



The Bone Sparrow: a contemporary tragedy

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An interview with **Zana Fraillon**

Nicholas Tucker interviews **Zana Fraillon**, the author of the acclaimed novel [The Bone Sparrow](#) [3] and giving a voice to the voiceless

*I am talking to Zana Fraillon at the Hachette headquarters in London. She has flown in from her native Australia the night before but remains remarkably un-jetlagged. Next day she will discover whether she has moved up from the short list of four to win the Guardian Fiction Prize for her fine novel **The Bone Sparrow**. This is set in an Australian Immigration Centre which is quite as horrible as various smuggled out reports over the years have suggested. We start with Subhi, a ten-year old boy born in the camp. He and his family are of Rohingya origin, a Muslim minority originating from Myanmar (Burma) and one of the most persecuted people on earth. In conditions of great secrecy he makes friends through the wire with scruffy and discontented Jimmie, an older girl living nearby. Spoiler alert: their story ends on a note of uncertainty. Why was this?*

I deliberately left it up in the air because that is the reality for these kids there ? they never know what's going to happen to them. I do like to think though that Subhi will get out because of some legal loophole, and the family does receive an official letter in the last chapter, though we never find out what's in it. But in reality leaving the camp would not be possible for anyone coming to Australia in boats without a visa.

But won't you get lots of letters from readers wanting to know what happened next?

Who can know? Perhaps I will. But I quite like leaving things up in the air! It makes readers think more about what they would wish themselves for my characters. For myself, I have to think there's hope. When I wrote [The Bone Sparrow](#) [3] I thought it might soon turn out to be historical fiction because things would have had to get better soon. In fact they have recently got much worse. But the truly draconian policies that now exist can't go on indefinitely.

What about Jimmie? Is she an Aboriginal?

I didn't think she was an Aboriginal when I introduced her into the novel. There are many other poor non-Aboriginal people living in Australia at the moment to choose characters from. But I did leave where she came from up in the air ? once again!

I hear your next book is going to be about child slavery.

Yes, I have just finished a first draft. It's almost like an alternative to what could have happened to Subhi and the other children in the previous story. Child refugees are increasingly being trafficked, sometimes ending up as slaves even in wealthy countries ? something I had not previously realised was happening.

Do you refer to the sexual abuse aspect of child trafficking?

I allude to it, but none of the main characters have been abused in this way.

Do you find yourself sometimes idealising your most needy characters rather than risk them losing reader support by revealing various faults they may possess too?

Well, there aren't many faults that a young kid can have that have already become deeply engrained. But with my adult characters, I think I do give them at least some faults. After all, faults make for more interesting characters.

But Eli, the unofficial leader of the camp's children and still recently a child himself, is completely faultless ? almost a Christ figure! Where did he come from?

I worked as an Integration Advisor in Australian schools for some years, helping pupils with learning difficulties or behaviour problems to get back into the classroom. There was one boy who really stayed in my thoughts afterwards, and I realised half way through the story that Eli was in fact loosely based on him. His father came from a very troubled background and his mother was a drug addict. But the boy himself was incredibly smart and very witty and during the time I worked with him we really bonded.

Are you ever going to give yourself a break from writing about contemporary tragedies?

I don't know! The research I have to do can be very depressing when I find myself reading about the dire state of the world as it applies to some people, young or old. But I also find hope in the kids I read about who are so amazingly resilient. Even if they are in a truly terrible situation they don't really know quite how terrible it really is.

*How did you get to writing **The Bone Sparrow** in the first place?*

Well, we kept reading the various statistics about failed immigration that appeared in the press but we weren't hearing the actual voices of the people involved. And as they were kept in camps that were off shore and out of sight there was a risk of them becoming completely invisible. I found myself drawn into finding more about them and then trying to write up some of their stories. As a kid I was also always fascinated by fairies and elves, and the whole idea of a world that's there but which we don't get to see. Perhaps that also fed into an interest in what is still being hidden from us today in Immigration Centres.

Are you a full-time writer now?

Yes. I work at home. I have three children. The oldest is nine, and has become passionately interested in the refugee problem facing Australia, collecting money in school and generally trying to help. And if I can reach out to other kids too, so much the better.

*Zana did not win the Guardian prize, but clearly got very close. A one-time professional magician, there is also something magical in the way she can turn a fraught subject into cause for cautious hope. Already the author of other novels and picture-books, there is much to look out for here both now and in the future. **The Bone Sparrow** is currently long-listed for the **Carnegie Medal***

; no mean achievement for the charming, still young author, with another title soon to appear that promises to be every bit as memorable.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at **Sussex University**.

[The Bone Sparrow](#) [3] is published by Orion Children's Books, 978-1510101555, £6.99 pbk

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