



After the Last Border: Two Families and the Story of Refuge in America

by Jessica Goudeau

About the Book

The welcoming and acceptance of immigrants and refugees has been central to America's identity for centuries—yet America has periodically turned its back at the times of greatest humanitarian need. "After the Last Border" is an intimate look at the lives of two women as they struggle for the twenty-first century American dream, having won the "golden ticket" to settle as refugees in Austin, Texas.

Mu Naw, a Christian from Myanmar struggling to put down roots with her family, was accepted after decades in a refugee camp at a time when America was at its most open to displaced families; and Hasna, a Muslim from Syria, agrees to relocate as a last resort for the safety of her family—only to be cruelly separated from her children by a sudden ban on refugees from Muslim countries. Writer and activist Jessica Goudeau tracks the human impacts of America's ever-shifting refugee policy as both women narrowly escape from their home countries and begin the arduous but lifesaving process of resettling in Austin, Texas—a city that would show them the best and worst of what America has to offer.

"After the Last Border" situates a dramatic, character-driven story within a larger history—the evolution of modern refugee resettlement in the United States, beginning with World War II and ending with current closed-door policies—revealing not just how America's changing attitudes toward refugees has influenced policies and laws, but also the profound effect on human lives. (From the publisher.)

Suggested Opening Prayer

Almighty and merciful God, whose Son became a refugee and had no place to call his own; look with mercy on those who today are fleeing from danger, homeless and hungry. Bless those who work to bring them relief; inspire generosity and compassion in all our hearts; and guide the nations of the world towards that day when all will rejoice in your Kingdom of justice and of peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Source: The Church of England

Discussion Questions

These are some suggested questions to get your discussion started. Some questions were provided by the publisher.

- How do we form our opinions and images of what a refugee is? How can we, as readers, shift away from those perceptions to a space of openness and listening?
- What did you learn from this book that you didn't know before—perhaps about another culture, or about the resettlement process?
- Discuss how the book was put together. Did you like how the stories were broken up? How did the shifts between narratives affect your reading experience?
- Talk about your experience with refugees in your own community (or of being a refugee in a particular city). Do you feel your area welcomes refugees with open arms? If not, after reading the book (or from your own experience) what changes would you like to see?
- For Mu Naw, though her young life was marked by war, upheaval, and stagnant years as a permanently displaced person, it's in the US that she experiences the moments where she feels the most “untethered” to everything she thought she was. Have you ever experienced being disconnected from the places, people, and things that remind you of who you are? Did that experience help you relate to Mu Naw's journey in those tough early months?
- Mu Naw and Hasna lead drastically different lives leading up to their resettlement in the US, and drastically different lives afterward despite similarities in their circumstances. Did reading this book change anything about your notions of who refugees are, or what their experiences might be like?
- Before Hasna leaves for Jordan, she does something that might seem counterintuitive—she methodically cooks and stockpiles her freezer for Jebreel. What does that action teach you about her personality? How do you think you would have handled the situation?
- For a variety of reasons, stories about war, border issues, and refugees often center around men. What do we gain from seeing this experience through the perspectives of Mu Naw and Hasna? Do you think the author's gender affected the story and how it was told?
- What did you learn about the history of refugee resettlement in America? What surprised you? How does that context affect your view on what is happening now with the resettlement program?
- In the history sections of the book, you can see how political rhetoric about refugees ranges from deeply humane to hurtful and damaging stereotypes. What kind of rhetoric have you heard in your own life and community about refugees? How have you seen that rhetoric change or shift?
- After reading this book, what is one conversation you'd like to have with someone you know (or even don't know), and what would you like to say?

About the Author

Jessica Goudeau has written for The Atlantic, The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Teen Vogue, among other places, and is a former columnist for Catapult. She produced projects for Teen Vogue ("Ask a Syrian Girl") and A Line Birds Cannot See, a documentary about a young girl who crossed the border into the US on her own. She has a PhD in literature from the University of Texas and served as a Mellon Writing Fellow and Interim Writing Center Director at Southwestern University. Goudeau has spent more than a decade working with refugees in Austin, TX and is the cofounder of Hill Tribers, a nonprofit that provided supplemental income for Burmese refugee artisans for seven years.

[Listen to EMM's interview with Jessica Goudeau or read the transcript.](#)

[New York Times Review: The Story of Refugees in America Through the Gripping Tales of Two Women](#)

Further Reading

Backgrounders:

- USA for UHNCR: [Syria Refugee Crisis Explained](#)
- Multifaith Alliance: [The Syrian Crisis](#)
- CBS News, September, 2020: [As their country crumbles, Syrians wrestle with the "terrifying" prospect of life as refugees](#)
- John Green video from 2015: [Understanding the Refugee Crisis in Europe, Syria, and around the World](#)
- Council on Foreign Relations (2016): [Understanding Myanmar](#)
- World Relief North Texas: [Burma \(Myanmar\) Karen Cultural Profile](#)

Books:

- "The Guarded Gate" by Daniel Okrent
- "Our Women on the Ground: Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World" by Zahra Hankir
- "America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States" by Erika Lee
- "A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves: One Family and Migration in the 21st Century" by Jason DeParle
- "The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives" edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Books continued:

- "The Good Immigrant: 26 Writers Reflect on America" edited by Nikesh Shukla and Chimene Suleyman
- "The Ungrateful Refugee" by Dina Nayeri
- "Somewhere in the Unknown World: A Collective Refugee Memoir" by Kao Kalia Yang
- "We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled" by Wendy Pearlman
- "War Is Not Over When It's Over: Women and the Unforeseen Consequences of Conflict" by Ann Jones
- "The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives" by Viet Thanh Nguyen