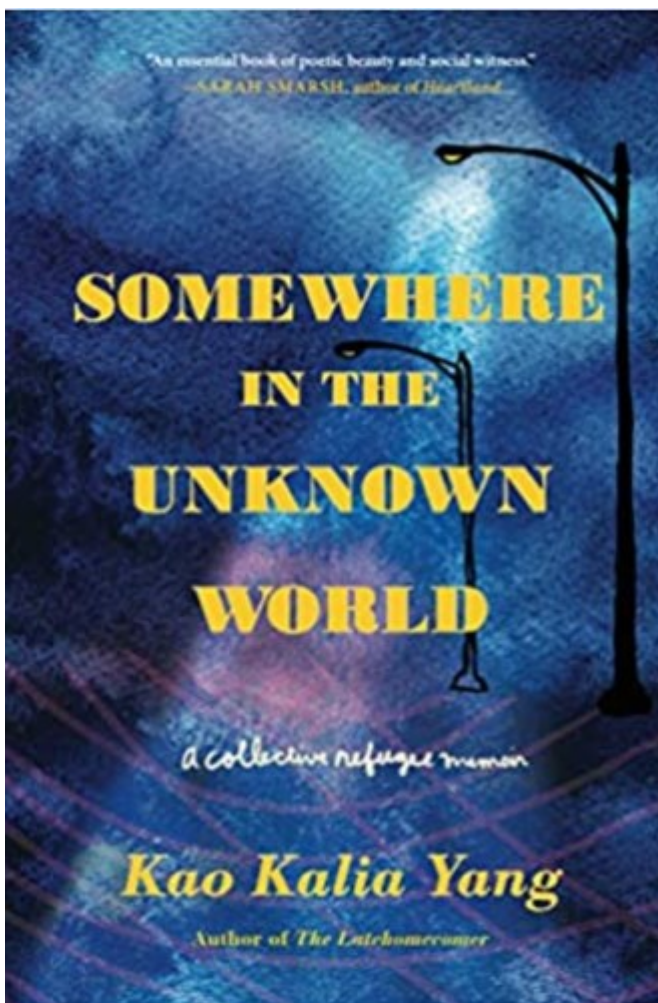


The many voices of refugee experience

Kao Kalia Yang's collective memoir conveys their diversity—and their singular humanity.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [January 27, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Somewhere in the Unknown World

A Collective Refugee Memoir

By Kao Kalia Yang

Henry Holt

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In a number of ways, this book is a testament to the impossible. First of all, it is paradoxically one story and many stories; one voice and many voices. Second, each story testifies to the impossible choices that refugees make (or that are made for them) in their many iterations. Third, while these refugees come from places as diverse as Vietnam, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Liberia, each of them ends up in Minnesota, where award-winning writer Kao Kalia Yang engages their journeys. It's head spinning.

As I read their stories, I thought, *Yang must be an extraordinarily good listener*. She captures each voice and each person, not only the basics of their stories but also the feeling behind them. She writes with generosity and specificity, but she also recognizes the big picture: the question of what it means to be a refugee in our time. "Collective memoir" should be an oxymoron, but here it is not.

I found myself often starting at the end of each story, where Yang records the name of the storyteller. I would try to deduce from the name the original geographical location of the teller. Sometimes I was successful, but just as often I failed. Why should this have mattered to me?

The more I read, the more it all started to blend together: the particular rebels or government forces, the particular troubles suffered, the particular diseases or violent threats that ravaged this or that family or person. Were we in Iraq or Eritrea? What beloved river is this? Which beloved, but now lost, village? Whose histories were erased as time moved on savagely? Whose were remembered? What was the cost? This is the puzzle that Yang and her many creators address. It matters and it doesn't.

One young man, who had worked for USAID in Afghanistan, ends up as a stateless person in Sweden. His journey is Kafkaesque. He is given passports that he can't use and that he tries to destroy in an airplane lavatory. He is interrogated over and over with questions he can't answer while being deprived of food and sleep. His traveling companions appear and disappear without explanation. He is told to "choose a last name."

At one point, he tries in a tragicomic way to hide behind a table in an airport where everyone can see him. A voice comes over the loudspeaker, “The person hiding behind the table in the corner, come out.” Finally, weeping, he asks the person interrogating him the question that has been plaguing him: “What is the difference between you and me?”

This becomes, in many ways, his life question. He begins to ask it everywhere, and finally, perhaps most productively, to a psychologist in Sweden who is assigned to him. He asks her, mostly ironically, for a certificate of his humanity that he can use in his quest for a livable life. She offers to make him one, but then he asks, “How come you are more human than me, in a position to observe and certify my humanity?”

This is the question of the book: What is the difference between a refugee and a non-refugee? What is the difference between a refugee from Laos and one from Syria? Yang writes of judo-practicing fathers and exhausted mothers, of grandmothers who refuse to leave their home countries and grandfathers who die for futures they believe in. She includes perspectives from children reflecting on their parents’ choices and parents who refuse to reflect on the past.

One of the most puzzling aspects of this book is that it’s hard to know what role Yang played in putting these stories on the page. Did she “write” all of them, using her voice chameleonlike to inhabit these many lives? Did she midwife the stories, drawing them out from others whom she helped to find their voices on the page? Is she a scribe, an interpreter, the creator of a one-woman show in many voices? Her own explanation isn’t terribly helpful:

I listened to each of the people represented here and then processed their stories slowly. . . . I then wrote each chapter, weaving in research to fill in the areas of the world I’ve never been to, and then sent it on to the interviewee with a direct question, “Is the story accurate?”

It’s a strange and impossible question, but I admire Yang for taking it on. The result is a sense of the diversity and the singular humanity of refugees the world over.

Somewhere in the Unknown World is an exceptionally good read. And if the United States is willing to reinvest in refugee outreach after its recent devastation, this book will be an invaluable resource for the communities that are poised to welcome them.