



The Newcomers: Finding Refuge, Friendship, and Hope in an American Classroom

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From an award-winning, “meticulously observant” (*The New Yorker*) writer comes a powerful and moving account of how refugee teenagers at a Denver public high school learn English and become Americans.

The Newcomers follows the lives of twenty-two immigrant teenagers throughout the course of the 2015-2016 school year as they land at South High School in Denver, Colorado, in an English Language Acquisition class created specifically for them. Speaking no English, unfamiliar with American culture, their stories are poignant and remarkable as they face the enormous challenge of adapting. These newcomers, from fourteen to nineteen years old, come from nations convulsed by drought or famine or war. Many come directly from refugee camps, after experiencing dire forms of cataclysm. Some arrive alone, having left or lost every other member of their original family.

At the center of *The Newcomers* is Mr. Williams, the dedicated and endlessly resourceful teacher of South’s very beginner English Language Acquisition class. If Mr. Williams does his job right, the newcomers will leave his class at the end of the school year with basic English skills and new confidence, their foundation for becoming Americans and finding a place in their new home.

With the US at a political crossroads around questions of immigration, multiculturalism, and America’s role on the global stage, Helen Thorpe presents a fresh and nuanced perspective. *The Newcomers* is a transformative take on these timely, important issues.

The Newcomers: Finding Refuge, Friendship, and Hope in an American Classroom **Details**

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From Reader Review *The Newcomers: Finding Refuge, Friendship, and Hope in an American Classroom* for online ebook

Lorna says

The Newcomers: Finding Refuge, Friendship, and Hope in an American Classroom is a remarkable and meticulous study and observation of twenty-two refugee students as they come together when they are enrolled in English Language Acquisition classes at Denver South High School, serving as a magnet school in the Denver metropolitan area. Helen Thorpe follows these immigrant students for a period of one year as they acclimate to their new surroundings. Ms. Thorpe undertook this project in 2015 amidst the backdrop of the candidacy, nomination and election of Donald Trump as president. As we witness the struggles of this refugee population, one of the most startling realities is the realization of the horrors that these young people had endured, some since small children. It goes without saying, that these experiences affected their acclimation as well as their learning. In addition to a full-time teacher and aide, there is also a psychologist in this ELA classroom. It is truly humbling to be part of this miraculous process.

"The school cultivated a mind-set, widely shared by faculty and students, that everybody under its roof was an asset. Native-born kids helped new arrivals learn English, even as foreign-born students helped their American peers become more global-minded."

"What took place inside his room always struck him as being close to a bona-fide miracle as he was likely to experience. If these students showed up every day, he believed, they would evolve and heal and adapt and flourish."

On South's diversity: *"Both the wealthier families and the newly arrived refugee families cherished the experience of walking through the hallways filled with hijabs, neqabs, dreadlocks, head scarves, tracksuits, baseball hats, purple cheerleader uniforms, and a cacophony of languages."*

Shauni says

"Fear is the only true enemy, born of ignorance and the parent of anger and hate."--Edward Albert

If you want to know what it's like to teach ESL, read this book. Of course, my job is even more fun because I teach adults instead of teenagers. I especially love this book since it was written recently and not too far away (Denver), and the classroom has very similar demographics to mine. My students are at beginning/intermediate English levels, and so I don't usually get detailed information about where they're from or how they got here. This author hired translators to get the background stories of the students, which were very interesting, and she spent a fair amount of time in their homes getting to know them. She even visited a refugee camp in the Congo, and wrote about her experiences there. This type of book naturally appeals to people like me, who work with immigrants and refugees, but I really wish people who are afraid of refugees (and vote accordingly) would read it.

Tucker says

In "The Newcomers," Helen Thorpe continues the remarkable and compassionate in-depth reporting present in her two previous books, "Just Like Us" and "Soldier Girls." "The Newcomers" follows a group of teenage refugees at a Denver high school as they learn English, adapt to American culture, and build entirely new lives for themselves. These refugees are fleeing famine, persecution, war, and other horrific situations. Thorpe attends class with them for an entire school year and is drawn into their lives where she becomes both a friend and an advocate.

As absorbing as well-plotted fiction while also being extremely enlightening about the timely subject of immigration, "The Newcomers" is a book I highly recommended to ALL readers. (Bonus points should be awarded to public policy makers and TV talking heads who take time to read this book.)

Thank you to Scribner and NetGalley for providing an advance copy of this book in exchange for my honest review.

DeAnn says

3.75 stars from me on this timely refugee book, well written, but could have been a bit shorter/edited in my opinion and I admit that non-fiction is harder for me to read.

This one has been on my radar for quite some time because Helen Thorpe is a local Denver author. It was recently picked by my local public radio station for their "book club" read. By the time my copy came in from the library, I missed the discussion, but still wanted to read this book. I'm going to hear the author speak next month.

The author spent 18 months with refugee students at South High School, located in southeast Denver, near the University of Denver campus. It was a fascinating journey as the students arrived with limited English skills and you can feel their frustration at not being able to communicate. Some are able to speak to each other as they know multiple languages, just not English. A few students had very few other students or paras to speak to -- one spoke Karen -- a language I had never heard of before. The teachers at South do an amazing job and Thorpe visits some of the families at home to learn more of their stories. Many endured horrible hardships, violence, and war in their home countries and the path to the US is very difficult. There is also an interesting window into the limited assistance refugee families can get here and how quickly they need to become self-sufficient. The soft heart in me wanted to help the families out financially.

During these 18 months, the presidential election is happening and when Trump is elected the harassment some of the students face is terrible. They are ridiculed and some were forced off mass transit because they are viewed as terrorists because they were wearing hijabs. I remember the news stories at the time and police officers had to ride buses for a while to keep everyone safe. I don't want to get too political, but it saddens me that some people in this country are so threatened by someone who follows a different religion or looks different. Somewhere I heard that the cure for racism is education and I think this is so true. For me -- education and reading widely would help so much!

Pat says

What a wonderful testament to public education, committed teachers and the resiliency and determination of immigrant families! In a classroom at South High in Denver, Helen Thorpe has found a microcosm of the refugee crisis, and she gently uncovers it student by student. Without preaching, she shines her light at trouble spots around the world and at our collective record of letting their people down. The stories of these teens convey a triumph of the human spirit, even though it's clear some of the students will falter. Thorpe did a wonderful job of bringing a diverse and changing group of students to life. Despite the severe struggles each of these disparate kids faced with language, culture, economics and more, ultimately, the title had it exactly right: This was a story of refuge, friendship and hope, of strangers in a strange land finding their way in America. Important reading.

Jen Alexander says

I'm literally gasp-crying as quiet as I can on this Metro North train as this beautiful book comes to a close. That surprised me.

I've had the book for a few weeks now, reading a chapter here and there as I could, finding myself thinking about the people I was meeting within its pages. Like Thorpe's other books, there's a lot here to unpack, and I learned about what America is like for a newcomer, the realities of refugee policy before and after Trump, and where most refugees come from (hint: it's not the Middle East). But I also learned from the thoughtful way she shares her own process of writing the book and how it changes her. It's not just a story about teachers and students in a Denver classroom or about the current political climate - it's also a reflection on how to face the injustice of disparity of opportunity - how to understand it and how to change it. I'm inspired by the people whose lives are profiled in the book and by the author!

Ali says

Anyone with opinions on immigration or the movement of refugees should read this book; the humanity brought to life is so moving. It's very easy for Americans to just point fingers at the rest of the world and forget just how involved and responsible WE are for creating the very refugees we talk about refusing. I live about 20 minutes away from South High School and had no idea they did this kind of work. I am very proud to call Denver home, and hope we continue to be a city that welcomes "the other" and embraces diversity.

I hope Thorpe writes a follow up book in a few years that can tell us what happened to some of the kids in room 142!

Sarah says

As an employee of DPS and a former teacher of Newcomers, I felt that Thorpe did a fantastic job of telling the stories of these kids, while interweaving history, politics and pedagogy. She keeps it real, refrains from hysterics and exaggerations, and makes you feel like you are a member of the classroom community. It makes me want to go back to the classroom and work with Newcomers again.

Kate Jonuska says

This fascinating book puts you in the classroom of recently arrived teenage refugees at South High School in Denver and shows how that classroom is a microcosm for understanding conflicts around the world.

Honestly, it's touching how kids are just kids, no matter what language they speak or traumas they endure, and every kid deserves a chance.

Amber Garabrandt says

Summary:

In Denver Colorado there is a special group of classes, ELA classes, given to the kids of new refugees. Teens from all over the world, newly resettled into America from across the globe, come together to learn English, and get caught up in school- some of which have been out for some time. Thorpe joined the class for a year, getting to know the teachers and students while also researching what each of these families went through before coming to America, and what they dealt with after. This book takes place in 2015, around the time that Trump started his campaigning in earnest. While families from Vietnam, Somalia, the DRC, El Salvador and many other areas were trying to acclimate to a very different life and learning how to move through a new society, racism is beginning to run rampant. Students are worried- both the refugees and regular students. It brings to light what each family went through, and how hard they work to become self reliant.

It also begs the question- what are we going to do? Are we, as a country going to accept refugees- truly accept these people and work to help them? Or do we close our borders and our hearts? Can we even make such a decision without knowing what they are going through- not just what they had to go through in their lives, but the trouble they have once here- learning English, getting jobs, racism and misunderstandings?

My thoughts:

I loved this book, but it broke me. These are teens- children really- who have had their lives threatened. Some had to hide from soldiers- or witnessed car bombs in their own neighborhood. Some were born in refugee camps- one family went through the process of trying to get accepted for ten years. We are talking about a 22 step vetting process in some instances. So many of us, myself included, feel like we are knowledgeable about these issues- but I knew nothing about what these families went through- and very little about what help is available to refugees when they get here. While the families stories were painful, and hard to handle; I found myself taking my time and pushing through. I loved this book. For me, this is a definite five star.

The adult content scale is hard to be objective about here. There is so much violence, so much pain, talk of (the threat of) rape and death.... I would not feel comfortable giving this book to a teen. Also, you have to think about the fact that in 2015, many of the refugees written about were teens- would I be ready for Juliet to read about someone her own age going through all this? I don't think I could, unless there was a lot of discussion time afterward. I have to give this one an eight.

I received an eARC of this book from Netgalley and Scribner Publishing for the price of an honest review. Many thanks- I loved it so much that I preordered a hard-copy from Amazon and will receive it Tuesday. The book comes out 11-14-17.... I cannot stress the importance of this book at this time, when refugees are so numerous, and their acceptance into new countries so uncertain.

Heather says

I've often wondered what it would be like to move to the U.S. from a non-English speaking country and have to learn to survive here. This is a book that answers those questions. I think this should be required reading for anyone who wants to talk intelligently about the immigration debate in the U.S.

The author spends 18 months with a group of teenagers who are in a Newcomers class in a Denver high school. All of them are recent immigrants and have tested at the bottom level of English language proficiency. They represent most of the major conflict zones on the planet - The Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Iraq, Burma, Central America, Eritrea. The school year starts with learning how to introduce yourself in English. Most of the kids are stumped.

One of the things I found interesting in this book was the transparency of the author's process. She is writing about minors who have all experienced a great deal of upheaval and trauma in their lives. She explains how she approaches the kids with a translator in their home language to ask if she can include their stories in the book. There are kids who say no at this point and she respects that. If they agreed, she sent home a letter written in their language to their parents that requested permission to interview the children and requested to interview them. If permission is given, then home visits are started with an interpreter. In spite of all these precautions, there are still communication errors and just the plain inability of an American to truly understand the lives that refugees have led. She discusses her thought process about what questions to ask about their backgrounds. When does reporting the story just become an excuse to pry into things for the sake of the sensational details? She talks about when she chose to walk away from lines of questioning that are relevant to the story but would lead to retraumatizing the people being interviewed.

For the families that agreed to participate, it opens a window in to the lives in war zones. Hearing what they had to endure before fleeing their homes was heartbreaking. There are Iraqis who worked with the U.S. Army and then were left behind. A Central American female police officer was targeted for murder after arresting gang members and when they couldn't get to her they started threatening her children. A family with 10 children had to walk out of the DRC to avoid repeated violence. Some of the kids were born in refugee camps. Most are already multi-lingual.

Life in the U.S. isn't easy. Resettlement agencies help but families are required to be self-supporting within 4 months of arrival. That's hard when you don't speak the language and can't get a good job. I'm surprised how many families did it. Other families' stories show how one small setback can upset their whole resettlement journey.

The importance of this story is underscored by the fact that it takes place from September 2015 to December 2016. Reading about the rise of Donald Trump as it relates to these families was stressful all over again. Incidents of racism rise on public transport as the election takes place. Court cases to receive asylum for Central American children are suddenly in doubt. Family members scheduled to arrive from Somalia are suddenly turned back at the airport.

The author does go to the DRC to see where the family that she knew from Denver came from. She traces their route to refugee camp and meets friends and family members who have been left behind.

This is an ultimately hopeful book as you see how far the kids come in 18 months. Some go from silent

observers on day 1 to being a part of the student government a year later. Others are still struggling with English but are able to have full conversations. No one who reads about these families would think they are lazy and trying to work the system. This is a book I'd love to force all Trump fans to listen to in order to see if these people's realities align with their idea of what immigrants are.

This review was originally posted on Based On A True Story

Rachel says

This book was SO GOOD and eye-opening and well written and relevant and I want everyone I know to read it and love it too.

Jennifer Louden says

While the scope of the story at times overwhelmed the writing and there was too much repetition of the classroom activity, this book still blew me away. To spend a year with these refugee kids, to experience the challenges of their lives, was life changing. I wish every member of Congress was required to spend a week in this classroom and in this school.

Kristy Miller says

On my daily commute I pass a beautiful, old high school. This is Denver South. Denver South High School is the magnet school for teenagers in the Denver Public School System who have limited or no English skills. This book takes place from August 2015 through the fall semester of 2016, and follows Mr. Williams, and his Newcomer Class. Over the first year 22 teenagers will find themselves in Mr. William's classroom. Almost all of them are refugees or asylum seekers. Many have experienced trauma that most people will never experience in their lifetime. Over the next year and a half these children will struggle to learn English as they learn a new city and transportation system, adjust to a new culture, and try to overcome their difficult pasts. All of this is set against the rise of Donald Trump.

I will be proselytizing for this book for a long, long time. I thought about these kids every morning and every evening as I passed their school. I thought about them when the Trump administration revoked the protected status of Salvadoran asylum seekers (two of the children are from El Salvador). I thought about them as the POS masquerading as the human President of the United States called many places "shit hole" countries. I thought about them tonight as the government shut down over Dreamers and the damn wall. The rage was physical at times. There were tears, and grinding of teeth. If I could hit every person in government over the head with this book until they read it I would. As it turns out, the more advanced students read another book that I think every member of Congress should read, Sherman Alexie's The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.

So read this book. Don't make me hit you over the head with it.

David says

As a teacher of English as a Foreign Language, both in the US and elsewhere, I found this excellent book hit close to home and was also a complete pleasure to read. There was a lot of nodding my head in recognition at the types of students in Mr. Williams' *Newcomers English* and the bureaucratic and cultural struggles they and their families were going through as the election of Donald Trump went from joke to awful possibility to appalling reality.

I think the big problem this book might have is a marketing one, to wit, people in the teaching business or the refugee-helping business may feel that reading an accurate portrayal, however worthy and well-done, of the stressful and trying job they do all day is the last thing they want to read when they get home. The people who *need* to read this -- the people who don't know anything about refugees and, in their ignorance, fear them -- won't, because most people don't read things that seriously challenge their preconceptions. Maybe it's an act of unwarranted optimism to believe that a mere book can change the mind of those who feel that foreigners are somehow less than human, but it's important to live in hope.

At one point, the author crosses pass with an admirable Evangelical Christian who has taken it upon himself to aid, as a volunteer, newly arrived refugees, She writes:

...we did agree on one central thing: that to live in comfort in the developed world and ignore the suffering of strangers who had survived catastrophe on the parts of the globe was to turn away from one's own humanity.

...which pretty much says it all.

(Probably Much Too) Complete Disclosure: Thanks to Scribner for providing a free advance galley copy for review via NetGalley. After I received it, I found out that, although I have never met the author, she was maid of honor at the second wedding of my wife's best friend from high school, and also a former girlfriend of the husband of my real estate agent. I am not making this up. Also, my wife's best friend from high school berated me for being a cheapskate and not supporting the maid of honor at her second marriage by paying money for the book in some form.
