



# *The People Smuggler:* *the true story of Ali* *Ali Jenabi, the Oskar* *Schindler of Asia*

Robin de Crespigny

## Book blurb

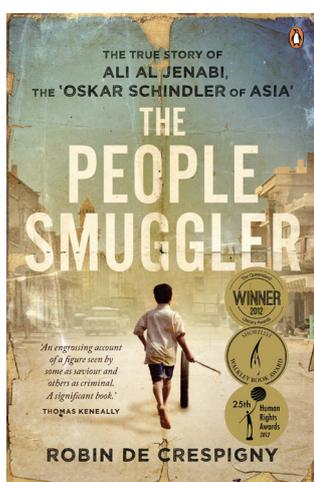
'...the most extraordinary book. It has opened my eyes in a life-changing way' **Missy Higgins**

A passionate and personal true story about love and loss, overcoming insurmountable odds, endurance, heroism and survival.

Ali's golden childhood in Iraq is taken from him when his family becomes victim to a dangerous dictator. After a daring escape Ali becomes a people smuggler in order to save his mother and siblings on an epic journey of desperate mountain treks, boats on high seas and the shadowy world of displaced people. When he is finally caught by the Australian authorities he comes to be seen, not as the heinous criminal they had hoped, but as the 'Oskar Schindler of Asia.'

'... tight, powerful and extraordinarily well written... a book which glories in the strength, courage and compassion of the human spirit.' **Bruce Haigh, The Canberra Times**

**Sebastian Faulks's 'Favorite book of the Year' in the New York Times, UK Guardian & Observer**



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## RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper secondary and tertiary students (ages 14+)

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

**Learning areas:** English; Humanities and Social Sciences

**General capabilities:** Literacy; Critical and Creative thinking; Personal and Social Capability; Ethical Understanding; Intercultural Understanding

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

It encourages students to identify and empathize with the perspectives of others, helping to change hearts and minds from fear to compassion, promotes discussion around personal ethics, social justice, human rights and displacement, and encourages creative and imaginative writing.

## THEMES

- Love of family
- Resilience & survival
- Persistence & courage
- Grief, loss & survivor guilt
- Betrayal & deception
- Forgiveness & hope
- Identity & belonging

## PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia

## PUBLICATION DETAILS

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## Plot summary

*'...gripping, thrilling, humorous and epic... compulsive reading'* **Helen Crompton, The West Australian**

Ali lives an idyllic childhood in Iraq with his family until Saddam Hussein seizes power in a bloodless coup. Ali's father is imprisoned for speaking out against him and Ali, at the age of ten, has to take over as head of his family.

He supports them by selling cigarettes in the markets after school but as a teenager Ali rebels. In a purge, Ali is imprisoned and tortured.

In order to gain his families freedom, he is forced to seek a desperate escape across six countries to Australia on an international odyssey through shady worlds of fake passports, crowded camps, and illegal border crossings.

He's left behind his childhood and the girl he loves. Every day is uncertain but he sets in motion a plan, to first get himself to Australia, then to apply for his family to follow.

In Indonesia it all goes awry when he is swindled and stranded on the beach by Omeid, an unscrupulous people smuggler.

Ali is devastated and his money is gone but he is offered a way out. If he works for Omeid he will put one of Ali's family on each boat for free.

Ali agrees, but after finding himself in a world of treachery, deception and duplicity, he decides to become a smuggler himself and, in the process he helps five hundred other Iraqi's escape persecution.

During this time, he meets Eni. They fall for each other and have a child but in a final moment of betrayal, Ali is captured by Australian Federal Police and tried for people smuggling.

Imprisoned in Darwin, his wife and child still in Indonesia, Ali realises he has arrived at his destination but not in the way he had dreamed! But his family and five hundred others are now free.

*'A story every Australian should read... a complex mixture of love of family and a hard-edged determination to survive'* **Bruce Elder, Sydney Morning Herald**

## About the author

**Robin de Crespigny** has a BA in Literature and a Post Grad in film. She is a Sydney author, filmmaker, screenwriter, producer, director and former Directing Lecturer at the Australian Film, Television & Radio School.

She began writing a film about the refugee *Ali Jenabi* but after discovering the epic breadth of his journey realised a book would serve his story better.

It took three years of research, with hundreds of hours in conversation with Ali, retracing his footsteps in Indonesia and chasing down records of a lengthy trial in Darwin.

It was published in 2012 and became the highest selling Australian book in the Sydney Writer's Festival. Won *Best Non Fiction* at the *Queensland Literary Awards*, the *25th Human Rights Award for Literature*, and was a finalist in the *Walkley Book Awards*. In 2013 was shortlisted for the *Nib Prize for Research*, the *General Non-Fiction Book of the Year* and *Newcomer of the Year* at the *Australian Book Industry Awards*, long listed for the *Stella Prize*, won the *Ned Kelly Award for Non Fiction* and became a nation-wide bestseller.

## Author's inspiration

Robin de Crespigny was inspired by Ali's phenomenal journey and the desire to help him get justice. He had been denied a visa to stay in Australia after getting his family, and five hundred others escaping persecution to freedom.

She could see how his story could touch people who had previously never asked themselves what they would do if they were in the same situation. She could show how it is not all black and white.

It also allowed her to write about the plight of refugees from their point of view, and help Australians to be more understanding and compassionate towards those less fortunate than ourselves, and to gain respect for them as fellow human beings.

Intriguingly, Ali was also completely opposite to the 'heinous criminal' people smuggler profile we were used to hearing.



He was just an ordinary but insightful guy with high moral standards and a great sense of humour. He took his punishment with grace even though he could not see how bringing so many to safety was a crime. His loyalty and courage were deeply inspiring to her.

Plus it opened a door to a culture far from the author's, where she tasted terror, the despair of having to leave one's home, statelessness, and through the emotions associated with love, grief, family and life-changing choices, she recognized how these emotions are comparative to all our lives in a relative way, and thus universal.

For someone to take you into the darkest moments of their life, a life they had never wanted to relive, she saw as a privilege which needed to be shared.

*'An utterly gripping portrait of a man attempting to retain his dignity and humanity.'* **Mid-West Times (WA)**

## Writing style

*The People Smuggler* is highly unusual in its structure and style.

It is not a novel because it is a true story. Nor a traditional biography because it is written as if the author is the subject. Nor a memoir because it is Ali's story not the author's. Nor is it ghost written because ghost-writers are paid to write the subjects story as they would like it to be seen, neither of which occurred. So it tends to be categorized just as non-fiction.

In a Three Act structure which is common in screenwriting, the author tells this true story in the first person present, as if the author is Ali seeing the world through his eyes.

This puts the reader in Ali's shoes in a life that many readers may not be able to imagine living, in a way that they could experience his journey as he did, and empathize enough to ask themselves 'what they would have done if they were in the same situation'.

But to do this the author had to imagine everything as if she went through it too, like making a video in her head in order to describe it exactly. Thus getting inside Ali's motivations more than an objective telling of the tale would do.

Writing in the first person also required the author to find Ali's 'voice'. A task exacerbated by her being

a white Western woman and him an Arabic Muslim man. The melding she has produced, which she describes as the essence of him, is a construct of them both, in the English language as he might have spoken it. It creates a bridge which allows his story to more affectively reach a Western audience.

*'...one of the most immensely readable and most deeply thought-provoking books... a reminder of the power of literature to capture stories that not only change the world but also change the way we think.'*

**Echo Magazine**

## Pre reading

Read the **Author's Note** at the front of the book with the class before they read it to establish the context and understand the voice.

Personal circumstances of some students, especially refugees, may need to be considered.

The 2nd Chapter 'The Kindness of Strangers' (P30) is set in Iraq with scenes in Abu Ghraib prison and needs to be introduced with consideration of the physical violence and emotional struggles that are detailed in the book.

This story will support students to become responsible local and global citizens. As detailed in the General Capability of Intercultural Understanding; this story will compliment

*"students learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect"*

## GEOGRAPHICAL THINKING

- Enlarge and photocopy the two maps in the front of the book plus a map of the world.
- Locate Iraq on a map and begin a KWL (What I know, What I want to know, what I learned) chart together. This can be completed together during the course of reading the text as a class.
- After locating Iraq on a map, discuss what countries and oceans you would have to cross to reach Australia, with ideas on how people without resources or travel documents might achieve that.



## Activities & discussions

### EMPATHIC BOAT ACTIVITY

*Note: It may not be appropriate to conduct this activity with some students (students with PTSD, Anxiety etc). The teacher's professional discretion should be exercised before beginning this activity*

- Before students arrive use masking tape to create the outline of a boat on the floor to fit the class sitting comfortably but close together inside the line.
- Prepare the students before they enter the class that they are about to complete a silent reflective activity. Ask students to enter the space quietly and to sit inside the boat shape
- Hand out pen and paper. Tell the students that they will listen to a short narrative and that they will be asked to respond by writing down their thoughts at certain points in the story. Assure them that this is an imaginative activity.

*Narrate:*

- *“You have arrived home from school and there are tickets on the kitchen table. You have to leave immediately with your family to an unknown destination with no return. But you can only take six items with you and no pets.*
- *Think carefully about what items you might choose and make a list of those six items to pack in your bag.*
- *You arrive at the docks with your family to get on to the boat, but are told that now you are only allowed to take four items. Revise your list.*
- *You are now instructed that each family is only allowed to take one bag per family. You now have to reduce your items to two. You have to leave your bag behind.”*

*Activity:*

- Discuss why and what you decided to leave.

*Continue Narration:*

- *Imagine you are now told that there is not enough room on the boat. Each family will have to leave one member behind. You are not allowed to choose yourself. Make your difficult decision.*

*Activity:*

- Write a letter to the person that will have to stay.
- Select willing students to read their letter out.

This can be a very moving experience even if students just listen to others.

*Continue Narration:*

- *Imagine that you are now on the boat. It is rough sea. There are no toilets. There are crying children, there are people who are sea sick. You have no idea how long this journey will take. Food is scarce. Fresh water is running out. People are fighting over limited resources.*

*Activity:*

- Write down how you are feeling
- Discuss how they feel about being in the isolation of a boat at sea in close proximity with people they may not know well, with no idea how long it will be.

### HERO OR VILLAIN? THINKING FROM TWO PERSPECTIVES

*Thomas Kenally says on the cover of The People Smuggler; ‘An engrossing account of a man seen by some as a saviour and others as a criminal.’*

- Discuss the title with the class. What images or concepts does this conjure up? What makes Ali a *hero* or *villain* in their eyes.
- Discuss how people smugglers have been demonised with descriptions as “absolute scum of the earth...the vilest form of human life” by an Australian PM
- Get students to divide a page in half with ‘villain’ on one side and ‘hero’ on the other and list attributes.
- Divide into debating teams to represent either side. Teacher should ensure respectful debate.
- After the debates discuss how it has affected student’s opinions.

### WALKING IN ALI’S SHOES

- Divide a page in half with ‘the same’ on one side and ‘different’ on the other.
- Imagine yourself in Ali’s shoes in key situations. List how you would handle those situations if it was you.
- Choose one incident from the ‘different’ column and explain how you would have done it differently.



## ALI AND OSKAR - SIMILARITIES

Thomas Keneally has written a book *Schindler's Arch* and Steven Spielberg has made a movie *Schindler's List*.

- Who is Oskar Schindler? Encourage students to inquire into the life of Oskar Schindler.
- Why is Oskar Schindler so revered? What are the similarities to Ali?
- Students create a mindmap that details the similarities between Ali and Oskar.

Questions to compliment Mindmap:

- Does Ali's story encourage you to feel helping others can give meaning, empowerment and pleasure to our lives?
- Does this story warn us that we must develop compassion and understanding in order for change?

## EMPATHIC WRITING ACTIVITY: "THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHARACTER"

The Author says: *'when writing The People Smuggler I tried to put myself inside Ali's situation and picture it. Then let the words fall freely onto the page, often in a muddle that lacked any literary merit. Then began the struggle to find the best way to craft those words to expand character and tell the story, and when they were not moving the story forward it was a small death each time I had to sacrifice bits I loved, but essential.'*

- Think of a dilemma that someone you know is facing. Try to write a paragraph about this situation in the third person/past.
- Rewrite the same paragraph in the first person/present
- Analyse some stories that are read out and note the affect of objectivity, when you stand outside your characters and observe them, and subjectivity, where you write from inside of your characters as if you are them, as the Author did in *The People Smuggler*.
- Discuss what a powerful device this is for a writer and in what sort of stories they might chose to use it.

The Author explains: *'To get the affect of 'first person' in film we do it by where we position the camera. We*

*let it become the eyes of the character so the audience sees the world as they do.'*

- Use a paper cup as the lenses of a camera and find the shots you would take to get this affect of seeing the world through the eyes of a character.

## FINDING THE CHARACTER'S VOICE

The author claims she *'found Ali's voice once she realised it was all about rhythm, which was best discovered when read aloud.'*

- Write a paragraph about your best friend or pet as if you are him/her. Let the writing sing poetically.
- Revise which devices the writer can use - imagery, metaphor etc
- Then read it aloud to the class.

## LOVE AND HATE- WRITING ACTIVITY

- Describe how you felt reading the section when Ali's mother met Saddam Hussein to get his father's release? Chapter 2
- Write your version of the letter Ali wrote to persuade Saddam.
- Ali was very close to his mother. Explore his love/hate relationship with her.
- Divide a page in half with 'love' on one side and 'hate' on the other . Choose an incident from either side and write a letter to Umi reflecting back on the incident, from jail in Australia

## WHO IS HASSAN PILOT? CHARACTER PROFILE

- How did Hassan Pilot get his name?
- Map Ali's relationship with his father.
- In what ways did his fathers values shape Ali?
- Is Ali justified in feeling as though he betrayed his father?
- Writing task: As if standing in Ali's shoes, write a letter to Hassan Pilot explaining how you feel.



## Questions

The following questions could be used as part of class discussion or in the style of 'book club'. They could also act as prompts for writing tasks.

### PART ONE: IRAQ 1970-1999

- When Ali was going off the rails, what did he feel when his mother discovered him bloody and drunk in the bathroom. P47
- What do the roosters symbolise? P52
- What is your reaction to the guard's behaviour in the tea shop? What does it reveal about Ali? P61
- How does the author create an ominous feeling without giving anything away? P77
- What do his Uncle's actions reveal about Iraqi family values? P85
- Why was the arrival of a coffin with three bags of sand so unfair for the family to receive? What does it say about the regime they live under? P110
- Finally they experience kindness. Who helps them, how and why do they do this? P113
- Was Ali right not to trust Fadi? Describe what kind of smuggler Fadi was. P137
- How is Australia described? What is the process of getting there? Where are the flaws in this? P143

### PART TWO: INDONESIA 1999-2003

- Should Ali work for Omeid? What are the pros and cons? Why is it so hard for him to make a decision? P161
- Smuggling is so much more difficult than Ali anticipated? List the tasks that had to be accomplished and with whom, to get a boat out?
- What aspects of his personality make Ali good at the job? How does he feel about being in control? Does it change him?
- Why does Ali "feel (his) blood running cold" on page 194? List all of the complications of this disaster.
- Are you surprised at Resa's behaviour? What warning signs were there?
- What does Ali's ride on the Big Dipper at the theme park symbolise? P179&199
- Why is Ali's warning futile? P219
- What does Ali mean when he says "I wonder

how he could be so cavalier with such precious cargo"? P226 Why does this stand out to Ali?

- What does his promise to Eni mean about his past? P232
- What makes Ali cry tears of joy at his wedding? P246
- What makes Ali as sad as he is joyful at the reunion of his family? And what is his reward? P250
- Select one image that symbolises the happiness and freedom they now have?
- Why doesn't Ali get on the boat with his family? P257
- Imagine the devastation Ali feels as he thinks his family has drowned. Write a brief passage describing his despair.
- What is your response to the AFP spying on Ali despite people smuggling not being a crime in Indonesia until 2010.
- What is Ali's comment on the 'children overboard scandal'?
- Draw a concept map of the emotions Ali goes through in chapter 14.
- List the terrible conditions of the Bangkok jail.
- What is the irony at the end of this section?

### PART THREE: AUSTRALIA 2003-2012

- What is the significance of the title 'A Dangerous Man' of this chapter?
- What is the devastating news his mother brings home from Iraq?
- What is the injustice about the way the Weasal is treated?
- How does Ali feel when Saddam is finally caught?
- Why do Ali's lawyers try and make a deal?
- What is revealed about the notion of 'queue jumping'? How does this challenge the popular rhetoric?
- How does the treatment of the guards differ to previous jails Ali has been in?
- How does Ali feel about so many of his fellow prisoners being aboriginal?
- Why is detention "more terrible than jail"?
- "They kill you not by torture or execution, but by



hopelessness and despair". How does it feel this is happening in our own country? P329

- How did Ali feel when Kate Watson's recommended for a visa, was suppressed?
- Why do all of these people fight for Ali?
- Should so much government money been spent on this case?
- How did you feel to hear Intisar had waited for Ali all this time?
- Explain the quote "The rosy glow of liberty begins to dim and I realise I am back on the treadmill of endurance." p341
- What immense pleasure does Ali get from having a heart attack?
- What did you feel about Intisar's plight and the cultural difference around love in the world?
- How does Ali take the final rejection of Intisar's visa. What does it say about him as a man?
- Discuss the irony or otherwise of the Chapter Titles



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