

Book Review

Refugee Sandwich: Stories of Exile and Asylum



Peter Showler

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R*efugee Sandwich* ought to be compulsory reading for every Canadian member of Parliament, and is recommended reading for anyone who votes in this country.

Peter Showler has a careers-worth of experience working in all aspects of Canadian refugee law. It is a tribute to his immense insight that *Refugee Sandwich* is his chosen contribution at this point, the culmination of well nigh thirty years of reflection. The book goes right to the heart of the central problem of refugee law and policy here and elsewhere: positions on all sides of public discourse are entrenched, no one is learning anything new, innovation is stifled by a need to defend each corner. It is impossible to express any complexity in this atmosphere, let alone shed any light on the labyrinth which is refugee decision-making.

Showler is an advocate. At a juncture when many advocates would have written a political tract, led a non-governmental organization, joined a think tank, or published a text, Showler has given us a work of what might be called 'fiction'. It is a crowning achievement.

Refugee Sandwich is principally comprised of thirteen stories told from and about different positions in Canada's refugee determination process. We are introduced to lawyers and judges, interpreters and decision-makers, bureaucrats, refugees and claimants. Even the much maligned refugee protection officer has a voice. Heroes and villains are largely off-stage. Despotic regimes and genocidaires are condemned, but this is never the focus of the narrative. The people we meet are too complex for easy labels.

Each story works its way around a sharp grain of truth, aiming at the oyster's trick. Some are told in the first person, some with omniscient narration. Every pearl is not evenly formed, but then each bit of truth is not an equally attractive starting premise.

Ironically, that became one of the issues in the case, whether or not the woman was from the north. It was so obvious, not worth

a moment's thought. If they had only asked me. But of course I am the interpreter. I am not a witness. There is a line and it cannot be crossed. I accept that the law requires certain immutable formalities ("The Go-Between", 166-67).

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The claimant had not proved his case but she was still pierced by that one glimpse of pain that had transfigured Vasily's mask for just an instant. That was real pain, no doubt, and it had come in response to the question about the first incident at the school. But so what? What did it relate to? It was a crack in the story, nothing more ("Looking for the Little Things", 209).

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...some portion of her story would have to be tested, and so I ask, looking into the eyes of a woman who is not there, who finds herself somehow not dead, her body sitting in a strange chair in a strange land answering strange questions from a white man, questions that are repeated in her language by the large kind Hutu man sitting next to her ("Ghost", 69).

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Beth looked carefully at her husband, who was obviously pleased with himself. Over his shoulder she saw a woman in a thin dress walking away over dry and barren ground, holding the hands of two young girls ("Circumcising Mutilation", 123).

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...he didn't say anything for a minute. He didn't look at the members. He did glance over at me and for once I was smart enough to shut up and wait. Finally he thanked her for her testimony and said he had no more questions ("A Crack in the Mirror", 161).

Refugee Sandwich creates a kaleidoscopic view of Canada's refugee system. With each small shift, the picture fractures and reforms, the light refracts differently; it is impossible to remember the preceding image. In this way,

the book mirrors the dilemma of refugee policy making – each position sees a new problem.

Some part of me wishes that the book were longer. My other quibble with it is that Showler introduces us to more decision makers than lawyers, judges, bureaucrats and interpreters. These others are a freshening contrast and in the additional pages I pine for, I would like to meet more of them.

My greatest fear for this book is that it will not reach the audience that would most benefit from reading it. The work is an ambitious attempt to engage a wide range of people in re-imagining refugee determination. Those who are most

likely to read it are, of course, those who are already mired in the complexities it presents. For us, there is a creative affirmation. But the book will fall short of what I imagine to be Showler's aim if it is not read more broadly, and most especially those with broad responsibilities for Canadian public policy. This is an important marketing challenge, one what would be furthered by a Donner prize nomination.

CATHERINE DAUVERGNE
Canada Research Chair in Migration Law
University of British Columbia.