

The Bird's Nest

A Reading A-Z Level S Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,084

Connections

Writing

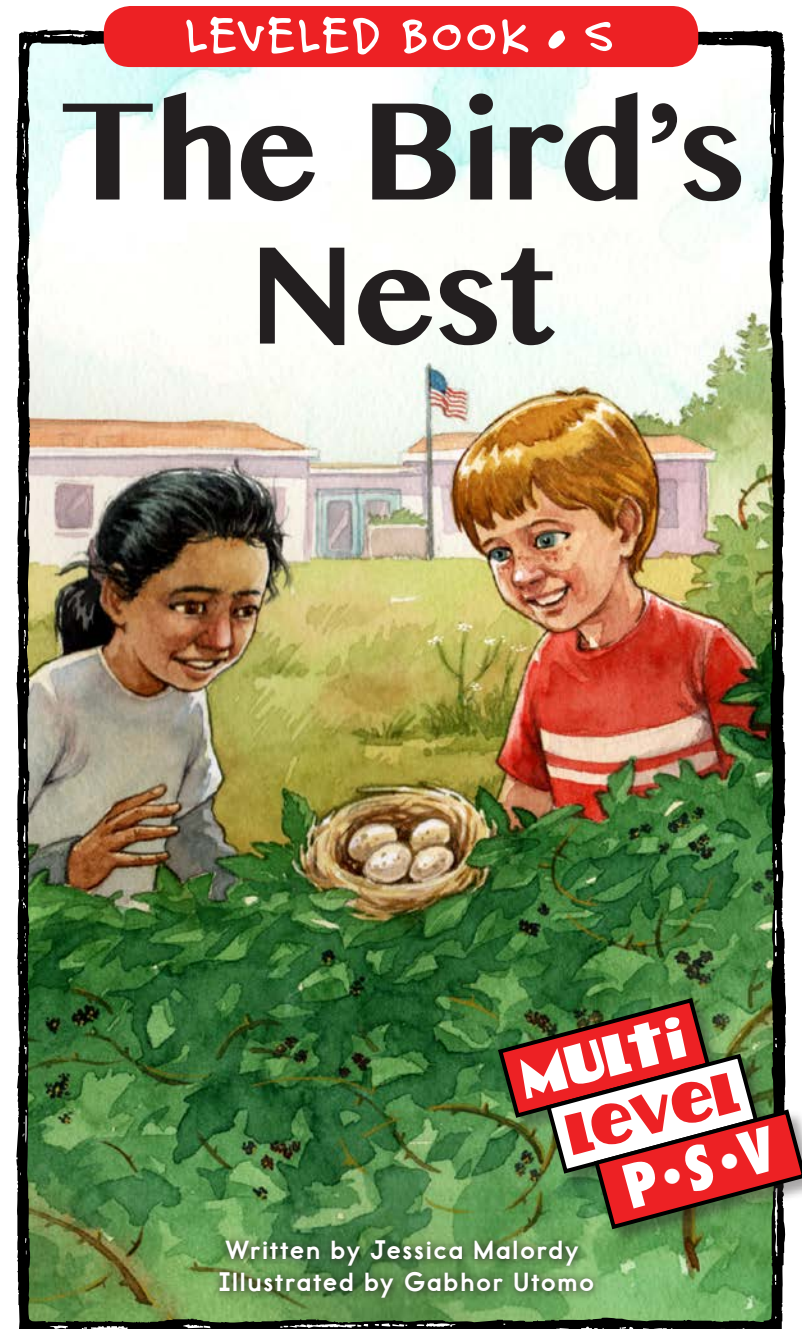
Write a recipe for a favorite food dish in your family.

Social Studies

Make a map of Syria. Include major cities, landmarks, rivers, and the countries that border it.

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The Bird's Nest



Written by Jessica Malordy
Illustrated by Gabhor Utomo

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Focus Question

What is the importance of bird nests in this story?

Words to Know

Arabic	pistachios
baklava	refugees
habibti	Syria
homeland	tradition
phyllo	

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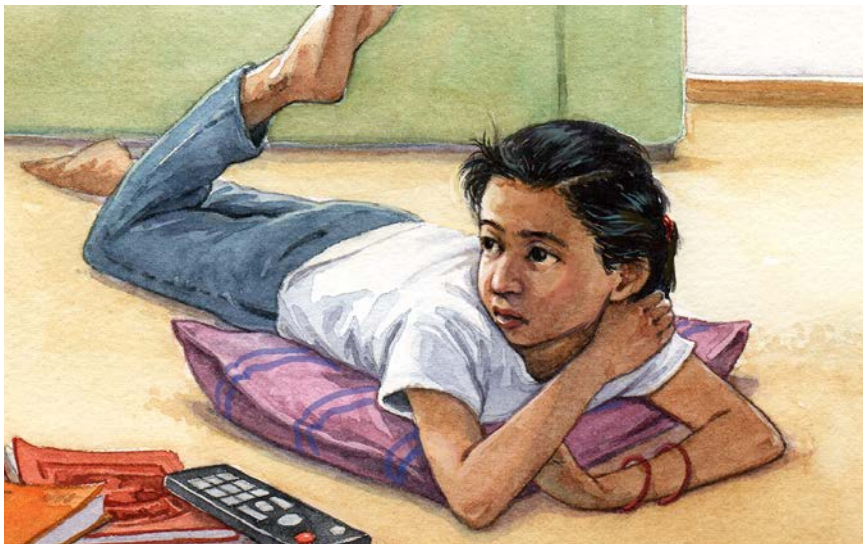
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Correlation

LEVEL S

Fountas & Pinnell	O
Reading Recovery	34
DRA	34



It's Saturday, and Rima is watching cartoons.

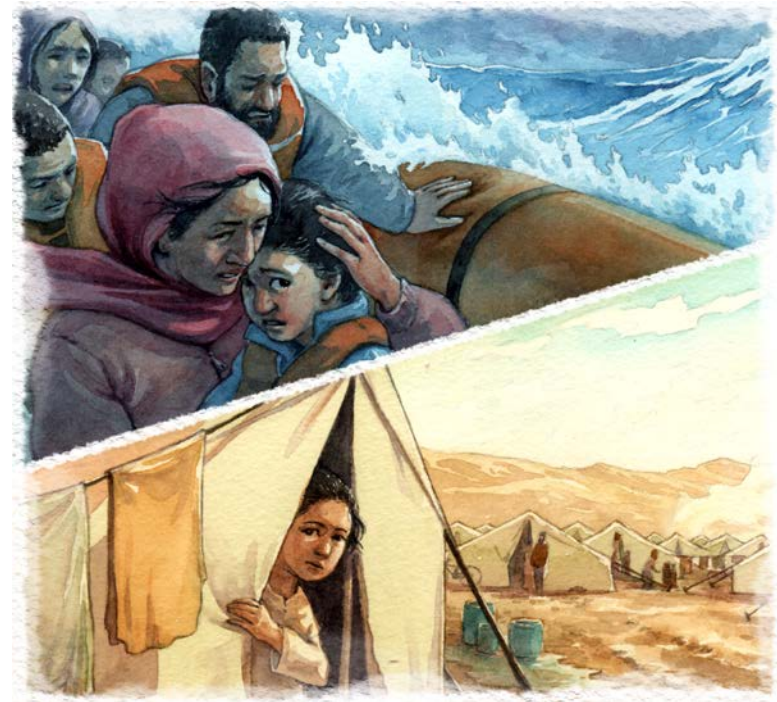
"I'm bored," Rima complains to her mother. "This show is boring."

"So change the channel!" her mother says. "TV will help you learn English faster."

As soon as those words are out of her mother's mouth, Rima braces herself for the words she knows will follow.

"Because this is our home now," Rima's mother says. "You know that, don't you, **habibti**?"

"I know, Mama," Rima sighs. "I know."



This time last year, when Rima was eight, home was a tent surrounded by other tents. The year before that, home was the side of the road, a storm-tossed boat, a stranger's basement. It was wherever they happened to lay their heads at night. The year before that, though, when Rima was six, home was a house in a city called Aleppo, in the country of **Syria**. Home had a big window in the kitchen where black-and-white-tailed birds came to roost. It had a carpet in the living room that smelled of honey and flour, and a bedroom with a perfect view of the moon.

What Is a Refugee?

A *refugee* is a person who is forced to leave his or her country to seek safety in another country. The term comes from the word *refuge*, which means a safe place—the very thing that refugees are in search of. Refugees flee their country to escape danger, natural disaster, or trouble that they face because of their ethnicity, religion, or political beliefs. Refugees usually leave behind their family and friends, homes and communities, and even their culture. In the case of Rima and her mother, they left Syria because of civil war. Since 2011, millions of Syrian families have fled their country and become refugees all over the world.



Now home is here: a tiny apartment in America, with a mother who speaks in a hushed voice whenever she mentions Syria. Rima wishes she wouldn't tiptoe around the reality. War came to Aleppo long before they left, and it has only gotten worse. They are never going back. There is nowhere to go back to.

"Rima, come here," calls her mother, and Rima does. The kitchen counter is covered with baking sheets, a sack of sugar, **pistachios**.

"We're going to bake today?" Rima asks. After a week at school learning English, it feels good to speak **Arabic**.

"Tomorrow there will be a bake sale at the community center," Rima's mother explains.

"Bake sale?" Rima asks. "What's that?"

"Those of us who are new here will bake our favorite sweets from Syria," her mother says. "Americans will come to buy them and try sweets from our **homeland**."

Her mother opens the refrigerator and pulls out a box of **phyllo** dough noodles. Rima grabs a handful of pistachios and begins to crush them into smaller pieces. They haven't baked together in forever—and they are making bird's nest **baklava**! When they are done, the chopped pistachios will sit inside the pastry, just like little eggs in a doughy nest.

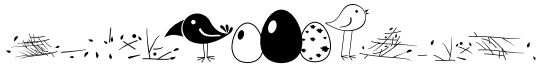
Rima is delighted. She begins to hum an old song she loves from home.



The next day, the community center is crowded and noisy. Syrian families unpack their baked goods on folding tables. Everywhere Rima turns, she sees the sweets of her childhood . . . and beyond them, a long line of American families waiting. What if they don't like Syrian baking?



Their customers *ooh* and *ahh*, though, pointing at the trays. “What are these called?” they ask in English before trying to repeat the food names in Arabic. It’s fun, Rima thinks, to teach someone else a new language for a change. “Delicious,” they say, one by one, after biting into the baklava, and Rima blushes with pride.



Rima and her mother return the next week, and the next. Their bird’s nest baklava are the bake sale’s star treat. “What’s your secret ingredient?” another family asks. But there is none—just the joy Rima and her mother share in the kitchen. Joy and peace after three years living as **refugees**, never settled or safe enough to bake together.

One week, a boy named Andy from Rima’s school stops by her table with his family. “At my house in Aleppo, birds built nests just like this outside our kitchen window,” Rima tells him.

“Can we buy some, Dad?” Andy asks.



“*Yislamou*,” says Rima automatically when Andy hands her the dollar bills. “Sorry,” she adds, blushing. “*Yislamou* is how we say ‘thank you’ in Syria.”

“*Yislamou*, then,” says Andy, lifting her baklava with a grin before taking a big bite.



Thus begins a **tradition**. They don't talk at school—he plays during recess with the other boys, and Rima spends half the day learning English. But every weekend, Andy and his family return to the bake sale. Each time, Andy asks Rima how to say something new in Arabic: *hello, goodbye, you're welcome, how much does this cost?* Rima says the words clearly and slowly. Andy's accent is awful, but she knows not to poke fun. Rima doesn't like it when the kids at school tease her about her English.

One day, Rima tells Andy all about how, when she was little, she would pick pistachios straight from her grandparents' tree.



"You must miss it there," Andy says, and suddenly Rima's eyes fill with tears. Ashamed, she ducks her head.

If he notices, though, he doesn't let on. Instead, he just smiles—a kind smile, Rima thinks—and waves goodbye.

Afterward, as they pack up, Rima's mother says, "Habibti. Who is that boy who always talks to you? A friend?"

"No," Rima mumbles. "Just a boy from school."



That week during recess, Rima is reading on a bench when somebody taps her on the shoulder. She turns, shielding her eyes from the sun. It's Andy!

"I want to show you something," he says.

"Okay," Rima says. It takes a moment for her brain to shift from reading in Arabic to speaking English.

He points to the woods behind the school, and the two walk toward them together.

"Look," Andy says and points again.



Rima gasps. Nestled in some blackberry brambles is a bird's nest. The two of them look more closely: inside the nest sit four perfectly speckled eggs.

"Wow," Rima breathes.

Andy nods. "They really do look just like your baklava," he whispers.

"I wonder if they will all live close to home once they hatch," Rima says, "or fly far away to somewhere new."

"Birds of a feather flock together," Andy says.

Rima has never heard the saying before.
“What does that mean?” she asks.

“It means—it means when you’re friends
with someone, you spend time together.”
Andy shoves his hands in his pockets.
“Rima?” he says. “I know you’re sad to have
left your first home behind. But I want you to
know that here in your new home, you are . . .”
He pauses shyly. “You are my *sadiq*,” he says,
at last. “Did I say that right? *Sadiq*?”

Rima grins. “Of course,” she tells him—
and though his Arabic sounds as awkward
as ever, she means the words with all her
heart. “There’s no wrong way to say *friend*.”



GLOSSARY

Arabic (n.)	the language originally of the Arab people, now widely spoken in the Middle East and Northern Africa (p. 6)
baklava (n.)	a Middle Eastern dessert made of thin pastry dough, honey, and nuts (p. 7)
habibti (n.)	an Arabic word meaning <i>my love</i> , in the form used to address women or girls (p. 3)
homeland (n.)	the region or country where a person is born (p. 6)
phyllo (n.)	a dough that is layered in very thin sheets to make pastry, often used in Mediterranean cooking (p. 7)
pistachios (n.)	pale green nuts (p. 6)
refugees (n.)	people who flee war, famine, bad treatment, or natural disaster, often with no definite place to go (p. 9)
Syria (n.)	a country in the Middle East that is on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea (p. 4)
tradition (n.)	a custom, habit, or behavior that is done on a regular basis or has been practiced for a long time (p. 11)