

What Strange Paradise by Omar El Akkad

CITY LIBRARY BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

About the book

"More bodies have washed up on the shores of a small island. Another overfilled, ill-equipped, dilapidated ship has sunk under the weight of its too many passengers: Syrians, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Lebanese, Palestinians, all of them desperate to escape untenable lives back in their homelands. But miraculously, someone has survived the passage: nine-year-old Amir, a Syrian boy who is soon rescued by Vänna. Vänna is a teenage girl, who, despite being native to the island, experiences her own sense of homelessness in a place and among people she has come to disdain. And though Vänna and Amir are complete strangers, though they don't speak a common language, Vänna is determined to do whatever it takes to save the boy.

"In alternating chapters, we learn about Amir's life and how he came to be on the boat, and we follow him and the girl as they make their way toward safety. *What Strange Paradise* is the story of two children finding their way through a hostile world. But it is also a story of empathy and indifference, of hope and despair—and about the way each of those things can blind us to reality" [publisher].

About the author

"Omar El Akkad is an author and a journalist. He has reported from Afghanistan, Guantánamo Bay, and many other locations around the world. His work earned Canada's National Newspaper Award for Investigative Journalism and the Goff Penny Award for young journalists. His writing has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Guernica*, *GQ*, and many other newspapers and magazines. His debut novel, *American War*, is an international bestseller and has been translated into thirteen languages. It won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award, the Oregon Book Award for fiction, and the Kobo Emerging Writer Prize, and has been nominated for more than ten other awards. It was listed as one of the best books of the year by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *GQ*, *NPR*, and *Esquire*, and was selected by the BBC as one of 100 Novels That Shaped Our World" [publisher].

Interviews and articles

- **CBC Books:** ['We can't afford not to be hopeful': Omar El Akkad's What Strange Paradise is on the Canada Reads longlist](#)
- **CBC Books:** ["Omar El Akkad on the 'casual cruelty' that inspired his novel What Strange Paradise"](#)
- **Powell's Books:** [Omar El Akkad, author of 'What Strange Paradise'](#)
- **The Giller Prize Book Club:** [What Strange Paradise](#) [video interview, 1 hour]
- **TEDx Talks:** [Fiction in a Dangerous Age | Omar El Akkad](#) [video, 15 mins]

Discussion questions

1. Amir is the book's central character, but *What Strange Paradise* includes a wide range of voices – people from different places with different personal histories. Did a particular voice stand out to you the most? How come? What was the role of that voice in the story?
2. Why do you think that El Akkad chose to make 2 children – Vanna and Amir – the protagonists? What does this focus on children add to the story, versus if the main characters were adults?
3. The book's chapters alternate between 'Before' and 'After.' Did you like this? Why do you think El Akkad used this format?
4. What stood out to you the most from the 'Before' chapters — particularly from the chapters set on the boat? For example, a specific character, something someone said, a general theme. How come?
5. El Akkad said that he writes about what makes him angry, and that this book came from a place of anger. Did you sense his anger throughout the book? Did you sense any other emotions?
6. El Akkad also said that "the act of writing the story is hope." Did you find the book hopeful? In what ways?
7. El Akkad says that the book is a "repurposed fairy tale" that's based on the story of Peter Pan (but also that "a lot of the stuff is beneath the surface"). Did you notice this? What are some similarities between this story and a classic "fairy tale"?
8. El Akkad is also a journalist, having reported around the world from locations such as Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay. How do you think that his experience influenced his writing?
9. What does this book have to say about the migrant crisis in Europe? What did you learn? How does it compare to what you might've heard about it previously?
10. In a CBC article, *What Strange Paradise* is said to ask the questions "How did we get here?" and "What are we going to do about it?" Did the book provide any answers for you?
11. What is your interpretation of the ending? What were your initial thoughts after reading it? Do you think it was satisfactory?
12. What do you think is the significance of the title, *What Strange Paradise*?
13. What will stick with you the most from *What Strange Paradise*?