

No More Borders for Josef

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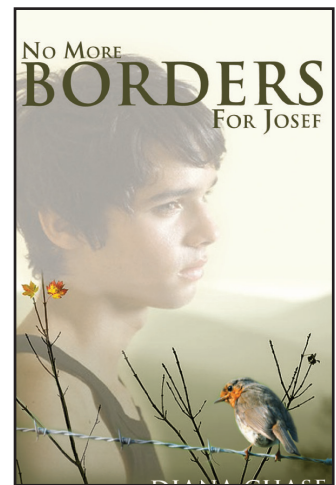
Synopsis

At the age of thirteen Josef sees his parents killed and his village ravaged in the brutal war sweeping the former Yugoslavia. Still badly shocked and confused, Josef and his friend Sasich, have to help the Keydar brothers get two old women and some young children to the border. The remaining villagers take to the hills to 'fight bastards'. Repressing memories of home, Josef and Sasich respond to forest life. Eventually they pass the border checkpoint and reach a Red Cross camp on the other side. During the weeks of tedious camp routine, Josef and Sasich make elaborate plans to join the resistance and 'fight bastards'. Somehow these plans never materialise. Then Josef finds he is to be sent to Australia to an uncle he has never heard of, and he makes a desperate and unsuccessful attempt to escape back to the forest. When this fails, he joins the hundreds of refugees on their way to the bottom of the world — Australia.

Josef is deeply suspicious of this sudden uncle; he could be a slave driver or an axe murderer. He thinks of him as 'the uncle' and refuses to believe that the man is family. He tolerates his fussy Aunt Leisel, but his cousin Karina; feisty, clever, fighting with her father and continually eye-rolling, is something else — part feral cat, part witch-bitch. He plans to find a way back home somehow.

Heartsick, Josef rejects Australia as his new home. It is such a flat, calm country. There may be no guards with guns, and people may have lots of machines and money, but no one knows the things Josef knows or talks the way he talks. His clothes are strange and he has no control over his own life any more.

School is another ordeal; there are other refugee kids who have secret horrors and hang-ups. Putting on a school uniform and being a child again doesn't make the past go away. Then there's Ms Markovic, the teacher who has a dress like Josef's mother and who is convinced Josef has an anger problem. But slowly Josef learns the new language and new ways. He plays football, makes friends and helps 'the uncle' around the farm. He even comes to terms with Karina. Eventually he learns the truth about this part of his family.



Josef enjoys the school camp until he fools around with some other kids and a wallaby is killed. It may have been accidental but the boys must accept responsibility and spend holidays and weekends at a wildlife refuge. They fight and argue all the time, but gradually learn to care for the animals. Josef finds purpose there and resolves to continue working with wild animals. Now he must decide between his new dream and returning home to 'fight bastards'. When a violent storm threatens the refuge, the boys work together to save the animals. Each boy gains confidence from the experience. Josef learns to face his memories, move forward, and change if he has to.

Author's Inspiration

No More Borders for Josef is a story about a boy who overcomes destruction, death and frightening odds and can still dream his dreams. It is not written for any other reason than to recognise his struggle and salute his courage. The story points no finger nor pleads a case. For this reason, it would be desirable for children to read the book first before analysing it.

Just over four years ago, an old school friend and I backpacked around Eastern Europe. We lugged our cases in and out of buses, trams and those ancient 1930 trains that still rumble through Hungary, Romania and the former Yugoslavia.

We stayed with families, in poky rooms in someone's house, or at backpacker hostels. Wherever we went the people were welcoming and intrigued that we were from Australia. Many had relatives there who had written home from places with names that sounded strange and wild to them. People had nearly always heard of sharks and kangaroos and, more surprisingly, the Barrier Reef.

We chatted to folk on trains and buses and in cafes. Where there was a language problem (and there usually was) we got by with schoolroom French, waving our arms and shouting a lot. They did the same.

Street names, underground stops and ticket centres were often in Cyrillic, which made life difficult. The petty officials in places of petty power were as surly and unhelpful as they'd been under Communism, but there was always a young person there to help us through the tickets, timetables and endless documents.

But of course the shadow of that dreadful war hung over everything. Hate, suspicion and outrage still divide those states and communities. Everyone lost someone and they are not about to forgive those they see as responsible. In moving from one country to another we sometimes found that officials wouldn't cooperate at borders, change money, stamp travel arrangements or give directions about a neighbouring state. Legless beggars, destitute people, and starving, homeless dogs were everywhere.

Among all wars, the war in the Balkans was possibly the most confused about who was fighting whom and why. It must have been among the worst for pointless brutality. Children from all sides suffered terribly. They were picked off as target practice as they dashed across streets or burnt alive when they sought sanctuary in churches. Many saw

their parents shot and their homes and villages destroyed. Yet everywhere we went, children played and sang and believed in their own particular God.

Many of these children from the former Yugoslavia and surrounding states arrived in Australia as refugees. When I got home I wanted to write about the courage and resilience of these children. How could they, after what they'd been through (far out of the experience of even most adults in this country), find anything beautiful in life again? How could they put on a school uniform and become a child again? And yet like all children through the ages, they somehow managed.

I wanted to talk to some of those who had arrived in Australia, so I approached different authorities and was finally directed to the DTT.

DTT? Apparently, The Department of Torture and Trauma! A real department or an informal soubriquet? I don't know. Anyway, through the DTT I met some of these war-affected children.

Everyone is doing their best to help. The Government policy is to guide the children, with their families or new guardians, into our society. Their initial accommodation and physical requirements are supplied, then the kids attend language schools and gradually move into mainstream education.

I cannot speak highly enough of the dedication and skill of the teachers at these schools. I spoke with one liaison officer and he arranged for me to meet some of these young people. He told me that most had been through frightful experiences, but he placed no caveat on our discussion, except to avoid talking about which group they came from or what side they were on. The emphasis is for the old baggage to be left behind. Stories were not all positive, but of the several I heard, one from a young Moslem girl, inspired me the most. I'll call her Karina.

Karina was sixteen when I talked to her and had been in Australia since she was eleven. She came from a very small, very poor village where her father worked a tiny plot of land. Their house had no power, and there was a communal pipe down the road where people could get water in a bucket. (I saw many houses like this, though most homes had a water barrel as well.) Karina's father had been to school only to grade five and her mother had never learned to read or write, nor been expected to. Her father was keen for Karina to go to the local school and learn basic skills.

During the war their village was attacked and razed. No one seemed to know by whom or why. Karina and her family were lucky to escape through the forest; first to relatives, then to a Red Cross Camp. She told me that others in her village were not so lucky. Subsequently, she and her parents were sent to Perth.

Karina described her first impressions: her amazement that everyone had flushing toilets and running water, TVs and motorcars — that even women drove. She found the climate very hot and couldn't wait to get rid of the heavy tracksuit and the boots she'd been given in camp. She wanted the same clothes as the other kids were wearing. She'd never seen anyone from the Middle East, Asia and Africa before and she was intrigued and delighted by how everyone here seemed to be treated the same. She said Australian teachers were not nearly as strict as the ones back home. She had never seen the sea before, and the freedom and beauty of the beaches delighted her. She was learning to swim. She played netball and was part of a band. She wouldn't go to soccer matches and had no time for those kids (and there were some) who kept old hates alive. She was keen to learn everything about her new country. She loved it here and couldn't see how she could ever go back. Of course settling in wasn't as easy as it sounds. Apart from what she'd been through, she had all the normal teenage doubts and worries. She had to learn how to be a kid again, how to make new friends and communicate with them, and how to deal with the complicated business of what was 'in' and what wasn't. She thought Perth was beautiful and clean, but also huge and flat. She missed the mountains, the snow and her old friends, and she didn't want a permanent boyfriend until she'd achieved her goals.

And boy did she have them! Karina was going to be a lawyer or legal reporter and start a business of her own. Wow!

So here was a girl who survived a fierce and bloody war and who, until just a few years ago, faced a lifestyle similar to that of her mother's — a life of drudgery and very limited literacy. Now, thousand of miles away on the other side of the world, that same girl was planning a future in law. For her, out of all that tragedy and unbelievable brutality, something beautiful had happened. How's that for inspiration?

The next part of my story came together when I arrived back home. I read about three youngsters who'd been caught up in some stupid group behaviour and had stoned a quokka to death.

The outcry in the press was understandable and letters to the paper demanded the boys be pilloried for their actions, or at the very least put in stocks and have rocks thrown at them. Everyone was appalled at the senseless killing of a defenceless creature, and so, it seems, were the boys involved. They could not believe that they had done anything so horrible. I fell to thinking that this sort of thing must often be the case: a bunch of young blokes, high-spirited and perhaps acting foolishly, can lose their sense of right and wrong and do stupid things in the need to show off and be part of the action. They probably hate themselves afterwards.

Anyway, I followed developments in this case and discovered that the officials who'd had to deal with these kids had used their brains. The boys were required to work on a marsupial farm, giving up their free time for a lengthy period. I located this farm and talked to the kind and committed lady involved. On the first day, one of the hardest things was for the boys to walk up her path and admit their stupidity and subsequent disgust at their own behaviour. However, over the next few months, these kids accepted their responsibility and took on many messy and tedious tasks without much complaint. They

learned to respect animals and themselves, and the lady was ready to guarantee that they would never do anything like that again.

The press often carries stories of immigrant youngsters who have got themselves into trouble. I speculated whether much of this was caused by a similar need to be part of a macho group. I hope that they too might get another chance.

However, this is not a story with any particular message. Every situation has many sides to it and rights and wrongs are not always clear. I have woven my thoughts into a story that I hope readers will enjoy. Maybe, by sharing Josef's experiences, they might live for a while in his shoes.

Educational Themes

Society and the Environment:

- Knowledge of the geography and history of Eastern Europe.
- Reasons for and results of war in the former Yugoslavia and how it has affected Australia.
- Refugees.
- Differences and problems with language and culture.
- Climatic differences in each hemisphere.
- The bush and native animals.
- Looking after damaged wildlife.

Social and Civic responsibility:

- Commitment to achievement.
- Self acceptance and respect of self and others.

The story highlights:

- Coming to terms with differences in behaviour, language, clothes, attitudes and customs.
- Understanding problems for newcomers to this country.
- Understanding why they came.
- Respect for what they may have been through.
- Problems within families from newcomers and from age and sex differences.
- Traditions and changing attitudes.
- Adapting to change.
- Understanding misunderstandings in language and culture.
- Looking at the cause and effect of stupid actions.
- Taking responsibility for those actions and correcting them.

Topics for discussion

1. Why does Josef want it to be yesterday? What has happened? How do you know something terrible has happened? What has caused the dark hole in his head?
2. What is a border? Why don't we have similar borders in Australia? Discuss the title of the book with this in mind.
3. Describe the ways the group survived in the forest. How is the forest different from the Australian bush?
4. What would happen at a border check-point? What sort of 'papers' is Josef concerned about? Describe the fear and confusion that led up to the group getting through the border. What memories of this might haunt Josef for a long time?
5. What sort of people would be working in the Red Cross camp? The camp probably saved the lives of thousands of refugees. Why would Josef and Sasich come to think of it as boring?
6. Discuss why Josef should so hate the idea of being sent to Australia.
7. Why should Josef feel so embarrassed and ashamed at the failure of his escape plan?
8. Josef grew up in a very simple village with few amenities. imagine his feelings on the plane.
9. Put yourself in Josef's place at Perth Airport and on the drive to his new home. What would you be feeling and why? What was his response to the guard at the parking station and why? Discuss the uncle's advice about not feeling sorry for yourself.
10. In what ways had Josef lost control of his life? Why does he feel so lost? In his position how would you feel?
11. In Karina's position, how would you react to a 'full-grown, instant cousin' becoming a permanent member of your family? What are the things that Josef fears and hates about Karina?
12. Describe Karina's relationship with her father. Why is it so? Why do they set each other off? How does Aunt Leisel fit in?
13. Why was Josef keen to get rid of his track suit? Why was he prepared to take Karina's advice about clothes? What does the beret represent?
14. Discuss the bad feeling between the Gavosics and the Lagdas. What is a feud and how can such a thing arise in a new country?
15. Discuss reasons why Josef and other migrants students were wary about discussing their experiences. What did Father Michael mean when he said 'no one was an old enemy in a new country'? Why was Josef suspicious of that sort of talk?
16. Discuss Miss Markovic and the reasons for Josef's feelings about her. Why did she single him out, and did he really hate her? Give your reasons.
17. Discuss Josef's friendship with Danny and Valda. What was the basis for it and discuss if it was going to last.
18. Why did Josef feel like a 'half-and-half person, divided between *that* time and now'? What did he miss? What did he mean by finding that 'life was comfortable, unthreatened, pleasant — but at times too calm, like the land itself'?
19. Why do you think Uncle Alex read some of Karina's science books? What chances had he missed? What difference did Karina's story about her father's reason for coming to Australia make to Josef?
20. Discuss the different sides to Josef's personality and how this works for and against him at camp. Compare this with Josef's experiences at the Red Cross camp.

21. What incidents led to the death of the wallaby? Discuss each boy's reaction and responsibility in the incident. In what ways did the later reaction of [a] Danny, [b] Aunt Leisel, and [c] Valda, upset Josef. Discuss the changing relationship between Karina and Josef. What situations at the farm might cause problems for them in the future?
22. What do you think about the ruling of the CALM Board? Discuss the characters of Gavosic, Wilcox and Danny and their relationship with Josef. Karina described the situation as 'an epic exercise in social relations'. Discuss how accurate she was.
23. What sort of person was Austin Grey and why did he run a marsupial farm? How did he gradually earn the respect of each boy? What effect did he have on Josef? Why did Josef feel so strongly about Lucky? What was the main purpose of the farm? Which animals would you favour?
24. Trace how the time at the marsupial farm changed the boys. In what way did the storm bring out their strengths? Discuss Josef's need for them all to realise 'that they'd shared something really great'. Discuss what happened to Josef that changed his mind about staying in Australia.
25. Move forward fifteen years and describe a meeting between the boys and the main characters in the story. How has each of them turned out?

For further discussion

1. Locate Serbia, Romania, Croatia, Montenegro and Slovenia on a map of Eastern Europe.
2. What countries were once Yugoslavia and why they are now independent?
3. When was the war and what happened?
4. Suggest possible reasons for the war.
5. What is Australia's refugee policy? Why are limits imposed?
6. Discuss problems arising from language differences.
7. What is Cyrillic?
8. What roles do the United Nations and the Red Cross play in the unrest in Eastern Europe?
9. If you were setting up a Red Cross camp under similar circumstances, what sort of arrangements would you have to make?
10. Suggest ways in which Australia benefits from migrants. Discuss ways we can help new migrants.
11. If possible, meet a new migrant and interview them about their experiences.
12. Describe the care required for an orphaned joey (or other native animal) and the action needed for its full recovery.