

RED LEAVES

By Sita Brahmachari

MacMillan
(Lower secondary)



Red Leaves is set in an ancient wood in London and tells the story of three young people who seek refuge there. Aisha, a 13-year-old Somali refugee, struggles when her foster mother announces a new family has been found for her. Zak, 12, is trying to cope with his parent's divorce, while homeless Iona fends for herself on the streets. Each has been uprooted by war, rejection, family break-up and grief. But in Home Wood, unexpected bonds form, and they become stronger by each other and the magic of the place.

BACKGROUND

'I wish I could make them understand how it feels when a bomb falls into the middle of your world and explodes, leaving a crater in your heart.'

Author Sita Brahmachari says *Red Leaves* draws on some harsh real world realities, like refugees, culture, isolation, belonging and wars, but the young lives who find their way to the air raid shelter in a London wood also discover a place where adventures and transformations are possible.

Amnesty International says: 'We are proud to endorse *Red Leaves* because of its sensitive depiction of diversity and the human need for somewhere to call home. It's a novel that encourages readers' empathy, which is a big step towards understanding, tolerance and kindness – all values that help us to uphold human rights.'

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who is Elder? Why doesn't she want to live indoors? How did she end up in Home Wood? What clues are there to her background?
2. What does Aisha's faith mean to her? Why doesn't Liliانا want her to fast? Why does Aisha decide to wear the hijab? How does her faith help her when she runs away?

3. What motivates the adults in the novel? Eg why does Mrs Kalsi look after Iona and submit her picture? Why does Liliانا foster children? Why does Zak's mum leave her family to report on other people's children?
4. All three children express their anger and frustration with the people who have or are parenting them. What are your thoughts on what makes a good parent? Does Mr and Mrs Kalsi act as parents to Iona? What about Shalini to Zak? Is Elder a parent or child?
5. During the book, how do the young people help each other, and what have they lost and gained by the end of the story?
6. Why do you think the author decided to let Elder die in the end?

ACTIVITIES, ROLE PLAY AND WRITING

- Using a map of the world, find the places that the characters have travelled from. Use pins and string to connect them to London.
- Write character names on paper leaves and record facts and impressions about them. Make a display creating branches showing their similarities and connections.
- Draw the wood with four paths travelling to the centre for each character: how did they get there?
- Research one of the conflicts mentioned in the novel – who was involved, when it took place and how it began, eg Somalian civil war, Syrian civil war, Sri Lankan civil war, World War 1.
- Read the letter to the unknown soldier, which can be found at www.1418now.org.uk/letter/new-read/. Write your own letter to him (or to a soldier in the conflict you have researched).
- Draw a picture of Red and record what the dog represents to each of the characters.
- Discuss how young people feel the weight of what is said in the media about their religion, culture, identity and right to belong.

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Article 1: We are all born free and equal. We all have our own thoughts and ideas. We should all be treated in the same way. ▶

Article 2: These rights belong to everybody, whatever our differences.

Article 3: We all have the right to live, to be free, and to feel safe.

Article 6: We all have the right to be accepted everywhere as a person, according to law.

Article 19: We all have the right to make up our own minds, to think what we like, to say what we think, and to share our ideas with other people.

Article 25: We all have the right to enough food, clothing, housing and health care.

FOLLOW UP WORK

Make a paper leaf and imagine, like the characters, you are hiding out in an air raid shelter. Write down how you're feeling/what you're doing.

THEMES AND LINKS

Homelessness

'I'm just one of the great invisibles.' p255
www.shelter.org.uk

Looking after children

'It's a shelter, Aisha told herself. Surely nobody should be denied shelter.' p244
www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk

Refugees and asylum seekers

'I suppose we're all refugees here.' p246
www.refugeeyouthproject.org.uk

FIND OUT MORE

Further resources for teaching around human rights can be found at: www.amnesty.org.uk/education