

# The Refugee Summer Short Guide

## The Refugee Summer by Edward Fenton

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## Overview

In the summer of 1922, when Greece was at war with Turkish Anatolia, Nikolas lived with his mother, caretaker of the Villa Pandora, in Kifissia, an aristocratic suburb of Athens. Everything was quiet and peaceful, until the Averys (an American family) rented the villa. Soon after, the striking Madame Arnauld, her daughters Nadine and Stephanie, and their Greek "uncle" moved into the villa next door. High-spirited, bored with grown-ups and in search of adventure, the five children decide to form a secret society called the Pallikars, after a group of young men and women who fought for freedom during the Greek War of Independence. Their secret society and the "seeds" they do (deeds in Desperanto, the language they create), are all a game to them until reality and the war upset the quiet suburb. When the Pallikars begin to glimpse what true suffering really is, they decide to do whatever is in their power to help the situation. *The Refugee Summer* is a poignant and exquisitely written novel filled with strong anti-war themes and accurate social commentary, as well as a unique glimpse into the carefree last moments of an innocent young boy before he gains awareness of the harsh reality of life.

## About the Author

Edward Fenton (1917-1995) was born in New York City on the 7th of July in 1917. He attended Amherst College in Massachusetts and served with the American Field Service and as an ambulance driver in the British Eighth Army in North Africa during World War II. Being well traveled, he spoke at least five languages. Fenton lived mainly in Italy and Greece and was thus considered an "adopted Greek."

Together with his wife, Greek psychologist Sophia Harvati, whom he married in 1963, he shared his time between Athens and Galaxidi, a town below Delphi. His writing included works for both children and adults, but his best-known works are those for young readers, such as *The Refugee Summer*, which was nominated for the American Book Award, and *Phantom of Walkaway Hill*, which received the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1963. In addition to books about Italy and Greece, he translated three of Alki Zei's Greek children's books—all of which received the Mildred L. Batchelder Award, an award for outstanding translated books for children—as well as books originally written in Spanish, German, Dutch, Polish, French and Italian. Fenton's poetry, short stories and travel articles have been published in many magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Cricket*, and *The Horn Book* as well as in other European publications.

In his approach to writing stories for younger readers, Fenton claimed that: "Children hunger for plot. The recognition of this desire for a story is another way of saying that they require form. . . . They are absolutely logical and impossible to deceive. They know when the Emperor is wearing no more than his underdrawers."



# Setting

The Refugee Summer is set in a wealthy suburb of Athens during the summer of 1922. It was a summer of change, when political upheaval was prevalent and social changes were apparent. Greece was slowly changing, and the war in Turkish Anatolia was about to bring much disturbance and turmoil to Greece and its people.

The suburb of Kifissia, is faithfully described as the aristocratic summer retreat for the wealthy and the foreign. There was, as the narrator points out, nothing there for tourists to see, for it was filled with villa upon villa. For the child heroes of the novel, among its green leafy trees and holiday mansions, it looked like a great place for adventures, a place where they could run free in safety from the harsh reality of the world beyond. For the characters of The Refugee Summer, Kifissia was a place of freedom, a place for garden parties, society balls and gala concerts, where the only ugliness could be found in the poorer area of the suburb where none of their kind ever set foot and where Manolis Kondylis's widow and mother lived.

Authentic details of the time and of the place creating the genuine atmosphere of Greece and the 1920s are constant. The children, for example, wear unique sailor suits including straw hats with the name "Dreadnaught Averoff" stamped in gold on the rim, aiding in the portrayal of the historical sense of place and of patriotism as an important element of Greek life. Furthermore it is true that children often enjoy wearing clothing which makes them a part of the new and different place that they are visiting. The faithful depiction of the train, "Wild Beast" (which to the American holiday makers is "a little train") as well as the train ride, i.e. what it was like at that time with people jumping off between stops, is also an important element creating the historical atmosphere. Icons with flickering votive lights in the widow's home give a hint of the Greek cultural and social importance of religion. Furthermore there is mention of Greek foods and drinks (gazozas, koulouria and the traditional "spoon sweet") which are important indicators of an accurate sense of place.

The further historical/political sense of place created in the novel is important not only as a backdrop, but also as a key and influential element in the development of the characters and the plot. It is described through two particular narrative methods: grown-up conversations which take place and are heard by the child characters, and through Manolis Kondylis's diaries which are read by young Nikolas. The political discussions, which are an integral part of Greek society and culture, thus aid in both senses, by describing the political and historical situation of the time and also by aiding in the creation of an authentic atmosphere of the setting through accurate detail. Scenes of men sitting at the coffee house, or even at the aristocratic and sophisticated garden party, discussing the political situation are plentiful. The diaries aid in showing the more realistic and harsh side of the war and not only the side of the war which is discussed in adult conversations in the gardens and tea parties of Kifissia. Finally, small details, such as the photograph of Mustapha Kemal captioned as "The National Enemy" serve as "fillers" to the authentic portrayal of the state of affairs, the time, and the attitude taken by the Greek people with regards to the political situation. Other historical details such



as that of Lord Byron and the Pallikars bring about a sense of Greece's historical search for peace and freedom and aid in the formation of the anti-war theme which is developed within the novel. With the children's ultimate application of a) the Pallikars as the name of their secret society, and b) the name of Lord Byron for the "good" adults that they can trust, the authentic details of Greece's history are completely embedded within the plot and more particularly in bringing about an even stronger sense of place.

It can further be observed that the setting in *The Refugee Summer* functions as one of the main characters of the novel, for it is affected by the political and social changes, just as the heroes are. With the changes that occur, the calm, safe and upper-class nature of Kifissia which is described in the beginning of the novel, is overturned once the reality of the situation brings refugees to the impounded villas and changes the social balance of the suburb.

There is, however, another view that could be taken of the setting: that Kifissia is a symbolic microcosm of a child's innocent internal world, first protected by parents, filled with games and adventure, only to have the realities of the adult/outside world slowly begin to trickle in just as in adolescence, and thus experience begins to displace innocence. Reality appears in all shapes and sizes, through the shock of seeing the decadent Rumanian Princess, to the true face of "polite society" along with its cruel gossip and hypocrisy, to the view of the other side of Kifissia which no one usually visits but brings about understanding and truth of the historical/political situation through an uneducated, yet brave and genuine man's diaries.

## Social Sensitivity

This novel can be suitably used as an anti-war novel. It clearly portrays the horrors of war and the development of young adolescents who are far away from the war front but then have to come to terms with its effects on their safe environment. It is similar to the situation of the United States when war took its sons away to fight in battles thousands of miles away from their homes. The people left behind were aware of the horrors of war, but many children were waiting for their fathers to come home as heroes. Many such fathers were lost, while other children had to deal with their fathers' experiences upon their return home.

This novel can be used in conjunction, for example, with a discussion of the Vietnam or Korean War, or even the War in the Gulf.

In addition, it can be used as a comparison regarding the issue of refugees who came to the United States during and after the Second World War. There are many similarities in both cases which can be used to show the everlasting horror and cruelty of war whatever the era, country or war. The novel can further be used to discuss the issue of political and war refugees.

Finally, *The Refugee Summer* is an excellent young adolescent novel which can be read and discussed with the theme of innocence and experience in mind. The main characters of the novel are all developing into adults, each in his or her own specific way. Some of the characters such as Nadine and Stephanie do not seem to experience any changes at all, while the transition from childhood to adulthood in Nikolas is evident. The search for identity and understanding of the adult world is an important theme, and the manner in which it is portrayed in this novel allows for the reader to identify with the trials and tribulations that the characters experience even though the era is different. *The Refugee Summer* suggests that issues that concern children and adults alike are diachronic and everlasting, and time cannot act as a barrier to feelings, understanding and sharing the same concerns.



# Literary Qualities

Edward Fenton's narrative methods are the first of many literary qualities that stand out in *The Refugee Summer*. The narrative voice of the novel, for example, surprises the reader almost at once. Although the narration is held in the first person, one has no idea who the speaker may be. He or she is obviously one of the children as he/she follows all of their antics and adventures and can thus not be an adult since the children dislike grownups and do not have any around them during their escapades.

Although one has no idea of who the narrator may be, this does not make the reader uncomfortable, and the narrator is most certainly reliable and trustworthy. Furthermore, he also seems to know more than the characters themselves. This is evident when he openly states that "Sotiris didn't see that" when describing the burning of Smyrna.

This naturally aids in the creation of a sense of mystery. The name of the narrator is finally disclosed on the last page of the book, and although one does feel surprised due to the twist involved, one can almost swear that it was obvious throughout the whole book as to who it had been for if the narrator had been any of the other characters, he would never have been able to be in those places that were described. The fact that the character's real name is not used, but rather the one which he had chosen as a Pallikar is also curious. It leaves the reader with a strange feeling, one of questioning.

Was the character schizophrenic, or was it that the Pallikar made him objective towards the circumstances and occurrences?

Is the fact that the narrator calls out for his friends as a Pallikar mean that he is bored with reality and adulthood, and that he wishes to return to childhood innocence and the life that they left behind?

The narrator's voice is also important in the set up of the novel. The narrator is remembering a past event. He is remembering a summer of his childhood when everything changed. Due to the fact that memory is involved in the novel, hindsight also becomes an important element as well.

The narrator knows what happens next and has the power of experience. This method not only allows the narrator to have more information for the reader of the novel, but also permits him to describe scenes more accurately with specific knowledge of the time and what truly happened after that.

The narrator, however, does not allow the reader to know what is to happen next, not even ironically smirk at the Alexandrian Greek boy who pompously states that "The Egyptians would never drive us out." It is simply mentioned towards the end of the book that things did change, nothing stayed the same or happened as was expected, and that the Greeks were driven out of Egypt.





The narrator is correct and makes his statements in a matter of fact tone, without taking any sides with any of the characters.

He is objective and stands away from the action in order not to confuse or mislead the reader.

The diary copybooks of Manolis Kondylis also portray splendid use of another narrative in this novel. This method, through the portrayal of this soldier's "authentic" experiences brings a realistic viewpoint to the fictional plot. The Refugee Summer may be fiction, but through the copybooks one gets a flavor of authenticity and "autobiographicality." The concept of the life of a soldier during World War I and the Asia Minor conflict helps in the creation of the "true" atmosphere of the time. An almost authentic narrative which captures the reader's attention and points towards what it must have been like to experience the horrors of war. In addition, one may observe the positioning of the copybook readings. These follow straight after trivial matters, whereupon this narrative transports the reader away from frivolity and into realism, and the truth of the situation is returned to the forefront.

In addition to the main plot running in a linear wave through the novel, there are other quaint and comic secondary plots which circle the primary plot. These involve both secondary characters as well as the main heroes of the novel. Such secondary plots include the story of Madame Arnauld and her indiscretion with the young aviator who turned out to be married, and whose wife burst into the Gala concert trying to get her husband back thus embarrassing Madame Arnauld, whilst also upsetting her relationship with "uncle" Panos; another such story also involves Madame Arnauld, who has a special singing teacher coming to train her voice almost every day.

The teacher is very strict and scolds Madame Arnauld persistently; however she helps the dainty singer bring her voice to new heights and prepares her for the Gala concert. After the ruckus caused at the concert, Madame Arnauld leaves hastily for Beirut, whereupon there is a superb description of the poor teacher arriving at the villa the very afternoon after their departure only to find that the shutters were all closed, and she had not been paid for her piano support at the Gala. Finally, another story that can be added to this collection of secondary plots is that of the Rumanian Princess and the Pallikars. Unfortunately the story is not developed and is cut short due to the children's clumsiness, thus making the reader wish that they had the time to find out more about the Princess and her situation. These shorter plots surrounding the main story line of the novel add to the flavor of diversity in life as well as to the development of the atmosphere of The Refugee Summer.

The literary style that further comes to mind when examining Fenton's novel is the fact that there is use of such cinematic techniques as "zooming in" which remind one of a camera's zoom from the general setting into the action. This is especially noted in the way the plot is introduced as the "camera" zooms in from the setting to portray Kyria Angeliki hastily preparing and cleaning Villa Pandora for the Americans who are supposed to arrive, to the scene when Krikor suddenly appears and informs the housekeeper that the new family has arrived. One can almost envision the action as it



occurs with a broad panning motion of the camera suddenly zooming in and focusing on the shocked housekeeper's face when she is informed of the Averys arrival.

Furthermore, in addition to this, the way that Manolis Kondylis's life is described can almost be visualized in black and white with the scenes narrated taking place whilst Manolis's voice describes the events over the images flashing before one's eyes.

In order to bring color and life to the descriptions, metaphors and similes are also used abundantly. These are evident in the way that Krikor's eyes are compared to ripe olives, to the murmur of birds flapping and also to the way that the afternoon garden is depicted as thick with deepening shadows that bring out such a green color that "it was almost as though they were underwater."

Foreshadowing is also prevalent in the novel, and one of the reasons for it is the element of hindsight which the narrator has at his command. The children, for example are compared to a small band of conspirators even before they have formed their secret society of Pallikars. Thus metaphors, personification and similes play further roles in strengthening this literary quality. Descriptions with shadows also seem to bring a new change into the forefront. This is evident not only in the afternoon garden "thick with deepening shadows" before Nikolas meets the Avery children whose friendship shall change his life, but also the description of "a dark cloud above everything, shadow[ing] everyone's face and the air becom[ing] heavy with tension" which leads to the ultimate account of the Catastrophe in Smyrna. The way in which the garden of the villa is depicted is also important: the garden of Pandora beckons to them, beyond that Kifissia, further beyond Greece and beyond even that, the distant war in Anatolia "waiting for them." This description can be read on two levels. First of all the garden of Pandora (as in the name of the villa) beckons to them to join it for adventure, but secondly that the garden is like Pandora's box, filled with experiences and troubles which encompass the problems and realities of the distant war in Anatolia, which they shall open and thus lose their innocence and childhood. They shall be offered the problems and experiences of reality and the adult world. Together, these two readings bring about a sense of foreshadowing of the adventures that are waiting for them as well as foreboding that they shall soon experience that which shall forever change them. It is through Nikolas's feelings that the reader experiences a further sense of foreboding: he "felt a sudden bounding inside him, as though about to leap into something unknown, as though Oliver was about to lead them all toward some unimaginable adventure that might even change his whole life." There is also further curious turmoil inside Nikolas as he reads from Manolis's copybooks. He realizes what the truth is and begins to find his own identity as he learns details that his late father must have also lived through; thus he begins to lose his innocence and naivete.

Language also plays a significant part in *The Refugee Summer*. Primarily it brings about the authenticity of the setting through the scattering of Greek words throughout text, but secondarily, it becomes part of the plot when the children make up a language of their own. They call it Desperanto, and it is similar to the London Cockney rhyming dialect that utilizes word games. This is clever in terms of the author's imagination and the way he manipulates words. "The time of the figs" is both, for example, the time when the children sat in the fig tree and ate almost all of the figs and managed to prove the

grownups wrong by not getting a stomachache, but it is also the time of the refugees, as the children had called refugees figs.

Finally it is important to note the use of metafiction in *The Refugee Summer*. The book obviously comments about itself both in terms of structure and in terms of content.

This is clear in the following two comments: "Is it a real book? . . . A story, I mean? Or is it boring like history?" and "The best books you can ever read have layers and layers of story until you get to the heart of it and in the end it has to bring tears to your eyes," just like an onion. Furthermore, it is made clear that the children do not want books that are "teachy and preachy," thus the novel itself tries to make clear what it wishes to be like, what it wants to do. It wants to tell a fictional story in an authentic historical setting. It has to have a true plot, however and not be boring like history; thus it plays games with its narrative style in order to bring about variety and excitement. It has various layers of story and one only gets to the heart of it at the end, whereupon one is left with a sense of loss, not at all unlike an "end [that] brings tears to your eyes."



# Themes and Characters

There are a variety of different themes which coexist throughout *The Refugee Summer*. These range from the difference in attitudes and ideas between cultures, to the futility of war, to children's perceptions of "grownups" and their world. Along with the superbly portrayed characters resting comfortably in the safety of the novel's setting, these three elements intertwine and weave together into a flying carpet traveling through time to reveal the diachronic issues which have always provoked children and adults.

The first theme that the reader encounters is the difference in attitudes and ideas between different cultures. These are glimpsed through interaction between Nikolas and the "foreigners." The image that one creates in one's mind when being described the commuter train between Athens and Kifissia and being told its name "The Wild Beast," is that of a very noisy, steadfast train groaning against the weight of itself and its cargo as it slowly goes back and forth between the suburb and the city.

Strangely enough, for Nikolas, the Averys mention coming into Kifissia on "that little train." The difference is obvious as in the United States, in opposition to Greece, everything is big and new and fast. What seems large in Greece is probably small for an American. There are different viewpoints and different manners of thinking between cultures. Another hint of this difference in attitude is that of Mr. Avery's idea of "a little money." Nikolas is certain that this idea must be infinitely different from that of a Greek's, for a Greek with a little money would never be able to afford European "writing vacations" or the rent of an aristocratic villa, even in the suburb of his or her own city. Nikolas thus highlights the fact that Americans, "who as everyone knows," have all the money in the world, and thus Mr. Avery might just be one of the poorer Americans, who nonetheless are wealthy in regard to Greek standards. The latter characterization of the American people may put stress on the stereotype and false or confused concepts that people of different countries may have of each other. This could also be an attempt by the author to thwart stereotype and to draw attention to the genuine characters and descriptions to be found within the novel. This can also be linked to the fact that the American children, Oliver and Edith Avery, wish that they could be Greek, while the logical thought for young Nikolas to have is exactly the opposite. Although he does not state it out right, he wishes that he could look more like Oliver: blond, handsome and not black-haired as he is.

The children are in awe of everything that is Greek. They want to eat and drink everything that is Greek, want to dress like young Greek children (right down to their patriotic Averoff straw hats); they take political sides and try to help in a war that is not theirs and create a secret society that has to do with Greek history. Through Nikolas's wish to take the side of Venizelos's political ideologies, due to his late father's convictions, the other children side with him and do the same. They believe Nikolas lucky to be Greek and feel that they owe something to the country in which they are living, thus wish to do whatever they can do to help the situation. Part of their "obsession" with Greece is due to the novelty of the country and people they are meeting.



On the other hand, it could be observed that the two American children are much more enthralled with the idea of helping Greece and becoming secret Pallikars than are Nadine and Stephanie, who retain an ignorant and rather indifferent stance to the political situation. This is obvious in two comments which they both utter: "Oh you mean that war the Greeks are fighting somewhere? What does that have to do with us?" [Nadine] and "Who cares about Anatolia anyway? It is so far away. What is happening there might just as well be ancient history" [Stephanie].

This indifference is linked to the theme of class differences which is also a key element of the novel. Aristocracy and the upper class are already brought into the plot through the setting. Kifissia was then, and still remains to a large degree, one of the most prestigious, expensive and aristocratic suburbs of Athens. Thus, all the child characters, except for Nikolas, belong to the upper levels of society. Young Nikolas seems to regret being the housekeeper's son at the beginning of the novel, however Oliver's openness and down to earth nature show him that this is no cause for concern. Oliver overlooks the class difference and makes Nikolas out to be even more special due to his Greek nationality. Kyria Angeliki, Nikolas's mother, however, tells her son to be wary of the "aristocrats," that he should be careful of his manners around them, and, above all, be careful not to trust them or be too friendly with them. Although his standing in the class system seems to be brushed aside during most of the novel, as he is more or less "adopted" by the Averys and is invited along with them to social functions, teas and other such gatherings, he is practically insulted at one of the garden parties when the Alexandrian Greek boys from next door blatantly ask Oliver whether his parents "really permit [him] to go around with the son of the local dressmaker?" Although Nikolas enjoys his new friends and his adventures with them, he understands that they are not the same, and the feeling that they shall part is present although not at the forefront of the plot.

The Refugee Summer has a strong antiwar theme running through it. It questions the reasons for war, describes the reality of war through raw graphic narrative, and tries to find logic in the horror of the situation. Through the children's innocent yet insightful observations in addition to Manolis Kondylis's crude and perceptive writings, the truth about the horror and cruelty of war is guiltlessly uncovered. Manolis writes: "I think of the enthusiasm with which we used to be inspired by our ancient history.

Did it die of boredom or did our Division officer kill it off for us? We Greeks haven't yet really learned how to go to war without enthusiasm. But in our times war is different from in those ancient days." In contrast to the wars fought in ancient days, today people regard the human issue, the concept of family, of loss, of homelessness. In ancient days, these issues were not considered, but in a civilized society, it is inhumane and barbaric to think that these points are not important. Politics and authority are what drive men to war today, and this is accurately conveyed through Manolis's inkblotted scrawl when he describes how when war with Bulgaria came to an end, and they passed "enemy" soldiers, he realized that the "enemy" was just like him—no different: "They are just like us, all shapes, all sizes. Their faces, like ours, are filled with joy. Happy the war is over and all going home to their families." He asks one of them why they shot at them, to which the reply clearly is: "Why did you shoot at us?"



Were you any better? It's not your fault or ours. Those big bastards who run things are to blame. The war is to blame." The cruel graphic imagery of war, such as the scene at Aidini where as many dead mutilated corpses as trees are described to be found while the stench overwhelms the soldiers, is necessary for it compares the safe and serene setting in which the children are living to what soldiers only a few hundred kilometers away were experiencing. The scenes are used as a balance and as a window into reality from a protected location where children's adventures and games are played, and adults talk of politics, "sides" and garden parties, through which the young heroes even question the concept of heroism: is it more heroic to fly high in the skies of Anatolia as an aviator or to trample all day in the boiling sun fighting as a footsoldier?

Furthermore, with regards to the latter, towards the end of the novel, Nikolas comes to understand that the situation in which he is living is nothing but a socially constructed "bubble" which in his terms is "boring."

The children's adventures, their formation of a secret society whereupon they called themselves The Pallikars on account of the war in Anatolia and the changes taking place in Greece and with the hope to be like those historical brave young men and women who fought for a noble cause during the Greek revolution, in addition to their "supposed" understanding of the current political situation are all insignificant in relation to reality and the truth. This is not only evident in terms of the "reality" portrayed in Manolis's accounts but also in the description of "real history" that the young refugees from Smyrna have lived through: "Nikolas suddenly understood that what he had just heard was history. What was boring was all that talk about kings and ministers and politicians. Real history was what Sotiris, and Frosso and Diamando had lived through." He comes to realize that their ideas of "seeds" and noble causes are nothing and that they are just childish games in comparison to actual experiences, escape and ultimate survival or loss in the war. The comment made earlier in the novel describing history as boring whilst a fictional story is interesting and exciting is disparaged.

Another theme in the novel is the continuation of life. History moves on in The Refugee Summer, and from the Bulgarian war, the soldiers and the strife moves on to Anatolia. Once Anatolia and the Asia Minor Catastrophe become part of the past, so another historical figure becomes the focus of attention: Mussolini. Things never change; futile war keeps cropping up, even if the characters, nationalities and war fronts change. The reasons always seem to be the same. Things never change, and in the same way as history, people move on. The summer ends and so people move on and as children become adults, so do they progress as well. This is highlighted in Nikolas's meeting with Sotiris on the streetcar in Athens. Sotiris is now an adult, living his adult life, having seemingly put the past behind him and proceeded with life. Nikolas however, tries to keep hold of his childhood and his past. He, as Salokin (the name he had chosen as a Pallikar), calls out to his childhood friends on the last page of the novel, searching for them and his past. He has become an adult and has realized that life moves on too quickly, and he wishes he could turn back time to be with them again, sitting in the fig tree and planning their next "seed."



An interesting theme that is brought up often in the novel is the fact that grownups are not taken seriously by the young heroes of the novel. When Oliver Avery arrives at Villa Pandora and takes a look around, he turns to Nikolas and says: "I think we are going to like it here. If the grownups don't interfere, that is." The grownups seem to be a constant annoyance to the children. They are portrayed as silly and immature, even compared to cabbages. They supposedly have no imagination as if they were never children and were born grownup, and they never seem to understand children. It is as if they keep getting caught up in the children's business—when they should not—and do not let them enjoy themselves. In addition, grownups never listen—they are always wrapped up in themselves, never say what they really mean, and talk about things that are boring. They are absentminded and hardly ever smile; if they do, they most certainly do not mean it. In conclusion, grownup affairs are regarded as absolutely boring, and the adults themselves are portrayed as superficial. When the children form the Pallikars, they separate the grownups into Byrons ("the good guys") and Turks ("the bad guys"), and side with the Greeks in the war. Taken over by their zealotry, they finally divide everything, even animals and books. Books are divided just like grownups are, and they do not choose ones that are: "teachy and preachy."

The main characters of the novel are five children: Nikolas, Oliver and Edith Avery, and Nadine and Stephanie Arnauld. They are all different personalities and bring about diversity through which an authentic view of the world may be witnessed. It is through these five children's experiences and points of view that the plot and themes develop and with their varying opinions and thoughts allow the reader to observe a rounded panorama of the events depicted.

During a conversation, the children ask themselves what sort of people they want to become when they grow up, their replies represent their characters clearly: Nadine and Stephanie, the two Belgian, or rather Hungarian, daughters of the "singer of sorts" Madame Arnauld, wish to become gorgeous, graceful, charming, and adorable. This nonchalant, rather self-centered attitude characterizes them perfectly. When they are first introduced, they appear wearing party dresses early in the morning.

They have been brought up as small copies of their mother who is also very beautiful and femininity-conscious. They portray the stereotypical society debutantes who are ignorant, giddy and giggly. Their ignorance regarding politics (which is preferred by their "uncle" Panos, who is offended when Mrs. Avery talks about politics at one of the garden parties), is obvious when both sisters comment on why the Pallikars should even bother about "that war" being fought so far away, and that it might as well be ancient history to them. Although they do live through the Pallikars' adventures, these do not affect or change them at all, and this is reflected as they leave Kifissia for Beirut.

Nikolas, the housekeeper/dressmaker's son and the only Greek main character in *The Refugee Summer*, wishes to be "knowing" (i.e. to know and understand everything). It is this quest for knowledge and understanding that is a driving force in the novel.

As an adult, Nikolas admits, on the last page of the book, that he never did learn everything and looks back and yearns for his childhood adventures and friends.



Throughout the novel, Nikolas is confused and searches for reason and reality amidst the complex adult world in which he finds himself. Manolis Kondylis's notebooks find a connection with Nikolas as he finds a link to his father and comes to understand what he went through in addition to discovering a refuge in which he can safely look for the truth. The books inform him that things are not easy and that war is not a game. He asks himself whether he will ever grow wise enough to understand all those unknown "Kifissias" and what they mean, all those unknown worlds, those "bubbles of fiction" and the layers of truth which lie beneath them. At the end of the novel it is revealed that the narrator is Nikolas, or Salokin as he has called himself in the Pallikars. It is through his eyes that the plot unfolds. He is an objective and reliable narrator searching for the truth throughout the book. He observes with untainted views, innocent and hungry eyes, a world that is not his and that he wants to comprehend.

His cautious, careful character is portrayed in contrast to those of Oliver and Edith Avery who are two American children clearly described as naive and loud, excited and curious, and have many adventures and games in mind. It is perhaps this opposition in their characters that brings about a romantic attraction between Nikolas and Edith. This romantic connection, however, never blossoms.

Oliver Avery wishes to be a leader, and he is one, forever organizing things, and is even described as bossy by his sister, Edith.

The narrator states in the novel that Oliver "had started it all" that "it" had not generally begun when the Americans arrived or that the Turks had done it. It had been Oliver. Now what had he started: the beginning of questioning; the formation of the Pallikars; or the planting of the seed in the children's minds that they had to do something noble? He had begun something that would change the children's lives forever.

He had made them feel that they were strong enough to help one of the worst historical catastrophes that the world had seen. Although even Oliver himself did not know what he had begun, his actions would influence him as well.

Edith, on the other hand, wishes to be kind, and that is the word which describes her completely. She is a kind, honest, sweet young girl, her mind flying off in many directions. She is, however, not very feminine, and is almost a tomboy, thinking women are ridiculous with regards to all their preparations to achieve beauty. Nadine and Stephanie cannot understand her for they have been brought up with the prototype of femininity and passiveness as their mother; however Edith, whose mother is a steadfast and independent woman, is different. Furthermore, Edith resolutely maintains that she would hate to be dressed up like an adult when still a child, as the Arnauld sisters are, but that she wants to be accepted as a child (a child that plays, gets dirty, etc.) and not be treated like an adult before she has had the time to enjoy her full term as a child. Finally, Edith seems to have a small attraction for her "wonderfully" Greek friend Nikolas, constantly complimenting him on the magnitude of being Greek and how special it makes him.





The children, however, are not alone in the novel, and are surrounded by their parents and guardians as well as other less important yet intriguing characters. These include the Avery parents who are not that important to the plot in that they do not really take on many plot-related responsibilities. What one can say about them is the fact that Mr. Avery is an author moving from country to country, and most probably living on inherited money, trying to overcome his writer's block, whilst Mrs. Avery is an independent woman with her own particular views and opinions (even in politics), which shocks some of the more conservative male adult characters such as Uncle Panos, Madame Arnauld's "friend."

Moving to the next-door villa, one encounters Uncle Panos (Pandelis), Madame Arnauld and her strict singing teacher. Uncle Panos is a stereotypical Greek man with his anti-feminist views that a woman should be feminine, beautiful and silent. The children fear what he might be like if he gets angry.

Madame Vivienne Arnauld on the other hand, is a Hungarian singer "of sorts" adored due to her ethereal beauty by a variety of different benefactors or "uncles" (as they are called by her daughters). She is one of those women, living off her beauty, and moving from man to man for their security and financial backing. It is evident that her daughters, although still children, shall follow in their mother's footsteps.

Finally, because of her indiscretions, the Arnauld family is forced to leave hastily from Kifissia and move on to Beirut to join yet another new "uncle."

Finally, the only other adult character who merits attention is the old, wretched and decadent Rumanian Princess. Although her character is not developed much and her friendship with the children, which may have led to new experiences and adventures, is cut short, she is very important to the plot as a symbol. She is the catalyst which begins the encroachment of reality into the children's fictional and ideal world.

Through her appearance, the image of the "dream princess bubble" is burst, and she is transformed into a macaroon-stealing old lady wearing shabby old clothes. She also represents an ending to a nonchalant life, a life of no worries. She is a symbol that the era of indifference is now over and that in a short time all that shall be left will be aromas and photographs.

The themes aid in the development of the characters, while the characters bring about the themes through their existence.

This is particularly apparent in terms of the Rumanian Princess. In addition, the characters all seem to symbolize each and every kind of personality and social standing. The only static and balanced character trying to search for the truth and for understanding within the chaos of the situation is young Nikolas. He portrays the ideal adolescent trying to come to terms with his surroundings and with himself. He is on a search for identity and his place in a society that has been created and disrupted by adults.



## Topics for Discussion

1. What is the importance of the setting in *The Refugee Summer*? Why is a suburb of Athens used, and not Athens itself which could have brought about many more details of the political situation, etc.?

2. Discuss the role of the Rumanian Princess. Why is she important to the plot?

How does her appearance in the novel influence the characters?

3. How are Manolis Kondylis's diaries important to the anti-war theme of the novel?

4. Edith says that "Ignorance is only when you don't know something and somebody else finds out." Discuss this comment taking Nikolas's "ignorance" into consideration. Do you find her definition of "ignorance" to be true? If not, why does she say this to Nikolas?

5. We only find out the true identity of the narrator at the end of the novel. How would the plot have been different if we had known who the narrator was at the beginning? Which of the other characters would you have preferred to have been the narrator and why?

6. Discuss the use of hindsight in the narrative while keeping in mind that the narrator of *The Refugee Summer* is an adult describing, through memory, a childhood summer.

7. How is it possible to know someone for many years and yet never know anything about them? This is portrayed with regards to Krikor and the two Arnauld sisters. Describe why one believes the Arnauld sisters to be Belgian throughout the novel when they are really Hungarian. How can such a misunderstanding be brought about?

8. What are the elements in *The Refugee Summer* that symbolize "the end," i.e.

the end of summer, the end of a friendship, the end of innocence and childhood? Discuss how each of them contributes to this "end" both separately and together as a theme of the novel.

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Keeping "The Wild Beast" in mind, find out about another regional train that you know about. Write about its history and discuss its role in the area— how it has aided in bringing more people to the area, etc.
2. Who was Lord Byron and what was his role in Greek history?
3. Differences between cultures and people from other countries can bring about misunderstanding and confusion.

Describe a situation in which such misunderstanding can occur and discuss how such situations and misconceptions of people from other nationalities can be avoided.

4. The narrative method of diaries used in *The Refugee Summer* has been used successfully in other books for adolescents.

Choose one of these books and examine the reason why such a method is used. What is the difference between the use of a diary or letter format and a straightforward narrative?

5. *The Refugee Summer* quotes Empress Elisabeth of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as having said: "It is better to love than to be loved." Find out about Empress Elisabeth's life and discuss the reasons why you believe that she would have said this, keeping in mind the fact that she had a fairy tale life which ended under the most tragic of circumstances.

6. What is Esperanto and why was it created? Did it succeed as a language, and if it did not, why not?

## For Further Reference

Horn Book (June 1982): 286. A review of *The Refugee Summer* published upon the book's release.

Lanes, Selma G. *New York Times Book Review* (April 25, 1982): 34. A review of *The Refugee Summer*.

*School Library Journal* (April 15, 1982): 80. A review of *The Refugee Summer*.

## Related Titles

Fenton's love for Greece can be witnessed through the number of books that he wrote about the country. He has written two picture books which include *Alekos's Island*, 1948, and *An Island for a Pelican*, 1963. These books are simple with straightforward stories; however they provided stepping stones for the author to write his two other young adult historical novels: *The Refugee Summer*, 1982 and *The Morning of the Gods*, 1987.

Through these books one glimpses authentic cultural and historical settings of Greece, the first being set during the Asia Minor catastrophe in a suburb of Athens, and the second in regional Greece during the Colonels' Dictatorship. Fenton realistically portrays the setting of Greece during the specific historical periods, while objectively outlining the political episodes during which the plots unfold. Together, all four books make up a rich fictional archive of an author's love for his adopted country and can be used to travel back into historical periods where one gets to know about the different culture, religion, thoughts and dreams of Greek children who are not unlike other children during times of strife and political unrest.



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