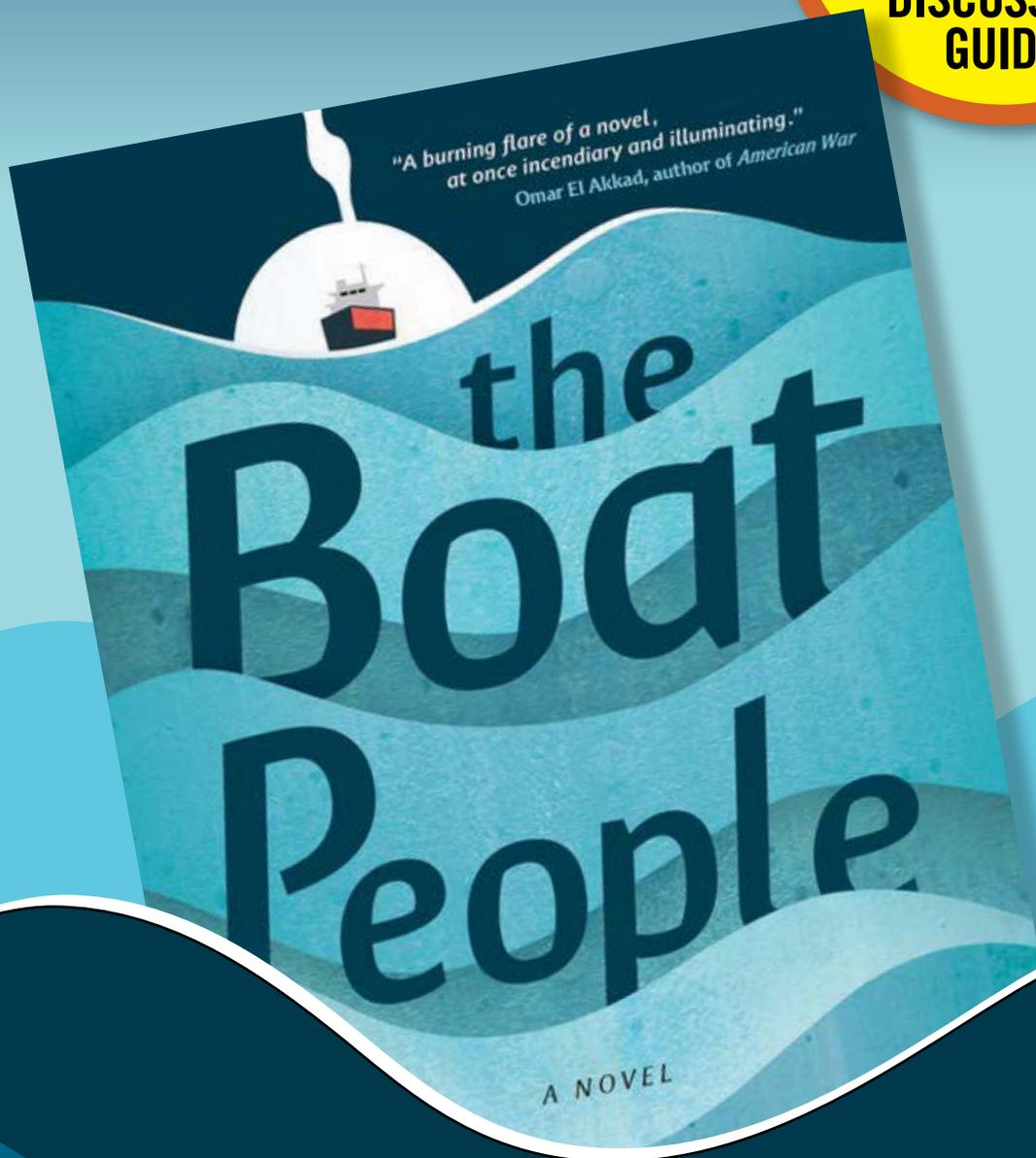


MARCH / APRIL 2019

DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL 
BOOK CLUB
DISCUSSION
GUIDE



The Boat People

BY SHARON BALA

RECOMMENDED BY RANDY KANEEN



WELCOME

AMNESTY BOOK CLUB MEMBERS

Welcome back to the Amnesty International Book Club! Continuing on the important conversation about refugees, we are pleased to announce our March/April 2019 title *The Boat People* by Sharon Bala. This debut novel of Sharon Bala has been recommended by guest reader Randy Kaneen, with whom you will explore the novel and read beyond the book to learn more about some of the most important and timely concerns of human rights facing refugees and migrants.

In this guide, you will find Kaneen's reflection on the book, as well as discussion questions, an Amnesty Background section, and an action you can take to urge Canada to be a refugee rights leader in the world.

The Boat People is a novel about what happens to 500 Tamil refugees who flee civil war in Sri Lanka and arrive in Canada. Mahindan and his son Sellian are among them—and spend most of the book held up in the bureaucratic limbo of admissibility hearings and detention reviews, amidst fears of violence by Tamil Tigers believed to be on board their boat. During this time spent in detention and separated from his son, Mahindan remembers his life as a mechanic in Sri Lanka before and during the war. Meanwhile, Japanese-Canadian Grace Nakamura leads the admissibility hearings, while grappling with her own family history of having been interned during WWII. And second-generation Tamil Canadian lawyer, Priya, has to decide how involved she wants to be in advocating for Mahindan and his fellow refugee claimants.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

We think you will find this book to be an important and useful book to read. Besides its concept of refugee rights, the book discusses important themes such as parenthood, kindness, racism, and doubt. We are pleased to be able to be part of this conversation.

About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit **www.amnesty.ca** or write to us at:

Amnesty International,
312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

About this month's author, **Sharon Bala**



Sharon Bala is a Canadian writer residing in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. Her bestselling debut novel, *The Boat People*, was a finalist for Canada Reads 2018 and the 2018 Amazon Canada First Novel Award. Published in January 2018, it is available worldwide with forthcoming translations in French, Arabic, and Turkish. The unpublished manuscript won the Percy Janes First Novel Award (May 2015) and was short-listed for the Fresh Fish Award (October 2015).

In 2017, Sharon won the Journey Prize and had a second story long-listed in the anthology. A three-time recipient of Newfoundland and Labrador's Arts and Letters award, she has stories published in *Hazlitt*, *Grain*, *Maisonneuve*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Riddle Fence*, *Room*, *Prism international*, *The New Quarterly*,

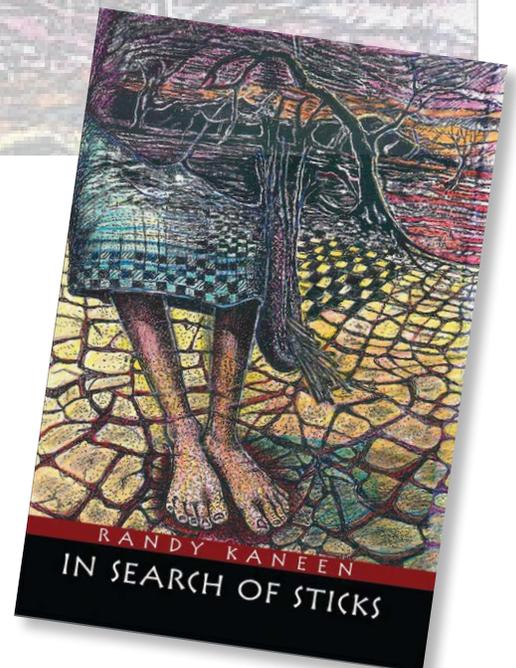
and in an anthology called *Racket: New Writing From Newfoundland* (Breakwater Books, Fall 2015).

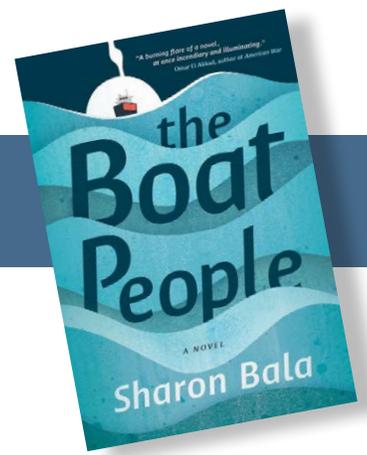
Sharon is a member of the Port Authority writing group. They can be found every second Thursday swapping fiction in the closet of a store room on Memorial University's campus.



About this month's reader, **Randy Kaneen**

Randy Kaneen is an educator and author. In *Search of Sticks*, a story of hope amidst tragedy, was shortlisted for the Somerset Award. The novel weaves parallel tales of isolation, one in a war-torn, poverty-stricken landscape and the other in an affluent and peaceful setting. Kaneen believes that its underscored sentiment will likely be appreciated by most, if not all, members of Amnesty International—life is as much about that which isn't done in the face of opportunity rather than just what was acted upon. Thematically, the story embraces Mahatma Gandhi's words, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Kaneen's next novel, *Should Have Seen it Coming* is scheduled for release in 2019.





Randy Kaneen's reflections on *The Boat People*

The author's choice of genre—historical fiction—is an interesting one. Given that the event which provided focus for the story happened recently (a cargo ship, carrying almost five hundred people, was intercepted off the coast of Vancouver Island in August of 2010) one might think a documentary would be the logical choice to inform on this subject. However, the dearth of specific information available in the public domain (addressing who, what and how questions) would have made any such effort to provide awareness using this approach, an arduous, if not impossible task. (To be fair, it should be noted that some details were withheld to protect those seeking asylum.)

By choosing to tell a story rather than relate an account, Sharon Bala was able to merge her fictionalized characters with historic and systemic information and did so to great advantage. The scope of the narrative increased. We, as readers, became aware of the tensions which not only surrounded the circumstances of refugee claimants but also visited some with roles in the decision-making process. She accessed emotions, excited intellects and forced the internal conversations.

Grace, a government employee freshly transferred from the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure to the Immigration and Refugee Board, found herself on a personal discovery path. Her family had been unfairly treated by the Canadian government. During World War II, the rights of the individual were sacrificed under an atmosphere of irrational hysteria. Canadian citizens of Japanese descent were forcibly moved to internment camps. Now, as part of a decision-making body—one which addresses the vital question of who gets to stay and who does not—Grace worked in a similar environment of purposefully fermented anxiety where the terms 'criminals' and 'terrorists' were descriptors commonly accessed to describe these Tamil people. The normal humanitarian procedures used to work with refugee claimants in Canada were suspended. Politically motivated, unusually long periods of incarceration were imposed on this group. The parallels between the lives of her mother and grandparents and those of these Tamil refugees are readily evident.

Priya, is an articling student intent on pursuing a corporate law career. As a second generation Canadian who only knew a "few phrases" of her father's native language, Tamil, she was forced to reconcile specific revelations about her

family's past with the ongoing struggles of the passengers on the MV Sun Sea who sought refuge in Canada.

The asylum seekers' stories are largely seen through the eyes of Mahindan, one of the people on the migrant boat. Insights were gained into the difficult Tamil villager's lives which were being led during the period of violence. Utilizing a writing approach which seamlessly cycles, focusing on both past and present experiences, the author, Sharon Bala, confronts her reading audience with the realities of living in an environment of intense struggle. She challenges them to come to terms with these refugees and understand something about the definition of choice. If a person refused to join the cause what would be the ramifications.

Beyond these personal stories and their associated degrees of disquiet, *The Boat People* opens yet another window, one which allows us to see, in a degree of detail, the Canadian system designed to investigate and decide on the legitimacy of those wishing to claim refugee status. It is a complex structure, one which is susceptible to government outreach. Those on the MV Sun Sea were deliberately denied access to the timely hearing procedures and living conditions available to other claimants. The politics of the time prevailed. We, as readers, are supposed to digest this information, learn from it and question the construct of this quasi-judicial body which continuously holds individual lives in balance.

***The Boat People* does not tell. It links and it shows. While reading this novel, the reader must come to his or her own conclusions about people, empathy, systems, fairness and justice. I wonder what happened to Mahindan.**

—Randy Kaneen



THE BOAT PEOPLE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discussion questions from guest reader

Randy Kaneen

1. Mahindan, while being rounded up to fight as a soldier for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), (“Any fool can teach maths, Arun said. Tamil Eelam needs you for a higher cause.”) let it be known that he was a mechanic. The LTTE then saw him as someone who might be useful in a different way. Subsequently, he was charged with the task of not only fixing vehicles but also arming them. “Every time he was made to rig up the brakes on a car or strap bombs to the underside of a truck, he thought of how he was bound to these weapons, one link in a chain of events that would end a life. It gave him nightmares....” “But what choice did he have?” During the examination to determine if Mahindan might be admitted to Canada, a piece of information surfaced. “The LTTE drove a bus rigged with explosives into an airplane hangar in Ratmalana, killing seventeen people, including three children and Sri Lanka’s minister of agriculture. In repairing the bus, this man was directly responsible for the death of seventeen civilians.” Mahindan explained the reason for his participation. “My wife was pregnant at the time.” “The cadre would have set fire to our house, allowed my wife to burn inside. The things they did to us...you cannot imagine. Sinhalese army, Tamil Tigers...we were nothing to them.”

The fate of Mahindan was not revealed. The reader is faced with resolving a complex task. He or she must come to terms with the actions taken within the context of ‘the definition of choice.’ In effect, you have become a member of the Immigration and Refugee Board and,

as such, are charged with determining the course of Mahindan’s life. Should he be admitted to Canada or not?

2. In ‘*The Boat People*,’ Sharon Bala writes: “These politicians are very clever. They know if they repeat something over and over, eventually people will believe them.”

Is this an accurate summation of a common stratagem employed by elected representatives? What does this quote imply about the analytical capacities of the voters?

3. All quotes in this preamble to the posed question have been extracted from various Government of Canada web pages. The Canada Border Service Agency (CBSA) is charged with “determining the admissibility of individuals by verifying identification and checking for violations of Canadian Law.” The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) is “Canada’s largest independent administrative tribunal” and is “responsible for making well-reasoned decisions on immigration and refugee matters, efficiently, fairly and in accordance with the law.” The membership of the IRB is composed of Governor in Council Appointments. Successful candidates are chosen following an “open, transparent, and merit-based selection process.” “All members must go through extensive training and orientation.” “This training includes a strong emphasis on professional, fair and ethical conduct.”

After cross-referencing the highlighted cases in *The Boat People* to the respective mandates of the CBSA and the IRB, how successful do you think these two government arms have been in meeting their stated obligations? Do you feel the process we, as readers, were witness to can be improved? If so,—What would

you do differently?—What would remain the same? How do you think the author, Sharon Bala, would respond to these three questions?

4. A Canadian Council for Refugees summation document (2015), stated that they, as well as “Amnesty International Canada and the Canadian Tamil Congress,” had “called for the rights of passengers to be respected, expressing concern about public comments ‘labelling Tamil asylum seekers as ‘terrorists’ before they have even had a chance to tell their story.’” After reading *The Boat People*, do you think these groups’ efforts to bring focus to this issue were warranted? Why or why not?
5. The same Canadian Council for Refugees document referenced in question #4, notes “Before the boat had even arrived, Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) sent its officers in BC a memo entitled ‘Marine Migrants: Program Strategy for the Next Arrival,’ directing them to use all legal means to detain the passengers as long as possible, to try to have them declared inadmissible on grounds of criminality or security, and to argue against them being recognized as refugees. This instruction was given even though, as the memo itself recognizes, many were likely to be refugees and there might be women and children on board. The rationale given was to ‘ensure that a deterrent for future arrivals is created.’” (“The memo (undated) was obtained” “through Access to Information.”)

In a Government of Canada online document titled “Know your rights—Refugees” it says “The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects all people in Canada.” Within the text of this charter are many directional statements including the following: “everyone has the right not to be arbitrarily detained or imprisoned.”

With reference to the refugee claimants’ experiences depicted in *The Boat People*, do you believe the directive issued to the CBSA is consistent with the constitutional expectations concerning human rights as outlined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

6. The author, provides extensive familial backgrounds for two characters—Grace, a Canadian with Japanese ancestry, is a government employee serving on the Immigration and Refugee Board; Priya is a second generation Canadian whose father and uncle emigrated from Sri Lanka. She provided legal representation to some of those requesting asylum. What is the thematic reason for the inclusion of each?

7. Using Ranga as an example, Sharon Bala in her novel described the expected outcome for some who are deported. “Hello sir, they would say. Please follow me. They would wear heavy boots with heavy soles. Heavy enough to smash a head. Or they would make Ranga drink petrol, then light him on fire. In Sri Lanka, there were many ways to make a bad death.”

CTV in a news article noted the following:

“Sathyapavan ‘Sathi’ Aseervatham said he was held for a year without charge in a Sri Lankan prison, beaten with plastic pipes and forced to go without food and water according to an affidavit arranged by his Canadian lawyer.” This report provides further disturbing details of torture. (Sathyapavan was a victim of a hit and run accident in Sri Lanka.)

A Government of Canada document titled “Pre removal risk-assessment—refugee claims in Canada” states “Canada is committed to ensuring that people being removed from Canada are not sent to a country where they would be in danger or at risk of persecution.” Is this claim valid? Do you feel Sharon Bala’s fictional account, *The Boat People*, mirrors real-life events? (Cite as many examples as you can to support your position.)

Discussion questions from the Amnesty International Book Club

1. Which aspects of *The Boat People* did you enjoy the most, and which ones did you find the most challenging? Why?
2. In what ways do immigrant parents impact the growth of their children in the new country?
3. Author Sharon Bala has said that she wrote the novel as a “meditation on empathy.” Discuss how the novel explores both the need for empathy as well as how it is tested?
4. Has your perspective on immigrants and refugees changed after reading this book? Is there anything you now see differently?
5. Who would you recommend *The Boat People* to? Why?

BACKGROUND



Rohingya refugees arrive by boat from Myanmar, near Teknaf, Bangladesh, 28 September 2017. Thousands of Rohingya continued to flee to Bangladesh in late September and early October, describing the burning of their villages as well as starvation caused by the Myanmar military's severe restrictions on their movement and on humanitarian assistance.

Support Refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants

Every day, all over the world, people make one of the most difficult decisions in their lives: to leave their homes in search of a safer, better life.

Many people in the world have had the experience of leaving the place where they grew up. Maybe they will only move as far as the next village or city. But for some people, they will need to leave their country entirely—sometimes for a short time, but sometimes forever.

There are many reasons why people around the globe seek to rebuild their lives in a different country. Some people leave home to get a job or an education. Others are forced to flee persecution or human rights violations such as torture. Millions flee from armed conflicts or other crises or violence. Some no longer feel safe and might have been targeted just because of who they

are or what they do or believe—for example, for their ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or political opinions.

These journeys, which all start with the hope for a better future, can also be full of danger and fear. Some people risk falling prey to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Some are detained by the authorities as soon as they arrive in a new country. Once they're settling in and start building a new life, many face daily racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

Some people end up feeling alone and isolated because they have lost the support networks that many take for granted – our communities, colleagues, relatives and friends.



I WELCOME REFUGEES



Amnesty activists send an S.O.S to Europe from the Greek island of Lesbos, July 2013.

What is Amnesty's position on migrants and asylum-seekers?

We campaign for a world where human rights can be enjoyed by everyone, no matter what situation they are in. Amnesty has championed the human rights of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants for decades.

We campaign to make sure governments honour their shared responsibility to protect the rights of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. We condemn any policies and practices that undermine the human rights of people on the move.

The people are not the problem

There are about 25.4 million refugees globally. Many people feel overwhelmed by the numbers and see people moving across borders as a global crisis. We at Amnesty International disagree that it is a crisis of numbers. The people are not the problem. Rather, the root causes that drive families and individuals to cross borders and the short-sighted policies that make the process difficult and dangerous, are the problem.

Campaigning for people on the move

With our campaigns, we put pressure on governments to honour their responsibility to protect every single person's human rights. They must make sure that refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants are safe, and

are not tortured, discriminated against or left living in poverty. We campaign for governments to properly process the asylum claims of asylum-seekers so they are not left in limbo—sometimes even locked away in detention centres—for years. We also want to see migrants being protected from exploitation and abuse by their employers or by traffickers.

Why should governments welcome refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants?

- We want to live in a world where people who are in grave danger have the opportunity to rebuild their lives in safety.
- In a globalized world, sharing global responsibility for global issues is the fair thing to do.
- Welcoming people from other countries strengthens host communities by making them more diverse and flexible in our fast-changing world.
- Some of the most inspiring and influential people in the arts, science, politics and technology have been refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. They were allowed to rebuild their lives in a new country and they thrived as members of a new community.

TAKE ACTION: Call on Canada to become a leader for refugees' rights

Call on the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to support a generous and robust resettlement program.

<https://takeaction.amnesty.ca/page/37046/action/1>

Governments must do more so that people can rebuild their lives in safety – by humanely hosting more refugees, providing legal and safe routes for travel and admission, increasing resettlement places or fulfilling funding appeals.

Shared global solutions are needed to provide refugees with the protection and rights due to them. These are not special rights, they are simply human rights such as safe shelter, food and water, the opportunity to work, access to education and legal assistance.



GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS

IN DEPTH:

Currently, according to the UNHCR **68.5 million** people worldwide had been forced to leave their homes as a result of conflict, persecution, violence and human rights violations.

Of these:

25.4 M

25.4 million people had to escape to another country. These people are referred to as refugees.

3.1 M

3.1 million people have sought safety in another country. These are people seeking asylum.

40 M

40 million people were displaced within their own country. These people are described as internally displaced persons.

Right now, the vast majority of the world's refugees live in developing regions.

GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS

Over 1.19 million women, men and children need to be resettled in a safe country, yet only 30 countries offer just over 100,000 annual resettlement places.

Sign up here to ask Canada to be a leader for refugees.

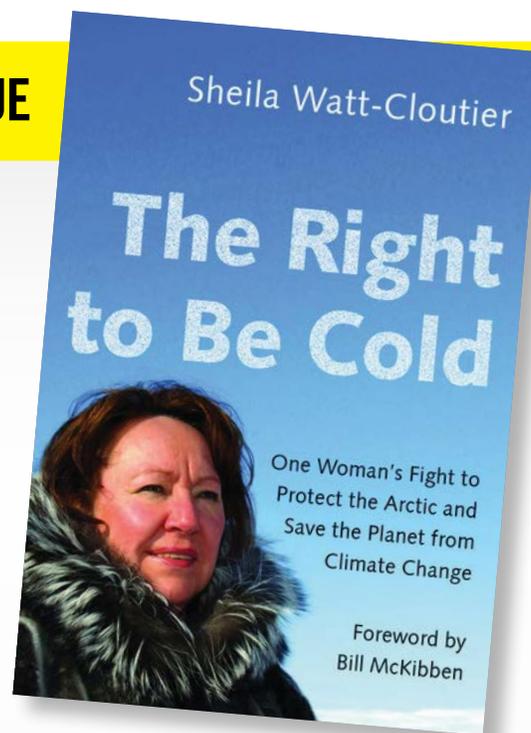
<https://takeaction.amnesty.ca/page/37046/action/1>

COMING UP IN MAY/JUNE 2019

The Right to be Cold

by Sheila Watt-Cloutier

Recommended by guest reader
Sarah Cox



Sheila Watt-Cloutier

The Right to Be Cold is a human story of resilience, commitment, and survival told from the unique vantage point of an Inuk woman who, in spite of many obstacles, rose from humble beginnings in the Arctic community of Kuujjuaq, Quebec—

where she was raised by a single parent and grandmother and travelled by dog team in a traditional, ice-based Inuit hunting culture—to become one of the most influential and decorated environmental, cultural, and human rights advocates in the world.

The Right to Be Cold explores the parallels between safeguarding the Arctic and the survival of Inuit culture—and ultimately the world—in the face of past, present, and future environmental degradation. Sheila Watt-Cloutier passionately argues that climate change is a human rights issue and one to which all of us on the planet are inextricably linked. *The Right to Be Cold* is the culmination of Watt-Cloutier's regional, national, and international work over the last twenty-five years, weaving historical traumas and current issues such as climate change, leadership, and sustainability in the Arctic into her personal story to give a coherent and holistic voice to an important subject.

The discussion guide will be sent out May 2019.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at Bookclub@amnesty.ca

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