



# Escape from Aleppo

*N.H. Senzai*

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**Nadia's family is forced to flee their home in Aleppo, Syria, when the Arab Spring sparks a civil war in this timely coming-of-age novel from award-winning author N.H. Senzai.**

*Silver and gold balloons. A birthday cake covered in pink roses. A new dress.*

Nadia stands at the center of attention in her parents' elegant dining room. *This is the best day of my life*, she thinks. Everyone is about to sing "Happy Birthday," when her uncle calls from the living room, "*Baba*, brothers, you need to see this." Reluctantly, she follows her family into the other room. On TV, a reporter stands near an overturned vegetable cart on a dusty street. Beside it is a mound of smoldering ashes. The reporter explains that a vegetable vendor in the city of Tunis burned himself alive, protesting corrupt government officials who have been harassing his business. Nadia frowns.

It is December 17, 2010: Nadia's twelfth birthday and the beginning of the Arab Spring. Soon anti-government protests erupt across the Middle East and, one by one, countries are thrown into turmoil. As civil war flares in Syria and bombs fall across Nadia's home city of Aleppo, her family decides to flee to safety. Inspired by current events, this novel sheds light on the complicated situation in Syria that has led to an international refugee crisis, and tells the story of one girl's journey to safety.

## Escape from Aleppo Details

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Author : N.H. Senzai

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# From Reader Review *Escape from Aleppo* for online ebook

## Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

It's October 2013 and explosions from barmeela, bombs packed with shrapnel, are being dropped from helicopters by the Syrian army on Aleppo's Salaheddine neighborhood where Nadia Jandali, 14, lives with her family, including aunts, uncles, and cousins. It's time carry out their plan to leave the civil-war torn city and head for the Turkish border. But before they even get out of the parking lot, their apartment building is hit. Nadia, caught on the stairs, is knocked unconscious and buried under debris, so when her cousin Malik looks for her, he doesn't find her.

Waking up later, Nadia realizes her family has left and decides to go to the dental clinic where they had agreed to head to. But it's a long way, and the streets are unsafe. After walking for hours and getting lost, Nadia takes shelter in a destroyed pharmacy where she meets Ammo Mazan, a frail old man traveling with a cart and a donkey named Jamila. He offers to take her to the dental clinic, though Nadia isn't sure if she should trust him.

Taking detours around the bombed out city, Nadia and Ammo Mazen finally reach the clinic, only to find it deserted. A note left for her there says her father will wait for Nadia at the Oncupinar border crossing between Syria and Turkey, and Ammo Mazen agrees to take Nadia to the border. Looking for shelter that will accommodate the cart and Jamila, the two make their way to an orphanage, where they find two young boys. After resting, they leave and the youngest boy, Basel, 8, goes with them, though Tarek, 15, decides to remain behind, waiting for the mother who gave him up.

As they travel north towards the Turkish border, Ammo Mazen makes various stops which reveal the kind of covert activities he has been up to even as his health continually begins to fail him. Eventually, Tarek rejoins the group. As their journey becomes more and more difficult due to the physical destruction of the country from constant bombing and shelling and the different warring factions found everywhere, Ammo Mazen's health gets worse and worse, finally leaving him unconscious most of the time, and leaving the children to their own devices. Eventually, he must be left in the care of a healer, while the children, along with Jamila and the cart, make their way to the Oncupinar border crossing. And though Nadia does see her father on the other side, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen to Basel, Tarek, and Jamila now.

*Escape from Aleppo* is a book I wanted to read from the moment I first read about it and it is a fascinating story. Told in the third person from Nadia's point of view, readers learn about what is happening in Syria from her, as she eavesdrops on the conversations of the adults around her, and begins to pay more attention to current events on television. She must also deal with some serious PTSD issues, afraid to leave her home after an earlier bombing incident that left her with a painful scar on one of her legs.

I paid close attention to what was happening in the Middle East once the Arab Spring began, and I think Senzai does an incredible job of folding in the history of those days, the later Syrian Civil War with the life of a young Syrian girl that time. Using strategically placed flashbacks, Nadia is at first shown to be a typical tween, more interested in watching Arab Idol on TV than she is in school, a girl who fixes her nail polish at the first sign of a chip. Yet, as she recalls her life and family, she begins to develop a new appreciation for them. And as Nadia travels through the now destroyed Aleppo and surrounding areas, she continually calls up memories of places she visited with family in happier times - the Palmyra Boulangerie, dress shops, mosques, the extensive world-famous 1,300 year old souq, the massive Citadel where her family picnicked - now all damaged, completely destroyed, and/or occupied, making Nadia aware that she not only has

(hopefully just temporarily) lost her family, but has also lost the cultural and intellectual artifact's of her beloved country's long history.

Escape from Aleppo is so much more than a coming of age story. At first, impatient with Ammo Mazen's slowness and the necessary stops he must make, Nadia develops into a more compassionate, more take charge young lady able to comfort Basel with tales from an ancient copy of Alef Layla (One Thousand and One Nights), and to put Ammo Mazen's needs over her own desires to get to Turkey, all over the course of just a few days, but a lifetime of experience. Thus, Escape from Aleppo is a story about empathy, hope, kindness and survival in the midst of war, as well as a harsh reminder of how quickly lives and history can be changed by those in power with an agenda.

This book is recommended for readers age 9+

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### **Danielle says**

"Like Nadia, these kids recognized the sounds that accompanied death." (p. 43)

"And it was all burning, centuries of history and culture turning into ash." (p. 239)

"What had taken five thousand years to build had taken less than two to ravage." (p. 289)

A devastating story of one young girl trying to find safety and her family in the midst of the war in Syria.

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### **Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says**

Nadia is a typical pre-teen---enjoying spending time with her friends and family, delighted about being selected to appear in a tv commercial, celebrating her twelfth birthday---and then she is not. Suddenly, a man appears on tv and sets himself on fire, and Syria is at war, and Nadia's world becomes a world of bombings and soldiers and fear. Her family decides they must escape to a safer place, and Nadia unexpectedly gets separated from them and must make her own way out of the turbulent city, Aleppo, she has called home all her life.

This is an important story for children, both those who have lived through these horrors and those who have only heard of such events through the media.

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### **Kirin says**

([www.islamicschoollibrarian.wordpress.com](http://www.islamicschoollibrarian.wordpress.com))

N.H. Senzai's newest book (published in January 2018), gives a face and a voice to the grave situation in Syria. Like Senzai's other books, she uses the rich culture and history of a country to inform the reader, and a compelling front story to keep middle school readers entertained. This 336 page book is not in the AR data base yet, but fourth grade and up should be able to follow the story and be able to handle the violence and

destruction presented. The story is unique in the genre, in that it doesn't focus on getting to a safe country, but rather on the heroine's journey to simply get out of a dangerous one, Syria. The storyline is fairly linear with flashbacks of life before the war making the story informative, but not necessarily gripping. I wanted to love it, but found myself forgetting about it when I stopped reading.

#### SYNOPSIS:

Fourteen-year-old Nadia, has a fun full life in Syria: a large extended family, she stars in a commercial, has good friends, and a lot of opportunity and perhaps privilege. All that, however, slowly disappears as civil unrest and ultimately war consume the country. As a child she gets glimpses of the changes coming, but is able to still hide in her ignorance and focus on things like her nail polish and Arab Idol. As food gets short however, she sneaks out to get bread with some cousins, and is hit by shrapnel. While, her leg is able to heal, her anxiety of going out alters her life and makes her family's attempt to get to the Turkish border later, a hard mental obstacle she must face. Her inability to move quickly with the family on their covert escape route, and the bomb that hits their home, separates her from her family and leads to her getting left behind. As she tries to remember how to get to the designated meeting location, she must navigate Syrian soldiers, rebel factions, ISIS, secret police, violence, hunger, and being lost. With her cat, Mishmish, for companionship, Nadia reaches the location only to find that her family has left for Turkey and will wait on the border for her. Luckily for Nadia, amidst this devastating news, she meets an old man, Ammo Mazen, and his Donkey, Jamilah, willing to help her reach the border. Along the way the two face long odds of surviving, not only from the war around them, but also the weather, the old man's illness and lack of food and water. As they journey through Aleppo, snippets of history and culture are shared, two more children join their journey and mysteries as to who Ammo Mazen really is come to light.

#### WHY I LIKE IT:

The book's premise is simple, allowing the reader to focus on Nadia and her companions and not get bogged down in the political factions and names and alliances. The book is not about all of the aggressors, it is about a girl trying to reach her family, and the growth and ability to choose kindness that she learns along the way. The girl is not religious, but culturally it is a part of her environment. Her companion Tarek, is religious and he spouts Islamic tidbits as they journey, adding some knowledge to be conveyed about Islam which is sometimes informative and sometimes comical as his character is often a bit awkward.

I love the cultural beauty that is conveyed, and the heaviness in Syrian's heart that "What had taken five thousand years to build had taken less than two to ravage." The saving of historical artifacts, the showing of cooperation between people of different faiths as the characters meet in mosques and churches and meet people of all backgrounds, makes the loss of humanity and history so palpable.

I also love that there is an Author's Note at the end. The whole book I kept having to shush my mind as I felt like this was the story of Mariam in Senzai's book *Shooting Kabul*. Yes that takes place in Afghanistan, but it was so similar in that it was a girl getting separated from her family in an escape attempt during a war, and sure enough she mentions that, that is where Nadia's story grew from.

#### FLAGS:

There is a lot of violence and death, but nothing gruesome or sensationalized.

#### TOOLS FOR LEADING THE DISCUSSION:

This would be a great Book Club choice, because it would encourage readers to keep at it and finish the book. While reading it, the book is wonderful, but for some reason, I had to urge myself to pick it up and start it again. Perhaps it is because I have read all of Senzai's books and I was pretty confident all would end well, or because I've read quite a few books now about war and refugees and Syria, but while it reads quick it did take me longer than it should to finish it. I think parts of the book that detail a lot of the skirmishes and fighting might be hard to visualize in the mind's eye so as an assignment or Book Club selection would benefit the readers to allow them to discuss all the mini climaxes, understand the terrain and architecture, and to really put themselves in Nadia's shoes. The transformation in Nadia from a brat, more or less, to a compassionate, strong, determined young woman is a journey that I would love to hear feedback from other kids about. I think they would definitely have thoughts and opinions that would really bring the humanity of us all out, and make us connect with the plight of those trying to get out of such horrific circumstances.

Publisher's Page: <http://www.simonandschuster.com/books...>

Teaching Guide: <https://www.teachervision.com/teacher...>

Author's Page: <http://www.nhsenzai.com/escape-from-a...>

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## **Lucy says**

When I saw this book in my library, I picked it up. The cover is very compelling and the summary immediately drew me in. It was a quick book once it got going and I was riveted right up until the last page because while this was fiction, it also wasn't and I wasn't entirely sure how it was going to end.

Escape from Aleppo is about fourteen-year-old Nadia whose family are trying to escape from Aleppo into Turkey. She gets separated from them and then has to journey through the city she once knew in order to find her family and escape with them. During the book, the chapters switch between 2013, the present for them, and 2010 when everything started to happen. I think Senzai did a brilliant job of writing a child character who doesn't understand completely what is going on, she doesn't understand the ramifications for it, but she understands a lot more than people give her credit for. Nadia is a teenager and that shows up in her words and her actions but she has also been exposed to horrific sights, some throughout this book. On the way she meets up with two other children and an old man, all of which are trying to get out of the city.

What I think hit me the most was how Nadia didn't just grieve for the people she had lost or those she had seen killed, but also for her home, for Aleppo itself. She talks frequently about how she has good memories of that place or the other or how she had learnt about this part of history and you can feel her mourning what was being lost. There were buildings that survived thousands of years and are now destroyed. They meet people along the way who are trying to preserve the history and the culture of Aleppo, even risking their lives to do it and throughout the book, Nadia comes to understand why. She comes to realise that while people are the most important, the history of their home is important as well and should be preserved as much as possible.

This book was lovely even as it left me unbearably sad at the same time. Four stars!

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## Ms. Yingling says

ARC provided by the author.

Nadia and her family live in an apartment building in Aleppo, Syria, so her aunts and uncles, and well as her grandmother, are all close by. When their neighborhood is being bombed in October of 2013, they have a plan to leave and head toward the Turkish border to meet Nadia's father. With the help of her older cousin, Razan, Nadia packs up her cat, Mishmish, and prepares to leave. Since being caught and injured in a bombing earlier, however, Nadia is very fearful of being outside, and her hesitancy Causes the family to be caught in a direct hit of their building. Nadia is not badly injured, but is trapped in the rubble, and her family leaves her, assuming that she has perished. When she finally emerges, Nadia tries to follow the agreed upon route to a dental clinic, but the landscape of her neighborhood is barely recognizable. Along the way, her cat reappears, and she is fortunate enough to meet an elderly man, Ammo Mazen, making his way across the town. He agrees to help her, applies ointment to her wounds, and listens to her story. The two don't find Nadia's family, but they find two boys who were being helped by a friend of Mazen's. Basel, who is eight and looking for his grandfather, leaves with them, but Tarek decides to stay behind. Mazen must visit lots of contacts on their way out of Aleppo, and Nadia, after snooping through his wagon and overhearing conversations, discovers that he is finding a preserving rare books and artifacts that would otherwise be destroyed in the war. Mazen's health is not good, but the small group, which Tarek eventually rejoins, makes their way towards Turkey. Mazen's health is not good, and the journey is arduous, so he stays at a small town near the border while the children make the final leg of their journey, hoping to be reunited with Nadia's family.

This is a timely and important story that will help young readers understand what is going on in Syria, and grasp why there are so many people who have been displaced. Since a story is only illuminative if children read it, Senzai adds many vivid details that will draw readers into Nadia's experience. In the first part of the book, Nadia flashes back to more pleasant times of her life. We see her enjoying a birthday party, celebrating with her family, and relishing small pleasures, like polishing her fingernails or playing with her cat. For reasons I don't understand, my students don't quite grasp that children in other countries live lives very similar to their own until wars or other tragedies disrupt them. These details of Nadia's life before the bombing of her apartment building goes a long way to investing readers in her life.

As Nadia travels across the city, Senzai does a fantastic job of describing both the shops and streets before the war, colored with Nadia's experiences in various places, and contrasting that with the devastation that has occurred. Details about the history of the conflict and of Ammo Mazen's past alternate with the grim present that include soldiers, snipers, and bands of teenagers out looking for any supplies they can steal. This makes the story both informative and exciting, and sweeps us along in Nadia's journey to Turkey.

As Nadia's fear turns to grim determination, we also see how the war is affecting young Basel and Tarek. Ammo Mazen is a huge help to the group despite his somewhat suspect past, and his ill health makes his devotion to getting the children to a safe place all the more touching.

While Gratz's recent *Refugee* has the story of a family escaping a similar situation in Syria, *Escape from Aleppo* will appeal to readers who wonder how they would survive in a war-torn environment, but like this author's riveting *Ticket to India*, showcases young people trying to survive such trials without the support of their families. When I was a tween, I was fascinated by stories of children my age during the Holocaust or on the Oregon Trail because they were pulse pounding and exciting, but reading about these experiences also made me appreciate the hardships of others. *Escape from Aleppo* is a must-read middle grade novel for

understanding the evolution of the current political environment in the troubled country of Syria.

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### **Maggie says**

I really wanted to love this, because there's not nearly enough books on our shelves with Muslim main characters or set in Arab countries, but I'm afraid it's one of those books that adults will like for kids rather than a book most kids will actually enjoy. There's way too much exposition and info dumping here, and not enough storytelling and character development. The story seems like a thinly veiled excuse to offer expertise; characters are constantly spouting off as though they are teachers, newscasters, or human encyclopedias. However, there is a LOT of useful and worthwhile information, and a kid who truly wants to know about the horror of what is happening in Syria, the Arab Spring, and/or Syrian history and culture, might enjoy reading this book as a way of learning about those very important topics. But to try to sell this story to a middle schooler as a "gripping read" or a "page turner" or an "action-adventure" story .... well, as much as I wish it were, it just isn't any of those things. Having said all that, I'll still put it in my middle school library because the information and point of view it contains is so valuable.

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### **Beth Honeycutt says**

What an amazing and sad and important book! I was entranced by Nadia's story, and I learned more about the events in Syria than I'd known before. I feel so lucky that I was able to meet the author and get an ARC of the book for my class.

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### **KC says**

Twelve year old Syrian, Nadia along with her family try to flee Aleppo before the anti-government protesters break out and bombs start to fall. It's too late, and her family fear that Nadia did not survive an air raid. Here is her journey, traveling through a war torn country in hopes to reconnect with her loved ones; along the way finding friendship and unearthing Syria's rich history and rediscovering the culture of her people.

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### **Laura Mossa says**

In 2010, Nadia is overjoyed to be starring in a local commercial, loves watching her favorite singers on Arab Idol, and is meticulous about her polished nails. But on the day of her twelfth birthday party, Nadia's world changes due to the start of Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings that take place in the Middle East and North Africa.

Flash forward to 2013. In the middle of the night, Nadia is awoken by her older cousin Razan and told they are leaving their home in Syria. As her family is leaving their apartment building, Nadia hears the sound of helicopters. The force of an explosion sends Nadia tumbling down steps causing her to hit her forehead against a Jeep bumper. Fortunately, Nadia is able to crawl under the Jeep for safety but due to the ongoing bombing, her family cannot locate her and must make the painful decision to leave Nadia behind.



Once Nadia regains consciousness, she is faced with the realization that she is alone. A mix of trepidation and determination, Nadia begins her journey to find her family. Not long into her journey, Nadia meets Ammo Mazen, a former bookbinder who offers to help Nadia locate her family. Unsure of whether to trust him, Nadia makes the bold decision to accept the old man's offer and becomes his travel companion.

Escape from Aleppo is Nadia's story of courage, resolve, and faith to be safely reunited with her family. Like her teacher Ms. Darwish once told her, Nadia learns that she can accomplish great things if she puts her mind to it.

Special thanks to Naheed Hasnat Senzai for providing our #bookexcursion group with an advance reader copy of this amazing novel which is a window for me to better understand the traumatic experiences of Syrian families like Nadia's who were forced to leave their homes in order to survive. Pre-order now, for Escape from Aleppo will be released in January 2018.

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### **USOM says**

Senzai mixes little snippets of history, facts about the conflict in Aleppo, and the history of Nadia all together. It is this amazingly cohesive mixture that rolls off your tongue. Let me just stop this review to say, if you're looking for profound touching MG books with rich characters stop what you're reading and go get this book. It is a wonderful historical fiction that not only sheds light on the history but also on ourselves. Nadia, and all the other characters around her, are really fantastic. I fell in love with each and every single one of them.

Disclaimer: I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review from Netgalley.  
full review: <https://utopia-state-of-mind.com/revi...>

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### **Dana says**

The story line got confusing/long-winded it seemed, but I appreciated the recent history of Syria that was told through this book. Nadia is separated from her family after a bomb hits their apartment, and on her way to reunite with them, meets three other individuals that are trying to make their way out of Syria. Along the way, they run into soliders and rebel groups that either help or hinder their journey.

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### **Sara Ahmed says**

Where do I even begin with this book. A representation of what has been happening in Syria. The voice was RAW. The emotions HIGH. The feelings INTENSE. I started and finished it in one day praying that it would end on a good note. And it did. If only what is happening in Syria would do the same. End on a good note. I learned a lot from this book. It has made me want to go online and learn more about the crisis. It makes me want to run out and do something to help. Be prepared for a book that'll keep your throat clogged for half of it.

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## **Emma says**

Even though the writing was a bit uneven, I enjoyed the story and was invested in how Nadia's journey unfolded. This reminded me of *Prisoner B-3087* by Alan Gratz, and I can see my 6th graders enjoying this book as they did *Prisoner*, while becoming interested in the current refugee crisis as well. This title is certainly a better choice for discussing current events than *Refugee*, also by Alan Gratz. My quibbles with the writing didn't totally detract from my enjoyment of the story, but they were there:

Nadia faded into being a secondary character/narrator once she met Ammo Mazon. This was a story about him that was told through her eyes rather than a story that focused on her character development. Some of Nadia's problems (PTSD about going outside, the pain in her leg from a bombing injury) should have been crucial plot points throughout the book, as they were in the beginning. But, she seemed to all of sudden and without explanation get over her fear of going outside once Ammo Mazon entered the picture, and there was barely a mention of her aching leg again until the end of the book. Neither issue affected her or her journey at all.

The explanations of historical circumstances that led to the conflict in Syria and information about current events during the war seemed awkwardly crammed in. Usually it was posed as dialogue between the adult characters, but it read as if they were taking turns reading a news article out loud. I don't know that younger readers would notice the awkward info dump and how it made some of the dialogue and narration unrealistic, since it did provide enough but not too much information in a simple and straightforward manner.

The pacing slowed toward the end, even though it was supposed to be building the climax. I found myself skimming many of the awkward historical explanations and also Nadia's flashbacks, since they didn't really add anything to the plot.

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## **Adriyanna Zimmermann says**

Not sure why this book has 1 & 2 star ratings already but two can play this game.

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