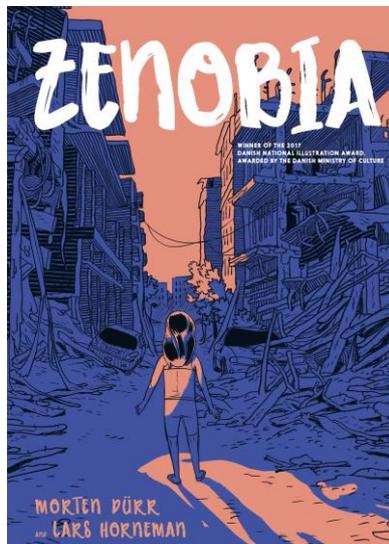


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ZENOBIA

Morten Dürr & Lars Horneman



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

Fleeing for safety, Amina finds herself aboard a small boat filled with people desperately seeking refuge from the war in Syria. When she is tossed overboard in stormy seas, Amina draws courage from memories of home and her mother's stories of Queen Zenobia, an ancient warrior who displayed great strength and resilience.

Zenobia is a quiet, yet evocative, graphic novel that reveals the devastating effects of war. More than that, it poses the question of what happens to the countless many who are caught in its devastating path.

THEMES

- Refugees
- Syria
- War
- Family
- Home
- Displacement
- Courage

WRITING STYLE

Zenobia is a graphic novel that seamlessly interweaves three separate narratives to pay homage to the victims of the Syrian War. The powerful illustrations connect with the alarmingly quiet voice of Amina as she faces an uncertain future. Indeed, the 'silence' that permeates this text is an enduring feature, reminding readers of the tremendous tragedy associated with war, particularly its impact on civilians. More than that, it reflects the enormous struggles faced by refugees fleeing for safety. Because of its lyrical and literary qualities, *Zenobia* is suitable for audiences of varying ages from Upper Primary onwards. It should be noted that the text has a confronting ending.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, take time to examine the front cover. Make predictions about the book's themes, setting and storyline. Consider first reading *Zenobia* by showing the illustrations without the written text. Discuss what written text may accompany these illustrations.
- Examine p1. What is happening in these panels? Who are the people in the boat? How do you know? Turn to p2–3. Why can't we see the eyes of the refugees, apart from Amina's? What comment is the text making about the way in which the world views asylum seekers?
- How do the colours in the opening pages capture the mood of *Zenobia*?
- On p7, why do you think only part of Amina's body is visible in the frame?

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- Discuss the way in which contrasting colours have been used to transition between different threads of Amina's narrative. In addition, discuss the use of language to link story fragments together, for example, lost/found, salty food/sea etc.
- When underwater, Amina reflects on her childhood memories. How are her memories similar to yours? How does this connection help readers to empathise with Amina and become even more invested in the story?
- Why does Amina call on her memories of Mama and home when she falls overboard? How does thinking of Queen Zenobia help her at this time?
- What role does Mama play in Amina's life? How do we know this? What does Amina learn from her mother? What life lessons have you learnt from your mother?
- Why do you think Amina's mother shares stories of Queen Zenobia with her? How do these stories give Amina hope and courage? Who gives you inspiration and courage? Write or draw a reflection to share the influence of a 'hero' in your life.
- *Zenobia* is structured in a non-linear style by interspersing Amina's present-day narrative with her memories of home and the story of Queen Zenobia. Why do you think the author has chosen to tell Amina's story in this way? How do Amina's memories, combined with the story of Queen Zenobia, add complexity and depth to the text?
- Discuss the powerful technique of using wordless page openings in Amina's story. Why are these pages so effective? How does the sparse use of language make the written component even more evocative?
- The illustrator uses three distinct colour schemes to distinguish between different time periods – full colour for Amina's present-day narrative, sepia for her memories of home and a nostalgic pink/blue palette for the story of Queen Zenobia. How do these various colour schemes serve to both connect and differentiate the three storylines?
- Why do the illustrations represent war using limited colour palettes? What colours do you associate with war? Why? Create an image of war using these colours to express your thoughts.
- The author and illustrator use text and graphic matches to connect the three storylines in *Zenobia*. Examine the text connections on p14–16 and 23–24 and the graphic match on p48–49. Why have the storylines been connected in this way?
- Study p48–49. How are these pages similar and different? Why is Queen Zenobia illustrated using a combination of the three colour palettes? What is the significance of the written text on this page – 'I can feel sunrays through the water'?
- Why do the colours from p58–65 become more and more foreboding? What does this tell us about Amina's situation?

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- In what ways is *Zenobia* a story about the underlying strength of women in times of conflict?
- How do the illustrations on p74–75 foreshadow Amina’s fate?
- Why does Amina whisper, ‘Find me’?
- Amina’s story has a tragic ending that readers may find confronting. Why has the author ended the story in this way? If you could rewrite the ending, how would you change it? Why? Discuss the author’s purpose in structuring the story in this way. Write or illustrate an alternative ending.
- Consider companion texts that also share stories of refugees, such as *A Long Walk to Water* by Linda Sue Park, *Stepping Stones* by Margriet Ruurs and Nizar Ali Badr, *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan, or *Home and Away* by John Marsden and Matt Ottley. How do these stories explore the hardships and challenges of such journeys?
- What can be learnt about Syrian customs and traditions from *Zenobia*? Use examples from the text to support your response.
- View the following clips from Behind the News and YouTube to help contextualise the war in Syria (for older students):
 - <http://www.abc.net.au/btn/story/s3525259.htm>
 - <http://www.abc.net.au/btn/story/s3720534.htm>
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_88DhYEAzU
- Consider a class or school project to raise funds for refugees from Syria. Create a promotional campaign to support this cause by making posters to place around school, writing articles for the school newsletter or local newspaper, and creating a blog or website to promote fundraising. See the websites below for further information about helping refugees:
 - Refugee Council of Australia (www.refugeecouncil.org.au)
 - Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (www.asrc.org.au)
 - United Nations Refugee Agency (www.unrefugees.org.au)
 - Unicef Australia (www.unicef.org.au)
 - Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) (www.msf.org.au)
 - International Rescue Committee (www.rescue.org)
 - Oxfam (www.oxfam.org)
 - Australian Red Cross (www.redcross.org.au)

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I wrote the story that later became *Zenobia* in the summer of 2015, when there was a lot of debate about the war in Syria and about refugees. In Denmark the debate was very confrontational. There was a lot of shouting in the media. So I wanted to make a story with a soft, quiet voice that reminds people that war is a tragedy. A story that could serve as a few minutes of silence in honour of the victims of war.

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I decided to ask artist Lars Horneman if he was willing to do a graphic novel with me. I find that comic books have a fantastic ability to convey emotion and invoke empathy. A book like this also serves as an antidote to digital media news reports of war zones and crisis areas, which can be upsetting, confusing and even frightening, because you never seem to get the whole story or a satisfactory explanation.

This is why we decided that *Zenobia* should not depict actual war and fighting, but rather the effect of war. Still this story has a sad ending. Originally we had the main character, Amina, be rescued by divers. That is the reason why the shipwreck *Zenobia*, which lies at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea south of Cyprus, is in the book to begin with. This shipwreck is very popular among divers. So why not have them save Amina's life? After a long while we had to abandon this plan. It did not feel right. When I visit schools in Denmark, I often discuss the ending. As one child put it: *If you had made a happy ending, it might feel like you did not take war seriously*. Of course there are many refugees that escape safely from war and start a new life in peaceful circumstances. But they can only do so if there are people willing to help them achieve this goal. Thank you for reading *Zenobia*.

ILLUSTRATOR MOTIVATION

When Morten Dürr sent me his manuscript for *Zenobia* I didn't hesitate a moment: This was an illustration job I would love to do. Not only because the story is great and sadly urgent, but because it immediately triggered a lot of images and visual narratives.

War is tragic, but makes spectacular scenery. A ruined city has its own strange beauty. The girl's drowning and sinking through the sea are truly powerful images. A sunken ship is fascinating, and the shoals of fish on shades of blue seemed perfect to create a beautiful ending.

The cartoon features three dimensions of time: Present, past and flash back. I chose to represent each of these by their specific color in order to make them easily distinguishable to the reader. Present is shown in natural colors, for the past I chose brown and yellow associating old photographs, and pink/blue are used for the flash backs to the reign of Queen *Zenobia*.

Please enjoy *Zenobia*.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morten Dürr is the award-winning author of 54 books in Danish, which have been translated into nine languages. He lives in Copenhagen with his two daughters. This is his first book to be published in English.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Lars Horneman is an award-winning illustrator who has illustrated over 100 books – for both children and for the education market. He lives in Copenhagen, Denmark.