The Breadwinner

*The Breadwinner* also known as Parvana is a children's novel by Deborah Ellis, first published in 2000. The title of the book refers to the role of the protagonist, 11-year-old Parvana, who is forced by circumstances to be the breadwinner for her family in a war-torn Taliban-era in Afghanistan.

Parvana lives in Kabul, Afghanistan with her mother, her father, her older sister Nooria and two younger siblings, Maryam and Ali. Soon after the novel starts, Taliban soldiers come into her house and arrest her father for not having an Afghan education, instead going to university in a different country. Parvana and her mother go to the jail nearby to see if her father was taken there, but the guards are unhelpful. Soon after her mother becomes depressed and will not move. The family starts to starve, as they have no male escort and so cannot go outside.

Parvana’s mother and Mrs. Weera decide to make Parvana disguise as a boy by cutting her hair and making her wear her dead brother Hossain's clothes so that she can buy groceries seeing as she is the only girl who was of age and her body had not developed, and as it worked so well she starts to do it every day. Eventually, she continues her father's business of reading and writing letters for people that can't. Parvana runs into a girl when she used to go to school with named Shauzia who has been put through the same experience. They start to work together and soon become close friends. They were never that close in school but they are now trying to figure out ways to
earn more money. They come up with an idea of a portable shop by using trays to move their items around. To do that, they needed money to buy trays. They find a way to get a lot of money by digging up bones from a grave.

Parvana also meets a family friend named Mrs. Weera, a former physical education teacher who comes to stay with Parvana's family to help her mother get well with her granddaughter and takes charge of the household because Parvana's mother has become severely depressed over the loss of her husband. Eventually, Parvana's mother begins to feel better and eventually teams up with Mrs. Weera and a group of other women to write the Afghanistan National Magazine, smuggling it to and from Pakistan to be published.

Throughout the book, Parvana grows closer to her older sister Nooria, and becomes more responsible and stronger emotionally as a person. She also becomes very close with a woman who appears in the window of a building behind where Parvana works. This woman throws small gifts onto her blanket while she is there.

The climax of the story comes when Parvana's seventeen-year-old sister Nooria announces that she is leaving for Mazar-e-Sharif to get married to a boy, because there is no war and she will be going to college. She leaves along with her mother and younger siblings, but Parvana stays since she looks like a boy and her appearance will be difficult to explain and be kept secret. Despite being against it at first, Parvana grows to accept her sister's decision.
Parvana remains in Kabul with Mrs. Weera. One day after work, she meets a runaway girl from Mazar-e-Sharif who is deeply upset. Parvana leads her home at night, and soon the girl, named Homa, tells them that Mazar-e-Sharif has been captured by the Taliban. Homa's family had been murdered by the Taliban, and she had been extremely lucky to run away. Mrs. Weera gladly takes her in and Parvana is very worried since the rest of her family is there.

One day, Parvana's father returns home, being led by two kind men who found him released from jail, but unable to get home due to the loss of his leg. Mrs. Weera, Homa, and Parvana nurse him back to health, and the novel ends with Parvana and her father leaving to Mazar, hidden in the back of a truck. They will search for their family in refugee camps. Shauzia, who had been planning to run away from her difficult family so that she would not have to marry and could start a new life, tells Parvana that she will be leaving with some nomads. They plan to meet in 20 years in France, at the top of the Eiffel Tower.
**Parvana’s Journey**

"To children we force to be braver than they have to be." With these words that are dedicated to children and that implicate adults, Deborah Ellis launches *Parvana’s Journey*, the second of her children’s novels set in present-day Afghanistan. This is a book about the day-to-day bravery of children in a land ravaged by adults. It is a story ironically unsuited for grown-ups who, if they read it with care, will find it harrowing, haunting, disturbing in what it says about war-making the worst of adult crimes against children. On every page of this small book is this subtext: adult wars, whatever rationale we devise for them, are making collateral damage of the world’s children.

This story is part two of the *Breadwinner Trilogy* of books about life in Afghanistan, during the Taliban rule.

Parvana is a twelve year old girl, who is travelling across the country to try to find her family. She had started the journey with her father, but this book begins at her father’s funeral. Her father, who had been a teacher, always said

‘If we stop, we die’.

Parvana knew she had to keep going on her journey, even though she was all alone. She is desperate to find her mother and family. On her travels she finds other children who are alone and need help too. She meets Hassan, the small baby whose mother has been killed in a bomb attack on their village. She finds food for them and brings him along on her journey. She then meets Asif, a boy with one
leg, who seems to enjoy annoying her, but who is afraid on his own and is really good to Hassan.

Together on their way, they also meet Leila, an eight year old girl. Her father and brother went to war and her mother left one day to find them and never returned. She lives with her grandmother near a minefield. The grandmother has given up on life and just lies and sleeps all day. Leila feeds them by salvaging the remains of the animals that get blown up in the minefield. Leila’s grandmother is killed in a bombing and so Leila also joins the other children on their journey.

They eventually make it to a refugee camp and finally Parvana is reunited with her family, after suffering the loss of one of her dear friends.

The story is based on true life and it is an easy book to read. The short chapters and descriptive language are a help when reading it. The book made the children think of children whose lives are not happy, as a result of war etc., and made them appreciate all they themselves have. The readers are amazed at the children’s bravery to continue on their journey alone.

The Breadwinner Trilogy continues with Parvana’s odyssey to reunite with her surviving family. Parvana and her recently released father leave Kabul at the end of The Breadwinner, determined to find Parvana’s mother, older sister, younger sister, and toddler brother who traveled north for her older sister’s wedding. The journey begins with
harsh tragedy, at the graveside of Parvana’s father. Parvana is still traveling as Kaseem, but at 14, she will not be able to hide her true gender much longer. The villagers are initially welcoming Parvana as Kaseem but soon she must escape in the middle of the night after being warned that she is about to be sold to the Taliban.

All alone and not even certain of where she is going, Parvana recites multiplication tables, just as her father taught her, to keep her going during the most trying times. Barely able to take care of her own self, Parvana’s wanderings lead her to a struggling baby in a bombed-out village whose dead mother lies beside him, then an angry, abused young boy who has already lost a leg, and finally an imaginative little girl who believes she is forever safe from land mines that litter the damaged, broken, war-torn country. Together, they form a new kind of family.

Parvana shares not only her strength and protection with the younger children, she also tries to impart her hard-won education, teaching her new siblings to read and write. She writes undeliverable letters as often as she can to her friend Shauzia, who also survived life in Kabul as a cross-dressing breadwinner for her family, with whom Parvana shares the secret promise of meeting at the top of the Eiffel Tower in now less than 20 years.

In spite of the endless difficulties she faces, Parvana holds on to her father’s beloved books as long as she can, as well as the single copy of a feminist magazine her mother helped to write and produce before the family was scattered. Parvana is determined she will not
only find her missing family but she will one day put her mother’s brave, banned work into her waiting hands.

Deborah Ellis creates another challenging, fast-moving story about the will to survive, even in the youngest, most vulnerable souls. The children’s ability to nurture one another even as adults prove unreliable provide moments of uplifting wonder. Truly, the future lies in children; their resilience, their determination, their forgiveness, and their awe-inspiring hope.

Adults were everywhere in *The Breadwinner*. Set in the time of the Taliban regime, it records the efforts of a younger and feistier Parvana to support her family by masquerading and working as a boy in Kabul’s marketplace, bone yard, soccer stadium. This girl had a place to call home, a purpose, a group of people who knew of and cared about her. She had reason to hope.

But what a difference a year makes. In *Parvana’s Journey*, the Afghan people’s diaspora is underway, and Parvana is caught in it as she wanders her country in search of what may be left of her family. The grown-ups have disappeared, died, retreated to their mountain caves. Or they fly the skies above in their surveillance planes and bombers. The Taliban are shadowy—routed and on the run. In the opening chapter, Parvana’s father, with whom she has been walking cross-country to reach the rest of her family somewhere in the north, lies dead in an unmarked grave outside a nameless village. His daughter, with neither map nor compass to her name, will never be able to locate his resting place again. And until they meet accidentally
in a crowded and chaotic refugee camp on the border with Pakistan in the final moments of the narrative, the whereabouts and fates of Parvana’s mother and siblings are unknown.

Without parents, teachers, or guardians of any sort, without food, clean water, warm clothing, Parvana and three other children – Asif, a disabled and abused cave-dweller; Hassan, a wailing baby whom Parvana names when she finds him beside the body of his dead mother; and Leila, a sprightly little girl convinced of her own invincibility who scavenges minefields in search of food and booty, come together in desperation and form a temporary family. This is what it means and feels like to be a refugee, the author shows us. The children are starving much of the time. They are afraid and angry all of the time. They struggle to resist the absolute despair or exhaustion afflicting the few adults they do encounter as we observe Leila’s catatonic grandmother; a nameless woman keening inconsolably on a hillside; the helpless aid worker in the refugee camp. Only two members of this brave quartet survive the events of the novel. Two die in bitter and graphic circumstances.

Forced to be braver than they should have to be, this quartet copes as characters in children’s books often do, by creating a fantasy world, an arcadia Parvana and Leila refer to not as Wonderland or Neverland or Oz, but the Green Valley. It is a place of plenty and of peace, full of food and magically uncontaminated water, where

“…the children ... have both arms and legs. ... No one is blind, and no one is unhappy.”
In the Valley, children are safe from bombers with their anonymous pilots and deadly pay-loads dropped indiscriminately as it seems to them on the targets below. Parvana also persists throughout in writing letters to her absent friend Shauzia her companion who was setting out to make her way to France when she and Parvana parted company in The Breadwinner. These letters, in which Parvana maintains her belief that Shauzia and she will meet someday at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, offer moments of terrible, futile hope, and are some of the most painful passages for adult readers venturing into the pages of this children’s novel.

We are conditioned to look for geopolitical details, for heroes to admire, for enemies to blame, and most of all for outcomes. We take comfort in finding factions to praise and blame. Deborah Ellis denies adult readers this kind of grim gratification. For her child characters, all is chaos, and there is no comfort to be found in the facts, the maps, the logistics, and the punditry.

Ellis shows in scene after scene what it feels like to be alone, to be powerless, to be caught in the crossfire, exploded in the minefields, rained on by bombs in the night. Who planted the landmine that blew off Asif’s leg? Who’s to blame? We are not allowed to know. Who drops the bombs that imperil all the children? The rumour is that American planes are responsible, but those in the story never know, nor does knowing the national identity of the warriors matter. This is what it feels like to be turned from human child into collateral damage, to be robbed of every one of the rights set out in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.
Parvana’s Journey is a book for older children serious about understanding the world they will inherit. But adults, too, should read Parvana’s Journey before the war in Iraq of 2003 makes the 2002 war in Afghanistan a dimly remembered set of blurred images in our overcrowded historical memories. We should read it to see in Ellis’s images of children, starving, blighted, wounded, dying, surviving and, how we are forcing children to be braver than they should have to be. We should wonder why. It’s the least we can do.

Parvana is not a typical eleven-year-old girl, but she would certainly like to be. She is living in Kabul, a city in Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, so she is surrounded by violence, oppression, and poverty… and before long, her family sees her as their only hope for survival. No pressure or anything though.

After Father is kidnapped and imprisoned by the Taliban, Mother has a great idea. They used to dress Parvana as a boy so she can walk about the marketplace freely. This way she can get food and earn some money for the family; it will be great. And while the entire family makes plans to turn Parvana into Kaseem, Parvana doesn't have a clue what they are talking about. She is just a kid, but Parvana's family knows something that she doesn't. And that is that she is totally strong enough to handle the situation.

So they cut her hair, dress her up in her dead brother's clothes, and then send her out to fool the Taliban. To Parvana's surprise, her
family is right. No one pays any attention to her as Kaseem. As she buys rice and tea for her family, she feels proud, thinking,

"I can do this!" (6.72).

Over time, Parvana comes to enjoy her marketplace outings, watching the people and feeling the

"Sun on her face", which for an Afghan woman at this time is a dream come true, the Taliban requires them to wear burqas when they leave the house.

These trips to the marketplace, however, aren't about fresh air and sunshine. Parvana is supposed to be taking over Father's job as a letter-reader, and she's a little skittish. She is only eleven, after all, but mother reminds her that she has

"…more education than most people in Afghanistan" (7.11)

She knows that her mother is right. So Parvana takes a deep breath and reads the letters with confidence, and as she does, she learns something in the process: these soldiers who have ruined her life and country are real people with emotions just like hers. She wonders:

Could they have feelings of sorrow, like other human beings? (7.38)

This is a majorly insightful moment on Parvana's part. She recognizes the fundamental humanity in the very people who refuse to acknowledge hers and it shows us how bright this young girl is. It's also a generous realization. it would be easy to write all members of
the Taliban off after what they've done which clues us into how fundamentally kind Parvana is.

While part of the reason Parvana gets sent to the market as Kaseem has to do with the fact that she is literally the only person in her family who can pass as a boy, we think another reason behind Mother's brilliant idea might be that she knows how smart and aware her daughter is and both of which seem like useful qualities while hanging around with the Taliban.

When Parvana runs into Shauzia in the marketplace she is relieved. Not only is Shauzia an acquaintance from school, but she is pretending to be a boy to help her family too. Finally, Parvana thinks,

“There are other girls like her in Kabul!” (9.7).

And while Shauzia is not exactly like Parvana in plenty of ways she is more adventurous and forces Parvana to take some risks. We are thinking about the graveyard in particular on this one she brings a bit of much-needed childhood back to Parvana's life.

Shauzia and Parvana laugh together, daydreaming about their futures and imagining themselves saving a princess while they

"…ride through Kabul in a cloud of dust" all while outwitting the Taliban, mind you. (13.43)

When they walk home someday, they talk about their classmates from school almost as though they were still allowed to go the way they used to. And, like true childhood friends, when it's time
for them to go their separate ways, they refuse to say good-bye, and instead say,

"So long for now" agreeing to meet each other twenty years later in Paris. (a15.75)

But though Shauzia brings companionship and childish whimsy to Parvana's days, she isn't Parvana's only friend. Our main girl spends her mornings with a different friend—a.k.a. the Window Woman.

At first the Woman seems a bit creepy. She hides from sight and throws strange presents on Parvana's blanket but Parvana only feels comforted by her presence. She looks forward to the little signs of life from the window, and the anticipation gets her through her days and keeps her focused on the positive. Again we can see friendship as helping Parvana tap into her childhood. The Woman drops presents down to her, impractical little gifts and treats, really that speckle Parvana's days spent otherwise carrying the burden of being the sole provider for her family.

Before Parvana leaves Afghanistan, she plants the Woman flowers in the place where she usually set up her blanket; so that the Woman will have something pretty to look at when she is gone.

As a gesture, it shows how kind and thoughtful Parvana is, and also how hopeful she leaves the potential for beauty and growth as a gift to her mysterious friend. And even if the flowers don't grow, it won't matter because it seems the woman watches Parvana plant the seeds when Parvana looks to the window to wave, she thinks she sees someone wave back.
Parvana's father tells her of the story of Malali, a girl who inspires the Afghans to rally in war and beat the British. Father tells Parvana that she has that same courage. It isn't just a cool story, though it serves as inspiration for Parvana to act courageously later on when all she really wants to do is crawl in a hole and hide forever. Malali reminds Parvana that she may be just a little girl, but she can do great things.

Parvana pretends that she is Malali when she needs to feel brave, like when she goes with her mother to the prison to find her father, and when she rescues home from the Taliban. Parvana thinks

I'm Malali, leading the troops though enemy territory. (14.27)

And in this way, Malali becomes like a second alter ego to Parvana. And just as she is able to do things as Kaseem that she couldn't do as Parvana due to Taliban law. Malali isn't just a story her dad told her. Malali is the best pep talk Parvana knows how to give herself. And this means, that though Parvana quakes with fear sometimes, she is also figured out how to pull herself out of it, which is pretty impressive for an eleven-year-old.

Parvana definitely rises to the occasion and becomes the family hero, but deep inside she just wants to be a normal kid. She was quite content playing with Maryam and fetching the water as needed, and what she wants more than anything is to be bored in geography class and walk home from school with her girlfriends again. She says:

I just want to be an ordinary kid again. I just want a normal, boring life. (12.36)
But for the good of the family, Parvana takes on Father's role, stepping into some pretty big shoes because she can, not because she wants to. This shift in her life only deepens the toll war takes on her though, and after seeing the prisoners' hands chopped off, she stays home for a bit because she doesn't want to see anything ugly for a little while. War has shown Parvana far more than she has ever wanted to see, and as the book ends, though we hope otherwise, it seems like Parvana's childhood is behind her.

Parvana is mad because since the Taliban has taken over Kabul, girls can't go to school or leave the house without a man. She is the lucky one though at least she can leave the house when she helps her father walk to and from the market each day so he can make money reading letters. At home, Parvana seems like a typical eleven-year-old. She fights with her older sister and has chores, like fetching the water.

There isn't much to do in their little apartment most of their belongings have been destroyed by bombs or stolen. So Father tells stories after dinner. He tells a story of a girl named Malali, who leads the Afghan troops to win a battle against the British.

But then one night Taliban soldiers break into the apartment and kidnap Father; they don't like that he is an educated man, and to make matters worse, he went to school in England.

As he is being dragged away from his family, Father says,

"Take care of the others, my Malali" to Parvana. Yup - the pressure's officially on. (2.78)
Mother and Parvana go the prison where Father is being held, but it's no use; he is going to be there for awhile, and their protests against this just get them both beaten. This hurts the Mother and remains impossible to handle, she just lies in bed for days. Parvana goes to the market to get some food for the family, and she runs into Mother's friend from the women's group, Mrs. Weera. Mrs. Weera, a former physical education teacher, rallies the team back together, so to speak. Everyone decides that it is a great idea for Parvana to pretend that she is their male cousin, Kaseem, so she can make money at the market. Everyone accepts Parvana as Kaseem. But while she is hesitant at first, Parvana comes around, and so they chop off her hair and dress her in her dead brother's clothes.

Parvana does just what Father used to do – she lays her blanket in the same spot, and reads letters for money. She is pretty proud of herself. One day she senses that there is a woman peering down on her from the window overhead. The Window Woman starts plopping little gifts on Parvana's blanket from time to time. Later on Parvana runs into Shauzia, a girl from school—except that like Parvana, Shauzia doesn't look like a girl anymore because she is also pretending to be a boy in order to support her family. Meanwhile, Mrs. Weera and Mother are making big plans at home. Mother, a former writer, has returned to her craft and they are going to publish a magazine. They also want to start a school.

At the market, Shauzia and Parvana team up, but realize that they aren't making enough money to support their families. So then Shauzia has a great idea. They should dig up bones and sell them.
Both the girls spend the day at the graveyard digging up remains and then cashing in. If this sounds a bit morbid to you, worry not—they keep spirits light by using some of the skulls as mascots.

After a while, they earn enough money to buy trays so they can wander the market selling cigarettes and gum.

Parvana and Shauzia head over to the stadium to sell to the soccer fans one day, but when they get there, they realize this is not a game, and instead prisoners' hands are being chopped off by Taliban soldiers.

This is too much for Parvana, and she decides she needs a break from the market scene for a while, so she hangs out at home and regroups. But soon after, she is back at it again. She still gets gifts from the Window Woman and Shauzia tells her about her plans to leave Afghanistan with nomads and head to Pakistan.

After Nooria agrees to marry some dude from Pakistan, Mother and the little ones make plans to take Nooria to Pakistan to prepare for the wedding. Parvana doesn't want to go, though, and basically throws a temper tantrum until Mother gives in. Mrs. Weera and her grandchild stay with Parvana.

As a parting gift, Parvana gives Nooria a pen to use first as a student, and later as a teacher. These are her sister's big dreams, and the reason is that she is going to Pakistan.

During an awful storm, Parvana ducks into an old building for cover. She falls asleep, and when she awakens she finds the girl,
Homa, who is running from the Taliban. Pretending to be Malali, Parvana rescues Homa and brings her back to the apartment. Once they get there, Homa delivers the bad news that she has come from Mazar because the Taliban has taken over the area and Mazar is where Parvana's family is headed. Parvana gets depressed, and is worried sick about her family in Pakistan. But one day as she comes home from the marketplace, she sees Father at their apartment. He has finally been released from prison, and though he is quite weak, he is alive.

Mrs. Weera, Homa, and Parvana nurse Father back to health, and Parvana feels proud to work to provide Father with the medicine he needs. Mrs. Weera hears that people in Mazar have all left and are living in refugee camps, so Father decides that he and Parvana will go to find their family.

As a way to say good-bye to the Window Woman, Parvana plants flowers below her window; she swears she sees her wave.

Before leaving, she says so long to Shauzia who is also heading out, and they plan to meet again in twenty years in front of the Eiffel Tower.

On the way out of town, Parvana is eager to see what the future will bring and sees the sun shining on Mount Parvana.
Character Analysis

Father may be frail and old at first glance, but he is the family patriarch, and a source of serious wisdom and experience, especially for Parvana. A former history teacher, pretty much every time Father opens his mouth, a gem comes out, like:

…never rely on the railing. (1.58)

Father was crippled by a bomb, and needs help getting to and from market each day, a job that Parvana happily does, and yet, when they come home each night, he doesn't use the railing on the stairs in their bombed-out apartment building. But Father is not just being literal when he tells Parvana to never rely on the railing and he is also telling his daughter to rely on herself first and foremost, which, in a country riddled by war and violence, is pretty sound advice. And he says it all in a few simple words.

Father's wisdom doesn't always come out in one breath, though, and with few belongings left to entertain themselves with, the family gathers around him after dinner each night as he entertains his children by telling stories from history. He might not be able to officially teach anymore, but school is definitely in session for his kids each evening.

His most noteworthy story is about the legend of Malali, a little girl who inspires the Afghan soldiers to fight against the British invaders. Father knows how important it is for his daughters to be strong, educated, and independent, particularly since the Taliban tries so hard to make women the opposite. So he tells them:
You are all brave women. You are inheritors of the courage of Malali. (2.61)

As his daughters grow up in a society that insists on their invisibility, they literally cannot leave the house without a man, and then are expected to be completely covered, Father gives them a different lineage to place themselves in the lineage of Malali and by doing so, reminds them about how powerful and brave women can be. The story of Malali is particularly meaningful for Parvana, and she remembers her Father's story several times while he is imprisoned and uses it as a source of strength.

Speaking of being imprisoned, we don't actually see Father for much of the book, since Taliban soldiers raid the family apartment early on in the story, tearing through it and taking Father off to prison without ever offering a reason. And then after Mother and Nooria and the little kids have left Father is just as mysteriously released and comes home. When he does, though, he is barely recognizable, and because of this we get a sense of how cruel life inside Taliban jails is.

It is important to note that Father is the only positive male figure in the book. Since the Taliban is entirely male, he serves as a reminder that though life in Afghanistan at this time is intensely violent and oppressive to women, it doesn't have to be this way. It is entirely possible for men to be kind, gentle, and thoughtful people who treat women with the respect they deserve. And yet because Father is the only man like this that we ever see, we also get the sense that he is exceptional and that, as such, better times remain far off in the distance.
Mother is one resilient woman. She has lost a son, her career, her house, and even, for a while, her husband, but every time she gets knocked down, she pulls herself back up. Suffice it to say, nobody breaks Mother's stride.

Mother lost her first-born son to a land mine when he was fourteen, a loss we know wracked her to her core since she's held onto his clothes, keeping them in a cupboard in the family's tiny apartment. She looks sad when she touches them. But despite this loss, Mother remains fully committed to her other children, engaged with their lives and taking good care of them day in and day out.

And while it's great that Mother is there for her kids adding a deadbeat mom into the whole war-ravaged-childhood thing would be pretty rough the bigger role she plays in the book is to show readers just how badly women suffer under Taliban rule. While Parvana can disguise herself as a boy and roam freely through the streets, Mother becomes a prisoner in her own home.

Mother also, like Father, received a university education. She is bright and skilled. But she has been stuck in the house since the Taliban forbade women from walking freely outside alone and forced her to quit her job. When the story opens, she hasn't been outside in eighteen months. She has lost the home. Both, she and Father worked so hard to provide for their family, so the place she has been stuck inside is one cramped little room that doesn't even have running water.

Mother is surprisingly patient and optimistic for someone whose life has been so dramatically altered, and she believes that the
Afghan people, who are supposed to be smart and strong will win the war against the Taliban, and then life will be normal again. Despite being pretty much smothered by oppression, she continues to believe that there are good people out there in the world she is waiting for things to make right again in Afghanistan. That Mother still believes that the good guys will win and she doesn't just show us that she maintains a positive outlook amid horrible conditions. It also shows us that she is fundamentally good in her own right. Instead of reacting to her horrible treatment with hatred, Mother keeps her eyes on the prize i.e. a brighter future and her ability to do so feels us know that the faith she has in humanity comes from a strong connection to her own goodness. After all, it's hard to believe that the good guys will win if you are tempted by the dark side yourself.

Mother isn't one to needlessly take risks, she also isn't one to sit idly by and do nothing while her family is ripped apart. So when Father is kidnapped, Mother has Nooria forge a note from him granting her permission to leave the house, and then makes Parvana escort her to the prison where she confronts the Taliban and screams:

"Release my husband!" (3.54)

When they refuse, she keeps demanding them to free him. Even as they beat her with sticks across her back, though she ultimately goes home without him, it isn't for lack of trying, and if nothing else, she has at least shown her children that there is one thing that Taliban cannot take from any of them: loyalty and love for each other.
Mother is human, of course. After she fails to free Father from prison, she falls into a depression. Luckily, though, Parvana brings her to Mrs. Weera by the apartment, and Mrs. Weera snaps her out of it. Together, these two start making all kinds of big plans. They turn Parvana into Kaseem in order to bring food and money to the family. They start a small school in their apartment, and they begin writing a magazine so the world can hear about life under Taliban rule.

While these are all worthy causes, they also have something else in common. The Taliban can keep her stuck inside her house, but she is willing to risk life and limb literally to make sure her family is fed, and to work against their oppressive regime using the skills she has by starting the school and writing. In other words, nobody puts Mother in a corner.

As the book ends, we don't know what fate Mother has met traveling with Nooria and the little kids to Pakistan, though we know the Taliban has taken control of the area they were traveling to. One thing is certain, though: no matter what's happened while she has been away, we can be sure that Mother has done her best to protect her family, and been willing to fight to keep them together.

Mother hasn't been outside in eighteen months, since women in Afghanistan can't leave the house without a man. As an educated woman, this is just humiliating.

She used to be a writer for a radio station, but then the Taliban made her quit her job; and though Father wonders why she doesn't
continue to write, she figures the Taliban won't publish her work so why bother. Parvana notices since Mother can no long write her

"…temper grew shorter every day" (2.31),

and also that Mother is sad a lot, especially since her son died from a land mine.

Mother busies herself cleaning the house, and takes pride in her home, saying,

The Taliban said that we must stay inside but that doesn't mean that we have to live in filth (2.20).

When the Taliban barge into their apartment to kidnap Father Mother fights back by pounding them with her fists. After they leave, she cleans up, and the next day she and Parvana go to prison to demand his release.

Mother storms the prison saying that

“Father has committed no crime, and I want him released!” (3.47),

But the soldiers respond by beating her.

Since Mother hadn't walked outside in almost two years, her feet are raw and her face is stained with tears and sweat.

When they get home, she lays on the tosh, buries her face in her pillow, and cries… and she stays like that for days.

When Parvana brings home Mrs. Weera from the marketplace, it's just what Mother needs; Mrs. Weera washes her up makes her feel
human again. That's when they come up with a great idea: they should turn Parvana into a boy so she can make money and buy food. Mother thinks it's a great idea and starts by cutting off Parvana's hair; then she pulls out Hossain's shalwar-kameez and gives it to Parvana to wear. Unfortunately, as soon as Mrs. Weera leaves, Mother gets depressed again. She can barely look at Parvana dressed as Kaseem because it reminds her of Hossain. To solve this problem, Mrs. Weera and her granddaughter move in. They decide to start a small school. Mother will teach reading and writing and Mother can also work on her magazine.

One day Mother gives Parvana her shalwar-kameez to sell. It's Parvana's favorite outfit, but she does what Mother says. It's not like she will ever need it anyway. Mother makes lunch for Parvana every day, and she worries when Parvana misses lunch. When Mother finds out that the reason Parvana has been missing lunch is because she has been digging up bones at the graveyard to sell, she is disgusted and says,

"So this is what we've become in Afghanistan" (11.12).

Parvana does something she has never done before—she says no to Mother—and Nooria agrees; Mother wonders why her daughters are disobeying her, stating, "I'm glad your father isn't here to hear you talk to me with such disrespect" (11.25).

After three days of watching Parvana mope, Mother gives in—she doesn't want to explain to everyone why Parvana looks like a boy anyway.
Nooria is a typical older sister of Parvana. She is bossy and controlling and most of the time you just want to tell her to shut up. Everything about her drives Parvana nuts, including her "superior big sister smile" (2.7).

But do not confuse their bickering with true dislike, because these two sisters seriously love each other—so when Parvana goes to prison with Mother, Nooria hugs her and whispers to come back and when she does, we know she is not only concerned about her little sister's safety, but that she would be devastated to go through life without her.

Though in many ways their lives are governed by war, Parvana and Nooria suffer from textbook sibling rivalry. They are super different from each other. Parvana's hair is stringy, while Nooria's is long and thick. Parvana is close with Father, while Nooria is close with Mother and so while violence wages just outside their door, inside they bicker away like kids leading much more ordinary childhoods.

And while Nooria can definitely be a little snippy, to be fair she has a lot on her plate. She is Mother's right-hand man, stuck inside day in and day out, helping with the little ones and household chores. And while Parvana risks her life every time she leaves the house, Nooria can't do the same since her body gives away her female identity.

In some ways, Nooria's age puts her in the position of being the person who has had to sacrifice the most since the Taliban's takeover.
She's at the point in life in which her education is vital, with limited school-aged years ahead of her and a serious desire to follow in her parents' footsteps and attend college, in hopes of someday becoming a teacher. Nooria is ready to take charge and make something of her life, but instead she holds hostage in a tiny apartment with annoying little kids which definitely was not a part of her plan.

Because of this Nooria shows readers how much people lose under Taliban rule. While Mother has been pulled from her career, she has got the skills to return to it should that someday be possible; and though Father has lost his leg, the same is true for him. But Nooria is someone with drive and potential, someone who wants to learn in order to give back to society, but who instead is forbidden from receiving an education. We can feel the clock ticking for Nooria, and see how severely off-course the Taliban can pull people's lives.

Though Nooria cheers up a bit when the small school is formed in the apartment, Parvana notices that

"…a change had come over Nooria." (11.36)

She still jumps at a chance to get the heck out of Afghanistan, and even agrees to marry a man in Pakistan in exchange for her freedom. As she explains to her little sister:

There's no future for me here. (13.7)

And we can see why Nooria believes this. She has no freedom, after all, and the small joy she experiences through teaching at the secret school can be taken away at any moment by the Taliban. Nooria has a
chance to ditch the burqa, go back to school, and attend a university and even if it means she has to marry a total stranger, she doesn't care.
Since the Taliban takeover, sixteen-year-old Nooria hasn't left the small apartment. When she is forbidden to go to school, she is devastated. She fights with Parvana quite often, and orders her around, telling her to fetch the water and such.

Nooria has her own chores to take care of, including helping Mother with two-year-old Ali and all of the cleaning. She and Mother seem to share a special bond probably because they are stuck at home all day with the little ones while Parvana and Father are at the marketplace. Nooria is the only child who remembers Hossain, who was killed by a land mine, and she tells stories about their brother to Parvana.

When the Taliban comes into their apartment and kidnaps Father, Nooria covers herself completely with her chador and scrunches into a small ball because she knows that the Taliban like to steal young women. Mother insists that she and Parvana go to prison to rescue Father, and before they leave Nooria does something unusual. She hugs her sister and whispers to come back.

With Father gone and Mother depressed, Nooria takes over as head of the family. But with food running out, she needs help. So she tells Parvana that she has to go out and buy some food. Parvana doesn't want to but Nooria doesn't take no for answer, telling her Now move! When Parvana returns with just tea and rice, Nooria is unimpressed. Mrs Weera arrives, and Nooria feels massive relief because she can take some of the responsibility off her
shoulders. Nooria continues to gripe about her sister and bust on her, but Mrs. Weera urges Nooria to keep positive.

Nooria senses Parvana's hesitancy to go into the marketplace as boy, and in her nastiest voice she tells Mother that she knew Parvana would be scared. This works and Parvana storms out. Now that Parvana can move about Kabul freely, the family thinks Nooria and the younger kids should go out as well. Nooria isn't thrilled about Parvana being her escort, but everyone hopes that if Nooria gets some fresh air, she won't be as grumpy. So Nooria goes out with her siblings; she even flips up her burqa and enjoys the sunshine on her face.

Mrs. Weera starts a small school in the apartment and Nooria is one of the teachers; sometimes the kids came to her, and other times she goes to them escorted by Parvana. Parvana notices that Nooria has changed and that she isn't as ornery. When Mother arranges for Nooria to marry a boy from Pakistan, Nooria is pumped. Finally she can dump the burqa, finish school, and attend college, all to realize her ultimate dream of someday becoming a teacher. Parvana gives her a pen as a good-bye present, and as she hops into the truck to head for Pakistan, she has Parvana's gift clutched in her hand and tells her,

"I don't know when we'll see each other again" (13.35).

A former track star, hockey coach, and physical education teacher, Mrs. Weera lives her life through the metaphor of a team. She believes that no matter what the score, if the players work together and have a positive attitude, they can win the game even if the
opponent is the Taliban. She is often telling Parvana's family to keep up the team spirit. And to not for nothing, but it gets annoying in the face of violence and death.

Mrs. Weera is truly unique. She is a large woman, and with her distinctive way walking, she really knows how to work a burqa. And unlike most other women in Afghanistan, she is not intimidated by the Taliban, and even tells Parvana at one point that thanks to years of experience dealing with teenage boys in gym class, she could outrun or outfight any soldier. And if that fails, Mrs. Weera is also confident that any man can be reduced to tears with a good lecture. Based on how quickly she gets Parvana's family in order, we are inclined to believe her.

Once the fastest runner in Afghanistan and that she has the medal to prove it, this white-haired woman is strong as an ox, both emotionally and physically. So when Parvana runs into her in the marketplace while she is running from the Taliban one day, Mrs. Weera instantly assesses the situation and knows the family needs help. After she yells at Parvana for mangling the bread and she is pretty funny, she goes to the apartment and whips everyone, especially Mother who has fallen into a depression into shape.

Mother and Mrs. Weera go way back, and were both part of a women's group and are advocates of women's rights. And while Mrs. Weera lost her teaching job, she lost something much bigger too and that is her family. In reference to herself and her granddaughter, she tells Parvana:
We are the last of the Weeras. (8.13)

Every other member of her family has died. So while we're intimately aware of how badly Taliban rule has made things for Parvana and her family, Mrs. Weera lets us know that things could be even worse. But the thing is that Mrs. Weera is also the embodiment of resilience. Not only does she rally Parvana's family after Father disappears, but she is one of the only people who ever jokes in this book. When Parvana helps her move, Mrs. Weera jokes about not having very much stuff thanks to the war and bandits. She quips:

War makes it easier to move, though, doesn't it? (8.16)

Like everyone else, Mrs. Weera leaves Afghanistan at the end of the book. She, Homa, and her granddaughter head to Pakistan to work with women in exile, and with Mother's magazine hidden under her burqa, she cannot wait to show the world what is happening in Afghanistan. Knowing how much education is important to her, Parvana asks if there are schools in Pakistan, and Mrs. Weera remarks,

"...if there isn't, we'll start one" (15.41).

Shauzia, like Parvana, dresses up like a boy to support her family. She was Parvana's classmate in school, and when Parvana runs into her at the market, they both are thrilled to have friend to share their days with. But though they're in similar situations, Shauzia is pretty different from Parvana. Her home life isn't nearly as loving her dad is dead and she and her sickly mother are forced to live with her
father's family, who aren't very nice and Shauzia is much more daring than her little friend.

It was Shauzia's idea that she and Parvana sell bones for money. When Parvana questions the idea, Shauzia just says:

What do we care, as long as we get paid? (10.11)

And when she says this, we see not only that she has got an adventurous streak, but that she is also resourceful. She is just a kid like Parvana, but she is working the system a bit more, willing to do whatever it takes to try to get ahead even just a little bit. And just as she promises they will, the girls earn enough money to buy trays, which enables them to walk around and sell gum and cigarettes.

While Shauzia seems carefree, she is actually focused on her future. She wants to be out of Afghanistan’s dream of living in France where

"The sun is shining, people are smiling, and flowers are blooming into reality”. (12.24)

As the book ends, Shauzia takes off with nomads in the hopes of making it to France, but before she leaves she gives Parvana a bag of dried apricots and promises to reunite with her in front of the Eifel Tower in twenty years. Despite the Taliban's best efforts, this girl has a life to lead, and she is determined to overcome any obstacle that stands in her way.

Parvana's little brother and sister haven't been out of the house in eighteen months, and since Ali is only two years old and Maryam is
only five, this means they have had pretty bleak childhoods. Ali was only a couple of months old when the Taliban took over, so this lifestyle is all he knows. He dozes on Mother's lap with

"...a piece of nan in his little fist trying hard not to fall asleep "as if he hated the thought of missing something" (2.47).

Meanwhile, Maryam likes to draw pictures and imagine that someday she will be rich and wear a green silk dress. The highlight of their days is to sit in a ray of sunshine that seeps into the apartment from the one tiny window up high.

The night the soldiers kidnap Father is terrifying for these kids. They watch their parents get beaten, and they scream with every blow to their mother's back. After their screaming subsides Mother comforts the children by putting them to sleep on an uncluttered spot on the floor next to one another.

Even though the children don't know exactly what is going on, they know Father is gone and they miss him. Ali keeps waddling over to the door and pointing to it, as if waiting for Father to appear. Meanwhile, Maryam helps Parvana put together a puzzle made of Father's face, but it just isn't the same. And then when Mother falls into her deep depression, the children suffer some more. Ali stops crawling around on the floor and just curls in a ball sucking his thumb, while Maryam desperately needs food; her cheeks begin to look hollow.
Once Parvana starts making some money to put food in their bellies, things look up a bit for the little kids, and Parvana even starts taking Maryam with her to fetch water. Parvana, Nooria, and the two children sometimes go out for a few hours in the market, which energizes the kids, who love to splash around at the water tap, finally getting a chance to act like children and feeling livelier than they had in a long time. These moments are brief, though, and the general sadness of Ali and Maryam's childhood is a stark reminder of how many innocent lives the Taliban ruins.

Hossain was killed in a land mine when he was fourteen, before our story begins. And though this is a terrible way to die, it's woefully common in Afghanistan, and part of his character's role in the book is to make sure we know this. His parents packed his clothes in the cupboard but don't talk about him too often because to remember him was too painful but from what Nooria tells Parvana, Hossain sounds like a great kid.

Deborah Ellis' story is of Afghanistan under Taliban rule, a country where women's freedoms have been stripped away and people live in extreme poverty. But Parvana, our main character is happy, helping her weak Father back and forth to the market where he tries to earn a buck by reading people's letters for them. Because most of the folks are illiterate around here.

Parvana's family of five members lives in a small apartment, one small room, and Parvana's big sister couldn't be more annoying if she tried, but it's all good. They are making the best of their life together,
and though things are pretty bad outside especially since the Taliban recently shut down the girls' schools Parvana's family has a lot of love between them.

A plan is hatched for how the family will survive. Parvana will wear her dead brother's clothes to work in the marketplace as Kaseem. This will make the family some money and, disguised as a boy, Parvana should be as safe as possible out and about on her own. Though Parvana is none too keen on this idea, she eventually concedes—she's really the only person who can do it, after all, and the alternative is pretty much that her family starves.

She likes her time in the market more than she had expected, especially after she hooks up with her friend Shauzia from school, who is also disguised as a boy to support her family. But reality of the Taliban's violence hits home before long though, when the girls see soldiers chop off prisoners' hands for sport. And though Parvana responds by taking a little break from the harsh realities of the outside world and hunkers down at home for a bit, we know that the Taliban's violent practices can still show up at any moment.

Parvana's whole life changes when Nooria decides to get married and move to Mazar. Mother and the kids will go for a few months to get her settled, but Parvana will stay behind in case Father comes home. But life is depressing.

While ducking out of the rain in an abandoned building one day, Parvana finds a women running from the Taliban. Pretending she is Malali, she finds the courage to rescue her and take her to their
apartment. It is Homa. Here, though, Homa tells Parvana and Mrs. Weera that when she left Mazar, the Taliban had taken over the area and were killing people including Homa's whole family. Instead of escaping life under Taliban rule, Mother and Nooria and the little kids have actually walked right into it. Parvana is terrified.

Mrs. Weera and Parvana nurse Father back to health, and Parvana feels re-energized now that he is back. She works hard to pay for his medicine and helps him get well. When she is not working, they all hang out in the apartment, reading his books and listening to Homa and Father speak English with each other. They even start to laugh again. The word on the street is that most people in Mazar have fled the city and are living in refugee camps. This is all Father needs to hear, and he decides to pack up and head to Pakistan with Parvana to find his family.

Everyone makes plans to leave Afghanistan and head to Pakistan. Mrs. Weera and Homa will work in women's refugee camps; Shauzia will head in the same direction but travel with nomads instead. She and Parvana agree to meet in front of the Eiffel Tower twenty years later, so their friendship ends on a happy note.

As Parvana and Father leave Afghanistan in the back of the truck, she wonders what the next twenty years will be like and despite all the uncertainty ahead of her. Will they find her family? She feels hopeful as she watches Mount Parvana in the distance.

The story begins in the Kabul marketplace where Parvana is helping her crippled father. He reads letters for money and sells
anything Parvana's family doesn't absolutely need in order to put food on the table.

For about a year and half, the country has been under Taliban control, and living conditions are dismal to say the least. Bombs have destroyed buildings and homes, and land mines abound. One of which killed Parvana's brother. Women are forbidden from attending school, and they have to wear burqas to cover their bodies and faces, in addition to not being allowed outside without a man. Parvana is lucky because she gets to go to the marketplace with Father, but her mother, sister, and two younger siblings have been stuck in their tiny apartment.

Someone has to go leave the apartment in order to buy food for the family, and since Parvana is the only one that can pass for a boy, her family disguises her as one, cutting her hair and dressing her in her dead brother's clothes. Parvana puts her blanket in the same spot in the marketplace, and does what Father did reads letters for money and by doing so, earns enough to buy tea and rice. She feels pretty proud of herself, and rightly so and she even finds a way to bring her siblings out for an hour or two.

Meanwhile, Parvana learns a lot about the Taliban soldiers by reading their letters. And as she does, she comes to see them as human beings with feelings and emotions—which is a pretty generous response given how generally crappy they make life for her and her family.
Parvana becomes aware of the presence of a woman looking down on her blanket from the window above. Though she never sees the Window Woman, Parvana knows she is there, and also knows that this Window Woman is the person leaving presents on her blanket—beads, an embroidered handkerchief, that sort of thing. It's quite exciting, and helps keeps Parvana's spirits up too. Everybody looks forward to getting presents, after all. In the marketplace, Parvana runs into a girl from school who is also dressing up like a boy to make money for her own family. Shauzia and Parvana quickly become good friends.

Neither Parvana nor Shauzia are making enough money to support their family—mayday—but Shauzia hears about a great gig at the graveyard, digging up bones and selling them. It seems easy enough, right. And it is the girls go digging, and wind up with enough money to buy tables.

One day Parvana and Shauzia go to watch a soccer game. Except it turns out not to be a soccer game, and the two girls are horribly surprised when instead they find the Taliban chopping off prisoners' hands for sport. This sickens poor Parvana, and she decides to stay home for a few days. The whole war and violence thing really gets to a person after a while.

After a few days off, Parvana's back in action, ready to hit the streets again. When she returns to the marketplace, she is happy to see that the Window Woman is still watching over her, though one day she is certain her mysterious friend is being slapped around.
Upon returning home one day, Parvana is shocked to hear some big family news that her older sister, Nooria, has agreed to marry a man from Pakistan. Something she is doing just to get the heck out of Kabul. Nooria wants to go to school, become a teacher, and frankly burn her burqa, but she has got a zero chance of doing any of these things where she currently lives. So Mother and the children will go with Nooria to Pakistan to get her ready for the wedding, but Parvana opts to stay behind in case Father is released from prison.

One rainy night, Parvana hears a women crying in an abandoned building. This stranger is running from the Taliban and isn't wearing a burqa. Parvana bravely brings the woman back to her house, where Mrs. Weera takes care of Homa, the crying woman, and she stays with them.

Father comes back. Unfortunately, he is in pretty rough shape. He was barely fed and badly beaten in prison. Mrs. Weera comes to the rescue again. She nurses him back to health while he enjoys Homa's company because they both can speak English. Sadly, Homa tells them that the Taliban have taken over the city where Nooria and Mother are.

Parvana and Father head to Pakistan to find their family, and Shauzia bolts with some shepherds, ultimately hoping to land in Paris where she and Parvana plan to meet again in twenty years. Meanwhile Mrs. Weera, her grand-daughter, and Homa make plans to travel to Pakistan and help out with women in exile. Everyone is on the move.
As Parvana sits in the back of a truck next to Father, leaving Afghanistan, she takes one last look at Mount Parvana and the snow on its peak sparkling in the sun and as she does, though their futures are unsure, Parvana feels a sense of hope.

She is listening to her father read a letter, thinking she could read almost as well except for the fact that the Taliban who completely run the show around here have no tolerance for women out and about, let alone reading in public.

As far as the Taliban is concerned, women are not allowed to do much of anything, and because of this, Parvana, who is in sixth grade, and her sister Nooria, who is in high school, were sent home from school when the Taliban came to power. Girls are officially forbidden from getting an education.

The Taliban didn't just screw up Parvana's and Nooria's educations. They also outlawed women working, so their mother lost her job as a writer for a radio station, and their family lost a whole income. In short, the Taliban has majorly screwed things up for Parvana and her family.

Father tells the Taliban that Parvana is the only one that can help him walk since he lost part of his leg when the school he used to teach in was bombed. Parvana knows how to follow the rules outside of the house, and she dutifully keeps her head down and never makes eye contacts with the Tallies. Its best to be invisible because the Taliban like to beat and whip women.
Parvana can read, though, because her parents both attended university and believe strongly that everyone—even girls—has the right to learn. Most of Father's customers speak Dari, which is good because that Parvana's most fluent language, though she can understand a little of Pashtu as well. Her parents can speak both languages, in addition to English.

The market is the place to be. Men buy and sell, while tea boys run tea between stalls. Parvana thinks running around the market would be great fun—way better than being stuck in the apartment—but what she really thinks would be great is to be back in school. It seems our girl majorly misses history class, especially learning about conquerors from the past kicking the bad guys out of Afghanistan.

Now the Afghan Taliban militia rules the country, and these guys are serious control freaks. When the Taliban first kicked girls out of schools, Parvana was pretty psyched no more math tests but Nooria promptly let her know that she was being stupid. Education has always been a big part of Parvana's family, helping them land high-paying jobs and buy a big house with lots of rooms that is, until bombs leveled the house. Since then, the families kept moving, and each time their living environment got smaller, until finally they found themselves in the one-room, that's one room, not one bedroom apartment they currently reside in.

War has been raging in Afghanistan for twenty years, and Parvana has never known any differently.
It was a time for a little history lesson. First, Afghans were at war with the Soviets, and when the Soviets left, they turned on each other. Parvana has run from bombs her whole life, though lately it seems like Kabul is being spared and most of the war is taking place to the north. But the country is still under Taliban control. Taliban means seeker of knowledge. Parvana's father thinks religion should be about kindness not killing. The time comes for Parvana and Father to head home, so Parvana packs up the items they are trying to sell, which are mostly things from home that they can do without.

With the help of a walking stick and Parvana's arm, Father hobbles along. He used to have a false leg but he sold it. Kabul used to be beautiful, but Parvana has only known it as bricks and dust it makes her angry and sad to think of what has been taken away from their country and her family Parvana tries to maneuver her father through the broken roads. She has no idea how women wearing burqas manage. When she mentions this to Father, he says that they fall down a lot and when he does, we understand that the very infrastructure of Kabul is unfriendly to women. No one is laughing now though, as they approach their apartment only half of it still stands after it was hit by a rocket attack.

It isn't just their home and belongings that have been destroyed by the Taliban. Their social lives have been crushed too, and they can't even talk to other people in the building because, according to Father, the Taliban encourages people to spy on each other. Parvana feels so lonely. Father has his books, while Nooria and Mother keep each other company, but she feels like she has no one.
Nooria has filled Parvana on some details about Hossain's life, and apparently he liked to play games and really liked to play with his little sister, Parvana. The meal is served Afghan-style, meaning the family gathers around a plastic cloth spread on the floor. At the end of the meal, Nooria and Mother simultaneously start to clean up. It's like they share a secret signal but Parvana has no idea what it is.

Father tells a tale about the British invading Afghanistan in 1880; the Afghans fought, but the British wouldn't leave. Then, a very young girl named Malali ran out in the street, took off her veil, and waved it as a flag. She encouraged her countrymen to keep fighting, and keep fighting they did, all the way to victory.

The women of Afghanistan are brave, and they've inherited the courage of Malali. Nooria wonders how they can be brave though, when they can't even leave their apartments. Father explains there are different types of battles, and Mother chimes in including the battle with the supper dishes, which everyone chuckles about until Taliban soldiers barge through their door. They soldiers grab Father and search the apartment; Nooria is hiding, and the little ones are screaming. The Talib don't like foreign ideas, and they aren't happy that Father was educated in England as they try to take him away, Mother tries to stop the soldiers, but one of them hits her on the head with a rifle. In desperation, Parvana grabs Father by his waist as he yells to take care of the others and then Parvana watches as soldiers drag her father down the steps, ripping his shalwar kameez.
Inside their apartment, soldiers search the cupboards, throwing the few belongings they have left onto the floor. Remembering Father's secret stash of books, Parvana attacks the soldiers and they hit her on the back with their sticks. Finally the soldiers leave. Maryam strokes Parvana's hair and the family sits, shocked by what's just happened.

Mud City

*Mud City*, the final volume in Deborah Ellis’s Afghan trilogy, follows 14-year-old Shauzia, Parvana’s best friend, into a refugee camp in Pakistan. Having fled an arranged marriage in Kabul, Shauzia becomes little more than a gopher for Mrs. Weera, her former physical education teacher, who is in charge of the widows’ compound at the camp and a tireless worker for a better future. But Shauzia still dreams of escaping to France and putting the horrors of her life behind her, so she leaves the camp with her dog Jasper and tries to fend for herself on the dangerous streets of the nearby city of Peshawar. When she is wrongfully accused of theft and thrown into prison, she’s rescued by a well-meaning American family, but that sours when she tries to emulate their generosity and, instead, incurs their disapproval. Returning to the camp, Shauzia slowly discovers that, like Mrs. Weera, she likes helping people and can make a difference in their lives. She doesn’t give up her dreams but realizes that they can wait until she’s ready for them.

Like its predecessors, *The Breadwinner* and *Parvana’s Journey*, *Mud City* is a stunning portrait of a totally devastated world where children are forced to fend for themselves, often at the mercy of
adults who have abdicated all responsibility. Ellis succinctly guides readers through the complex worlds of the refugee camp, the streets of Peshawar, and the luxurious house of the Americans, without ever being judgmental. She’s grown tremendously as a writer in this trilogy and nowhere is this clearer than in her portrait of Shauzia. Ellis has imbued her with a strong sense of self that’s particularly important since Parvana is a shadow in the background.

As always, Ellis balances tragedy with rare comic moments. She takes obvious pleasure in Shauzia’s antics with Jasper – in the way she opens the doors of the Americans’ house to anyone who rings at the gate, and even in her ongoing battles with Mrs. Weera. The result is a novel that resonates imaginatively.

“Remember how cool and clean the air felt? How could we hear birds singing, not women moaning?” she reached under her chador to lift up her hair, which was sticking to the back of her neck. “Maybe we should have stayed with the shepherds,” she said, brushing off a fly and redraping her head and shoulders with the chador. “Maybe I should have kept my hair short like a boy’s instead of letting it grow back. That was Mrs. Weera’s idea. Mrs. Weera orders me around, has dumb ideas, Wand won’t even get me a decent pair of sandals. Look at these!” She took off a sandal and showed it to Jasper, who kept his eyes closed. The sandal was barely held together by bits of string. (MC:7)

When faced with overwhelming disaster, are able to carry on - even make progress - while others in the same circumstances resort to evil or to the torpor of indifference. In truth, not much separates these
two polarities. In suffering, it is easy to slip from fierce determination to survive, to callous rejection of the needs of others. In this brutal examination of life in a Pakistani refugee camp, Deb Ellis once again compels us to look into our own hearts as we follow the harrowing journey of 14-year-old Shauzia.

“I bent down and grabbed two burning sticks from the fire. I held them up just as the wolves jumped at me. They were hungry and strong, but I was angry that they had disturbed my quiet night, so I was more than a match for them. I kicked at them and waved the burning sticks until they were so tired out that they collapsed at my feet and fell asleep. In morning, they were so embarrassed, they simply slunk away back into the forest, grateful that I didn’t laugh at them. (MC:11)

Shauzia has left her grasping, cold family to strike out in the world on her own, dressed as a boy. While working with some Afghani shepherds, she befriends a dog, Jasper, and the two of them end up in Mud City, a refugee camp just inside Pakistan, near the city of Peshawar, where she works with Mrs. Weera to run the Widows Compound, a section of the camp for women and children. Irritated by what she sees as inertia, Shauzia leaves for the city of Peshawar, hoping to earn enough money to get to France, where she has promised to meet her friend, Parvana at the Eiffel Tower. In Peshawar, Shauzia does odd jobs but finally resorts to picking through garbage for items to sell. Finally, she ends up begging and is falsely imprisoned. Shauzia is rescued by a rich American, Tom, who bribes the police to release Shauzia from prison, but Tom and his wife, Barbara, return Shauzia to the refugee camp when she invites other
needy people into their opulent home in their absence. After Shauzia's leg is broken in a food riot, she has a lot of time to think about her position, and she finally follows Mrs. Weera back to Afghanistan to nurse the refugees there, leaving the faithful Jasper with another young girl who needs him.

Shauzia is a strong, compelling character who moves from the crabby self-interest of an impatient young girl to the realization that happiness may come with service to others. Other strong characters are Mrs. Weera, a former physed teacher who is determined to change the lives of girls and women in Afghanistan, and the compassionate Tom and Barbara, who represent Western countries that will help the impoverished as long as it doesn't threaten their own lifestyle.

The refugee camp is brought to life, complete with stifling heat, flies, unclean water, food distribution and UN tents. The streets of Peshawar and the desperation, anger and cruelty of its inhabitants are also vividly painted for the reader.

*Mud City* could have been a horrifying book, far too frightening for children, as the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan is indeed appalling. Ellis is careful to tell only enough to keep students glued to the story and not so much that children would be terrified. This careful writing ends optimistically as Shauzia takes off with Mrs. Weera for another adventure - this time with a more adult attitude.

A gripping, heart-stopping novel, *Mud City* serves both to entertain and to inspire. The author clearly supports equal rights for men and
women, the necessity of education for all children and the reform of the political and prison systems in Afghanistan and Pakistan. *Mud City* ends with an Author's Note explaining the political situation in these countries, the role of the Taliban and website students can access to offer help. A glossary covers the few words not explained by their context. Maps at the front of the book position the story in the real world. It is worth noting that the author has set an example for students by donating the royalties for this book to Street Kids International, an organization which support children living on the street around the world.

That was where she needed to be, in a field of purple flowers, where no one could bother her. She would sit there until the confusion left her head and the stink of the camp left her nostrils. When she had enough of that, she would go to Paris and sit at the top of the Eiffel Tower until her friend Parvana joined her there, the way they had promised each other. They would spend the rest of their days drinking tea and eating oranges and making fun of Mrs. Weera. (MC: 23)

*Parvana’s Journey* takes the reader on a trip across Afghanistan with a 13-year old girl. Afghanistan and the Muslim culture, specifically under Taliban domination, is depicted through a variety of literary methods. Ellis uses language, characterization and setting to portray the society and culture of Parvana’s world.

Ellis’ use of language adds flavor to the text through both description and dialog. The characters’ names such as Parvana, Shauzia and Asif allude to a middle-eastern setting. The story is peppered with non-
English terms like burqa, toshak and shalwarkameez. While these terms are not defined in the text of the story, context is often all the reader needs to understand the general meaning of unfamiliar words. For some culture-specific terms, Ellis provides a definition in a glossary at the end of the book.

Dialog, both internal and external, is another cultural indicator in Parvana’s Journey. The main character, Parvana, acknowledges to herself she has given up trying to understand why the Taliban hated women. The children speak to each other of things such as tanks, bombing planes and empty bellies. They build shelter with plastic sheeting and pick up grains of rice to be eaten raw when there is no other food. While this type of danger and poverty can and does occur in many places around the world, it offers a view of the grim situation in which many Afghan children find themselves.

The characters in Ellis’ novel offer further insight into Afghan society. Parvana and her family are of a progressive, less traditional ilk. Parvana’s father taught her poetry, astronomy, math and English. Her mother is an organizer, helping families work together and teaching children in the camps. She also writes articles for women’s magazines which are forbidden in Afghanistan. Asif, Parvana’s new ‘brother,’ seems to have traditional male attitudes toward females. He frequently berates Parvana calling her stupid and weak. However, he is atypically patient and tender with baby Hassan. Though there are many opportunities for Asif to leave, he chooses to stay with Parvana and Hassan, as he puts it, just to annoy her. This caveat is Asif’s attempt to save face. It shows his internal struggle between the
traditional view of female inferiority and the need for family and community.

The setting, too, reveals the cultural background of Parvana’s Journey. There are descriptions of green valleys, hills and deserts. There are also descriptions of land mine fields, villages reduced to rubble and camps for Internally Displaced Persons. Thus, a picture is painted of a once beautiful country now decimated by the ravages of war. The novel offers a perspective on the lives of children in war torn Afghanistan. With no one to take care of them, Parvana, Asif and Hassan must care for themselves. Thus, readers watch the children attempt to rebuild their lives and become a family under the most adverse of circumstances.

A bittersweet ending offers some hope for Parvana and her family, but readers are left with a horrifyingly realistic picture of the effect of war on children. While the reading is not difficult, the grim content cries out for discussion.

One of the most interesting things about the novel is its absence of human antagonists. A sequel to her hugely successful The Breadwinner follows the same character, Parvana, now 13, on her search for her mother and siblings in war-ravaged Afghanistan. Parvana’s adversary is the landscape, both political and physical: the fearful reign of the Taliban still looms, bombs fall from the sky, minefields block her path; food, water, and shelter are always scarce. In many ways this is a novel of survival, in which the resourceful hero must prevail over the elements. It is also a quest, not far less hopeful,
for there is no set destination for Parvana, no home as well. She can only hope that somehow her meandering path will cross with her displaced family.

In *The Breadwinner*, Ellis necessarily had to deliver a considerable amount of information to the reader about Afghanistan, its history and current living conditions. *Parvana’s Journey* contains scarcely a historical or political reference. The result is a swifter opening, and a story focused more on one character’s physical struggles than on a geopolitical situation.

After burying her father, Parvana goes in search of her remaining family. Her quest is not purely the result of a stalwart heart – she has to flee the village when it’s rumoured she will be turned over to the Taliban for money. Despite this, most of the people Parvana meets try to be generous: if they have anything to share, they share it; if they have shelter, they offer it. Ellis draws a picture of a society in which adversity and suffering are so commonplace that people draw together rather than fly apart.

Once on her way, Parvana encounters other homeless children, the first of whom is a baby, squalling in a bombed-out shelter beside the corpse of his mother. Unhesitatingly, Parvana takes him with her. Later she meets Asif, a one-legged boy who’s fled his abusive uncle. Asif is insufferably arrogant and rude, but he adores the baby (whom Parvana has named Hassan), and excels at taking care of the infant. This trio then encounters a young girl called Leila, who’s managed to survive with her catatonic grandmother in a secluded valley by
pillaging from the wreckage of those people destroyed in the bordering minefield. At first Leila can’t stop talking, and she compulsively buries bits of her food to appease the ground so she can walk safely around the minefield. What starts as the novel’s most grotesque segment segues into its most dynamic and uplifting.

From this hellish setting, Parvana and the other children fashion a small Eden: they bury the rotting animal carcasses, dig a proper latrine, clean and heal the worm-ridden Leila, sanitize the shelter, nurse the grandmother to her feet. They make clothes, take stock of their provisions, cook pigeon stew, and for the first time in the novel, enjoy some sense of normalcy and community. But it all ends when the bombs begin to fall, destroying their little valley and killing Leila’s grandmother. Again the children are forced to continue their aimless quest. And this idyll, when compared with what awaits them, becomes all the more poignant. When they finally reach a refugee camp, initially it seems salvation is at hand. The dangerously dehydrated baby, Hassan, is taken into a clinic, and the children get shelter. But even here food and water and sanitation are scarce commodities – and we realize that there is no triumphant end to Parvana’s journey. Parvana and the other characters endure such hardships and traumas that it seems madness and brutality must be the only result. Ellis, a counselor in a Toronto group home, has travelled to Afghan refugee camps and interviewed women there – apparently the inspiration for the Parvana stories – and her experiences have obviously informed her portrait of children immersed in suffering. In Parvana’s Journey, their resilience is nothing short of amazing and
heartbreaking. They get on with things. They forage. They plan. They cook and clean and care for malnourished babies. They tidy up and make their squalid living conditions better. They are the personification of pragmatism and compassion.

Ellis is not afraid to show her characters’ moments of selfishness and cruelty. Asif is needlessly insulting and Parvana herself gets tired of caring for the baby, of its crying and stinking diapers. Given her material, Ellis might easily have fallen into a political screed, but her writing is measured and careful, the height of dispassionate objectivity. Her story moves swiftly and is thoroughly engrossing. This is a book that will open children’s perspectives to the larger world – a glimpse that will almost certainly make readers grateful for what they have. But that’s a window that can just as quickly be shut and forgotten, with a grateful shudder. Ellis, in focusing on the personal struggle of her young character, leaves readers with a lasting impression of another life and culture where – despite desperate hardship – compassion and courage can still prevail.

*Parvana’s Journey* opens with the eponymous character burying her father. Separated from the rest of her family and masquerading as a boy, Parvana has little choice but to carry on in their original mission—finding her mother, currently located in one of the many refugee camps in Afghanistan. Along the way, Parvana finds other children scarred by war. They make their own family for a while, but few things are stable in a country torn apart by war.
Deborah Ellis is a psychologist by profession. Her research for *The Breadwinner* and *Parvana’s Journey* consisted of interviews she conducted with female Afghan refugees in 1997.

While Parvana’s motivation is to find her mother, she wanders around from place to place in order to stumble across the three other children whose stories Ellis also wants to write about. In fact, when she finally reaches the end of her quest in a very roundabout way, it happens because of pure luck, not because of anything Parvana has done herself. While Parvana is a sympathetic character, being a girl forced to grow up before her time, she and the rest of the cast often feel like automatons just going through the motions. There is just something inorganic to the whole proceedings.

*Parvana’s Journey* is unrelentingly dark, book-ended as it is with the deaths of two people close to Parvana. Ellis doesn’t shy away from discussing the diarrhea they all contract or the maggot-infested wounds Leila has, which Asif mercifully takes care of.

Ellis is writing this series in order to educate children about life in a war torn country. Of course its going to be dark. Ellis manages to find just the right amount of gore; one of the most horrifying moments doesn’t even end in any bloodshed. While Parvana and Asif are playing in a cave, she makes up a story about a hidden treasure. The two discover a box, but it’s filled with bullets—a stark and sobering reminder of how war can even infiltrate your private imagination. Yet there’s something almost too dark in Ellis’s simplifications of morals for side characters. Parvana, naturally, has to face tough choices, such as the necessity of stealing to survive and initially abandoning another girl in order to save them both. But an adult character who refuses to
help the children beyond limited means is demonized and stolen from, because he ought to be nicer to children.

Adults face just as many problems in a war torn country as children do. Perhaps this is because an adult reader reading a children’s book, feels that he can’t get away with making one character morally complex while others are morally rendered in black and white.

_Parvana’s Journey_ is a swift and easy and utilitarian at best and simplistic at worst, with occasional odd diction.

_Parvana’s Journey_ is widely successful novel as a way to teach children about life for refugees in Afghanistan. It is the thin story and is only a vehicle for Ellis to introduce and explore how different children cope with war. The characters feel like automatons; in fact, the whole novel feels mechanical.