

Asylum seeker and immigration policy have been major political issues over the last 20 years in Australian society. It has risen to particular prominence in Queensland since the rise of Pauline Hanson and the One Nation Party who has warned and argued against immigration in all forms – first concerned about Asian immigration in the late-1990s but pivoting towards the Middle East in more recent years. Australia has seen a considerable rise in asylum claims and arrivals by boat correlate with the coalition invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, and the Syrian Civil War more recently. General xenophobia and a tendency to conflate Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan with terrorism has resulted in support for Australia’s harsh and dubiously legal asylum policies.

The book ‘Unbreakable Threads’ chronicles the journey of Dr Emma Adams, a psychiatrist from Canberra and a teenage Afghani refugee, Abdul. Adams’ book provides an important contribution to the literature as it puts a story and face to Afghani refugees attempting to seek asylum in Australia. The book is broken into two major sections. The first recounts the enormous minefield of legislation and bureaucracy that guards the institutions of immigration and detention centres in Australia. The second section provides an account of Abdul joining the Adams family in Canberra and adjusting to life as a foster brother and son of sorts.

Abdul and Adams meet in a chance encounter when Adams provides last-minute sick coverage for a colleague by travelling to a Darwin immigration centre. While disturbed by the general conditions and mental health status of refugees in the centre, Adams developed a close rapport with 15-year old Abdul. Abdul is Hazara, an ethnic minority of Afghanistan. While Afghanistan has been engulfed by war and conflict since the 1980s, the Hazara have suffered more than most ethnic groups in Afghanistan. They played a pivotal and bloody role in removing the Soviet-backed government during the 1980s, only to become a favourite prey of the Taliban who would eventually seize power in the vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Adams tells a story of Abdul taking her on a Google Maps ‘tour’ of the places he had lived and visited in Afghanistan.¹ He points out multiple locations where his friends and family had been ambushed by the Taliban and finds a Kabul mosque which was suicide bombed in 2011 from which he narrowly escaped. Stories like this are important as they go a long way to nullifying the ‘economic migrant’ narrative that has become one of the favourites of the conservative press and politics and demonstrating that many refugees that come to Australian shores are genuinely in mortal danger.

Adams paints a very gloomy picture of the detention centre she visited in the Northern Territory, leading one to wonder how much worse offshore centres might be comparatively. She cites many examples of inadequate care, the most concerning being that of a 12-day old infant covered in ‘weeping, infected pustules.’² Even at the insistence of Adams and her obstetrician colleague, the private company contracted to the immigration centre to provide healthcare refused to even examine the baby. Adams points out that this is in direct contravention of standard medical practice in Australia, infants with potentially serious conditions are always examined by a senior doctor. Additionally, Adams noted that many of the refugees, including Abdul, were ‘clinically depressed’ and receiving no treatment.³

Shortly afterwards Adams convinces her family that they should ‘try to get Abdul out of detention [so that] he can come and live with us.’⁴ Adams then writes to the Minister for Immigration (then Scott Morrison) suggesting that Abdul be released from detention and be allowed to live with her

¹ Emma Adams, *Unbreakable Threads* (Crows Nest: Allan & Unwin, 2018), p. 208-209.

² *Ibid*, p. 9.

³ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 28.

family. The book chronicles and back and forth between the author and Morrison's office. While Adams makes a convincing argument that locking up innocent children, who are clearly suffering with worsening depression, is a poor reflection on a modern, liberal democracy, that embraces its international responsibilities, there is a level of naivety regarding her approach. Child asylum seekers in detention are essentially in the care of the state and the thought that a child be placed with the first random family that writes to the minister is naïve. This is not to say that Adams and her family were incapable or inappropriate for such a role but that it would require significantly more scrutiny than what Adams gave it credit for, particularly given the unusual and potentially first request of its kind. Secondly, while a virtuous cause, it was heavily centred on the plight of Abdul and it seems odd to anticipate an exception to be made in this one instance. Such a decision would have likely had significant policy repercussions and potentially created an us-versus-them dichotomy amongst refugees, considerations that Adams does not acknowledge. The reality is Abdul's story is consistent with a sea of others.

In addition to this, there is the issue of assimilation, which is often portrayed as an immigrant problem but could be just as easily construed as an Australian issue. Simple examples that Adams details from otherwise ordinary family life demonstrate this. Abdul struggled with Australian TV, an otherwise common family pastime. Explosions, gunfire and general violence would trigger PTSD symptoms. Sex scenes and nudity would make him uncomfortable given he was a young, unmarried boy with a strong Islamic faith.⁵ More seriously, there remains the aspect of attempting to assimilate, yet looking 'different'. Abdul is seriously assaulted by three classmates, who took it turns of holding him down and beating him. Despite having received several years of training in boxing and wrestling back in Afghanistan, Abdul had the sense to only use self-preservation skills against his attackers, aware that even an accusation of 'disruptive' or 'antisocial' behaviour could see his visa revoked. Despite Adams' insistence that it be escalated by the school or police, the attackers were never formally charged, nor were they expelled from the school.⁶

Adams does include one chapter on her Aboriginal heritage and tries to draw parallels between Abdul and her ancestors.⁷ While this is well intentioned, it is clumsily done. Outside of this chapter, it is barely mentioned throughout the rest of the story. As such, it comes across as a contrived effort to empathize with Afghani refugees, when in fact she has no comparable experience. The story is most powerful when it centres on Abdul.

The book is not a scholarly or even a heavily researched piece on the Australian immigration system, nor does it draw on the author's expertise as a psychiatrist. However, it has no illusion of trying to be and its greatest strength is the fact that it has been written as a personal memoir. The story of Abdul, albeit told from Adams' perspective, puts a face and personality to the refugee narrative in Australia, which has other become very generalized, stereotyped and impersonal.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 148-150.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 237-241.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 121-127.