



My Road to

THE BRINK OF FREEDOM

STELLA LEVENTOYANNIS HARVEY

Book Club Guide

Signature
EDITIONS

THE BRINK OF FREEDOM — Book Club Guide



Successful crossing of the Mediterranean

Where It All Began

I lived in Europe for three years, from 1997 to mid 2000, first in England, then in Italy. It wasn't until I moved to Italy that the issue of asylum seekers came into focus for me. Nightly, the discovery and detainment of yet another boatload of *rifugiati* was reported on the Italian news. Police in boats and helicopters scanned the coastline on the look out for people-smuggling operations. These refugees were mostly arriving from Eastern Europe.

In 2006, I spent a month in Spain. Again, Spanish news outlets covered the growing problem of asylum seekers. This time, most of the refugees were from various parts of Africa. In Italy and in Spain, governments spoke about the growing number of refugees, but there didn't seem to be any political will to do anything about it.

The problem continued to grow, further exacerbated by the increasing number of conflicts in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Suddenly, large numbers of people were on the move, many of them using the Mediterranean as their way into Europe.

In 2014, between January and September, the number of refugees arriving in Greece totalled 6,919, according to the Greek Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection. In the first seven months of 2015, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) reported 124,000 people reached Greek shores by sea, a seven-fold increase over 2014 numbers.

This mass migration came into full view when I was in Greece in 2012 finishing my novel, *Nicolai's Daughters*. At the time, I lived in the neighbourhood I describe in *The Brink of Freedom*. It was close to a Roma camp, which was torn down by the police in 2012. I was there when it happened and could see the desperation on the faces of the people who watched their homes (such as they were) being destroyed.

I saw refugees and Roma from various countries on the streets of Athens and what struck me was the attitude of Greeks towards them. Some wanted to help and did so. Others saw the refugees as a threat to their already fragile country. By 2012, Greece was in its fourth year of recession.

The economy was shrinking further, unemployment was in the double-digit zone and young Greeks in particular had few opportunities. This was also the time when I saw the rise of the far right Nazi party, Golden Dawn (*Chrysi Avgi*) and attacks by this group's followers on foreigners and the later murder of the Greek anti-fascist rapper, Pavlos Fyssas. I wondered what had happened to *filoxenia* (Greek for hospitality). The Greeks are famous for it. In 1989, among all the countries in Europe, Greece had won the Eurobarometer award (a set of public opinion surveys completed for the European Commission) as the country most tolerant and welcoming to migrants.

I kept asking myself what had happened. What had changed? I also wondered how I would feel if I were in a refugee's shoes. What would I do? I was an immigrant to Canada myself, when my family left Egypt because the government of the day was nationalizing foreign businesses in an attempt to get rid of Europeans and other foreigners. We were not persecuted or threatened, but my father saw the writing on the wall and applied for immigration to Canada. We did come on a boat into Pier 21. But we weren't mistreated and my parents felt, with few exceptions, that Canadian immigration authorities treated us in a respectful way. No people smugglers involved, no dangerous, life-threatening crossings.



I wondered what my experience would have been like if I were a refugee today, trying to get out of a war-torn country. Or if I were an economic migrant, someone simply looking for a better life.

This was the genesis of *The Brink of Freedom*. From there, it was important to me to talk to people, do research, and get as much information as I could about the plight of refugees. I didn't want to guess at the circumstances or draw conclusions from the headlines and stories I read. I wanted to infuse my novel with factual information.

I arranged to visit Amygdaleza, just outside of Athens, one of the largest refugee detention centres in Greece, which has since closed down.

I also met with counsellors at the Asylum Service of the Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection in Athens. Everyone was very generous with their time and information, even walking me through the entire asylum-seekers process. At the Asylum Service I had the good fortune to speak with an Afghani boy, who was waiting for his parents as they met with their counsellor. He spoke perfect English and it was an eye-opening conversation.

I explored some of the seedier parts of Athens, including areas around Omonia Square and Ta Prosfygika, the refugee neighbourhood where my characters Vijay, Saphal and Sanjit live in *The Brink of Freedom*. I spoke to Syrian refugees at a protest in front of the Greek Parliament. And I spoke to refugees from all cultures on the street and in front of their embassies.

I had an opportunity to visit the police station I described in *The Brink of Freedom*. Although I may have made the police in my novel too negative, seeing how those refugees behind a high fence with razor wire were being treated didn't make me feel very well disposed towards their keepers.

I interviewed the editor-in-chief of the Athens newspaper *To Vima* about his research and book on the activities of Golden Dawn, and interviewed the head of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

I also interviewed several service providers who were working with groups that provide services to the Roma, which resulted in an invitation for a ride-along to a Roma camp in Corinth.

You might wonder why I chose to use a South Asian national and a Ukrainian Roma to highlight the story of refugees in Greece as opposed to a Syrian or an Afghani. It's a good question.

Under the Geneva Convention, anyone who might die if he or she were returned to his or her country is automatically provided with asylum in the country of entry. This is not true of other nationals and yet they too have a story that needs telling; that's the story I wanted to share. It's a little more complicated and, of course, there is less sympathy for those who flee in search of a better life.



Migrant camp at the Franco-Italian border



Refugees seeking temporary shelter sleep in a central square in Athens

THE BRINK OF FREEDOM — Book Club Guide



An abandoned Roma camp

I was whisked away, seated between two gun-toting officers who didn't say a word to me. I wasn't exactly sure where they were taking me because the centre is also part of a police academy and had various entrances and identification checkpoints. At the time, I can tell you I was thinking: why don't I just make it all up? How much reality do you need in fiction anyway? But they eventually took me to the commander of the detention facility, who was very hospitable, and I was given a tour of the facility and spent a couple of hours there with various commanding officers, who seemed quite proud of the work they were doing to help asylum seekers. They were all incredibly open people. I even met an officer who reminded me so much of the Christos character I had created in *The Brink of Freedom*, it felt as though I was meeting him in real life. That officer confirmed everything I had created about Christos's personality and disposition, i.e., his need to help.

On the cab ride back into the city, the driver asked me lots of questions (including why I was out in this place so far from the centre of Athens). When I told him, he said as a Greek he was ashamed of how refugees were treated. He was talking about the bars, fencing and razor wire too. He said he didn't trust what the government and the police were reporting about the refugees and their treatment.

And a few days after I was at the Amgdaleza detention centre, a 26-year-old Pakistani man died in custody there, after a police beating. Even though I had never met him, my heart broke, reading about his death. I don't know what happened to him or why, but having run a jail myself in a previous life, I know how difficult it is to do this type of work, so I can't jump to any conclusions, except to say beatings can never be part of running a detention centre or a prison.

Lots of things frighten me, but people don't generally scare me. And let's face it: I was only writing about what I was seeing. I wasn't experiencing it. The refugees are the ones who are brave. I only hope I've done their stories justice.

Throughout my time in Greece (I made two lengthy visits in the completion of this novel) I practiced a bit of my Greek. What a difficult language! I figured out how to say that perfectly in Greek. It made everyone smile. Proud nation, Greece. And of course, the dark side of pride is shame, which is the downfall of this country, and Greeks in general. But that's likely the fodder for another book.

Some of my friends have called me crazy for the lengths I've gone to complete this project. Others have called me brave, asked me if I was ever scared. I admit that from time to time I had my doubts about what I was doing. When I went to the Amygdaleza detention centre, for example, there seemed to be some sort of communication breakdown about why I was there. When that was cleared up, or at least when I understood (with my bad Greek) it had been resolved, a paddy wagon drove up to the guard gate and two officers pointed at me and suggested I get in the vehicle.



Refugees waiting to cross the Macedonian-Greek border

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR BOOK CLUBS

1. Did the book shed light on any aspects of the refugee crisis you might not have heard about?
2. How are Vijay's and Kem's struggles the same? How are they different?
3. What are the main themes that run throughout the novel? Think about the relationship between parent and child, the need to help others, the struggle to survive and the compromises made in order to do so.
4. What do we learn about the female characters in the novel — Shelby, Mirela and Saphal?
5. What are Ted's struggles and how does his struggle add to the storyline?
6. How is Christos different and the same as his Commander?
7. Could there have been any other ending for Sanjit/Bo?
8. What is the author's belief regarding Greek hospitality, the plight of refugees and the different conclusions for the haves versus the have-nots? Do you agree with this conclusion?



Syrian protest in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Syntagma Square in downtown Athens



Stella Leventoyannis Harvey was born in Cairo, Egypt and moved to Calgary as a child with her family. In 2001, Stella founded the Whistler Writers Group, also known as the Vicious Circle, which each year produces the Whistler Writers Festival under her direction. Stella is a fiction writer whose short stories have appeared in *The Literary Leanings Anthology*, *The New Orphic Review*, *Emerge Magazine* and *The Dalhousie Review*. Her non-fiction has appeared in *Pique Newsmagazine*, *The Question* and the *Globe and Mail*. Her first novel, *Nicolai's Daughters*, was published in 2012 by Signature Editions and the Greek translation was published by Psychogios Publications of Athens in 2014. *The Brink of Freedom* is her second novel.

Stella currently lives with her husband in Whistler, but visits her many relatives in Greece often, indulging her love of Greek food and culture and honing her fluency in the language.

Signature
EDITIONS

www.signature-editions.com