

**hoopla digital:** What was the tipping point that led you to work on this book? Was there a particular moment, event, or catalyst that made it the right time to share these stories and insights with the world?

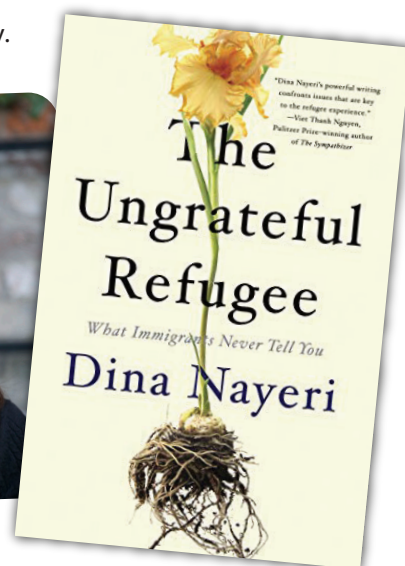
**Dina Nayeri:** Becoming a mother in late 2015, then watching the world suddenly change in 2016, was a huge catalyst for me. With the Brexit vote and the Trump election, I became aware of how the attitudes of the world's luckiest, most secure people had changed. They had forgotten their duty to the outcasts, the suffering. It was so different from when I had arrived in 1989, when we felt all around us the sense of American duty and pride. Even our asylum officers seemed to have internalized the humanitarian nature of their job. Suddenly it seemed all that was gone—of course it happened slowly, but for me it was a moment of realization, a cold feeling that my welcome was tainted. There was so much shock in the air, but for me there was also an old familiar fear that I thought I had put away. I began to worry for my daughter. And I decided it was time to say something about the state of things as me, without the veil of fiction.

**hd:** What was your process for collecting these stories, and how did you go about assembling the greater narrative around them?

**DN:** The larger narrative formed so organically because I had lived this story and knew its secrets—all the small moments that seem like nothing to others but sting so bitterly for us. There are so many small humiliations and indignities—so much private calculation. I wanted to show these things not just using my own story but by turning my focus outward, to other people. I also felt ready to return to the camps: I hadn't visited one since I lived in one thirty years ago. So I traveled to two camps in mainland Greece (which was difficult and also incredibly moving for me). I reached out to refugee help communities in London and across Europe. It was a slow process, being allowed back in. I would write to people and ask to be introduced to this person or that, and slowly I'd become a part of their communities. In the camps or in the homes of settled refugees, I would sit and have tea and listen for hours and hours. The story gathering process was at times difficult, but it was also a peaceful and moving time. I didn't have creative worries. I just listened without any plan, the way friends listen to private stories. It was nice to forget my role as witness and as the person who would ultimately shape the story. I didn't worry about narrative challenges until later, when I was alone.

**hd:** What emotional impact did returning to these individual people, stories, and points in time have on you? Were there recollections that were particularly difficult to capture or passages that were exceptionally satisfying to complete?

**DN:** Some of the passages (in the "camp" chapter especially) were written almost exactly as you read them into my voice recorder, breathlessly, angrily, tearfully. Of course, I was meticulous as I edited the stories, but sometimes I read a passage and see that a sentence has remained perfectly intact, the way it was spoken into my voice memo. I think that's why the chapter on my return feels so raw. There are events from my camp visits that I will never forget, and I wrote and rewrote them, trying to capture the mix of emotions that I felt—the fear, the worry, the despair, the sorry and regret. There is the moment in the book when this family I had come to like offered me their child and I had to find a way to explain with the child sitting just there...or when the women began dancing and I sat with the grandmothers, feeling a hundred years old. Some of these moments have worked their way into the deep places of my psyche.



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# 12 QUESTIONS WITH DINA NAYERI

**hd:** It must have been a hurdle and an honor to gain the trust of people who have had their trust broken time and time again. How did you earn their trust enough that they were willing to share their stories?

**DN:** It was an honor, but not a hurdle. They shared their stories so freely, I was surprised at first. I thought it would be a challenge, since their stories are all they have left and I was a stranger. But I didn't have to spend any time convincing them of my good intentions. They heard the premise of the book and immediately agreed. Maybe it was because I spoke to them in Farsi, and so there was some privacy from the Greek and English workers. Or maybe because they had nothing left but their story, they craved to have them dramatized in the Western way, to preserve them. Many agreed to be recorded. Others didn't, but told their stories with such openness and generosity. After a few days, I realized that I would have the opposite problem to what I had anticipated. I had to guard my time, to make choices among the stories. I know from personal experience that refugees can tell their stories for hours, in a hundred ways, because their primary job is telling those stories. At some point I had to be brutal with myself and think of the larger project. It was easy to tell when to stop. For the first few hours as they told their stories, it was all physical detail and the urgency of the telling. But then there would come a moment when everything would slow down, the story would slow down, wanting to conclude, but the teller wouldn't let it. Everyone around the table or the floor cloth would succumb to lamenting, and the new details would be fewer and farther between. In those moments, I knew I had to go, but it was so hard to extricate myself. I usually saved fifteen minutes at the end for a long Iranian goodbye, with many hugs and kisses. "Tell these rich governments," they kept saying, "to think about their soul." It was funny that in their abject moments, these refugees were thinking smarter, higher-order thoughts than most of our politicians. (That's why it was so gratifying when Representative Tlaib wrote to us about the book. I kept remembering the mothers and fathers who had said "tell these rich governments..." and here was one of our own, in a place where she can help us.)

**hd:** If readers or listeners want to explore Iranian culture and history more deeply, or if they are interested in learning more about the refugee journey (from Iran or from elsewhere), what other books would you suggest?

**DN:** Eva Hoffman's iconic memoir, *Lost in Translation*. BBC Correspondent Nick Thorpe's journalism from the primary migrant route into Europe (through the West Balkans), *The Road Before Me Weeps*. Anton Gill's *The Journey Back from Hell*, a powerful collection of oral testimonies from survivors of the Holocaust. From among the Iranian writers of my own generation, I recommend the novels of Jasmin Darznik (for pre-revolutionary Iran) and Laleh Khadivi (for detail into Iranian culture before and after the revolution and in America). Lately, I have my eyes on *No Friend but the Mountains*, Behrouz Boochani's memoir of his flight and incarceration on Manus island, a story he wrote on a phone and smuggled out of the prison.

**hd:** Much of this book revolves around the concept of waiting. Can you tell us more about that—not only in regards to how it affects refugees but also in regards to how it has affected you as an author, particularly as you anticipated publication day for this revelatory and personal book?

**DN:** Waiting is how we exert power over each other. Roland Barthes famously said, "To make someone wait, constant prerogative of all power, age-old pastime of humanity." So yes, I feel it too. Being made to wait for other people's judgments is humiliating and undignified—it dulls the joys that drove me to write: intellectual curiosity, the desire to make the world better, the absolute love of stories. I try not to care, but I'm human. In our full, settled lives we flex our muscles all the time by making others wait. And we're made to wait too: by lovers, by one's children, and by professional colleagues...all three are agony. None are as crushing as being made to wait just to start a life, though...in wealthy nations, we are misusing this power, making the suffering of the world wait without permission to work, without school, without the right to know their fate in a timely way so they don't have to watch their children transform from confident, curious little people into timid, scared creatures spending their days in idleness.

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**hd:** Assuming teddy bears are overabundant and men's shoes in small sizes are in short supply, do you have any suggestions for how those who have been moved by your book can practically and meaningfully show their gratitude and support for refugees?

**DN:** I don't expect them to be grateful to refugees, just as I don't expect refugees to be grateful to them. Everyone's gratitude is private. But if they want to be loving, and to help, I would say there are different things at every stage:

To help those waiting outside your borders, join lobbying organizations that help bring to light some of the border injustices and the flaws and misuses of asylum law.

To help those in camps, help charities like Refugee Support, who provide aid with dignity. Volunteer to teach classes in camps.

To help new arrivals into your communities: show curiosity, welcome them, invite them to join you in a hobby. Don't ask for their escape story. Don't be solicitous of their gratitude. Don't make a show of offering charity. Offer anonymously. Watch out for their dignity. Ask for something. What they want most of their old identity, their former pride, is to be of use to someone.

**hd:** Being a refugee involves facing innumerable uncertainties, including having to discard an identity without there being a new one guaranteed. Can you tell us more about these uncertainties and the bravery it takes to face them?

**DN:** All of life is uncertain for the displaced. I think a proper answer to this question requires the entire book.

**hd:** You talk about developing an "itch" as a child but also about moving frequently even now as an adult. This habit or compulsion—where do you think it will take you next? Are there any new places you yearn to go? Are there familiar places you'd like to return to and experience again anew?

**DN:** Everything has changed now that I have a child. I want to stay beside her and to relive it all with her. I do crave to return to Iran. I can't because it's too dangerous, but that's my ultimate wish, to return to my first home, to see a new generation of grandmothers in the village. I miss the grandmothers so much.

**hd:** The title—*The Ungrateful Refugee*—is so provocative and poignant. Did you know that you wanted it to be the title from the outset, or, if not, how did you settle upon it?

**DN:** I wanted to write a book that reveals the many private thoughts refugees and migrants don't share with the native-born because they are ashamed or grateful or fearful or traumatized. As I see it, the sentiment that most often keeps these secrets hidden is misplaced gratitude and the incessant posturing of that gratitude for the benefit of the native-born (and refugees don't do this on their own; the expectation is communicated to them in a hundred unspoken ways). And so, I thought, before any non-migrant can ever understand these private calculations, they must understand why they haven't already had access to them. They have to understand the burdens they've (perhaps unknowingly) put on the displaced. The title isn't really about gratitude itself: gratitude is inevitable among migrants and refugees. Every refugee I know is deeply thankful. But it should be a private thing, between a person and her god, her community, the institutions and friends who have lifted her up. It shouldn't be some commodity used to appease the angry, entitled acquaintances who happened to be born in safety and privilege, and had very little to do with any migrant or refugee's rescue. The title "ungrateful refugee" doesn't refer to me or any refugee that actually exists: I have never known someone like that. It is a reference to the use of that phrase by unthinking people who want to preserve their own unearned power over their displaced neighbors.

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**hd:** Have any authors inspired you? Did any inspire this work in particular? If so, who?

**DN:** Margaret Atwood, Lydia Davis, Marilynne Robinson (my workshop teacher), Alice Munro. They are the godmothers. Lately I've been returning to Kazuo Ishiguro and Richard Yates. I enjoy the wit and precision of Chabon and Eugenides. This work was inspired by events in the world, and my daughter, and partner, but if I had to choose a writer who was actively influencing my tastes at the time I was writing, I would say Rachel Cusk.

**hd:** Immigration and refugees are increasingly a focal point of our national conversation. In what ways do you hope your book contributes to or shifts that conversation?

**DN:** I hope it brings focus onto the intangible ways we damage the displaced. I hope it makes people think about dignity, shame, and the many private calculations that people make when they're at a social disadvantage to others, and how awful it is when that disadvantage happens suddenly for reasons you can't control. I hope it makes people understand how much of what we think is a functioning system is actually run by woefully unqualified people with hostile motives and hunger for power, and how many fates depend on the judgments of the few. And yet, how rarely do we speak about the accident of birth, and how little humility we have about our duty to our fellow man, considering that we haven't earned our privileged places at all.

