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The Day War Came

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

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Media type:

Book

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In the spring of 2016 Nicola Davies wrote a poem in response to our government's refusal to give sanctuary to 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees. It drew on a news story of a refugee child refused entry to a school because there wasn't a chair for her to sit on. The poem was published on **The Guardian** website accompanied by images of empty chairs by Jackie Morris and Petr Horacek. In a remarkable outpouring of support, hundreds of people posted their own images of empty chairs on the website. This is the picturebook of Nicola's poem with illustrations by Rebecca Cobb, endorsed by **Amnesty International**, with £1 from every sale going to the charity **Help Refugees**. The poem itself is understated and eloquent, bringing the terrifying experiences of a young refugee within the imagination and understanding of a child reader of the same age who, thankfully, might never face the same trials. In particular, I like Davies' succinct expression of the long-term psychological effects of conflict: 'But war had followed me. It was underneath my skin, behind my eyes, and in my dreams. It had taken possession of my heart.' This sense of the pervasiveness of war finds expression, too, in the anxiety and fear found in the people to whom she might turn for help: 'War was in the way that doors shut when I came down the street.' In contrast, the children offering chairs at the optimistic end of the poem is a perfect metaphor for the sympathy and hospitality that has so often been missing in the response of rich European countries to the recent refugee crisis. Rebecca Cobb's illustrations have a childlike quality that reminds me of the kind of pictures that refugee children might draw themselves, in which an innocent eye and naïve technique underline the awful experience that the drawings of guns, bombs, broken buildings and broken bodies can only inadequately but dreadfully express. This is a book to be admired for what it says and how it says it. It deserves a wide audience.

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