



★ **On Fragile Waves**

E. Lily Yu

Erewhon Books (Feb 2, 2021)

Hardcover \$25.95 (288pp)

978-1-64566-009-5

A refugee family struggles to adjust to a new life in E. Lily Yu's novel *On Fragile Waves*.

Firuzeh doesn't know why her parents have whisked her and her brother from Afghanistan to Australia. Nor does she understand why the Australian government is so reluctant to let them in, and to let them stay. Accompanied by the ghost of her friend Nasima, who died on the journey, Firuzeh navigates the many dangers, challenges, and tragedies of her new home.

Firuzeh finds herself trapped with hundreds of other refugees on Nauru, a barren, mosquito-ridden island where Australia stores and processes unwanted immigrants. Devastating descriptions breathe life into Nauru and its unwilling inhabitants. No matter how tightly the family—Firuzeh and her mother, father, and younger brother—clings to hope, it slips through their fingers, leaving only depression and desperation. Firuzeh seems to cope best, fortified by the traditional folktales her mother used to tell before she began resorting to sleeping pills to get through the day. When Firuzeh struggles, only Nasima is there to comfort her.

Although reaching Australia was their goal, the family's arrival brings new troubles. Family relationships are fractious, and nerves fray. Small injustices mar everyday life as the larger threat of deportation looms. Firuzeh is not allowed to forget how precarious the family's fate is, or how it is controlled by the whims of strangers. Loss after loss piles on the family's doorstep, pushing it to the breaking point. The final chapter includes enough hope to turn tears of despair into tears of happiness, its developments a relief and a blessing.

On Fragile Waves is a masterful and poetic novel about finding hope and joy in the most dire circumstances.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (November / December 2020)

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