

# Book Introduction: *Finding Refuge: Real-life Immigration Stories from Young People*

introduced by Victorya Rouse

Rouse, V. J (2021). *Finding refuge: Real-life stories from young people*. Zest Books.

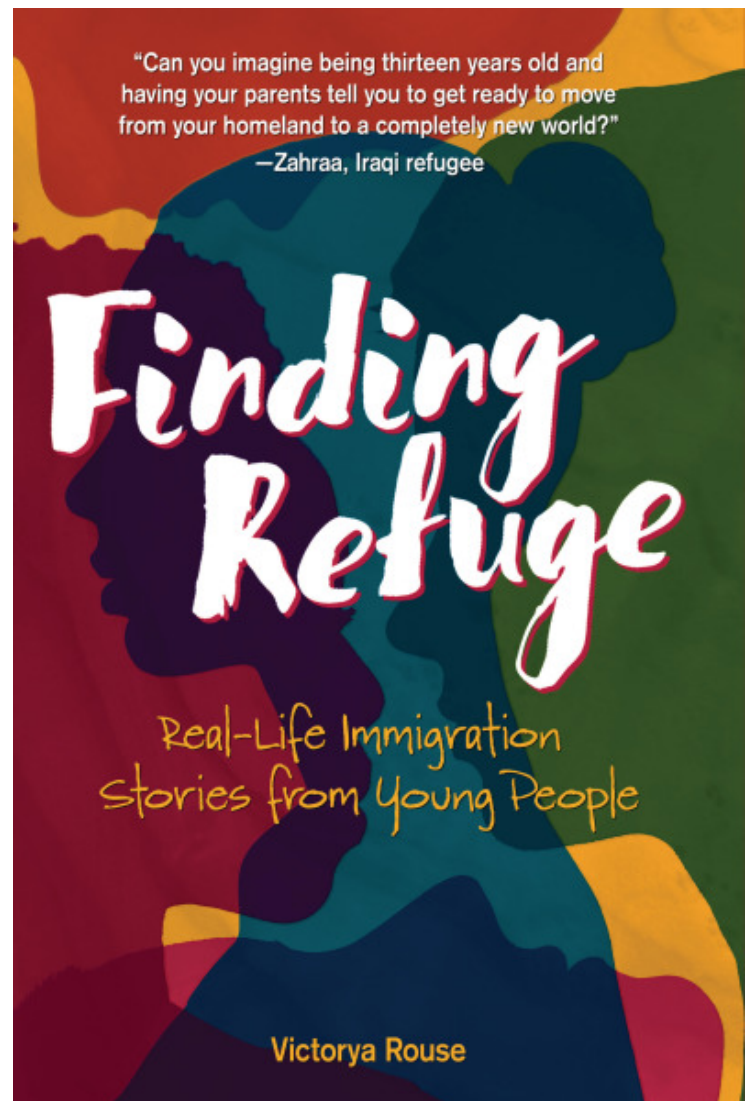
Throughout my career teaching English to immigrants and refugees, I have used journaling and writing personal narratives to develop writing skills. While my primary purpose has always been to help my students develop their language skills, I have often felt my students' stories needed to be shared. When a representative of Lerner-Zest asked me to consider putting together a collection of my students' stories, *Finding Refuge: Real-life Immigration Stories from Young People* was born. This book is an anthology of thirty-six stories from people who became refugees at an early age.

The students included in the book began their stories in their ESL classes by writing in response to journal questions, and then synthesizing their journal entries into essays and stories. What better way to develop writing skills than to write what we know? By asking students to journal on questions they could easily answer in their first language, I help them push their English skills to express what they have to say without wasting time wondering what to write. Putting their stories in writing helps them hold on to their history; too many families lose their immigration stories over time as memories fade. Students' stories also help me to understand them, and where they come from. Hopefully, the stories in this book will help readers understand who refugees are and how they came to be here in the USA.

The stories are simple and straightforward, appropriate for middle and high school students, with reading levels ranging from third grade to ninth grade. The stories began as assignments for English class, but they help the reader see life from the point of view of a young refugee. For example, in answer to the journal question: Who are the people in your family? What are they like? Michael Michelle wrote,

*My mother is a strong woman. I can say she is a warrior woman. She is from Sudan. She grew up in war and lost everything. Her parents were killed, and her husband was killed, but she saved her children. She saved me.*

These simple, yet powerful sentences begin her immigration story.



Nou Vang chose to tell her story with her Hmong story-cloth. Photographs of her cloth illustrate her story which begins with her parent's marriage in the highlands of Laos. She explains that in Hmong tradition the bride's family tells the groom that he cannot have their daughter

*because she is precious... to show the husband that she is special, that they love her, so he will love her too.*

This story helps to illustrate the traditions of the Hmong people as well as Nou's immigration story.

The book includes stories with various levels of complexity, making it accessible for a range of reading levels. Since I teach multiple levels of English Language Development, I sometimes ask students to revisit stories and essays written at an earlier stage of language proficiency, and revise—adding more details, clarifying events. Revisiting their earlier writing allows students to see how far their language skills have come and shows them the value of a multi-step writing process. To create this book, we took revisiting to another level.

Through the magic of social media, I tracked down former students and colleagues and asked if they would be interested in having their stories in this book. I met with each person and caught up with what they had been doing in the years since they left my classroom. I highly recommend this to all teachers, book or no book—these conversations were incredibly powerful for me. We went over their stories together, so each person had a chance to update their story, clarifying any points that they felt they had not been able to express clearly when they did their

original assignments, and giving permission for their words to be used in the book. The words and sentiments are their own. They then added an epilogue, explaining where they are now, their thoughts on life, the American Dream, and what they think Americans should know about refugees.

*"A timely book on an important topic that deserves a spot on any bookshelf, this is especially vital for libraries in areas with young multilingual learners, immigrants, and refugees."*

School Library Journal

*"A beautifully curated anthology presenting the voices of refugees."*

The Kirkus Review, August 2021

To give the stories context and to help the non-immigrant understand the situations which force people to make the difficult decision to leave their homes, I have included maps and brief histories for each of the twenty-six countries represented in these stories. The book is organized by continent and country. Some of these stories began as long ago as the 1970s, while others are as recent as 2017. The introduction and conclusion offer additional context about refugees and specific advice for making refugees feel welcome.



**Victorya Rouse** began her teaching career as Peace Corps Volunteer in Eswatini, Africa. She has been an English Language Development teacher for Spokane Public Schools since 1991. She has taught students from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, at all levels of English language development. Currently she teaches in Spokane's Newcomer Center, teaching English to newly arrived high school aged refugees and immigrants. She also serves on the Board of Directors for Refugee Connections of Spokane. You can contact her at [victoryarouse@gmail.com](mailto:victoryarouse@gmail.com).

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