GIVE BEES A CHANCE

Author Christy Lefteri explains why hope can mean something different to all of us



Sitting in the foyer of Brooks Hotel on Dublin's Drury Street, Christy Lefteri is explaining what compelled her to write her latest bestselling novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*. Having been raised by refugee parents who had escaped a war in Cyprus and settled in London, Christy recalls that growing up she would sometimes hear the word 'prósfyges,' the Greek for refugees, but her parents never spoke of the war. This was their way of protecting her, yet she says she felt the unspoken pain.

"You pick up on things as children, all of us do... It was like living normally with some weird darkness without quite understanding it," she says.

It was not until years later that her father, who was an officer in Cyprus, told her of his memories from the war.

"Stories like when he felt he should have saved his friends' life and one time when he was in a van and he noticed they were about to be shot and he shouted, 'Get your heads down!' and he saved them.

"Twenty years later someone bumped into him in London and [introduced himself] and my dad said, 'I don't recognise you,' and the man said, 'Don't you remember in the van that day when you saved our lives?'"

Christy believes the trauma her parents went through gave her the urge she felt to volunteer at a refugee centre in Athens. The moment came in 2016 while visiting her father who had moved back to Cyprus. As she sat on a beach on the far east side of the country, she stared across the shore and realised how close she was to Syria.

"I was looking out and thinking, 'I'm so close and there's so much devastation,' and I just remember sitting there and feeling overwhelmed by that thought, like 'Why am I here and I'm safe?' I felt really compelled to go and help and at the time I thought I was compelled because of the proximity, but when I look back it was probably to do with the fact that I had grown up in a household where [there was] trauma," Christy explains.

Due to the unsafe conflict in Syria, Christy travelled to Athens to work at a drop-in refugee base known as The Hope Centre.

"There was a play area, an area for new mothers to sit and nurse their babies, an area for showers because if they didn't have showers there they would be hosed down at the camps and there was a tea and biscuit area.

"These rituals helped people to settle and it was our job to supervise the children and serve the tea and biscuits, which sounds easy enough, but it was chaos. Often people hadn't eaten anything else, so these tea and biscuits became so important to them."

Surrounded by the mayhem of the centre, Christy had a need to write about what was happening around her.

"Often when I'm overwhelmed by something I feel like I want to write about it. After a few weeks I started organising interviews with people. I went around and said, 'I work at the Hope Centre and I would love to hear your stories,' and I found most people wanted to [talk]."

She says that being in Athens gave her to the opportunity to connect with the real people that we see in the media and this affected her deeply.

"As much as I saw [the crisis] on the news, I could turn the TV off and what I remembered when I turned it off was numbers and I thought I was caring, and I was, but it wasn't until I was there that something really shifted in me and got inside me. It got inside me in such a way and eventually when I got back to London I just couldn't live normally anymore," she says. "It was always on my mind, I

couldn't forget those children and I couldn't forget about those children that didn't make it to Athens as well."

Christy had written a book nine years previously but had taken a break from putting pen to paper, so that she could overcome her own losses.

"I knew I was ready to get back into my writing career [because] I had gone back to teach creative writing."

When researching the book Christy set out to learn the basics of Arabic.

"What I got from it was the rhythm of the language, the fact that it is a very metaphorical language and I used that when I was writing. [My tutor] Ibrahim was also a refugee, and he helped me with [learning about] Syria, because I thought, 'What right do I have to write about a country I don't know about?' [While looking at a map] Ibrahim [would say] 'They will take this route, there are trees on that road, when there is a dust storm it will look and smell like this.'"

Eventually *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* was brought to life, which tells the story of husband and wife, Nuri and Afra, who flee from Syria and travel to the UK.

The chapters jump between the present day with Nuri and Afra in England seeking asylum as refugees and to the past, describing the couple's journey across Europe.

The bees in the book that Nuri takes care of symbolise the life, hope and fear of the characters. Christy says that she always knew she wanted Nuri to be a beekeeper.

"I was researching bees and agriculture in Syria and I came across Dr Ryad Alsous who was a beekeeper and professor of agriculture in Damascus. He went over to the UK with his family from Syria and he set up the Buzz Project where he teaches refugees and jobseekers how to keep bees. We spoke on the phone and he said, 'Why don't you come and have dinner with my family and meet the bees?' He taught me so much, I had to go into his garden where he kept the bees without protective gear and [he told me] to stand really still and I just remember the sound of the bees, the smell of the honey and the flowers. It was extraordinary."

What Christy hopes is taken away from the book is the simple but profound message that we're all human.

"Nuri was a beekeeper and Afra was an artist, they had a life that most of us have and it was taken away. I think it's easy to dehumanise people and see them as an 'other,' if we imagine these people are completely different from us it means we don't have to connect with them or feel as much empathy and I think that's our way of protecting ourselves from the horrors," Christy says.



"But if we realise these people are like us and they were just getting on with their lives, and then one day something comes and tears it all apart. What if that happened to us?"

As incredible as the reaction to the book has been, recalling her time at the refugee centre has been emotional for Christy, but it's something she wants to talk about. Her responses during the interview are answered with care and you can see the memories playing behind her eyes as she remembers her time in Athens. It's these memories that make the characters of Nuri and Afra and the home they had to leave behind come alive for the reader.

"When I was at the centre I was always questioning, 'What is hope?' For someone who has lost everything it might be a tiny thing like making a friend or reconnecting with someone you love. That is what the hope is within the book, it's about rebuilding slowly." WW

The Beekeeper of Aleppo by Christy Lefteri (Zaffre Publishing, €14.99) is available now



