NOTES FOR TEACHERS

STILL ALIVE: NOTES FROM AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DETENTION SYSTEM
by SAFDAR AHMED

SYNOPSIS

Still Alive is a graphic novel that documents the stories of a number of people Safdar Ahmed met while running art classes in an immigration detention centre in Villawood, Sydney. These stories are told within the broader context of Australia's immigration detention systems.

Those seeking asylum in Australia due to war, strife and violence in their home countries face extraordinary challenges both during their journey and upon arrival. Ahmed's book focuses on people who arrive in Australia by boat. For these people, a long, perilous journey ends with the often equally perilous obstacles they face when dealing with Australia's legal processes, with the privations of onshore and offshore detention centres, and with inadequate health and psychological support.

In addition to documenting the stories of those seeking asylum, *Still Alive* also includes the author's own self-reflective thoughts on the ethics of telling other people's stories, the aesthetics of comics and heavy metal, and the way art can be used for catharsis, healing and redemption after trauma.

Still Alive interweaves journalism, history and autobiography with a striking visual style to bring to light the crucial untold stories of refugees in Australia, and the immigration detention systems they confront here.

THEMES

Still Alive explores a number of significant themes including:

1. <u>The experience of seeking asylum</u>

Safdar Ahmed conducted a series of intensive interviews and conversations with people seeking refuge in Australia. Their experiences, stories, details and memories – told in their own words – form a large part of *Still Alive*. Throughout the book, readers gain an understanding of what it is like to be a refugee fleeing one's home country and living in an immigration detention centre in Australia.

2. <u>Australia's immigration detention systems, policies and procedures</u>

Still Alive presents a comprehensive history of Australia's immigration detention systems, policies and procedures, including how this issue has been used and represented by Australian politicians and the media, and how Australia's legal systems treat asylum seekers.

3. The power of art and storytelling in the face of trauma

In *Still Alive*, Ahmed writes: 'Art can be helpful for trauma – which the brain codes differently to other experiences. Traumatic experience forms a 'hot memory' which spills through time and space – meaning it can be relived and felt as though in the present. Its narrative context is lost, allowing it to penetrate a person's everyday life. Trauma fragments memory, creating deep experiences of sadness, fear, anxiety and shame. Art and storytelling allow trauma to be visualised, externalised, and re-embedded in its context, which provides a greater feeling of safety and distance from it over time. In this sense, art can help us process our experiences on some level. To provide a new sense of control over our story and how it should be told.' (pp.21-22)

4. The ethics of telling other people's stories

Ahmed explores the complex issue of how to ethically tell and represent other people's stories. This is an issue of great current significance in all areas of artistic endeavour. Ahmed directly addresses the complicated ambivalence an artist might feel about this practice.

WRITING STYLE

Still Alive interweaves several genres and storytelling modes.

Some chapters, like the five which document Haider's journey (Exile, Limbo, Capture, Release and Reunion) use conventional non-fiction narrative techniques such as **a narrative arc** (suspense, conflict and resolution), **dialogue, first-person narration, character, scenes** and **setting.**

Some chapters, like 'The Legal Process' and 'The Pacific Solution' employ a more essayistic non-fiction writing style which relies on techniques such as **quotes, facts, research, summary** and **statistics**.

Parts of the book are also told in an autobiographical writing style, and use techniques such as **reflective writing, introspection,** and the **personal, confessional voice.**

The **drawing style** of the book is also worth noting here, as it contributes to the overall voice and style of the book. Safdar uses black and white images drawn with complex linework, cross-hatching, 'halos' around human figures, and many instances of unusual panelling – where a conventional comics panel 'grid' is broken or played with (see for instance p. 8, pp.69-70).

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

In his statement in the book's Afterword, Ahmed writes: 'The genesis of the book goes back a decade, when I started visiting the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre with some friends. Through these visits we founded a small not-for-profit community art organisation Refugee Art Project.'

Upon meeting and starting art classes with the refugees in Villawood, Ahmed writes in *Still Alive*, 'Without putting it into words, some refugees drew their experiences. People from Iran depicted the state repression they had fled. Sri Lankan refugees made images about the way of 2009 and the subsequent persecution they experienced under the Rajapaksa government.

Hazara Afghans drew blood-curdling images of the Taliban. A Rohingya Muslim man from Myanmar depicted the terrible trauma inflicted on his community. It was enough to sate my curiosity about refugees, and it motivated me to draw this comic – to explore these issues in more depth.'

Ahmed was also motivated to create this book to draw attention to these issues in order to inspire other Australians to speak out about the treatment of refugees in this country. Ahmed writes, 'beyond supporting or joining with refugee-led organisations or bodies which offer important legal or practical support to refugees in the Australian community […] it is important to vote thoughtfully, boycott companies which profit from the detention industry, protest in the streets, and write letters to local politicians.'

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Safdar Ahmed is a Sydney-based artist, musician and educator. He is a founding member of the community art organisation Refugee Art Project, and member of eleven, a collective of contemporary Muslim Australian artists, curators and writers. He is the author of *Reform and Modernity in Island* (IB Tauris, 2013) and the Walkley Award-winning documentary webcomic *Villawood: Notes from an immigration detention centre* (2015). He also sings and plays guitar in the anti-racist death metal band Hazeen.

STUDY NOTES

1. Further Resources on Australia's Immigration Systems.

These resources could be used as the basis for an extended discussion, class debate, or a group research project on Australia's detention and immigration systems.

a) Refugee Advice and Casework Service (RACS) provides fact sheets on policies such as fast-track processing, detention release, and refugee law definitions. Read through a couple of these fact sheets. What did you learn that you didn't know before? What surprised you? The UN Refugee Agency has published a comprehensive Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on International Protection. Do Australia's policies measure up to the UN Guidelines?

b) The Australian Government Department of Home Affairs provides annual Immigration Detention Statistics on their website. What were your expectations about these statistics and how did the actual stats differ?

c) In November 2013, a collective of Christmas Island Medical Officers wrote an 81-page Letter of Concern for review by the International Health and Medical Services Management and Executive. It outlines their observations and recommendations for the medical treatment of refugees detained in Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centres.

   Read some of this letter alongside the chapter in *Still Alive* titled 'IHMS' (pp. 169-181). Part of what is discussed in this chapter is the impossible position medical workers find themselves in when working under the IHMS. Behrouz Boochani says: 'IHMS has forgotten the values and dignity of protecting the health of people and is instead protecting its financial interests and benefits.' Dr Jonathan Phillips says, 'It became

obvious to me that IHMS was not a health provider in the usual sense of the word where the focus is to provide best possible care to detainees […] The real master was the government. IHMS had to report to the government and therefore became skewed in its activities.'

Discuss how political power plays a role in the lives of individuals at different levels of a structure. From the patient seeking medical care, to the doctors providing that care, to the IHMS administrators, to the government – how are each of these participants contributing to a system that is failing the most powerless?

d) Pp.143-165 of *Still Alive* is about Australia's 'Pacific Solution' – offshore detention sites on Nauru and Manus Island. The link between the Pacific Solution and the United States government's use of Guantanamo Bay is discussed in the article 'Refugees on Guantanamo Bay: A Blue Print for Australia's 'Pacific Solution'?' by Azadeh Dastyari (accessible via JStor, also attached). It's also explored by Daniel Ghezelbash in his book *Refuge Lost* (Cambridge University Press). Read an interview with Ghelbash here. The notion of a 'black site' is explained here, and is argued by Suverndrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese in this article for The Conversation and developed extensively in their 'Deathscapes' project.

What is a 'black site'? What do you think about Australia's use of black sites? How is Guantanamo Bay portrayed in the media compared to Nauru or Manus Island?

2. Interviewing and Active Listening Exercise

Humans are often naturally talkative, outgoing and self-interested people. For many, listening is hard. Active listening during an interview is much harder than it sounds.

If you're interviewing a subject whose story you want to write about, you need to practise **active listening**. This means paying attention, and *showing* that you are paying attention, every step of the way.

- Get into pairs.
- Make a list of five topics that are probably pretty boring but which anyone would be able to talk about. Things like: going grocery shopping, the layout of someone's house, someone's means of transport today, etc.
- Ask your partner to choose one of the topics to talk about for 5-6 minutes.
- While your partner is talking, don't make notes. Instead, listen actively to everything they say and try to remember as much as you can. Try to maintain eye contact, nod, or make sounds like 'uh-huh' or 'mm' to show that you are listening. Keep your mind actively focused on what your partner is saying.
- Make notes immediately afterwards, trying to write down as much as you can remember.
- Swap and repeat.
- Reflect: how difficult was it to maintain active interest in a boring topic? How well do you think you did as an active listener? Show your partner what you wrote: what did you miss?

3. Monster as Metaphor

There's a wonderful literary and graphic novel tradition of using monsters as metaphors or symbols within a personal narrative.

Read *Still Alive* pp. 16-22 for an example of how Safdar Ahmed has used visual representations of the monster as a way of discussing trauma, abjection, isolation and identity.

Can you think of other examples in popular culture – movies, books, comics – where monsters are used as a metaphor, or a way of commenting on something about society or identity?

Think of *Dawn of the Dead* – zombies are used to comment on consumer society. Frankenstein's monster in Mary Shelley's novel represents the danger of scientific experimentation pushed too far.

Exercise: Create your own monster and give it a meaning! What does your monster look like? Is your monster a version of yourself? Or does it represent some kind of horror in society? What makes your monster emerge, and what does it do? What does your monster consume? Is there a part of your monster that is pitiable/sympathetic as well as terrifying?

4. Other People's Stories – Discussion

In the literary world, there has been fierce debate in recent years about the ethics of telling other people's stories. The debate has centred particularly on questions about race and cultural representation.

To read a bit about how the debate has manifested in Australia, take a look at Jeanine Leane's article in Overland journal. Leane is writing specifically about settler fiction and its representation of First Nations people.

Discussion Questions:

- 'How can contemporary settler fiction writers represent the diverse communities that make up Australia in a way that is *considered* and *considerate*?' -Leane

- 'Why do you want to write Aboriginal characters? Do you know any Aboriginal people? And if so, how do you know them? Have you read any of our books? What is your motivation? What do you want to say? Whose story is it going to be? Have you sought appropriate permission from the parties involved? What do you hope to achieve through this representation?' -Leane

- How can fiction writers undergo the cultural immersion Leane talks about before writing Other characters?

- The kind of curiosity that white writers may bring to an other in their writing is sometimes not also brought to the self. Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda talk about this in their article on the limits of imagination – encouraging writers to bring a sense of curiosity to yourself and your own positionality. What are the limits of your experience and your imagination? What has made you who you are?

5. Comics Storytelling Exercises by Bernard Caleo

Comics is a complex form of literacy that requires many operations by the maker and the reader in order to assemble the words and pictures and panels on the page into a sequence. Here are some cartooning exercises to help students discover their own way of making comics.

1. A three-panel visual punchline comic (suggested time: one hour)

This is a three-panel comics exercise based on the comic strips, like *Garfield* or *Calvin and Hobbes,* that you can find in newspapers.

Designing/working out the strip
Drawing: on a piece of paper, work out the look of a character (start with a stick figure).
Writing: write three very short sentences that the character can say about their life, ie 'I'm Sam. I like fruit. And surfing.' Make the last sentence about something that you can show the character DOING, ie making a cake, driving a car, playing basketball.

Draw three boxes of about 8cm square in a row on a piece of A4 paper. These are your panels. In the first panel, draw a close-up of the character, ie just their head. In the second panel, draw a head-and-shoulders picture so that the reader sees more of the body. In the third panel, draw all of the figure so that the reader can see what is happening around them.

Adding words and speech balloons
Speech balloons take up a lot of space in comics, so put them in first. Draw lightly in pencil and rub out as you work things out. Balance the space in each panel between the speech balloons and the drawings of the character. Write the words, as legibly as possible, THEN draw the balloon around the words. Now lightly, sketch the character in (use stick figures). Work out the word balloon/character balance in all three boxes before going back and making the lines darker.

The idea is that in the third panel, the punchline will be visual, so if Sam is saying 'And surfing' and they are sitting on their board in the sea, the reader sees, for example, triangular shark fins circling around them. Or if the character is making a cake, the third panel might show them opening the oven with clouds of black smoke coming out. Aim for a contrast, or a dissonance, between what the character is saying and what is actually happening in the picture.

This exercise can also be used to show that a politician is lying or that somebody is putting a brave face on their situation but that their situation is actually terrible, ie if the character says in the third panel 'I am very comfortable here' and the image shows that they are handcuffed to the wall of a cell, that would be a powerful punchline.

The real test to see if your comic works is to show it to someone else and ask them to read it, with no explanation from yourself. When they have read it, ask them to describe what's happening. If they can, congratulations! Making a legible comic is difficult. If not, work out how you can make your comic clearer by going back and rubbing out the unclear bit and re-drawing it.

2. A nine-panel, three-tier narrated comic book page (suggested time: two hours)

This exercise will show a character telling the story of an incident. Because it is more complex than the three-panel comic strip, allow more time for the 'design' phase of the task, perhaps an hour or more. Working out what word-bits of the story and what picture-bits of your story belong in which panel is a very important part, perhaps THE most important part of making comics, and is called the 'breakdown' process.

This comic takes place across a 3 x 3 panel grid on an A4 page, where each panel is about 6cm x 9cm. Panel #1 features the name of the story and your name, and perhaps a small image. Maybe leave this panel until you've completed panels #2 to #9, as comic stories often (always!) change during the drawing process. Panels #2 and #3 will introduce the reader to your storytelling character, and the set-up of the story. So the character is 'talking' directly to the reader in these two panels. This finishes the first tier, or row, of boxes.

Aim for the middle tier, that is panels #4, #5 and #6, to SHOW the action taking place in the incident being described by the character. Perhaps the character is in these panels, perhaps not. Even if they are in the panels, any dialogue can be put in a caption box at the top or bottom of each panel, as a voiceover.

For an extra challenge, try 'telling' the incident with no words, ie really make the reader READ those pictures!

The third tier, panels #7 #8 and #9, could feature a return to the storyteller bringing the reader back to the 'present' of the story. Or maybe you need another panel or two to show the incident taking place, so perhaps there's just one or two panels left for your narrator to sign off.

Tip:
Use one of your own tales, or a story your partner told you in the listening exercise, or a joke, or...

Hot tip:
Comics are REALLY space-hungry. In the 'live telling' version of the source material for this exercise, you probably want the story to last about 10 to 15 seconds. No kidding.

A reminder that the real test to see if your comic works is to show it to someone else and ask them to read it, with no explanation from yourself. When they have read it, ask them to describe what's happening. If they can, congratulations! Making a legible comic is difficult. If not, work out how you can make your comic clearer, go back and rub out the unclear bit and re-draw it. Comics, like most arts, is a problem-solving process.