

Refuge

Ming Holden

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“By all accounts, moving from place to place helps one to locate a space, a home inside oneself,” Ming Holden claims. Whether or not, or to what degree, she believes this is a central motif in her memoir, *Refuge*. Twining an arc of personal growth in her twenties with a larger story of displacement, Holden recounts her work with refugee populations around the world.

The book is a memoir in ten sections. Each section is organized around a different geographic location and the idea of “refuge”: where people find it, how they make it, and where it takes them. At times, this means that Holden’s work with refugees is centralized. At others, it’s her own interior work that’s brought to bear.

Within each focus, Holden doesn’t shy away from the truth. Her interest in revelation spares no one. There are moments of transcendence in the collection, but not at the expense of recognizing the world’s ugliness, including the narrator’s own.

Structurally, these sections work like long-form essays that move with freedom back and forth between the experiential and the theoretical, exposition and lyrics. Some passages are gut-wrenchingly memorable; others treat the audience as an artifact rather than the purpose. Often, the work is radically moving because of this, but what presents as a strength in many sections is interruptive and distancing in others.

Holden writes from a stated place of advocacy and allegiance with refugees—not speaking for them, but speaking of them. She acknowledges the problematic nature of this gesture, good intentions notwithstanding. Nonetheless, her persistent concern with the presence of loss, the lives of ordinary people, and place as a necessary anchor in the world creates a sympathy between the author and her subjects, amplifying the sense of violence and sanctuary that human beings can find in each other.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (July/August 2018)

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