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Author Profile:



Catherine Stine

BIO

Catherine grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and can't remember a time when she wasn't writing stories and illustrating them. She graduated from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts, then in 2003 she earned an MFA in creative writing with a double focus in writing for children and fiction from the New School in New York City. Catherine has also designed children's fabrics, exhibited her paintings and written series books for Pleasant Company/American Girl. Her first YA book entitled REFUGEES was published by Delacorte Press in February of 2005. Most of her illustration work is in opaque gouache, and for black and white spots she likes to use pen and ink.

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Interviews

March 15, 2005

**Books by
Catherine Stine**

REFUGEES

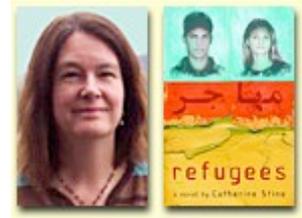
INTERVIEW

March 15, 2005

REFUGEES, by author [Catherine Stine](#),

is the fictional story of the unusual friendship between an American girl and an Afghan boy who flee their respective homelands in search of a better life. In

this interview conducted by Teenreads.com reviewer Alexis Burling, Stine talks about the significance of music in the book, the research she conducted for the Afghani portions of the story, and some of the important lessons that can be learned from reading this deeply affecting novel.



Teenreads.com: In the Author's Note, you mention that you wrote the first few paragraphs of REFUGEES while sitting on a park bench on Greenwich Street, the steps of the insurance company, and "by the greenish light of St. Peter's." From that point on, how long did it take for you to finish the novel? Describe that process.

Catherine Stine: For a few weeks following September 11th, I

spent time down near the site, walking around, mapping streets and sketching in scenes. Everything had to be accurate both factually and emotionally. Then I began to write chapters in whatever order they came. Dawn and Johar were "born" almost fully formed, so I hurried to record these clear impressions before they escaped me. The first four or five "Dawn" chapters were written separately from the "Johar" chapters. I wanted the story trajectory to mirror reality --- in a V-shape --- with the characters starting from two distant positions, each moving along a side of the V to grow closer as they better understood each other's world. After this rough draft, I fleshed out the novel using my research, including interviews. Finally, I fine-tuned with two more revisions. The process took a year and a half.

TRC: Is the character of Johar based on anyone in particular? If not, where did the idea of his character originate?

CS: Johar, as many kids I know, is brimming with creativity. But I didn't have one boy in mind when I created him. A fictional character is pieced together from an array of personality traits that intrigue me. Often a character struggles with issues that I, too, wonder about. Johar's challenge in remaining a pacifist during wartime echoed my question: is there ever a "good and worthy" war? By the way, I did not come up with a definitive answer. Nothing is ever black and white. Besides, I was interested in Johar's daily life, not in generalities, proclamations or in taking sides.

TRC: Dawn and Johar's friendship is a major focus in REFUGEES and one that highlights an open and free-flowing understanding between a man and woman that is not often seen (or allowed) in Islamic society. In your opinion, what can be gained (in America) by reading about and encouraging this kind of bond between two young people? In Afghanistan and other foreign countries?

CS: Friendship is always mind-expanding, no matter whether it's getting to know someone from another country or someone new in your classroom. With the Internet, friendships can blossom even before meeting someone face-to-face. For instance, Dawn and Johar connect over music, poetry and family problems. If they had met first, most likely their cultural differences would have slowed the process or changed it.

One thing that I learned through interviews is that Americans often misunderstand the separation between girls and boys in the Middle East, or in this case, Afghanistan (Central Asia). As one of my Afghan interviewees said, "The separation is more between public and home, rather than between men and women." Of course, this varies between clans, provinces and countries. In other words, generalizations lead to inaccuracies, which is why cross-cultural dialogue is so clarifying and cool!

TRC: You examine families and familial connections in REFUGEES. In both Dawn's relationship with her foster mother Louise and Johar's relationship with his Aunt Maryam and cousin Bija, strength and love are found when attachments are formed between people outside the immediate family circle. How does this reflect your conception of what constitutes a good family?

CS: A functional family is one where there is active love, mutual respect and communication. Sometimes friends are family. Sometimes friends and acquaintances can lead you back to family. Often one must create distance from family in order to see how important it really is. Dawn learned that blood relations don't automatically translate into a healthy family. She had to become a healer herself, in order to understand and open up to her foster mother. Johar had to be torn from his family and struggle through self-doubt in order to fully shout out his own strengths when he rejoined his brother. Ultimately, humanity itself is our extended family. Global neighborhood, a world beyond borders --- with the Internet, teens are beginning to understand these concepts in concrete ways.

TRC: In an attempt to deal with the horror at Ground Zero, Dawn begins to play the flute for various passersby. Over time, mourners begin to line up and request songs for their lost loved ones. Describe the significance of music in REFUGEES.

CS: Music is a major theme in REFUGEES. We appreciate the beauty of a song even if we can't understand the words. Music soothes and delights. It transforms. Immediately following September 11th, I was strongly compelled to seek out World Music. Why? Because I needed to understand the Middle East and Central Asia in a wordless and cosmic way --- in a way that reassured me that there was a universal force stronger than the force of hatred. The music I discovered mesmerized me: Afghani rubab, Algerian rai, Middle-Eastern hip-hop and Indian bhanga. I knew that I wanted music to be a connector between Dawn and Johar, as well as a vehicle for Dawn to learn to open up. Some of my favorite research was listening to Afghan teens talk about music on an MTV series!

TRC: Did you ever worry that REFUGEES would inadvertently offend an Islamic/Muslim reader and, if so, what were some of the measures you took to keep that from happening?

CS: I did not want to offend anyone --- Muslim or other. That's why I kept to the specific lives of Dawn and Johar, not to "issues." That's also why I was quite thorough in my research. I did not want to judge or provide easy answers. I wanted to portray a balanced picture. Oddly enough, I encountered no

resistance from Muslims. A few non-Muslim colleagues and friends thought it might be "too early" to delve into that time period. In contrast, the Afghans and Pakistanis who I interviewed were all excited about the project. One Afghan expatriate seemed to speak the others' hearts: "Anything that encourages dialogue between East and West is greatly needed."

TRC: What methods did you use in researching the Afghanistan segments of the novel?

CS: I read about twenty-five books, everything from ESSENTIAL FIELD GUIDE TO HUMANITARIAN AND CONFLICT ZONES: AFGHANISTAN, edited by E. Girardet and J. Walter, to A SHORT WALK IN THE HINDU KUSH by Eric Newby, about the comic misadventures of British trekkers who traverse the Nuristani tribal lands. I studied ancient Persian poetry, read sections of the Koran, and watched every news channel from BBC to MTV to Al Jazeera. I interviewed Afghani expatriates, librarians, translators and refugees. I fact-checked with the Manhattan MTA and the New York City Commissioner, and kept every copy of the *New York Times* from September 11th through April of 2002. My research was all-consuming, but absolutely fascinating.

TRC: Did writing REFUGEES help you deal with the events of September 11, 2001?

CS: It definitely helped me get past my own urge to hate, past my fear to a place of tentative hope. In writing Johar, I got a glimpse into the life of a Muslim boy and what it must be like to suffer through a war fought by outsiders on one's own soil. In writing Dawn I was able to honor the dead and celebrate the lives of the survivors. I learned that both east and west are misinformed, suspicious, uneducated about other cultures. During that time, and ever since, with Iraq and Iran in the news, people wonder if eastern and western cultures are unbridgeable. They are bridgeable --- totally.

TRC: What are some of the prominent lessons to learn from reading REFUGEES?

CS: Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue! When dialogue is challenging is often when it's most valuable. Take a bold step and connect --- to peers, to family, to kids from other cultures. Our common *humanity* is more important than anything. Don't give up trying to communicate. Have fun learning about other ways of life. At heart, they aren't so different from your own.

TRC: What are you working on now and when can readers expect to see it?

CS: I'm ensconced in an older teen story about a girl's bumpy first year in art school, and a younger teen novel that deals with multiracial identity and a trek to India. At some point I also want

to write another historical fiction, because I love delving into research. My stories are like planes on a crowded runway, waiting impatiently in line to take off.

Check my website at <http://www.catherinestine.com> for upcoming news.

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