachau, on the condition that he leave the country within two weeks.

ISABEL: JUST OUTSIDE HAVANA, CUBA – 1994 (1)

Eleven-year-old Isabel Fernandez is giving a few beans to a cat she had found under her house. She hasn't eaten much more than that for lunch, due to the rationing and food shortages. For years the Soviet Union had been buying Cuba's sugar for 11 times the price, and had sent food and gasoline and medicine to Cuba for free. When the Soviet Union fell in 1989, however, the support went away, and many people lost their jobs. People began to starve and had slaughtered all of their animals.

From the outset, Gratz places readers in the middle of the action and immediately demonstrates the cruelty of the Nazis against the Jews. Josef and his sister Ruthie are just children, and yet they are needlessly abused by the soldiers.



The Nazis labelling Aaron's practice as a "crime against the German people" inherently detaches them from their own German culture. Josef understands himself to be German, and yet the Nazis are trying to take away this aspect of German Jewish people's identity.



Josef demonstrates his personal desire to grow up, but over the course of the novel he comes to recognize the value of being able to be a child. His experiences with oppression in Germany, and then as a refugee, cause him to grow up far sooner than he should have to.



Gratz shows how Josef's experience is not an isolated incident: all over Germany, Jews are facing the same kind of erasure of their culture and identity. Yet instead of succumbing to the despair of these events, Josef and the rest of his family resolve to try to find a better life in a new country.



Isabel's next door neighbor Iván greets her, bringing over a dead fish he had found for the cat. He says they need to come up with a name for it, but before they decide, Iván's father, Señor Castillo, calls him to his shed. Iván insists that they are building a doghouse, but Isabel knows they're really building a **boat** to travel to the United States (or *el norte*, as they call it).

Isabel worries that the Castillos might get caught, because Fidel Castro, Cuba's president and prime minister, won't allow anyone to leave the country, or else they are thrown in jail. She knows this, because her father Geraldo, whom she calls Geraldo, had tried to leave and had been thrown in jail for a year when he was caught.

Isabel notices Geraldo and her grandfather, whom she calls Lito, heading down the road to stand in line for food. She retrieves her **trumpet** so she can go with them and play on the street corner. She loves playing music, and people often stopped to listen to her—though the only people who are able to give her any money are the tourists.

Isabel begins to play a salsa tune. She tries to listen to her own playing, attempting to identify the *clave*. *Clave* is "the mysterious hidden beat inside Cuban music that everybody seemed to hear except her." She tries to hear the rhythm in the music she is playing, but can't seem to identify it.

MAHMOUD: ALEPPO, SYRIA – 2015 (1)

Twelve-year-old Mahmoud Bishara is used to being invisible—it is how he survives. Getting noticed by the Syrian army or the rebels fighting them, he knows, is "just inviting trouble." When the bell rings in school, Mahmoud finds his 10-year-old brother Waleed to walk him home. He takes a different way every day, trying to find a back alley or bombed buildings that could serve as shelter in case more bombs came.

Here Gratz introduces the recurring symbol of boats, which appear in all three of the storylines. The boats are immediately associated with hope and opportunity—the one that Iván and his father are building provides the possibility for the Castillos and the Fernandezes to have a better future.



Isabel's thoughts hint at the fact that she has already had to take on an immense amount of responsibility, due to the oppression she and her family have faced. She has been forced to worry about her father, rather than the other way around.



Isabel's trumpet and music come to represent the connection to her own culture. In a country that is clearly undergoing hardship, playing traditional music on the trumpet is a way for Isabel to retain her Cuban roots.



The fact that Isabel has not yet been able to hear the clave only exacerbates her fears of leaving Cuba. The fact that the beat seems to come naturally to other Cubans suggests that Isabel struggles to feel connected with her own culture despite her efforts—a struggle that will likely only become more difficult if she and her family leave for the U.S.



Mahmoud's arc examines the benefits and drawbacks of being invisible. Here, Mahmoud emphasizes that being invisible serves as a form of protection for him: the less he is noticed, the less likely it is for him to be attacked. It is also worth noting that despite Mahmoud's young age, he has needed to take on a protective role for his brother Waleed because of the danger of the civil war going on.



Just four years ago, Aleppo had been a beautiful, bright city, until 2011 came and a wave of revolutions swept through the Middle East. The leader of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, made people who didn't like him "disappear." A man in Damascus was imprisoned for speaking out against him, and then some kids were arrested and abused for writing anti-Assad slogans on walls. Suddenly, tens of thousands of people poured into the streets, demanding more freedom, and within a month, Assad had turned his tanks and soldiers on his own people.

As Mahmoud and Waleed turn down an alley, they notice two boys beating another boy up in order to take the bag of bread he carried. Mahmoud remembers another incident, in which his friend Khalid, a Shia Muslim, was beaten by two older boys who were Sunni Muslims. Mahmoud had joined the fight to try and protect Khalid, and then he had been beaten up himself. That's when he learned how valuable it was to be invisible—even to the point where he and Khalid stopped being friends. A year later, Khalid died in an airstrike.

As Mahmoud watches the boy getting beaten up, he wants to do something—he feels angry, indignant, and sympathetic toward his boy. But he knows better than to get involved and averts his eyes, trying to be invisible. He takes Waleed on a different way home.

Gratz highlights parallels between Mahmoud's, Isabel's, and Josef's stories: all three are locked in oppressive and dangerous situations. Yet at the same time, even though these different societies have all sunken into despair as a whole, the people within those societies still try to find a sense of hope in order to make a better future for themselves.



Mahmoud again reinforces why it is so valuable to be invisible, as the alternative—being noticed—can put a person in even more danger. Yet Mahmoud also hints at some of the drawbacks that come with being invisible, such as the fact that Mahmoud and Khalid had to stop being friends, thus cutting off a vital source of support for Mahmoud.



This incident later haunts Mahmoud, as he wishes that he had chosen not to remain invisible in order to help the boy. Gratz shows how hard it can sometimes be to stand up and support others, but that it is necessary to empathize with those who are being oppressed and to give aid.



JOSEF: BERLIN, GERMANY – 1939, 1 DAY FROM HOME

Josef, Ruthie, and Rachel board a train to Hamburg and sit in a compartment labeled J, for Jew. They are going to meet Aaron in Hamburg and then board the ship that will take them to Cuba. Since the Nazis took over six years ago, countless Jews have fled Germany, and many countries have stopped admitting Jewish refugees. Josef's family hopes to live in Cuba until they can be admitted to the United States.

Ruthie was born the year Hitler was elected. She would be starting school this year, if Jews were still allowed to go to school. Josef thinks about his last time at school. His teacher, Herr Meier, called him to the front of the classroom and lowered a screen with faces of Jewish people so that the other kids could learn how to identify a Jewish person. Josef felt humiliated, being talked about as though he were "subhuman."

Rachel, Josef, and Ruthie don't hesitate to uproot their lives in order to stay with Aaron, recognizing that family is more important than remaining tied to their culture. This is particularly true for the Landaus because Germany is so intent on both erasing Jewish culture and making sure that Jewish people do not feel as though they are Germans.



Josef's memory of this incident at school displays more of the widespread cruelty in Germany, even among those who aren't a part of the Nazi regime—even the teachers and other students dehumanize Josef, singling him out and making him feel lesser than the non-Jewish German children. This enables the cruelty that Josef goes on to describe at the end of the chapter.



Josef decides to try to explore the train, slipping off the armband with the Star of David that he had to wear. He is able to buy a newspaper from a concession stand without anyone realizing that he is a Jew, but he knows that if he were wearing his armband, the man running the stand would be calling the police. When Josef reaches in his pocket for more money in order to buy Ruthie a treat, however, his armband falls out of his pocket for everyone to see. Instantly, a boy from the Hitler Youth takes him by the arm.

Josef recalls that when Herr Meier called him in front of the class, Josef's best friend, Klaus, had winced to show how sorry he was about the incident. But that afternoon, when a group of Hitler Youth beat Josef up, Klaus joined them. Josef knows that wearing the uniform turns boys into "monsters."

The irony of the incident that Josef describes at school is that it is shown to be completely ludicrous on the train. Without the armband with the Star of David mark, none of the Germans on the train know that Josef is Jewish. Therefore, their attempt to demonstrate how Josef is lesser or strange because of his ethnicity as a Jewish person is completely disproven.



Gratz illustrates how the teacher's abuse at school gives the children license to abuse Josef—even those who had called him a friend. Gratz implies that hatred is a learned behavior, and that instead it is necessary to learn empathy rather than to dehumanize others and brutalize them.



ISABEL: HAVANA, CUBA – 1994

As Isabel is playing her **trumpet**, she hears riots start to break out in the street, and people chanting against Castro. Isabel goes to search for Geraldo and Lito. She knows that if her father is caught by the police, he'd be sent back to prison. Isabel climbs onto a car in order to search for him, and spots him throwing a bottle at a line of policemen. She climbs down as she sees a policeman approach Geraldo, and throws herself in front of her father to prevent the policeman from beating him.

Just as the policeman rears back to hit Isabel, another policeman—Luis Castillo, Iván's older brother—stops him. The policemen are then called away by a whistle, but the first policeman turns back to threaten Isabel. He tells Isabel that he will find Geraldo and make sure he is arrested and sent away "for good." As Isabel watches the policemen leave, she understands that her father must leave Cuba—tonight.

Gratz establishes the way in which Isabel has started to take on the responsibility of an adult. She seeks out danger in order to protect her father, rather than the other way around. This is the first primary example of how being a child in a time of trauma and political upheaval can cause a person to grow up much faster.



Like Josef's family, who recognize that staying together is more important than remaining in Germany, so too does Isabel come to the realization that remaining connected with her father outweighs her desire to stay in Cuba.



MAHMOUD: ALEPPO, SYRIA – 2015 (2)

After school, Mahmoud, Waleed, and their mother, Fatima, do their usual afternoon prayer. They wash their hands and pray facing Mecca, praising God and reciting from the Qur'an. When they are finished, they roll up their mats and return to their afternoon activities: Mahmoud does math homework, and Waleed watches *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* on TV.

Similar to Isabel's affinity for Cuban music, Gratz also illustrates Mahmoud's connection to his own culture, particularly through his daily prayers. This will not only serve as a way for him to remain connected to his culture, but will also become a point of contention along his journey when he realizes the prejudice of tourists and others who do not like seeing Muslims pray.



Suddenly, the wall of Mahmoud’s apartment explodes, blasting concrete and glass throughout the room. He claws his way out of the debris, his ears ringing and his lungs gasping for breath. His head is streaked with blood, and as he looks back he sees that the entire outside wall of his apartment is gone. But the only thing that matters to him in this moment is finding Fatima, Waleed, and his infant sister, Hana.

Like Josef and Isabel, Mahmoud experiences a very startling trauma early on in the book, and he quickly learns to adapt and take on the gravity that this situation requires. Like Isabel, he also worries for his parents’ and siblings’ safety, a trait that will only grow stronger through his family’s journey.



JOSEF: ON THE TRAIN TO HAMBURG, GERMANY – 1939, 1 DAY FROM HOME

The Hitler Youth drags Josef down the train. Josef is worried that the boy will turn him into the Nazi Police, but the boy simply returns him to his own car, instructs him to put the armband on and not to do that again. Josef thanks the boy profusely.

In contrast to the Nazi soldiers at the beginning of the book, Gratz illustrates how people can make an active choice not to be overly cruel, as this boy does here.



A few hours later, the Landaus arrive in Hamburg and arrive at the **ship**, the MS *St. Louis*. It is the biggest thing Josef has ever seen—bigger than any building. Above the ship flies the Nazi flag, with the swastika in the middle. As Rachel, Josef, and Ruthie stand on the dock, a shabby man stumbles out from behind a pile of luggage, frightening them. They quickly realize, however, that the man is Aaron. Josef is surprised: his father is gaunt and scraggly, with his hair shaved off.

Aaron’s condition also illustrates the cruelty of the Nazis, whose concentration camps remain notorious in terms of the way they dehumanized the Jews. Aaron’s head (which has been forcibly shaved) and his thinness indicate some of the horrifying conditions to which Aaron has been subjected.



Aaron greets them warmly, but looks around “manically, like there [are] spies everywhere.” He insists that they have to get on board as quickly as possible and tells them to make a break for it. He runs past the other passengers in line to board and streaks up the gangway, with Josef, Ruthie, and Rachel running to catch up to him with their luggage. She apologizes to the sailor taking tickets on behalf of her husband, and hands him the family’s tickets and visas.

More than Aaron’s appearance, his fear and paranoia also hint at the kinds of trauma he experienced at the concentration camps. Whereas it is traditionally a father’s role to protect and lead his family, here it’s clear that Aaron’s psychological trauma means his wife and children will have to look out for themselves.



As Josef, Ruthie, and Rachel board the **ship**, Josef is amazed that all of the sailors on board treat them “like real people.” Their rooms are spotless, with clean linens and amenities. But Aaron insists that it’s a trick, and that the Germans are going to come for them. Josef is nervous, and Rachel tells him and Ruthie to head up to the promenade.

After so much dehumanization and cruelty at the hands of the Nazi’s, simply being treated decently comes as a kind of shock to Josef and his family—to the point where Aaron doesn’t even trust that such treatment is genuine.



Josef is glad to get away from his father. He and Ruthie watch Germany disappear as the **ship** pulls away from the dock and heads toward “a new life.” But Josef can’t help but think what could have happened to Aaron to make him “look so awful and act so scared.”

Josef’s thoughts here serve as the first connection between ships and the opportunity for a new life. Though Josef is the first to take this journey, both Isabel and Mahmoud also place their hopes in boats to shepherd them to new countries.



ISABEL: JUST OUTSIDE HAVANA, CUBA – 1994 (2)

Isabel, Geraldo, and Lito return to their home following the riots. Isabel's mother, Teresa, is pregnant and due to deliver in a week's time, and so Isabel retrieves the iodine for her mother to help with Geraldo's welts. Lito explains what happened during the riots, and Geraldo insists that he has to leave Cuba.

At this time, it is very difficult to flee Cuba due to a new American policy that the Cubans call "Wet Foot, Dry Foot." If Cuban refugees are caught at sea, they are sent to the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay and could either stay in the refugee camp or return to Cuba. If they are able to make it across the Straits of Florida and set foot on land, they are allowed to remain in the U.S.

Lito tells Geraldo that he should just lie low for a while because of the danger of trying to leave, but Geraldo insists that things aren't going to get better in Cuba. At that moment, Castro appears on their TV in the living room. He criticizes the riots breaking out in Havana, and announces a new policy: anyone who wishes to leave Cuba may do so legally. Isabel realizes that with this news, Geraldo will want to leave immediately. Lito tells Geraldo that he can't just leave—he has a wife, daughter, and a son on the way to think about.

Geraldo and Lito start to fight until Isabel proposes that the whole family travel to the U.S. Lito is surprised, and insists that Teresa can't go while she's pregnant. Isabel argues that there's no food for the baby in Cuba, and no money with which to buy it. They are all quiet, until Geraldo realizes that they don't even have a **boat**. Isabel runs out, determined to fix this problem.

Isabel runs next door to Iván and Señor Castillo. She sees the **boat** that they have been building out of metal billboards and oil drums, which is big enough for the four Castillos and four extra people. Isabel insists that they have to take the Fernandezes in their boat as well. Señor Castillo protests, saying that they don't even have gasoline, so they won't be going anywhere anytime soon.

Because of Isabel's mother's pregnancy, Isabel frequently takes on the role of adult for this reason, in addition to the tense political climate and violence in Cuba that forces her to grow up.



In both Josef's story and Isabel's, Gratz demonstrates a lack of social responsibility on the part of countries who are taking in refugees, including the United States. Josef's story shows how America is instating arbitrary quotas on the number of Jews it takes in each year, and here, Isabel's situation shows how America's policies put arbitrary restrictions in place so that the country can send back refugees caught in the water, despite the fact that they need refuge as much as the ones caught on land.



Rather than submitting to the despair and destitution that the country has fallen into, and putting himself in danger of returning to jail due to the political oppression, Geraldo chooses to maintain what optimism he can and insist on finding a better life. This becomes even more crucial to him after Castro legalizes Cubans' ability to flee the country—now is the family's chance.



Even though fleeing the country would mean leaving behind the only home and the only culture Isabel has ever known, she recognizes that it is more important to keep her family together than to remain in Cuba.



Isabel once again proves herself to have the maturity and ingenuity more typical of adults. It is she who formulates the plan for all of them to leave Cuba, and it is she who finds the solution that will allow the Fernandezes and the Castillos to do so.



Isabel runs home and grabs her trumpet. She heads over to the beach, where a fisherman lives. Isabel asks him for gasoline, telling him that she is willing to trade her **trumpet** for it. The fisherman agrees, giving her two large plastic jugs of gasoline—enough to get them to Miami and back. Isabel is thrilled.

Isabel's willingness to give up her culture for the opportunity of a new life is symbolized in this exchange. Isabel's trumpet represents her cultural connection to Cuba through music, and she is readily trading it for the chance to keep her family together and flee the country.



MAHMOUD: ALEPPO, SYRIA – 2015 (3)

Mahmoud spots Waleed across the living room, covered head to toe in concrete dust. Waleed's eyes are glassy, but he is able to talk. Then, Fatima emerges from the bedroom with Hana, thanking God that Mahmoud and Waleed are alive. Fatima starts to pack a few things, while Mahmoud takes Hana and Waleed out of the apartment building.

Mahmoud is again expected to act as an adult in this time of crisis, making sure that his brother and sister are safe while his mother tries to gather whatever she can. This serves as another example of how being steeped in a country undergoing trauma can greatly affect the level of responsibility given to a child.



The street is filled with rubble, and buildings are collapsing around them. Mahmoud is stunned that that there are no police cars or emergency crews coming to help, until he realizes that there aren't any left. Mahmoud watches as their own apartment building collapses. He starts to panic that Fatima is still in the building, but then he sees her emerge from the rubble with the family's backpacks, filled with clothes and diapers.

Mahmoud recognizes how the country has essentially lost hope, in realizing that there are no ambulances or police cars to help them. Syria has become so war-torn that there is no one left who might be able to help them.



Fatima tries to call Youssef, Mahmoud's father, but they see him running down the street, overjoyed that they are safe. Youssef tells them that he has parked their car nearby, and that they are going to make their way to Germany, which is accepting Syrian refugees. Mahmoud complains that it's cold in Germany, and Youssef starts to sing a song from *Frozen* as a joke to lighten the mood.

Like Isabel's father, Geraldo, Youssef recognizes the fact that Syria has largely succumbed to despair, and wants to find a better place to protect his family. This is also why he continues to make jokes throughout this harrowing journey, to lighten their spirits and give them hope about the future.



Fatima expresses doubts about getting to Germany, but Youssef assures her that they can drive to Turkey and then take a **boat**, or train. He points out that they don't have much of a choice, with their home destroyed. Fatima tells him that she was able to retrieve the money that they'd put away. Youssef insists that they need to use it to leave Syria, otherwise they may not survive the war.

It is interesting to note, at this point, the cyclical nature of the places the refugees are heading: Isabel to the U.S. from Cuba, Josef to Cuba from Germany, and Mahmoud to Germany from Syria. This demonstrates how any place and any person can fall victim to war or oppression, and that's why it's important for all people and countries to be kind to refugees—as Lito points out later in the book, it may one day happen to them.



JOSEF: SOMEWHERE ON THE ATLANTIC OCEAN – 1939, 6 DAYS FROM HOME

The *St. Louis* is a “paradise” for Josef and Ruthie, who enjoy far greater luxury on the ship than they have in the previous six years. In addition, everyone on the crew treats Josef and his family “with kindness and respect,” though Aaron hasn’t left their cabin once, and Rachel has barely left his side. Josef also notes that the other passengers—who are all Jewish—are similarly happy to be escaping the Nazis, and there is singing and dancing on the ship.

Josef and Ruthie befriend two girls named Renata and Evelyne Aber around Ruthie’s age. Ruthie tells them that Josef just turned 13, and is going to have his bar mitzvah soon. Renata tells them that they are traveling alone—their mother had to stay back in Germany, and their father is waiting for them in Cuba.

Josef proposes that they play a prank, soaping up door handles along the cabins so that no one can turn them. As they watch a steward carrying a large platter try the door handle, and fumble so hard that he dropped his tray. Josef, Ruthie, Renata, and Evelyne burst into laughter. Josef realizes that he hadn’t played or laughed like this in years, and wishes he could stay on the *St. Louis* forever.

The kindness and respect that Josef and his family are shown on the ship contrasts with the injustice and cruelty that they faced in Germany. The fact that the other passengers are feeling similarly hopeful again highlights just how mistreated and dehumanized) the Jewish people were as a whole during this time period.



Gratz continues to hint at the way in which children are forced to grow up too soon. Renata and Evelyn are around six years old, per Gratz’s description, and yet they are traveling alone from Germany to Cuba in order to escape the Nazis.



Again, the joy that Josef is feeling shows the responsibility that has been placed on his shoulders in the past several years as he and other Jewish people have dealt with political oppression. Now, he is getting the opportunity to be a normal child for the first time in years.



ISABEL: JUST OUTSIDE HAVANA, CUBA – 1994 (3)

Isabel, Iván, Señor Castillo, Señora Castillo, Geraldo, and Lito are carrying the **boat** to the beach, packed with water, food, and medicine. Teresa walks alongside them, almost nine months pregnant. When they arrive at the beach, they see many other boats preparing to leave. Isabel also notices a small group of police on the beach, though they are only standing and watching. Isabel wades into the ocean with the rest of her family and they start to climb into the boat.

When Isabel turns to look at the beach once more, she sees two policemen running toward them. Geraldo panics and tells them to start the engine as Isabel is lifted into the boat. But then, Iván and Señora Castillo help lift the two policemen into the **boat**, and Isabel realizes that it is Luis Castillo and his girlfriend, Amara.

Gratz highlights the hopelessness that people are feeling country-wide in Cuba by demonstrating the sheer number of boats that are trying to leave. To each of these families, the boats represent their hope for a better life in the United States.



The Castillos, too, understand the importance of keeping their family together. Even though they invite trouble by having Luis and Amara desert the police force, they recognize that it would be immoral and heartbreaking to leave them behind.



Suddenly, gunshots ring out and hit the side of their boat. Isabel realizes that the other policemen are shooting at them because Luis and Amara are deserting the force. Señor Castillo starts the motor and the boat lurches forward and away from the shore. As they pull away, Geraldo yells at Señor Castillo for letting Luis and Amara come, saying that they're putting everyone in danger. They begin to argue, until Isabel notices **water** pouring in from the gunshot hole in the side of the **boat**.

The gunshots will have serious ramifications for the rest of Isabel's story as water continues to fill the boat. The tension between the water rising and the boat trying to carry on mirrors the despair that Isabel and her family will feel over various points of their journey, but at this point they must still hold out hope that the boat can take them to a new life.



MAHMOUD: JUST OUTSIDE ALEPPO, SYRIA – 2015, 1 DAY FROM HOME

Youssef stops for gas a little north of Aleppo. Fatima puts on a long-sleeved dress and a headscarf, in case they run into stricter Muslims. They are particularly worried about running into Daesh—what the rest of the world called ISIS—because they believed anyone who disagreed with their ideology “should have their heads cut off.”

It is important that Gratz gives insight into Mahmoud's thoughts on Daesh, particularly because Muslims are frequently stereotyped due to groups like it—one of the reasons that so many countries, like Hungary in this book, treat Muslim refugees as criminals or “parasites.” Mahmoud here shows how these stereotypes are misguided.



Fatima finds a route to Turkey on her iPhone. An hour later, they are stopped by four soldiers with automatic rifles. Mahmoud tries to disappear in the back of the car. Youssef tells the soldiers that he's just trying to get his family to safety. The soldiers ask which side he supports, cocking his gun. Waleed speaks up, saying that they're against “whoever is dropping the bombs” on them. The soldiers laugh and lower their weapons.

This incident shows another example of Mahmoud attempting to be invisible. The less noticed he can be, and the less trouble he makes, the better off he thinks he will be. But it is only through Waleed speaking up and making a joke (though he doesn't know it) that saves the day in this instance.



The soldiers get into the car and tell Youssef to drop them south, even though the family is trying to travel north. When the soldiers see that they are attempting to go to Turkey, they tell the family that they should be standing up for their country and fighting “the tyrant Assad.” Suddenly, gunfire erupts. One of the soldiers is hit and killed. The car skids to a stop, and Youssef, Fatima (with Hana), Mahmoud, and Waleed immediately get out of the car and dive into a ditch. The soldiers run out to fight.

The fact that the soldiers tell Mahmoud's family to fight for their country, and then immediately are attacked, only reinforces for the family that leaving Syria is their only option. Though they love their home, keeping their family together and saving their children's lives is more important to Youssef and Fatima than trying to fight a brutal war.



Youssef waits for a pause in the gunfire, then runs back to the car. When he returns with his phone and charger, he jokes that he needs it to play Angry Birds. After another lull in the shooting, they hurry away from the car, leaving everything they owned behind.

Again, even in these moments in which the family has lost so much of what they have, Mahmoud's father attempts to keep their spirits up, knowing that it is necessary to enable them to keep going.



JOSEF: SOMEWHERE ON THE ATLANTIC OCEAN – 1939, 8 DAYS FROM HOME

The day of Josef’s bar mitzvah arrives—the day Josef will “leave his childhood behind and become a man, and he could hardly contain his excitement.” The social hall on the *St. Louis* has been converted to a synagogue, which will allow him to have his bar mitzvah. Aaron is extremely paranoid about the synagogue, worried that they will be targeted if they attend. He refuses to go.

Josef is upset that Aaron will not join for his bar mitzvah, but wonders if becoming a man means not relying on one’s father. At the synagogue, there are over a hundred people there for the service. Josef is amazed—he hasn’t been in a synagogue since Kristallnacht. Memories of the services flood back to him, and he is excited that he and the other passengers are reviving these traditions.

The rabbi asks Gustav Schroeder, the captain, to take down the portrait of Hitler in the social hall. Schroeder agrees, and it is removed. Josef notices a crew member on the balcony storm off as it is taken down. The rabbi then leads the service, and calls Josef up to recite the blessing he’s been practicing. Josef stumbles through the Hebrew words, but he is able to get through the ceremony. Josef is now a man. Many people congratulate him afterward, and Josef feels as though he is in a dream. As long as he can remember, he has wanted to be a man.

Later that day, Josef is walking the Promenade when Renata and Evelyne find him and tell him to stand guard while they latch all the stalls in the women’s bathroom from the inside and crawl out so no one can use them. Josef is unsure, but stands outside the bathroom and waits for them to return. After they have done so, Josef tells them to unlock the stalls. When they refuse, Josef recognizes that he has to be a responsible adult now, so he looks for a steward whom he can tell about the stalls.

When Josef sees two stewards talking, he approaches them. He overhears them saying that Captain Schroeder is trying to go as fast as possible because there are other ships that are trying to unload refugees in Cuba, and Cuba might then turn the *St. Louis* away. Josef is startled, wondering where they will go if they can’t get to Cuba.

Gratz continues to display the arc of Josef’s coming of age. With this Jewish ceremony, he becomes a man under religious law. But it is also notable that, as Josef goes on to states, he is becoming less and less reliant upon his father, suggesting that becoming independent from one’s parents is a crucial part of growing up.



Josef’s thoughts concerning the traditions of synagogue show that he doesn’t need to be in his home country in order to retain a connection to his culture. Instead, all he needs is his family to continue the traditions and a community with which to practice them.



Gratz once again reiterates how much Josef has been looking forward to entering adulthood, though this attitude actually demonstrates that he still has a kind of naïveté about the idea of growing up. As Josef learns over the course of the book, being an adult is not simply a quality: it also bears responsibility and the burden of making difficult choices.



Following Josef’s turning point into manhood, he starts to realize what this step means. Whereas before he was the one instigating pranks with the girls, now he feels that he should be more responsible. This is a small step in Josef’s arc toward adulthood, but the life-or-death nature of his journey thus far suggests that he will face much more serious tests of his manhood as the story progresses.



Gratz starts to hint at the fact that the refugees may have put too much hope in getting to Cuba, as the two stewards imply that Cuba may not want to take as many Jewish refugees as it is receiving. But there is also a kind of injustice in this (as is true of countries mentioned in Isabel’s and Mahmoud’s stories), that a country would decide that some refugees should be allowed to enter while dooming others.



ISABEL: THE STRAITS OF FLORIDA, SOMEWHERE NORTH OF CUBA – 1994, 1 DAY FROM HOME

(1)

The lights of Havana fade behind Isabel. Señor Castillo shows Isabel that at the bottom of the **boat** is a billboard with Castro's face on it. Geraldo and the other adults joke about Castro and the failures of the Cuban Revolution. Isabel asks how long it might be until they get to Florida, and Señor Castillo says that they are likely to get there by tomorrow night.

This is the first introduction of the word "tomorrow" as a signifier of hope in the novel. It's unclear at this whether the Fernandezes and Castillos really will make it to Florida in that time, given the precariousness of their homemade boat and the fact that it was shot on their way out of Cuba. Despite this uncertainty, the word "tomorrow" allows the families to distract themselves from the struggles of the current day, and to try to keep their hopes up as they push forward on their journey.



Teresa asks everyone what they think the U.S. will be like. While others mention things like food, clothes, sports, movies, and travel, all Isabel wants is "a place where she and her family c[an] be together, and happy." Geraldo says that he's looking forward to not being thrown in jail for criticizing the government.

Isabel's inner thoughts imply that she has actually thought very little about what life in the U.S. might be like. Her top priority, which led her to give up her Cuban roots, has always been to make sure that her family can be together.



Lito asks Isabel to play a song for them. Isabel explains that she had to trade her **trumpet** for the gasoline. Lito is shocked—the trumpet was "everything" to Isabel. Isabel thinks to herself that it wasn't as important as her family. Lito instead begins singing a salsa song, and everyone joins in. Teresa starts counting *clave*, but Isabel still can't quite hear the rhythm. Then, suddenly, the music stops—the **boat's** motor has died.

*Isabel again reinforces the fact that her family is more important to her than retaining her culture—though Gratz hints again at her insecurity in the fact that she can't count *clave*. Still, Gratz will ultimately argue that family is what actually enables Isabel to remain connected to her culture.*

MAHMOUD: KILIS, TURKEY – 2015, 2 DAYS FROM HOME

Mahmoud and his family wait at the border of Turkey, surrounded by countless Syrian families. Mahmoud notes that the children act like "miniature adults," with very little crying or whining. Mahmoud and his family have walked eight hours over two days, joining up with hundreds of other refugees who are also walking north. Mahmoud is glad to disappear among them—invisible.

Gratz implies with the description of the other children that they, too, have had to grow up far too early due to their status as refugees—this phenomenon isn't unique to Mahmoud, Isabel, or Josef. Additionally, Gratz shows yet another instance in which Mahmoud is glad to be invisible, so he can blend in amongst others and make it safely to the Turkish border.



Mahmoud feels like he is in trouble as they approach the Turkish border guards. Mahmoud realizes, looking at his family, that they look "tired and poor and wretched" after walking for so long, and he admits to himself that he probably wouldn't let any of these people in if he were a Turkish border guard. But when Mahmoud's family gets to the front of the line, the border agent gives them temporary visas and allows them in.

Mahmoud's recognition that he probably wouldn't let any of the refugees in demonstrates how everyone can bear these dehumanizing stereotypes of the refugees—even refugees themselves. But Mahmoud's personal story shows the necessity of affirming that they are people, too, regardless of where they came from or what they look like. Their lives have value and that they are worthy of aid.



Mahmoud and his family then enter into a giant refugee camp with masses of white tents. While walking through the city, Youssef finds information about a smuggler who can get them from Turkey to Greece, but they have to travel to the Turkish city of Izmir—a 12-hour car ride, non-stop. He goes to see if he can find a bus for them to take.

Mahmoud continues to walk through the city, and finds a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle toy that he can buy for Waleed. Mahmoud also notices a car driving through the city, with a young couple in the back. He realizes it is a marriage procession—it is Syrian tradition to be escorted to one's wedding by a parade of cars. Then, suddenly, Youssef finds Mahmoud and says that he found a ride, but they have to leave immediately.

The scale of the tent city demonstrates not only the extent of the destruction and despair in Syria, but also the hope that has sprung up as so many people migrate to try and make better lives for themselves and their families.



Mahmoud again illustrates his own sense of responsibility, and the belief that he has to take care of his Waleed, in buying a toy to cheer his brother up. Gratz also provides another example, through the marriage procession, of how one doesn't need to be in one's homeland to maintain one's culture—all that's necessary is family and community.



JOSEF: SOMEWHERE ON THE ATLANTIC OCEAN – 1939, 10 DAYS FROM HOME

Josef and some of the other children on the *St. Louis* take a tour of the ship's bridge and engine room. Captain Schroeder demonstrates how to change the ship's speed. Josef notices that the settings are on full, and asks if they're going full speed because they're racing two other ships to Cuba. The captain assures him that they're just making the best speed because of the calm seas.

Another officer then takes Josef and the other children down below decks to the engine room. They pass a room where crewmen are drinking and singing. Schiendick, the crew member Josef noticed storming off as the portrait of Hitler was taken down for Joseph's bar mitzvah, grows angry that passengers are being shown downstairs. Schiendick calls the children "Jewish rats" before staggering back and continuing to sing another Nazi song. Josef tries to block out the words, "When Jewish blood flows from the knife, things will go much better."

Josef feels weak and upset through the rest of the tour, realizing that they haven't fully escaped antisemitic hatred on the *St. Louis*. None of the other children are excited either, and the tour ends solemnly. Josef realizes that below the decks lies a different world than the one he has been enjoying above.

Josef's hope starts to waver following the discovery that the ship may not actually allow them to find a new life in Cuba. But Captain Schroeder recognizes the necessity of keeping those hopes alive, and so continues to conceal that there may be trouble when they reach Cuba.



Gratz illustrates more dehumanization from the Nazis, exemplified in Schiendick's equation of the children with rats. He also draws a clear line between this view of the children, and their justification of the violence that they deem acceptable against Jewish people.



The hatred that Josef experiences on the tour only reminds him, and the readers, of the stakes of the trip. If Cuba does not let the refugees in, it signifies a return to a society that is more than willing to be unjust and cruel toward them.



ISABEL: THE STRAITS OF FLORIDA, SOMEWHERE NORTH OF CUBA – 1994, 1 DAY FROM HOME (2)

Geraldo, Señor Castillo, Luis, and Amara try to figure out why the **boat's** motor won't start, while Iván and Isabel scoop **water** out of the bottom of the boat because the sock with which they plugged the bullet hole has soaked through. Teresa and Señora Castillo sleep in the front of the boat.

Lito talks to Isabel and Iván as they work, telling Isabel that he has a brother, Guillermo, who lives in the United States. In the 1970s, the U.S. airlifted political dissidents from Cuba to the U.S., and Guillermo chose to go as well. But Lito decided to stay because Cuba was his home. He says, then, that it was a mistake to leave on this "sinking coffin," because Cuba isn't worse now than it ever was. Iván then asks if Cuba would ever get better.

Lito says that they should have waited to leave Cuba, but Isabel is adamant that Geraldo would have been arrested. Lito counters, accusing Geraldo of risking his life and the lives of his family to go to the United States. And, Lito continues, Geraldo is taking Isabel away from her roots. He asks Isabel how she's going to learn to count *clave* in Miami. Teresa wakes up and assures Lito that Miami is just "North Cuba."

Isabel worries about what Lito said—she has never been able to count *clave*, but always assumed it would come to her eventually. She wonders, now, if she will ever hear it. Isabel thinks, "Like trading her **trumpet**, had she swapped the one thing that was really hers—her music—for the chance to keep her family together?" Suddenly, they hear the rumble of an enormous tanker, heading right for them.

MAHMOUD: IZMIR, TURKEY – 2015, 4 DAYS FROM HOME

Mahmoud is waiting with his family for a **boat** that can take them from Turkey to Greece. But the smuggler tells them that there is no boat today—that it will come "tomorrow." Mahmoud can't believe it—they spent two long days trying to get to the boat on time, and now it isn't coming. Fatima asks where they're supposed to go. The smuggler, shrugging, tells them that there's a park nearby.

As Mahmoud's family walks through Izmir, trying to find a hotel, Mahmoud is amazed at how little rubble and destruction there is. Mahmoud asks Waleed if he remembers when Syria was like this, but Waleed says nothing. Mahmoud worries about Waleed, who is usually a ball of energy, but now seems cheerless.

Gratz depicts yet another way in which Isabel takes on the role of an adult in these times of crisis: having to literally keep their boat afloat while they sail to the U.S.



Lito, as he elaborates in this chapter, feels that remaining tied to one's culture is just as important as being connected to one's family, which is why he chose not to join his brother Guillermo in the U.S. He also starts to lose hope in the potential for a better future, symbolized by the fact that the water is rising and threatens to sink their boat.



*Contrary to Lito, Isabel recognizes that for her, keeping her family together is more important than remaining connected to her culture. Though Isabel does have doubts about learning *clave*, she values the ability to be with her father more.*



Even though Isabel is worried about leaving her culture behind, Gratz continues to imply that these fears are unfounded—given that Isabel's relatives spent their lives in Cuba, her family can help keep her connected to their shared culture even when they are displaced from it.



Just as Gratz introduced the word "tomorrow" into Isabel's story as a marker of hope and optimism, he introduces it into Mahmoud's story here as well. Yet for Mahmoud, "tomorrow" carries a sense of despair in that they have to put off their journey and find a place to stay for the night—a task which proves very difficult.



Mahmoud is not the only child in his family who has been forced to grow up prematurely—Waleed has also lost much of his playfulness and childishness due to the trauma that he has experienced in Syria, and in traveling to Turkey.



Youssef discovers that every hotel in town is booked with three families in each room. The family goes to the park, but it is cold, rainy, and filled with other refugees. Then, a small Syrian boy offers to show them a place to stay for 2,000 Syrian pounds (about 10 American dollars). They pay the money and the boy leads them to an abandoned mall filled with squatters, where they find an empty shop in which to stay.

Though Mahmoud and his family's journey, Gratz proves how refugees constantly face injustice and a lack of empathy. Despite their vulnerable position, people (like the Syrian boy) take advantage of the fact that refugee families often have nowhere to stay, and lack the empathy to help them through their difficult journey.



Youssef assures the family that they are only staying there for the night. The Syrian boy asks if they're going to leave on a **boat** in the morning, and tells them that they need life vests in case the boat flips, runs out of gas, or wrecks on the rocks. Youssef is hesitant, but agrees to buy the life vests.

It's unclear at this point whether or not Youssef and his family can really trust the Syrian boy. Given that he asked for money simply to show the family where they could spend the night, it could be that the boy is taking advantage of their situation and selling them faulty equipment just to earn a profit.



JOSEF: SOMEWHERE ON THE ATLANTIC OCEAN – 1939, 11 DAYS FROM HOME

The **ship** begins to slow down, and Aaron starts to panic, saying that they have to hide or get off the ship to avoid the Nazis. Josef and Rachel try to restrain Aaron while he panics, and Josef explains that they're slowing down because an old man on the ship has passed away and they're holding a funeral, which only makes Aaron even more anxious because he thinks that the Nazis were responsible. But Josef explains that the man had been sick for a long time with cancer.

Josef continues to take on an increasingly adult role in his family, while his father is rendered more and more childlike in the way he acts. Because of the trauma Aaron experienced in the concentration camps, Josef must comfort him rather than the other way around.



Aaron finally seems to understand what Josef is saying, and insists on attending the funeral because he had seen “too many men die without funerals at Dachau.” Rachel and Ruthie stay behind while Josef and Aaron go to the A-deck for the funeral with a few other passengers. They rip their garments on the way—a Jewish tradition during funerals.

Here Gratz hints at yet another way in which the Nazis have dehumanized and degraded the Jewish people, in not giving them proper burials in the concentration camps.



As the funeral procession starts, Schiendick emerges from below deck. He introduces himself as the Nazi Party leader on the **ship**, and explains that German law dictates that a body buried at sea must be covered with the national flag—the Nazi flag. Aaron protests angrily and spits at Schiendick's feet. Schroeder breaks up the two men, and says that they can make an exception in this case. Schiendick looks at Aaron and Josef for another moment, then storms away.

Gratz contrasts the empathy and understanding of Schroeder with the viciousness of Schiendick, who is insisting on using the Nazi flag simply to make a point and to continue to oppress the Jewish people on board the ship. He is knowingly being cruel, and yet does not hesitate to do so even at a funeral.



The funeral continues. After the rabbi gives a short prayer, the sailors slide the body of the man over the side of the **ship**. Josef takes sand from a nearby sandbox and throws it over the rail of the deck. Captain Schroeder and the other sailors salute the man by touching the brims of their caps. After the funeral, Josef notices Aaron lingering at the rail of the ship and looking at the **water**, saying that at least the old man didn't have to be buried in "the hell of the Third Reich."

Here, Aaron is meditating on his own tortured existence as a concentration camp survivor. His comment that Hitler's Third Reich is equivalent to hell suggests that he may view death as preferable to continuing to live in such an oppressive society—a chilling implication, given that his mental health appears to be slipping.



ISABEL: THE STRAITS OF FLORIDA, SOMEWHERE NORTH OF CUBA – 1994, 1 DAY FROM HOME (3)

The tanker approaches Isabel's **boat**, at least seven stories tall and wide enough to fill the horizon. They desperately try to get the engine started to move out of its way, and in the last second before they're hit by the tanker, Luis is able to get it going. They speed out of the way, but the wake of the tanker dumps a load of **water** on top of them and they all tumble across the boat.

Being completely soaked with water and having it completely fill their boat mirrors the mental struggles that Isabel and the other refugees are facing as they sometimes feel like giving in to despair—just as one obstacle seems to clear, another one inevitably presents itself. But the fact that the boat's motor is able to start again also aids in retaining their spark of hope, and allows them to continue their journey.



Isabel realizes that Señor Castillo has been thrown from the **boat**, and they immediately look out into the darkness to try and find him. Isabel spots him in the **water** for a second. She remembers her grandmother, Lita, disappearing under the waves in the same way two years earlier, and immediately dives in after Señor Castillo.

Gratz reveals some of the trauma that Isabel has already experienced even as a child in witnessing her grandmother's death, and how that has forced her to grow up and be more responsible. This is evidenced in the fact that despite Isabel's young age and small size, she does not hesitate to dive in to save an adult man from the water.



MAHMOUD: IZMIR, TURKEY – 2015, 11 DAYS FROM HOME (1)

One week after the boat to Greece was originally supposed to arrive, the smuggler tells Mahmoud and his family the same thing he has been saying for the past week: the boat will come tomorrow. Mahmoud screams, Fatima starts to cry, and Youssef is in shock. Each time they are given a different excuse as to why they can't leave. Mahmoud yells in "pathetic, toddler-like frustration" that he wishes he could go back to Syria. He knows that he should be more mature than that, since he is "almost a man," but he can't help himself.

As the idea of tomorrow is repeated over and over again, Gratz shows how it transforms from being an opportunity for hope into something that causes more and more despair when Mahmoud and his family's journeys are delayed even further. Additionally, Mahmoud again shows the added maturity he has developed in the midst of his difficult situation. He wants to be able to be a normal kid—to whine about the truly frustrating experience he is having—and yet he recognizes that he has to be more adult than that.



Mahmoud and his family return to the mall. There, two Turkish men demand that they start paying rent to stay there: 5,000 thousand pounds a night, each. Youssef refuses to give in to this bullying. They then try to sleep in the doorway of a travel agency, but the police throw them out. Mahmoud is so tired that he starts to cry.

Mahmoud then begins to stop cars on the street, asking for help. One driver rolls the window down, and Mahmoud tells the man that the family has nowhere to go, and that his sister Hana is only a baby. Luckily, the man speaks Arabic, and says that he has a small car dealership in which the family can stay. Youssef starts to apologize for bothering the man, but Mahmoud accepts the offer and thanks the man profusely.

As the man drives Mahmoud and his family to the car dealership, he explains that his name is Samih Nasseer and that he is a Palestinian refugee. He says that he was forced to leave his home in 1948 during the first Arab-Israeli war. Then, Youssef gets a text from the smuggler, saying that the boat is ready. Nasseer offers to drive them to the boat and take them back to the dealership if it isn't there. But this time, the boat is finally there.

Mahmoud and his family continue to experience a lack of empathy, both from individuals and from society as a whole. Rather than helping refugees at the most vulnerable time in their lives, these two men try to take advantage of them further, and the police—who are supposed to help people—only make their lives more difficult.



Mahmoud further illustrates how he is taking on the responsibility of an adult here. While Youssef is embarrassed at their situation, Mahmoud is the only one who is able to reach out for help and find a place for them to stay that evening.



Nasseer shows compassion and empathy to Mahmoud's family because he, too, knows what it means to be a refugee, and he feels a social responsibility to help others. Nasseer's story hints at the circular and interconnected nature of the novel's storylines that becomes clearer by the book's end. Many Jews fleeing Germany immigrated to Israel, but this in turn displaced many people in Palestine.



JOSEF: SOMEWHERE ON THE ATLANTIC OCEAN – 1939, 14 DAYS FROM HOME

The day before the **ship** is scheduled to reach Cuba, the crew holds a massive party for the passengers. It is a celebration in the face of all of the trauma that they experienced in Germany, as they prepare for their new lives. The next morning, the anchor is dropped, and Josef learns that a Cuban doctor is going to visit the ship for a medical inspection, to ensure that none of the passengers are “insane, a criminal, or [have] a contagious disease.”

When the doctor arrives, he asks for the passengers to assemble in the social hall. Josef runs back to his cabin and explains what is happening to Rachel and Aaron. Josef is concerned that Aaron will be deemed “too mentally disturbed to enter Cuba.” Aaron, meanwhile, grows frightened, fearing that the inspection will be like a roll call in Dachau. He tells Josef that he saw another man shot dead with a rifle right next to him, and he couldn't make a sound. Rachel assures Aaron that it won't be like that.

Getting closer and closer to Cuba provides the passengers with a deep sense of hope for their new lives, as they move past the despair that they experienced in Germany. It is only through this sense of hope that they were even afforded the opportunity to find a new place to live.



Gratz continues to reveal more and more details about the horrors that Aaron experienced in the Dachau concentration camp, and how so many people were robbed of their lives and their humanity by the cruel treatment of the Nazis.



Rachel and Josef escort Aaron to the social hall. As the doctor approaches them in line, Aaron begins to whimper, attracting the attention of other passengers. Rachel tries to comfort him, to no avail. Aaron starts to blubber, until Josef slaps him hard across the face. Josef is surprised at himself, but realizes that “in the past six months, [he] and his father ha[ve] traded places.” Josef lies to Aaron and says that the doctor is a Nazi in disguise, and that if Aaron speaks or moves, he will send Aaron back to Germany.

Rachel starts to cry, but Aaron pulls himself together and stands at attention like a prisoner. The doctor comes down the line and looks at each person. Josef, Aaron, Rachel, and Ruthie all pass the inspection. Josef is relieved, but he feels terrible for scaring his father, and for “taking his father’s place as the man in the family.” He hopes, however, that when they get off the **ship**, everything will go back to normal.

Just as Josef starts to feel hopeful, the man in line next to him says that the whole process was a sham—there was no actual medical inspection. Josef wonders what the purpose of the visit was if it wasn’t for a proper inspection. Then, Josef sees that a few Cuban police officers remained behind, blocking the only way off the ship. A woman asks them when they will be allowed into Havana. The policeman replies, “mañana”—tomorrow.

Even though Josef is still only 13 years old, the hardships that he and his father have undergone have caused them to switch places, as Josef even points out here. Josef is forced to take drastic measures with his father and treat him like a child in order to protect his father and the rest of his family, even if it means scaring and physically hurting him.



While Josef’s plan works, the burden of deceiving his father and having to act as the adult is a huge one to bear. This burden is only necessitated by the trauma of what has happened to Aaron in Germany, showing how trauma can lead to this extra undertaking of responsibility by refugee children.



Just like Mahmoud, Josef starts to encounter the word “tomorrow” as they ask when they can get off the ship. But as the word is repeated to them every day, it becomes less imbued with hope and more imbued with despair.



ISABEL: THE STRAITS OF FLORIDA, SOMEWHERE NORTH OF CUBA – 1994, 1 DAY FROM HOME (4)

Isabel dives into the **water** and is slammed by waves as she tries to find Señor Castillo. She eventually finds him under the water, not moving, and pulls him up to the surface. Isabel kicks hard, doing as much as she can to keep them afloat. Iván dives in after her, guiding the boat toward them. They then pull Isabel and Señor Castillo into the **boat**. Señor Castillo remains unconscious for a few moments, then starts to spit up the water he had swallowed. Señora Castillo thanks Isabel.

Geraldo and Lito continue to get the **water** out of the bottom of the **boat**. They quickly realize that their medicine, bandages, and matches have fallen into the water. Isabel hopes that they can make it without them, as long as they get the engine running again and get back on track with the sun during the daytime. The others continue to bail water out of the boat through the night, as the waves grow higher and higher. The next morning, they see that a storm is rolling in.

Like Josef, Isabel, too, continues to take on the responsibility of an adult because of the adversities she and the others are facing as refugees. She doesn’t hesitate to dive into the water in order to rescue Señor Castillo, despite the fact that she is only 11.



As their boat is completely ravaged with water, Gratz creates a symbolic parallel with the water level rising and the refugees’ level of despair growing, giving the situation a sense of life-threatening urgency. Still, they try to maintain some hope and bail out the water, knowing that it is their only chance to keep going and make it to Miami.



MAHMOUD: IZMIR, TURKEY – 2015, 11 DAYS FROM HOME (2)

The **boat** Mahmoud's family is set to take is a black inflatable rubber dinghy with a motor. Though it only looks like it has room for a dozen, 30 refugees wait to get on board. They pay 250,000 Syrian pounds (or 1,000 euros) per person for the boat. Mahmoud and his family put on their life jackets and climb on board, squeezing in tightly.

Youssef assures Mahmoud that it looks like the trip will only last a few hours, looking at his phone through a sealed plastic bag for protection. He says that they only have to make it to the Greek island of Lesbos, and they can take a ferry from there to Athens afterward. They set out into the night. The boat is quickly tossed by the waves and it starts to rain hard. Mahmoud is soaked to the bone and the **boat** starts to fill with **water**. Someone suggests they go back, but Youssef and others insist they continue.

Mahmoud thinks that this is worse than Syria. He thinks that he is "an invisible brown speck in an invisible black rubber dinghy," and the **ocean** could easily swallow them and "no one in the whole wide world would ever know he was gone." No sooner does Mahmoud think this than the **boat** hits rocks, and Mahmoud is sent tumbling into the water.

Even though they pay a large price for this less-than-ideal boat, the dinghy actually represents something much more. To Mahmoud, it is the thing that they have been hoping would come while they have been put off more and more, and which will provide them with a path to a new life.



Still, the hope that Mahmoud and his family feels in getting to Greece is quickly countered by the difficult journey. Just as in Isabel's boat, where the rising water represents defeat and hopelessness, the water starts to collect in Mahmoud's boat and makes the refugees doubt that they will be able to make it to Greece.



It is here that Mahmoud starts to recognize how being invisible can actually be a negative thing rather than a defense mechanism. It makes him anonymous to the outside world, and means that no one would be able to help them if tragedy strikes, as it does here.



JOSEF: SOMEWHERE ON THE ATLANTIC OCEAN – 1939, 17 DAYS FROM HOME

Three days later, the situation has worsened on the *St. Louis*. The Cuban police are still telling the passengers that they will be able to disembark "*mañana*." Meanwhile, two other **boats** have been allowed to dock and let off their refugees into Havana. Josef is frustrated, wondering why these others have been let off while the *St. Louis* hasn't been allowed to dock.

Tension mounts between the passengers and the crew, and Schiendick and the other Nazis start allowing the firemen on board the ship to patrol the decks and harass the Jewish passengers. One of these firemen grabs Josef and brings him to Schiendick. Schiendick says that Josef is to come with them because his parents' cabin must be searched.

Similar to Mahmoud, the constant repetition of "tomorrow" starts to create feelings of despair and anxiety for the Josef and the other passengers as they lose hope that they will ever be allowed into Havana. Whether the Cuban police know what is happening or not, they clearly make no effort to try to comfort the passengers or give them more information about what is happening.



Schiendick and the firemen on board only add to the lack of empathy that the Cuban police are showing. They start to more freely harass and dehumanize the Jewish passengers because they believe Jewish people are inherently inferior to them.



Josef has no choice but to bring Schiendick to his family's cabin, where Aaron is napping and Rachel is reading. Schiendick and two firemen ransack the room, smashing the mirror and knocking the lamps off the basin. They throw the Landaus' clothes all over the cabin and tear the head off of Ruthie's stuffed bunny. They tear pages out of the book in Rachel's hands.

Josef, Aaron, and Rachel huddle in the corner. When there is nothing left to destroy, Schiendick spits at Aaron, and Josef understands that this is payback for what Aaron said at the funeral. Schiendick and the firemen leave. Aaron starts to cry, then reminds Josef that he said if Aaron stood still, the Nazis wouldn't come for him. Aaron sobs, accusing Josef of breaking his promise. Josef feels as though his father has slapped him. He is horrified by what he has done.

Schiendick and the firemen then take their dehumanization and cruelty even further. Their fabricated search is simply an excuse to enact harm and instill fear among people who are already vulnerable, simply because they can and because they do not recognize Landaus' humanity.



While Josef has taken on the burden of responsibility in terms of caring for his father, this also means dealing with the burden of responsibility when the hardships continue. Though Josef had good reason to lie to his father to get him to calm down during the inspecting, he must now face the repercussions of breaking the promise to keep his father safe as well. These are responsibilities that no 13-year-old should have to bear, and yet the trauma that Aaron has faced means that Josef must assume these burdens.



ISABEL: SOMEWHERE ON THE STRAITS OF FLORIDA – 1994, 2 DAYS FROM HOME

Isabel continues to bail **water** out of the boat, alongside Teresa, Geraldo, Lito, Luis, Iván, and Señora Castillo. They work feverishly, but the **boat** fills as quickly as they can bail, and the motor still isn't functioning. The storm clouds start to deliver a driving rain, and sea spray stings Isabel's eyes.

In the storm, Isabel thinks about the last time she saw Lita, her grandmother. Isabel had been nine years old, and she was staying with Lita and Lito while her parents were fighting. A giant cyclone came, which Castro and the government had not warned them about nor protected them from. Their shack was swept into the **ocean**; Lito and Isabel held onto each other, but Lita was swept away. Lito senses what Isabel is thinking about and comforts her as they continue to bail water out of the **boat**.

As the situation becomes more and more dire, Isabel is plagued by a sense of doubt that the Fernandezes and Castillos will be able to reach Florida. Still, they recognize that all they can do is place their hope in the boat's ability to get them there and try to rid it of water.



In this flashback, too, the water represents despair and hopelessness as Lita is swept out to sea. It is also this kind of trauma, exacerbated by the oppressive government under which Isabel in her family lived, that caused Isabel to become much more mature and gain a sense of what it means to be an adult.



MAHMOUD: SOMEWHERE ON THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA – 2015, 11 DAYS FROM HOME (1)

Mahmoud tumbles into the **water**, disappearing under the waves. He chokes and starts to drown, until his head is able to break the surface. He sees a cell phone bobbing in the water in a plastic bag, and catches it. He then hears Fatima scream out, and watches as she struggles to lift a crying Hana out of the water. Mahmoud swims over to his mother and tries to help keep Fatima and Hana above the water.

Even though Mahmoud is filled with despair, his immediate instinct is to protect his mother and sister. Instead of worrying about himself, he tries to make sure that they can survive. This is a very mature instinct for a 12-year-old boy, but the ordeal that they are facing requires Mahmoud to grow up and take on that responsibility.



Mahmoud then sees Youssef and Waleed swimming nearby. His father says that the life preservers are fake. Mahmoud is furious, but all he can do is keep kicking to stay afloat. All around them, people are wondering how to get to dry land, as the **boat** has sunk and there is nothing in sight. Hours pass and the rain stops, but Mahmoud's legs grow numb with exhaustion.

Suddenly, Mahmoud sees another **boat** of people. Mahmoud and his family cry out for help, but the dinghy isn't slowing down. Mahmoud grabs onto it, bringing Fatima and Hana with him. A woman in the boat yells for him to let go because he's dragging them down.

Mahmoud begs to be let onto the **boat**, but those on board insist there is no room. A man offers to call the Coast Guard for them. Mahmoud then makes a quick decision, asking them to take Hana because she won't take up any room. A woman appears on the side of the boat and takes Hana from them. Then, Mahmoud and Fatima are thrown back into the **ocean**. Fatima sobs in the water.

Gratz illustrates the cruelty and lack of compassion of the people they met in Turkey. These people knew that the life vests didn't work and that selling them could cost the refugees their lives, and yet they did so anyway in order to profit off of an already vulnerable group.



As refugees themselves, it is difficult for the people on the boat to help others, because they already have so little. Ultimately it is up to others with more resources to bear this social responsibility and help make sure that any refugee can get safely from political turmoil to a place where they can begin a new life, which is why Gratz tries to call on readers to sympathize with Mahmoud's and others' plights.



Here, Mahmoud makes his heaviest and most mature decision because of the direness of their situation. Even though it means separating from Hana and potentially never seeing her again, he offers his sister to the other refugees because he knows it will give her a better chance of survival. Again, this is not a decision that a child should have to make, but Mahmoud does so because he wants his sister to have a chance to live above all else.



JOSEF: JUST OUTSIDE HAVANA HARBOR – 1939, 18 DAYS FROM HOME (1)

Aaron is in another panic, stacking every piece of furniture in their room against the door in terror following the incident with Schiendick, even after Josef and Rachel have cleaned the cabin up. Ruthie crouches in a corner, crying and hugging her mended stuffed bunny. Josef is afraid, too, seeing his father as a "crazed ghost." After stacking everything he can, Aaron hides under the desk at the back of the room.

Rachel tells Ruthie to go to the pool, and she tells Josef that she's going to get a sleeping draught to calm Aaron. Josef warns her that if the doctor knows he's not well, they might not let Aaron into Cuba. Rachel says that she'll say it's for her—that she hasn't been sleeping. Josef is anxious to be left alone with his father as his mother and sister pull apart the barricade and leave their cabin.

Following what Aaron has experienced at Dachau, Schiendick's cruelty only reinforces how the Nazis have further dehumanized the people that they have sent to the concentration camps. Even to Josef, Aaron is no longer a man—he has been rendered a shell of one.



Even though Josef has become a man under Jewish law, it doesn't necessarily mean that he is ready to become an adult. Here, he shows his hesitation to be responsible for Aaron when his mother leaves him alone with his father.



Rachel returns within minutes, but she is panicked now, too. She says that the doctor made her drink the sleeping draught after she said it was for herself. She quickly falls asleep, and Josef grows worried, not knowing how to take care of Aaron. Josef suddenly realizes that he's now "the only adult" in the family. He can't go to anyone for help, and he also knows that he has to take care of Ruthie.

Suddenly, Aaron asks Josef if he's seen anyone drown. Josef doesn't respond, and Aaron talks about how at the evening roll call at Dachau every night, the Nazis would choose someone to hang upside down with his arms and legs tied together and his head in a barrel. They would then fill the barrel with **water** slowly so they could watch the man panic and thrash around, until he was dead. The other prisoners had to watch, and couldn't say a word or move a muscle.

Josef starts to cry, knowing that he had threatened his father with going back to Germany. Aaron says he can't go back there before closing his eyes and falling asleep. Josef then knows he has to find Ruthie at the pool as quickly as possible. On the way, he instructs a steward to bring the family's dinners to their cabin that night. He is pleased, returning with Ruthie, that he survived "his first day as an adult."

When Josef and Ruthie return, however, Aaron is no longer in the cabin. Josef instructs Ruthie to stay with Rachel, who is still asleep, and goes to search for his father. Josef runs into the passageway and searches for his father. He hears a commotion and sprints up to the deck. A woman screams and someone yells "Man overboard!" Josef slams into the railing and sees that his father has jumped into the **ocean**.

ISABEL: SOMEWHERE ON THE CARIBBEAN SEA – 1994, 3 DAYS FROM HOME

Isabel wakes to a very hot sun, and sees that Teresa has become sick with a fever. Lito and Señora Castillo try to help keep Teresa cool. Geraldo and Luis are able to get the engine restarted, while Amara continues to steer the **boat** north now that they have the sun to guide them.

Suddenly, Iván spots land at the side of the **boat**. Luis is confused, because it's on the wrong side of the boat to be the U.S, unless the storm blew them into the Gulf of Mexico. They get close to the shore and see beach umbrellas and white people in swimsuits. They are overjoyed, thinking they have found Florida.

Despite the fact that Josef may not be fully ready to be the adult in the family, the trauma that they have experienced has necessitated it. Aaron is mentally unstable and Rachel, through an unfortunate turn, is now incapacitated. These are the added pressures that Josef experiences as a child refugee.



This is another extremely disturbing and graphic example of how the Nazis dehumanize and enact violence upon Jewish people. Not only do they have a complete disregard for their lives, but they also torture them—it's understandable, then, why Aaron was so traumatized by his experience at the concentration camp.



Josef is thrust into the role of an adult not only in terms of taking care of himself, but also in terms of making sure that his sister is being cared for as well. He takes on these responsibilities ably, making sure that she has dinner much like a parent would.



Aaron's suicide attempt, particularly by drowning, shows just how deeply immersed in despair he is, despite being on a ship that will hopefully take him to freedom. Even after recounting the horrifying story of drowning, Aaron opts to die by the same means rather than face the dehumanizing torture of the Nazis again.



In this brief episode, Isabel and the rest of the refugees on the boat have a spark of hope as they regain their ability to navigate and the use of their engine, which eases the problem of the water filling the boat. Yet, Gratz still foreshadows some of the problems to come with Teresa, which Isabel feels like she needs to take on.



Despite the turmoil of the storm, Isabel and the others are able to keep their hope alive long enough to see land. This sight provides a rare glimmer of hope for Isabel and her companions, though it's unclear whether or not they have really reached Florida.



Amara steers them to a dock, and a few tourists and a few black men in uniforms come over to them, one of whom speaks Spanish. Lito tells the man they are from Cuba, and the man says that they are in the Bahamas—a long way east of Miami. The man tells them that according to Bahamian law, if they set foot on the shore, they will be taken into custody and sent back to Cuba. Some of the tourists start to argue with the officers.

Lito protests, saying that they have a sick pregnant woman on board. The officer says that Teresa can come ashore for medical attention, but then she will be deported to Cuba. Lito says that he will go with Teresa, but Geraldo refuses to be sent back to Cuba. Isabel grows upset—all she wants is for her family to be together. But Teresa refuses, saying that she wants to stay with her family and continue on.

Before they leave, one of the tourists gives the refugees a bottle of water. Soon the rest of the tourists are bringing bottles of water and chips from the café, giving whatever they can. Isabel asks for aspirin, and one woman pulls out a bottle of pills and gives them to Isabel. Isabel is overcome with gratitude: this moment of kindness might mean “the difference between death and survival” for Teresa. They restart the engine and turn back into the sea.

Gratz highlights how societies as a whole can fail refugees, just as Cuban law enforcement does with Josef and his family. Even the tourists start to argue with the officials, knowing that these countries have some social responsibility to help those in need and not return them to oppressive countries.



Again, the officer’s response shows a troubling lack of empathy—if not in the officer himself (since he is presumably just following protocol), then in Bahamian law more broadly. The officer is willing to help Teresa, but not in a way that allows her to stay with her family and ultimately avoid being deported back to Cuba. For Teresa, it is more important to remain with her family and keep the possibility of a new life, even if it means putting her and her unborn baby’s health in jeopardy.



These small acts of kindness serve as Gratz’s way of reminding readers that anyone can help refugees and that no amount of aid is too small. For Isabel, a small bottle of aspirin could be the thing that saves her mother’s life. Thus, Gratz calls on readers to embody that same empathy and give even a small amount if they can.



MAHMOUD: SOMEWHERE ON THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA – 2015, 11 DAYS FROM HOME (2)

Fatima continues to sob at having given away Hana, and Mahmoud can tell that his mother is ready to give up. He works to keep her head above the **water**, telling her that he needs her. Mahmoud is also deeply upset with himself at giving away Hana, knowing that his mother might never forgive him, but he thinks that at least Hana is safe.

Mahmoud suddenly sees a man floating face down in the **water** with a life jacket on. Mahmoud swims over to him, and sees that he is dead. Mahmoud fights his fear and takes the life jacket off of the man. He realizes that he will be condemning the man to the bottom of the sea, and says a funeral prayer for him. Mahmoud then gives Fatima the life jacket, and he floats alongside her, but he still doesn’t know how he’ll get them to safety.

Water continues to symbolize the despair that Mahmoud and his mother are experiencing. Even while Mahmoud takes on the role of an adult, he hopes that by reminding Fatima of his own need for her as her child, she can be convinced to hang on for him.



Mahmoud continues to have to make difficult decisions in the face of his traumatic predicament. He not only condemns a man not to get a proper burial, but he also faces his fears in order to retrieve the man’s life jacket from his body. This is yet another incident which forces Mahmoud to grow up beyond his years.



JOSEF: JUST OUTSIDE HAVANA HARBOR – 1939, 18 DAYS FROM HOME (2)

The ship's sirens start to blow. One of the Cuban policemen (Mariano Padron) dives into the **water** and swims out to Aaron. A woman screams as she notices two shark fins in the water. Aaron sinks beneath the waves, but the police officer grabs hold of him and swims back with him, even as Aaron shrieks to let him die. Meanwhile, **boats** are dispatched from shore to retrieve them.

Padron is able to get Aaron back to one of the small **boats**, where two other officers restrain him. The boat then speeds back to the shore. Josef is stunned. His father is gone, his mother is unconscious, and his little sister is alone. Josef worries that now that his father has “gone mad,” they will never let him and his family into Cuba.

Aaron's suicide attempt again represents this deep descent into despair, from which he does not return. The irony of this episode is that he is the only one of his family who is then able to go on to a life in Cuba, but the fact that he has become so steeped in paranoia and despair hints at the fact that he will never fully be able to get his life back.



Aaron's despair also has ramifications on Josef and the rest of his family, as Josef now has to act as the adult not only for his sister but also for his mother, and try to keep their hopes alive that they, too, can forge a new life in Cuba.



ISABEL: SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE BAHAMAS AND FLORIDA – 1994, 4 DAYS FROM HOME

More and more cracks appear in the **boat**, and the bolts holding the pieces together are coming loose. The **water** in the boat is almost to Isabel's knees. They continue to scoop as much water as they can. Iván whines, asking when they're going to get there. “Mañana,” Lito says. Lito then becomes lost in thought, and he explains to Isabel that he just remembered something he hadn't thought about in a long time.

Señor Castillo, who is lying down, instructs them to keep bailing. Geraldo suggests that he help. Señor Castillo responds that he is recovering, and points out that Geraldo isn't helping either. Geraldo says that he's tending to Teresa. They start to fight, until Amara tells them that they're acting like children. Amara suggests that they drink some water, and the adults quickly apologize to each other. Iván agrees that they're taking on too much **water**, and Geraldo suggests that a few of them hang onto the **boat** and float alongside it to alleviate the weight.

Lito's statement that they're going to get there tomorrow echoes what had been said to Josef and to Mahmoud in their respective chapters. The word carries the same double meaning for Isabel: she and the others in her boat are hopeful that they can get there tomorrow, but the word also carries the potential of not being able to make it to Miami.



Once again, Gratz shows how the adults are acting like children, while the children take on the responsibilities of the adults. Isabel is caring for her mother, while Amara is steering the boat and making sure the adults are getting along.



MAHMOUD: SOMEWHERE ON THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA – 2015, 11 DAYS FROM HOME (3)

Mahmoud comes in and out of sleep, until he hears the sound of a motor. He cries out, but the motor is far away. He thinks that “now, at last, when he most need[s] to be seen, he [is] truly invisible.” Mahmoud starts to cry, exhausted and miserable. He wants to go back and help the boy in the alley being beaten for his bread, to yell and wake up the citizens of Izmir so they can see the people sleeping in doorways and parks. He wants to stop being invisible.

This is a turning point for Mahmoud, as he builds on his earlier thoughts that being invisible might not necessarily be a good thing. He understands that being invisible prevented him from providing aid to others, like the boy, and how it is preventing others from helping him, because they do not know he is there.



The **boat** grows louder, and Mahmoud sees that it is a real boat, a Coast Guard ship from Greece. At the front of the ship are Youssef and Waleed. They pluck Mahmoud and Fatima from the water. Mahmoud explains how they gave Hana away. Youssef starts to cry, but thanks his son for saving her.

When they reach the shore, Youssef kisses the ground and says thanks to Allah. Mahmoud joins him for their morning prayers. On the shore, they notice a hill made out of thousands of life jackets. They also see a few bodies on the beach, of people who hadn't survived. Fatima notices an infant dead on the beach, but it isn't Hana. Fatima asks all of the other refugees she can find if they had seen Hana, but no one has. Fatima howls with sorrow, and Mahmoud feels like it is all his fault.

Mahmoud deeply regrets the decision he had to make. Even though Youssef is sad to have lost his daughter, he also recognizes the difficult and adult choice that Mahmoud was forced to weigh very quickly, and appreciates his desire to keep his sister safe.



Gratz illustrates the extent of the horrors that refugees face, which also helps demonstrate why making oneself invisible in attempts to survive can also be life-threatening. By trying to stay invisible, the refugees were doomed to smugglers looking to take advantage of them. Instead, the novel argues that it is society's responsibility as a whole to create a safe path for them to get from Syria to a new life in a new country. They should not have to endanger their lives in order for a country to accept them.



JOSEF: JUST OUTSIDE HAVANA HARBOR – 1939, 19 DAYS FROM HOME (2)

In the days following Aaron's suicide attempt, many other passengers on the *St. Louis* tell Josef how sorry they are about what happened and try to comfort him, but he's not sure how things can ever be all right again. Meanwhile, the sea around them is littered with motorboats and rowboats: reporters, relatives of the people on board, and thanks to Aaron, a handful of Cuban police boats to prevent others from jumping and swimming to shore.

One of the police boats pulls up to the *St. Louis*, carrying Mariano Padron, the officer who had saved Aaron. The passengers greet and cheer him as he boards, and give him a gift of 150 reichsmarks collected from the grateful passengers. Padron thanks them profusely for the money.

Josef, Rachel, and Ruthie go to talk to Padron. Rachel asks how Aaron is. Padron says through an interpreter that Aaron is alive, but has been sedated. Padron says that he will live. Rachel thanks Padron profusely for what he had done. Padron then spots Ruthie and begins to play with her, having her chase him as though he is a criminal and she is a cop. Josef notes that Rachel is smiling for the first time in weeks.

Even though Aaron still lives, his suicide attempt shows not only his own inner despair but the trauma that this event causes for Josef. For Aaron, it represents a metaphorical death, as he disappears into the water and subsequently out of Josef's life.



Even amongst people who have lost everything, they still have empathy toward this man who showed the same courtesy to a fellow Jewish person. Just as when Isabel gave some of her paltry food to the cat, Gratz shows here how even the most destitute people can still give something—thus, those with more than that should be able to provide any aid they can, too.



Josef again shows his passage into adulthood, as he notices and worries about his mother's mental condition. Yet this episode also shows how Ruthie has been able to retain some of her innocence and childhood as she plays, which only showcases Josef's comparative maturity when he refuses.



After letting Ruthie catch him, Padron turns to Josef and says that it's his turn. Josef tries to wave him off, saying he's too old to play, but Padron insists. Padron suggests that he will be the passenger, and asks Josef in mock anger when he can leave the **ship**. He immediately realizes his mistake, and becomes anguished at having brought up the fact that they are not able to leave the ship. Josef and Padron then say at the same time: "Mañana."

The officer's refrain of mañana again highlights the increasing despair of the passengers on board, as the word "tomorrow" becomes less a beacon of hope and more a promise unfulfilled.



ISABEL: SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE BAHAMAS AND FLORIDA – 1994, 5 DAYS FROM HOME (1)

Isabel slips into the **water** for her turn to float alongside the **boat**. The sun sets to the west, and Luis turns the engine off because they can't navigate without the sun. Iván, who is also floating in the water, asks when they will get to Miami. Señor Castillo says tomorrow, hopefully, though this is the third day in a row that he has said this.

Just as Josef has lost hope that they will be able to leave the St. Louis, Isabel and the other refugees fleeing to Miami begin to feel similarly. As "tomorrow" continues to be a promise unfulfilled, they grow more and more uneasy that they may not make it, but have no choice but to continue on.



Teresa starts to shift and wince, and announces that she thinks she's gone into labor. Isabel is both excited to see her baby brother born and terrified, wondering how her mother will have a baby on a **boat** in the middle of the **ocean**. But Teresa assures her that it could be a while before the baby is born. Iván asks what they'll name the baby, but Teresa and Geraldo haven't decided yet.

The baby only adds urgency to the refugees' situation, and it also forces Isabel to continue to take more and more responsibility as an adult in her family. Just like the boat, the baby brings promise of a new kind of life in the United States, but they still have to overcome the ocean in order to make sure that he can be born safely.



Suddenly, Iván jumps while floating in the **water**, and Lito yells that there is a shark in the water. Isabel scrambles into the boat, and the water around Iván turns dark red. They haul Iván's limp body into the boat and see that his right leg is a bloody mess. Lito cries out for a tourniquet, and Geraldo tries to tie his belt around Iván's leg, but the blood continues to gush, and they realize it is futile. Iván is dead, and they are trapped by the sharks.

Iván's death is yet another way in which Isabel is forced to grow up far too soon. Seeing the death of her friend has a profound effect on her, as she deals with grief and loss in a way that most children who are not refugees don't have to, even under the most trying of circumstances.



MAHMOUD: LESBOS, GREECE, TO ATHENS, GREECE – 2015, 12 DAYS FROM HOME (3)

Lesbos is another tent city filled with refugees. But the place feels mournful, as many people here lost someone in the crossing from Turkey. Fatima continues to go from tent to tent, asking about Hana. Mahmoud continues to blame himself for losing his sister. Youssef tells Fatima that Hana probably went ahead of them, and that they should continue their journey. Mahmoud tries not to think about alternative things that could have happened to her.

Not only does Mahmoud have to deal with the weight of giving away his sister, but he also has to deal with the ramifications of that choice on his mother's mental health, and the possible consequences of what could have happened to Hana. These are heavy burdens that Mahmoud's traumatic situation has caused him to face.



That morning, Mahmoud, Waleed, Fatima, and Youssef take a ferry from Lesbos to Athens. The inside of the ferry is like a hotel, clean and filled with glass tables and white chairs. Mahmoud and Waleed explore the **ship**, going up to the top deck to watch as the ship pulls away from Lesbos.

Mahmoud then notices a refugee laying out a mat for prayer. Mahmoud and Waleed join him, but Mahmoud can't help but notice the uneasy looks from some of the tourists on the **ship**. Mahmoud can hear the disgust in their voices, and thinks to himself that other people only see refugees when they do something that others don't like—that's when the refugees can no longer be ignored. Mahmoud's instinct is to disappear, but he begins to wonder if being invisible does more harm than good: "if no one saw them, no one could help them."

When they arrive in Athens, Youssef discovers that they don't have the right papers to travel past Greece, and it will take a week to get the papers. Waiting a week means more expenses, and so instead they decide to take a train to the border of Macedonia and sneak across during the night.

The ferry to Greece evokes some of the same descriptions as the St. Louis does for Josef—after their terrifying ordeal in the water, it provides a beacon of hope that they will be able to make it to a new life.



After Mahmoud's revelations in the water that it may not be a good thing to be invisible, he has those feelings reinforced here—he knows that other people see refugees like him, but only when the refugees are doing things that bother them. This is an unfair expectation placed on the refugees: to ask them not to do anything that might bother the tourists, such as peacefully and freely practicing their religion. Mahmoud realizes the need to counteract these prejudiced views of the refugees.



Gratz also counters some of the critiques surrounding refugees: that they are doing something illegal. But he demonstrates how difficult it can be for people who have lost everything to wait for papers or to know how to get the right papers. Instead of criticizing people for how they try to make a new life for themselves, the novel implies that society should instead focus on helping those people access the resources they need to make the transition to their new country.



JOSEF: JUST OUTSIDE HAVANA HARBOR – 1939, 21 DAYS FROM HOME

A single boat is allowed to approach the *St. Louis*, carrying Renata and Evelyne's father, Dr. Aber, who already lives in Cuba. He greets his daughters warmly, and with Officer Padron's permission, carries the two girls to the ship's ladder and leaves with them. The other passengers are speechless, demanding to know why they could leave and no one else could. Officer Padron tries to explain that they have the right papers, but the other passengers argue that they have the same visas, which they paid for.

The ship's engines start to rumble, and the crowd tries to rush toward the ladder. Officer Padron draws his pistol, and other officers do the same. The situation is about to boil over when Captain Schroeder appears. He explains that he had been to see President Brú to ask for the passengers to be allowed to disembark. Instead, the ship had been ordered to leave the harbor by tomorrow. There are cries of anger, but Schroeder continues, saying that they will sail to America and make appeals to President Roosevelt, and if not, Schroeder will try to make arrangements to disembark outside Germany.

Gratz shows the inequality and injustice that exists among the refugees as well, and how their experience is drastically different based on class and status. Many of these refugees have relatives in Cuba, and yet Dr. Aber is the only one who is able to get his daughters off the ship because of his wealth and political influence.



To not allow the other refugees to disembark could end up dooming many of them to their deaths, since it's uncertain where they will end up if they aren't allowed to enter Cuba. Through this injustice, Gratz implicitly demonstrates how countries across the world have a responsibility to help those in need and to recognize that all of their lives have value.



Josef then asks Officer Padron what will happen to his father. Padron explains that Aaron isn't well enough to come to the ship, but that Josef can't leave. He apologizes, saying, "I'm just doing my job." Josef searches Padron's eyes for sympathy, but Padron just looks away. Later, after lunch, Josef watches Cuba disappear, and says goodbye to his father. He rips his shirt, just as did during the funeral for the man on the ship, because his father is dead to his family.

Josef starts to mature even more as he recognizes the injustice that he and the other refugees are experiencing. His gesture of tearing his shirt to signify mourning Aaron suggests that now, Josef will have to step up even more as a father figure in his family despite only being 13 years old.



ISABEL: SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE BAHAMAS AND FLORIDA – 1994, 5 DAYS FROM HOME (2)

Isabel and Señora Castillo have been crying since Iván died of his shark bite hours earlier. Isabel doesn't know how to grasp it. He is just "like every other Cuban who had ever died trying to get to *el norte* by sea." But to her, Iván isn't some nameless person—he was her friend. Isabel aches with sorrow.

In Isabel's recognition that Iván is like so many other refugees who have died, there are parallels with some of Mahmoud's thoughts on being invisible. So many of the refugees that came before were invisible to Isabel, but just like Iván, they had full lives with families and dreams, and each one of their deaths is a tragedy that deserves to be prevented.



Lito says that they should do something with Iván's body, and moves to set him in the water. Señora Castillo asks to say a prayer first. Isabel has never been to church—Castro and the communists discouraged the practice of religion—but Lito leads a prayer for Iván. They then set him into the water, and Isabel retrieves the baseball cap that Iván always wore and keeps it with her. Then, on the dark horizon, they see lights peek through—Miami.

Just as Josef experiences the loss of his father at this point in the book, Isabel experiences a similar coming of age in recognizing the injustice of the circumstances that she and Iván have faced. Iván's death is both tragic and ironic because he was so close to Miami, but was still unable to make it there due to the dangers of the journey.



MAHMOUD: MACEDONIA TO SERBIA – 2015, 14 TO 15 DAYS FROM HOME

Policemen are guarding the border from Greece to Macedonia, and Mahmoud once again notices how dirty he feels. Youssef uses his phone to determine that they could make it across the border through a nearby forest. After two hours of walking, the family emerges from the woods across the Macedonian border. They try to find a hotel, but then a cab comes up next to them and asks if they are going to Serbia, offering to drive them all the way there. Though the family is exhausted, they agree, and two hours later they cross into Serbia.

Once again, Gratz emphasizes how Mahmoud is forced to act essentially as an adult. He and his family are forced to travel essentially nonstop for several days without getting to rest, but Mahmoud recognizes that he can't complain because there is no alternative for them.



Mahmoud and his family stop at a train station only long enough to recharge their phones. Youssef finds a bus for them to take into Belgrade, and once there, they still aren't able to stop moving. They hear that the police are raiding hotels for illegal refugees, so Youssef finds another taxi driver who agrees to take them to the Hungarian border. Mahmoud falls asleep as soon as he closes his eyes in the car, but when he wakes up a short time later, he sees that the taxi driver is pointing a pistol at them from the front seat.

It is also worth noting that in each of these countries, the police and other law enforcement officials continue to make it difficult for refugees to enter the country, despite the fact that the refugees have no intention of staying in those countries long term. Rather, they are only trying to pass through and continue on to Germany, which is welcoming the refugees. Gratz therefore implies that the officials should be more understanding of the refugees situation and allow them to pass through without incident, as their only crime is in trying to make new lives for themselves.



JOSEF: OFF THE AMERICAN COAST – 1939, 21 DAYS FROM HOME

Less than a day after leaving Havana, the *St. Louis* passes Miami. The U.S. Coast Guard cruises alongside the **ship**, seemingly to prevent it from getting any closer to shore. Some of the children continue to play games, but the adults walk around mournfully. The only adult who appears happy is Rachel. For days she had locked herself in their cabin, crying and mourning for Aaron. But after the *St. Louis* left Cuba, she cleaned herself up, put on makeup and a dress, and went to the dance hall. She has been there the entire day.

Again, Gratz highlights the lack of empathy and social responsibility that countries as a whole possess. The governments of the U.S. and Cuba surely understand that turning the refugees away could amount to a death sentence for many of the people on board, and yet they still choose to refuse to let the passengers disembark.



Josef finds Rachel in the dance hall, and she asks him to dance with her. Josef refuses, thinking he is too old to dance with his mother. She continues to dance anyway. He asks why she seems happy that Aaron is gone. Rachel responds by telling Josef how he got his name: he was named for her brother Josef, who died in the Great War. She then tells him, "You can live life as a ghost, waiting for death to come, or you can dance."

Following Aaron's despair, Rachel swings in the opposite direction, trying to will herself to have hope. Her statement that one can live life as a ghost, or one can dance, puts herself in direct opposition with Aaron as she tries to continue to find ways to enjoy life even in the face of uncertainty and tragedy.



At that moment, the bandleader says that there will be an announcement in the social hall. Josef and Rachel go to the hall, where they see a few passengers who had been working as a committee with Captain Schroeder on where they might disembark. They reveal that the U.S. has refused to take them. The other passengers cry out, particularly a man Josef recognizes named Pozner. Pozner says he has been to the concentration camps, and now refuses to return to Germany.

In contrast to the Nazi officials on board the ship (as evidenced by Schiendick in the next exchange), Captain Schroeder does continue to have empathy for the passengers as he goes out of his way to make sure that they can find a place to live safely, pleading to the government on their behalf. He recognizes the refugees' humanity and knows that they are worth trying to save.



As the panic erupts, Josef spies Schiendick lingering in the doorway, smiling. Josef grows angry. The committee assures the passengers that they are going to try to find other landing places in Europe. Rachel returns to the dance hall, saying that other people will figure out a plan, but Josef refuses to go with her.

In contrast with Schroeder, Schiendick continues to view the Jewish people on board as subhuman. His smug amusement in the face of their panic and life-threatening dilemma again exhibits his and the Nazis' cruelty.



After the meeting, Pozner catches Josef and tells him that there is a group of passengers who are going to try to take the ship hostage and run it aground on the American coast. Josef is hesitant, unsure that the plan will work, but Pozner argues that they have no alternative. Pozner says they need Josef, because he is one of the only people on board who knows how to get to the bridge of the ship.

This exchange with Pozner marks another development in Josef's maturation. Whereas he was previously taken to the bridge of the ship because he was part of a group of children, now he is being called to lead others there as an adult, and aid what amounts to mutiny and hostage-taking. Josef's responsibility, and the weight of the choices he is forced to make, continue to grow.



ISABEL: OFF THE COAST OF FLORIDA – 1994, 5 DAYS FROM HOME (1)

Isabel starts to cry upon seeing Miami, because Iván was so close to making it to the U.S. Suddenly, however, the **boat** starts to break apart, and **water** streams in through the hull. They all move to the front of the boat, but the boat starts to sink under the weight of the water and all of them. They try desperately to bail the ship.

Even as the shore of Miami is within view, the refugees continue to teeter between hope and despair. They are so close, but like Iván, the water could quickly cut their progress short. Again, the boat rapidly filling with water symbolizes the difficulty of trying to maintain hope in the face of adversity and setbacks.



Isabel then gets an idea, and starts to kick at the engine to pry it off of the **boat**. Amara joins her, and they are able to get it off of the boat and into the **water**, lessening some of the weight. Lito wonders whether they should row to shore or try to swim the rest of the way. Suddenly, an electronic siren starts up. A voice says in English, then in Spanish, that the boat is the U.S. Coast Guard and that they are in violation of U.S. waters.

Even while the water pushes in, Isabel devises a way to keep as much water out of the boat, working hard to avoid succumbing to despair in kicking the engine over the side of the boat and giving it some more buoyancy. Following this success, however, the lack of empathy and compassion on the government's part rears its head, as even after coming all this way and risking their lives, the Fernandezes and Castillos could still be sent back to the very destitution they fled in Cuba.



MAHMOUD: SERBIA TO HUNGARY – 2015, 15 TO 16 DAYS FROM HOME

Mahmoud is instantly awake, looking at the gun pointed at him. Youssef begs the taxi driver not to shoot. The driver demands 300 euros—more than twice what they had agreed to pay the driver. Youssef agrees, handing over 300 euros from what they have. The taxi driver then tells them to get out, and they immediately scramble out of the car.

Again, Gratz shows how Mahmoud and his family face cruelty and a lack of empathy from many people along their path. The taxi driver here tries to take advantage of them when they are at their most vulnerable, when instead the goal should be to aid them.



Once outside, Mahmoud sinks to the ground in tears. He thinks that he will never forget the fear of being so powerless in that moment. Fatima hugs Mahmoud, and as he cries over all of the events of the past two weeks, he apologizes for giving Hana away. Fatima says that he did the right thing—Hana would have drowned otherwise. Mahmoud promises his mother that he will find Hana.

Gratz again emphasizes how much Mahmoud has had to go through in his life and on his journey. He has to have the maturity not only to make the decision to give his sister away, but then also to deal with the consequences of possibly never seeing her again.



Youssef tells Mahmoud and Fatima that they'll have to walk to a nearby bus stop to get to the border. Just then, Mahmoud notices that Waleed had slept through the entire incident. He grows worried about his brother, who has been unfazed through air raids, shoot outs, and taxi holdups.

Mahmoud and his family are able to catch the late bus to Horgoš, near the Hungarian border. Once there, they see many Syrian refugees collected on the boarder, while the Hungarians are building a fence to keep them out. A group of refugees tries to rush the unfinished fence, screaming that they are not terrorists, and that they just want to go through Hungary to Germany.

There are more screams, and Mahmoud and his family are caught up in the surge toward the fence. Though Mahmoud is frightened, he is excited that the refugees are "finally standing up and saying, 'Here we are! Look at us! Help us!'" But the Hungarians aren't interested in helping them: as refugees swarm the border, the soldiers start to throw tear gas at them. Mahmoud's eyes burn and he starts to choke on the gas. He feels as though he is going to die.

Mahmoud is not the only one who has been forced to grow up far too early. For Waleed, these circumstances are quickly becoming the norm, and his reaction to the trauma is one of indifference and possibly denial or repression—a tragic consequence of growing up in a traumatic situation.



Gratz tries to combat many of the prejudices and misunderstandings of both people and governments in the countries through which the refugees are trying to travel. The refugees simply want to make a new home for themselves, and not even in Hungary. They are not criminals, nor are they not violent—yet they are frequently treated with injustice, as in this instance.



Mahmoud again finds optimism in the fact that the refugees can be visible and show the injustice of how they are treated. Yet, unfortunately, this doesn't prevent the further cruelty of the Hungarian government. There is no reason to be violent toward these unarmed refugees who have come in search of an escape from violence, and by allowing readers to become invested in Mahmoud's storyline, the novel aims to show how governments tend to lack empathy in situations like this.



JOSEF: SOMEWHERE ON THE ATLANTIC OCEAN – 1939, 22 DAYS FROM HOME

Josef watches Ruthie splashing happily in the swimming pool. He wishes now that he could join them and be a little kid again, but he knows that he now has responsibilities to keep his mother and sister safe. Pozner approaches Josef, asking if he's ready—Josef has agreed to help take over the **ship**.

Ten men gather as a group near the social hall, carrying metal candlesticks and pipes. Josef, by far the youngest, leads them to the bridge. They encounter the first officer, and quickly grab him and push him into another room. On the bridge, they attack three sailors, taking them hostage. They tell the officer to fetch Captain Schroeder.

Gratz indicates another way in which Josef has matured here. Whereas at the beginning Josef is eager to grow up, here Josef recognizes that he would much rather give up the weight and the responsibility of caring for his family on this journey.



The fact that Josef is by far the youngest indicates how, in a normal childhood, he would never be expected to do something like take a ship hostage. But because of their fraught situation in finding a place to land, Josef is forced to mature and take on these adult obligations.



When Schroeder arrives, Pozner tells him that they are taking over the ship and going anywhere but Germany. Schroeder tells them calmly that his crew will overpower them and that they are inviting criminal charges upon themselves. Josef cries out that the passengers will hold the crew as hostages to make them sail somewhere other than Germany. Schroeder tells Josef that the crew will only obey him, and that he refuses to take the ship off course. He points out that Josef does not know how to steer the ship.

Schroeder says that he understands their desperation, but tells them that they are committing a crime. If they leave the bridge, he assures them, he will overlook what has happened. Schroeder promises that he will do everything in his power to land the ship in England rather than take them back to Germany, even to the point of running the ship aground. The other men agree, but Josef is furious.

Josef illustrates how much weight he has taken upon himself not only by joining in this group, but also to be willing to speak up against Schroeder. Josef's actions are necessitated by the fact that he feels he must be the one to protect his family, now that his father is gone and his mother is not taking that responsibility upon herself.



Schroeder continues to underscore the contrast between himself and the Nazis. Even though he is not Jewish, he has compassion and empathy for the passengers on board and recognizes that he has a responsibility to protect them.



ISABEL: OFF THE COAST OF FLORIDA – 1994, 5 DAYS FROM HOME (2)

Isabel and the others become despondent at seeing the Coast Guard ship. A search light clicks on and scans the water. Suddenly, Teresa grows panicked: the baby is coming. Then, Luis realizes that the Coast Guard ship is not after them; there is another boat of refugees toward which the ship is steering. They desperately paddle for the shore as Teresa has contractions.

Isabel and the others continue to row to shore, getting nearer and nearer. The Coast Guard takes in the refugees on the other boat, but then its search light finds theirs. Isabel paddles like crazy as Teresa insists that she wants to have the baby in the U.S. But Isabel can see that the Coast Guard will reach them before they are able to make it to Miami.

Despite the fact that the Coast Guard is extremely close to apprehending the Fernandezes and Castillos, Isabel and the others refuse to give up the hope that they can make it, knowing that reaching Miami is the only way for them to build a new life.



Like Josef, Isabel has in many ways switched places with her parents. While her mother has contractions and her father cares for her mother, Isabel takes on the responsibility of an adult and tries to get them to shore.



MAHMOUD: HUNGARY – 2015, 16 DAYS FROM HOME

Mahmoud is choking on the tear gas, his eyes streaming tears. He is pulled off the ground, his hands are tied with plastic, and he is lifted into a truck. When he is able to open his eyes again, he sees several other refugees in the truck, including Youssef. They are brought to an immigrant detention center. Mahmoud, Youssef, and the other refugees protest that they're not criminals and that they simply need help. The guards ignore them, leaving them in holding cells. Hours pass without food or water, and Mahmoud and Youssef don't know where Waleed and Fatima have ended up.

Mahmoud and his family's processing through the immigrant detention center illuminates yet another way in which refugees are treated with injustice. Despite the fact that they have not committed a crime, and their only desire is to travel through the country to get to Germany, they are treated as though they are criminals and violently attacked and arrested.



When a soldier returns to process them, Youssef asks why they don't take them to Austria, explaining that the refugees don't want to stay in Hungary anyway. The soldier beats Youssef, yelling in Arabic that they don't want their "filth" in Hungary either, calling them "parasites." Mahmoud cries out, trying to stop the guards by telling them they'll agree to be processed.

When Mahmoud and Youssef line up, they pass another cell for women and children and find Fatima and Waleed—but the family is unable to be processed together. When they are processed, a man in uniform asks if they want to claim asylum in Hungary. Youssef says he would never stay in a country that beats and locks up refugees. He asks again why they don't allow them to go to Austria. The policeman shrugs, saying he's "just doing his job."

Youssef again emphasizes that he would never want to live in Hungary. The policeman then says that they will be sent back to Serbia. When Youssef and Mahmoud return to their cell and pass Fatima again, she cries out to them. But they don't acknowledge her, keeping their eyes on the ground to avoid being beaten again.

Just as Josef and the other Jewish passengers on the St. Louis are dehumanized by the Nazis, the Hungarian soldiers also dehumanize the Syrian refugees in order to justify their poor treatment.



The Hungarian officer echoes the words that Mariano Padron says to Josef when he asks about his father. With this repetition, Gratz argues that indifference can be just as harmful to the refugees as outright cruelty; instead, they need empathetic treatment, respect, and aid in establishing their new lives.



Mahmoud once again retreats into being invisible, because he sees how speaking up only invites trouble. However, the family's previous experiences have shown that sometimes being open and trusting people is necessary in order to receive help, even if it also means potentially inviting harm.



JOSEF: ANTWERP, BELGIUM – 1939, 36 DAYS FROM HOME

The passengers on the *St. Louis* receive good news: Belgium, Holland, France, and England have agreed to divide the refugees among them. The passengers throw an enormous party in celebration. Josef, Rachel, and Ruthie are assigned to France. Josef had wanted to go to England, across the English Channel, but just hopes that they'll be safe outside of Germany.

Josef, Ruthie, and Rachel arrive in France exactly 40 days after leaving on the **ship**. Josef thinks of the story of Moses, who wandered for 40 years before reaching the Promised Land. He hopes France will be their Promised Land. When they arrive in France, the secretary general of the French Refugee Assistance Committee officially welcomes them, and porters carry their luggage off of the ship for them.

The lack of empathy on the part of the Cuban and United States governments is temporarily remedied by the empathy and responsibility taken up by Belgium, Holland, France, and England—again allowing the passengers to retain hope that the ship will bring them to a new life.



Josef in particular is able to maintain hope that a new life awaits him, despite not knowing what life in France will be like. Additionally, it is worth noting that Josef has been able to retain his Jewish identity (evidenced by his comparison to Moses) despite the fact that he has been displaced from his home and frequently discouraged from practicing his religion.



Josef, Rachel, and Ruthie spend the night in a hotel before taking a train to Le Mans, where they are put up in cheap lodging. Rachel gets work doing laundry, and Ruthie starts kindergarten at last. Josef also returns to school—attending first grade, because he doesn't know the language. But two months later, Germany invades Poland, touching off a new world war. Eight months after that, Germany invades France, and Josef and his family are on the run again.

It is comical that after all Josef has experienced and the adult responsibilities he has taken on, he is placed in the first grade. This again marks some of the hardships that refugees face even after they have found a place to live. Additionally, Josef is unable to really resume his education, as the beginning of World War II forces them to become refugees once more. Thus, Josef doesn't only face this trauma once, but several times.



ISABEL: OFF THE COAST OF FLORIDA – 1994, 5 DAYS FROM HOME (3)

Isabel and the others continue to paddle, getting closer and closer to shore. As the Coast Guard ship approaches, Lito confesses that when he was a young man, there was ship full of Jewish people from Europe trying to get into Cuba, and that he sent them back. He knows that the Jewish people were seeking asylum, just as they are now. He says they kept telling them “*mañana*,” but they never let them in. He wonders how many of them died because he was just doing his job.

Lito's reveal that he was Mariano Padron, the Cuban officer who sent Josef and the St. Louis back to Europe, emphasizes why it is so necessary to have empathy toward refugees and those who are vulnerable. First, Lito now fully recognizes Josef and the others' humanity, understanding that he likely caused many of their deaths. Additionally, he realizes now, as a refugee himself, the desperation of their situation and their need for aid from (former) government officials like him.



Lito continues, telling them that he kept waiting for things to get better in Cuba all his life, but that they never did. He tells Isabel to take care of Teresa and the baby, and that they need to keep rowing. Lito then stands up and jumps into the ocean. He cries out for help to distract the Coast Guard from reaching the boat. Isabel sobs as Lito yells goodbye, and the Coast Guard ship steers toward him to send him back to Cuba.

Lito's sacrifice, to return to Cuba so that Isabel and the others can continue on, serves as a kind of retribution for sending the passengers of the St. Louis away. His story arc compels readers to recognize their own need to help refugees and face injustice directly, because they would want help if the situation were reversed.



MAHMOUD: HUNGARY – 2015, 17 DAYS FROM HOME

The next morning, Mahmoud and Youssef are taken to a refugee camp in a cold, muddy field surrounded by wired fence. They are reunited with Fatima and Waleed. Mahmoud can see that being beaten had broken his father's spirit, and Mahmoud realizes that he himself is the only one in the family who wasn't “broken.”

Following the trauma of their journey, Mahmoud understands that he has at this point become the adult in his family because his mother, father, and brother have all been “broken” by their experiences, essentially succumbing to their despair.



Mahmoud isn't ready to give up yet—he has hope that they can make a new life and be happy again. But he knows that trying to make this happen means drawing attention and being visible. He recognizes that being invisible is useful, like in Aleppo or in Hungary, but also that “being invisible had hurt them as much as being visible had.” He realizes that it largely depends on how other people react to you. He thinks, “If you were invisible, the bad people couldn't hurt you, that was true. But the good people couldn't help you, either.”

Mahmoud once again revisits the debate of whether it is better to be visible or invisible. In this moment, he understands that despite the risks of visibility, make oneself known means an increased awareness on the part of others, and would allow good people to help the refugees.



Mahmoud concludes that it is better to be visible. He looks and sees that some United Nations officials have come to observe the conditions of the camp. Mahmoud makes a decision and simply walks through the door of the main building to leave the camp. The Hungarian soldier guarding the door raises her gun at him, but stops when she sees the looks of disapproval from the U.N. observers.

The soldier calls for help from the other guards, wondering what to do, but Mahmoud simply continues walking outside. The other children in the camp start to follow him into the road, followed by the adults. The Hungarian guards yell after them, but don't do anything to stop them. Waleed catches up to Mahmoud and asks what he's doing. Mahmoud replies that he's walking to Austria.

The U.N. officials provide exactly the kind of visibility that Mahmoud is hoping for. Thus, Gratz highlights how agencies like these are crucial to providing support (in many ways) to the refugees.



Gratz proves the power of visibility here. "Drawing attention," as Mahmoud touches on earlier, is the only thing that allows him to escape. And this not only helps Mahmoud and his family—it allows the other refugees to benefit as well.



JOSEF: VORNAY, FRANCE – 1940, 1 YEAR, 1 MONTH, AND 10 DAYS FROM HOME

One year after arriving in France, Josef, Ruthie, and Rachel are hiding in a tiny schoolhouse in Vornay, trying to avoid the Nazi soldiers and gunfire. The only refugees from the *St. Louis* who are still safe are the ones who had made it to England. Josef, Ruthie, and Rachel are trying to get to Switzerland in the hope of finding refuge there.

Josef looks out the window and sees Nazi soldiers entering the building. He breaks a nearby window and helps Rachel and Ruthie out, glass ripping through his coat and into his skin. The Nazis spot them, and they start to shoot. Josef, Ruthie and Rachel avoid the bullets. They try to run to a nearby country house, but when they pound on the door begging for help, no one comes to the door.

The Nazis catch up to them, and search Rachel's coat for papers. The Nazis see that they are Jewish, and tell them that they will be taken to a concentration camp. Josef wonders why the Nazis don't let them keep going, if they want them gone so badly. Rachel tries to bribe the guard with money she keeps hidden, but they say it is not enough. Then she rips the seams of Ruthie's coat and pulls out two diamond earrings to give them.

The Nazi soldier examines the earrings, then tells Rachel that they are only enough to buy freedom for one of her children. Josef understands: the Nazis don't care about how much money they can give them. He is playing with them, "like a cat playing with a mouse before he ate it." The soldier tells her to choose which child to allow to go free.

*Even though the *St. Louis* was able to bring Josef, Ruthie, and Rachel to a new life, they are still unsafe. Thus, the decisions of Cuba and the United States to turn them away ends up being extremely harmful, again emphasizing the necessity of recognizing others' humanity and empathizing with them rather than sending them away to be dealt with elsewhere.*



In addition to looking at social responsibility on the scale of governments, Gratz also explores empathy on a small-scale here. The fact that the people living in the country house do not let Josef and his family enter is not only an injustice at the micro level, but also exemplifies the broader failures of society to protect them along the way.



Josef's thoughts echo Mahmoud's from the chapter in Hungary, which shows not only the indifference but the cruelty with which refugees are often treated. The Hungarian soldiers and the Nazis could easily let Josef and his family go, but they view them as subhuman and not worthy of living a free life.



Gratz again shows the intentional cruelty of the Nazis as they dehumanize Josef, Rachel, and Ruthie and treat them like animals (a cat playing with a mouse)—just as Aaron describes the drowned man as being treated like a fish.



ISABEL: OFF THE COAST OF FLORIDA – 1994, 5 DAYS FROM HOME (4)

The **boat** is close to the shore as Teresa pushes frantically, trying to bring the baby into the world while Señora Castillo talks her through it. The Coast Guard picks up Lito and then turns back toward them. Amara dives into the water to swim the rest of the way, but Isabel, Geraldo, and Señor Castillo row as hard as they can. Teresa tries to tell Geraldo to go without her and take Isabel, but they refuse to leave her side. Geraldo tells her that they should name the baby Mariano, after Lito.

The Coast Guard gets closer and closer. Señor Castillo grabs Isabel and pulls her into the water. Together, they swim and pull the **boat** toward the shore. The **water** is now only at Isabel's waist. Isabel then looks up and sees Teresa and Geraldo with the newborn baby, who is crying. She knows instantly that she will do anything to protect him. Geraldo passes the baby to Isabel so that she can take him to shore, while Geraldo helps Teresa out of the boat.

Isabel holds the baby high to keep him out of the water and staggers onto U.S. soil. She turns and sees that Teresa and Geraldo have also made it to the shallow water, and the Coast Guard boat can no longer follow them. It starts to turn back into the sea. As Isabel and the others help each other onto the beach, Señor Castillo kisses the ground. Suddenly, people on the beach start to run toward them to help them. A young woman asks Isabel in Spanish if they are from Cuba. Isabel says yes, she's from Cuba, but her little brother is an American—and soon she will be, too.

In this final race to the shore, Isabel continues to show her maturity in not abandoning her mother. She puts her family above all else, and refuses to give up hope that she, Geraldo, and Teresa can be together in America. It is only her perseverance in rowing and then pulling the ship to shore that makes this possible.



The receding water serves as a symbolic reversal of the families' journey up to this point. Whereas the encroaching water in their boat represented the danger and dread of their trip, as they now approach to the shore, they become more and more hopeful in the fact that they can make it to a new world and a new life in the United States.



Like Josef with Ruthie and Mahmoud with Waleed, Isabel takes on the ultimate responsibility in caring for her younger sibling. This motion echoes Mahmoud in particular, who lifted Hana onto a boat in order to allow her to reach safety. Isabel shows her maturity in taking on the same task: that of guarding her brother and ensuring he can live. Additionally, Isabel's statement that she will soon be American shows that she believes that she will be renouncing her Cuban culture by becoming American.



MAHMOUD: HUNGARY TO GERMANY – 2015, 17 DAYS FROM HOME

Mahmoud and the other refugees march down the highway toward Austria. They walk with the crowd for 12 hours, “visible” and “exposed.” Late that night, Mahmoud and his family reach the border of Austria. The refugees congratulate each other. Then, many alarms go off on their phones: a reminder that it is time for the last prayer of the day. Hundreds of refugees pray together. Mahmoud thanks Allah for delivering them to Austria, and hopes to reach Germany with His blessing.

When Mahmoud finishes praying, he sees that a group of Austrians had gathered around them. He worries that they will react poorly, but then the Austrians start to welcome and applaud the refugees. Suddenly, they are surrounded by people trying to give them things: clean clothes, medical care, food, and water. The Austrians saw the refugees' march on TV and have come to help them. Mahmoud is so thankful that he almost weeps.

Mahmoud again shows his maturity and leadership in the face of trauma and hardship when he leads the refugees on their walk to Austria. The fact that the refugees are “visible” and “exposed” becomes crucial, because it will potentially allow others to learn about their walk and come to their aid.



The greeting that Mahmoud and the refugees receive in Austria is deeply contrasted with the one that they received in Hungary. With the difference in these countries' responses, Gratz proves how important empathy is, and how these small acts of kindness on the part of the Austrians go such a long way for the refugees, who have so little.



Mahmoud and his family then reach the train station and travel overnight to Germany. In Munich, the response is the same as in Austria. There are hundreds of Germans offering food, water, and other supplies. One group is handing out diapers. This reminds Mahmoud of Hana, and Fatima continues to ask if anyone had heard of a baby pulled from the water—no one had. But they know that if the boat with Hana had made it to safety, they had likely continued on to Germany.

A German official, who has a Turkish name, asks in perfect Arabic if Youssef and his family are seeking asylum in Germany. Mahmoud wonders if this is the end of their horrible nightmare—if this is their Promised Land. Youssef says yes, they are seeking asylum in Germany.

Just as in Austria, the welcome that Mahmoud and the others receive in Germany again proves the power of visibility. Only because Mahmoud stood up and drew attention to himself, allowing others to do the same, are they able to receive the help that they need.



Mahmoud's words here echo Josef's, who also wondered if France was the Promised Land. The irony is that Mahmoud is seeking refuge in the very place that was so cruel to Josef: Germany. Thus, Gratz implies that the "Promised Land" is not any given country; instead, it is any place where people are welcomed.



ISABEL: MIAMI, FLORIDA – 1994, HOME

Isabel stands in the front of her classroom in Miami with a **trumpet** in her hand: a gift from her uncle Guillermo. She is auditioning for the orchestra, less than a month after arriving in Miami. After they arrived on the beach, Guillermo took Isabel, Geraldo, Teresa, and baby Mariano into his home until they found an apartment of their own.

Teresa is running a day care in her home, Geraldo had gotten a job driving a taxi, and the Castillos find new jobs as well to begin their own American dreams. Isabel, meanwhile, begins sixth grade, which is difficult because she doesn't speak English. But there are many other students who speak Spanish, who are warm and welcoming, and who help her learn.

Isabel begins to play the **trumpet**: she auditions with "The Star-Spangled Banner," the U.S. national anthem. But instead of playing traditionally, she plays it offbeat like salsa. She plays for Iván, lost at sea, and for Lito, who was in Cuba. She plays for her parents, who had left their homeland, and she plays for herself, so that she would never forget where she came from. As she plays, suddenly she realizes that she can hear a different rhythm, underneath the main one. She is finally counting *clave*; "she had brought Cuba with her to Miami."

Gratz once again ties family to culture, and shows that Isabel is able to connect to her Cuban heritage through the family that she has in Miami. While Isabel thought she had given up her connection to Cuba and her music when she gave up her trumpet, now she is able to rediscover that love with a new trumpet from her uncle.



Isabel and her family are able to achieve the promise of a new life in Miami, fulfilling the hope that they had carried across the ocean. Additionally, they are only able to do it with the support of Guillermo and, in Isabel's case, the help of other children like her.



*The conclusion of Isabel's story argues that she can find her culture anywhere, as long as she remains connected to her family. Being with them in Miami, in fact, allows her to become even more connected to her culture than she had been in Cuba, as she is finally able to count *clave*.*



MAHMOUD: BERLIN GERMANY – 2015, HOME

For four weeks, Mahmoud, Waleed, Youssef, and Fatima live in a school in Munich, until a host family agrees to let them share their home. Escorted by a German relief worker, Mahmoud's family arrives at their home and are greeted by an elderly German man and woman. The relief worker introduces the man as Saul Rosenberg. Upon entering the Rosenbergs' home, Mahmoud is surprised to see the Star of David symbol—the couple is Jewish. Mahmoud knows that in the Middle East, Jews and Muslims had been fighting each other for decade, and thinks that they are in a “strange new world.”

Frau Rosenberg gives Waleed a little stuffed rabbit, explaining through the translator that she is a toy designer. She says that she thought Mahmoud might be too old. He nods, but says that Frau Rosenberg can make one for Hana when they find her, explaining how they had to give her away. As the translator translates, Frau Rosenberg's smile fades and she leads Mahmoud into another room.

Frau Rosenberg explains that she was a refugee, too, and shows Mahmoud a picture of herself and her brother as young children. She tells Mahmoud the story of the *St. Louis*, and how they were resettled in France. Frau Rosenberg describes how the Nazis caught her along with her brother and mother, and gave her mother the choice to save only one child. Frau Rosenberg's brother chose for her mother, and offered to go to the concentration camp. Ruthie says that she doesn't remember much about her brother, but that his name was Josef and that he always wanted to be a grown-up. And when he chose to go to the concentration camp, he truly became a man.

Frau Rosenberg tells Mahmoud that she only survived because a kind French woman took her in and raised her as family. When the war was over, she searched for Josef and Rachel, but they had both died in the camps. Then she met her husband Saul, and they started their own family. Frau Rosenberg shows Mahmoud more pictures. She explains that Josef and Rachel died so that she could live. She tells Mahmoud that they will find Hana and bring her home.

By referencing the conflict between Jews and Muslims, Gratz illustrates how this empathy can surpass even longstanding hatred between groups of people. Given the age of the elderly German couple, it's likely that they may have lived through World War II and experienced oppression themselves as Jewish people.



Frau Rosenberg recognizes that Mahmoud is too mature for a stuffed animal—that the traumatic experiences he has had to face in fleeing Syria and arriving in Germany have forced him to grow up far earlier than he should have to.



Here, it becomes clear that Frau Rosenberg is actually Ruthie. This serves as the climax of the novel, as yet another connection is drawn among the book's three main protagonist. Frau Rosenberg again recognizes Mahmoud's maturity and ties it to Josef's own. She shows the reader how Josef, too, made the most mature decision of his life by sacrificing himself instead of forcing Rachel to choose between her two children. Again, this is a decision that a 13-year-old should never have to make, but the dire circumstances required it.



Ruthie understands that she is only alive because of the empathy of others. France took them in after Cuba refused them; Josef chose to save her life rather than his own; and the French woman recognized the value in her life and raised her as a daughter. All of these outcomes argue for the importance of kindness toward refugees.



Mahmoud is filled with sadness for Josef, but also with gratitude. Saul calls Frau Rosenberg back into the living room, referring to her as Ruthie. Looking at the photos, Mahmoud thinks about how Josef died so that Ruthie could live, and then one day welcome Mahmoud and his family into their home. Ruthie leads Mahmoud back into the living room, which is “bright and alive and filled with books and pictures of family and the smell of good food.” Mahmoud thinks that it feels like a home.

Ruthie also recognizes her fortune in being alive, and her determination to help others in the same way that she received aid. But ultimately Gratz calls not only on those who had been refugees to show their kindness—over the course of the novel, the author has implicitly argued that all people are capable of empathy and aiding refugees who need help, in both big and small ways.





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