



JOURNAL ON EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

Book Review: *Those We Throw Away Are Diamonds: A Refugee's Search for Home* by Mondiant Dogon, with Jenna Krajeski

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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2022), pp. 288-291

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/63615>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/uf7y-qqs5>

REFERENCES:

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King, Elisabeth. 2022. "Book Review: *Those We Throw Away Are Diamonds: A Refugee's Search for Home* by Mondiant Dogon with Jenna Krajeski." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 8 (1): 288-91. <https://doi.org/10.33682/uf7y-qqs5>.

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BOOK REVIEW

THOSE WE THROW AWAY ARE DIAMONDS: A REFUGEE'S SEARCH FOR HOME

BY MONDIANT DOGON, WITH JENNA KRAJESKI

PENGUIN PRESS, 2021. 336 PAGES

\$28.00 (HARDCOVER), \$18.00 (PAPER), \$14.99 (E-BOOK)

ISBN 978-1-984881-28-1

Those We Throw Away Are Diamonds: A Refugee's Search for Home by Mondiant Dogon (with Jenna Krajeski) is a simultaneously heartbreaking and inspiring firsthand account of Dogon's life as a survivor, "forever refugee," top student, child soldier, community leader, and change-maker. The narrative takes readers from Dogon's early childhood in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, through his more than two decades in refugee camps in Rwanda, and on to New York City, where he earned a master's degree in international education. Having been taught that "refugees are told to be quiet, and to be grateful for what we have" (252), and having long feared sharing his story, even with his classmates in each context, Dogon labels silence "a disease" (252). In breaking his silence, Dogon challenges many popular misconceptions about forced migration and refugee life and teaches readers through the power of his story. Many of the book's key themes are of special relevance to those who work, study, or are otherwise passionate about education in emergencies (EiE).

Dogon's book offers a corrective to frequent misunderstandings of refugee experiences. First, the media gaze is too often on a one-way period of flight, where safety is presumed if the journey is survived. Dogon and other refugees' ongoing search for safety is an important theme throughout the book. By the time he was 12 years old, Dogon had confronted unimaginable dangers, made a perilous journey from Congo into Rwanda, survived massacres in a refugee camp in which he lost multiple family members and friends, journeyed from Rwanda back into Congo, and once again from Congo back into Rwanda. Daily life was often dangerous, both within and outside refugee camps. Dogon writes, "I had seen more death than I'd ever thought possible" (221).

Second, through his experiences with a lengthy period of asylum and his efforts to make a life in refugee camps, Dogon challenges the common understanding of refugee status as a temporary condition. Dogon uses the term "forever refugee" to explain the prolonged displacement he and other refugees face. Refugees today are displaced for 20 years on average (European Commission 2021), and while UNHCR (2019) promotes alternatives to camps, many refugees' lives are entirely

framed by refugee camps. Writing about his brother, Dogon says, “It would be a miracle for him to buy a home or raise a family outside Gihembe [refugee camp]. He couldn’t leave the refugee camp for Kigali . . . Food and clothing, even medicine, would always seem like expensive luxuries” (204).¹

Third, Dogon’s writing complicates what is often an oversimplified, and largely negative, narrative about refugees’ lives. His story certainly illustrates the magnitude of the daily grind that he and those in his refugee community face in order to survive. Dogon also describes happy moments of familial love, intense friendship, generosity when there was little to give, joyous memories, and future aspiration. His writing encourages readers not to think of refugees from a deficit perspective or to position them as passive recipients of humanitarian aid, but to see them through a lens focused on their capacity, on their agency, and on their ability to lead creative, complex lives.

Each of these lessons should be instructive for scholars and practitioners who work with refugee populations, as well as a wider readership interested in gaining a better understanding of forced migration. Dogon’s book also offers insight into specific EiE programming. For example, his reflections on living through violence lend support to the current EiE focus on early childhood education and social emotional learning:

I was so young. But living through a war makes you older. When you are three or four or five years old and you spend a year living in war, you become as wise as if you were twenty years old. You learn when to close your eyes and how to keep them open even while you sleep. You stop asking for food no matter how hungry you are. You see people dying wherever you go, and you say, “Wow, I’m next.” (65)

Education is the overarching and perhaps most central theme of the book, as it ties all the parts of Dogon’s life together. Echoing themes common in the EiE literature, Dogon portrays schooling as the key to the future and to hope:

Through everything, school was the center of my life. I think this must be true for a lot of refugee children. It doesn’t matter what the classroom looks like or who the teachers are, or even what is taught. It doesn’t matter if we are threatened by violence. We will risk everything to study. If parents can send their children to school, all hope is not lost. (152)

1 Kigali is the capital of Rwanda.

The details of Dogon’s educational journey should be of great interest to readers. They highlight his incredible perseverance and how he overcame obstacle after obstacle—poor-quality primary schools; accessing school as a child soldier; ethnic, national, and refugee-based discrimination; the absence of secondary school and higher education options; a lack of required education and citizenship documentation; and more—which should guide those of us working in EiE. Reflecting on his time as a student in the camp, he writes, “I didn’t see any way out of Gihembe other than school, and so I became obsessed with being the top of my class. Besides collecting firewood and the occasional soccer game, I did nothing but study. In the refugee camp, school was more than a place to learn; it was an escape hatch” (258). Dogon’s narrative reminds us not only of the roots of the EiE field—which is built on the power of schools to promote wellbeing in conflict-affected contexts and as places to “cope and hope” (Winthrop and Kirk 2008)—but of the work that remains to be done.

A powerful first-person narrative that challenges misperceptions about refugees and their lives, Dogon’s *Those We Throw Away Are Diamonds* draws attention to key priorities in education in conflict-affected contexts. It is an important read for EiE students, scholars, and practitioners.

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² Elisabeth King is Professor of International Education and Politics at New York University. In writing this review and reflecting on her own positionality, she shares that she has conducted research in Rwanda, visited Gihembe refugee camp, and taught Dogon at New York University.

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