

The Invisible Girls

By Sarah Thebarge

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Reviewed by:

Christine Metz (crmetzo@stcloudstate.edu), Director of Academic Initiatives, St. Cloud State University

Having attended one of the many publishers' author events at the Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience in Orlando this past February, I was bound to come upon books to consider for our Common Reading Program which I would not have previously considered. Sarah Thebarge's *The Invisible Girls* was one of those books. I had the rather dumb luck of having sat down at Sarah's table for the dinner which preceded the author talks, which gave me an opportunity to get to know her before getting to know her story. She was of a gentle disposition, with earnest eyes and expression. She exuded a kindness and grace one rarely encounters. Her publisher shared with me that she'd be talking about her relationship to a Somali woman and her daughters and how that experience was transformative in the wake of her own very traumatic experience with breast cancer. As I come from a community in Minnesota with a significant Somali immigrant population, and all the accompanying civic issues that have emerged in the encounter of American culture with a suddenly quite significant immigrant community, I was intrigued immediately by the potential the story might have for engaging in a critical community dialogue.

As I packed the dozens of books I picked up to consider for our program, Sarah's called to me, so I began reading it on the flight home. Readability is one of our selection committee's criteria. We have an understanding more so than a definition of what we mean by that, as no measures, such as page length or genre, seem to be fairly representative of "readability." We must answer the question upon reading. We ask, "Does the book grab a reader right from the first page? Are the characters or narrator engaging, endearing, or entertaining? Might it appeal to people of many different backgrounds?" As I began to read *The Invisible Girls*, the readability box was immediately ticked.

While a memoir written by a 20-something young woman might seem a bit precocious, Sarah Thebarge tells an extraordinary tale of heartache and compassion and loss and hope—a story of how people, even strangers, can touch one's life profoundly and deeply. Thebarge intermingles her story of surviving a grueling battle with breast cancer with a story of recovery of her heart and soul. Having felt dehumanized in her medical care and demoralized by a failed relationship, it is the chance encounter with a Somali refugee named Hadhi and her two youngest daughters on Portland's public transit that marked a turning point for Thebarge. She had moved to Portland to start over, leaving the East Coast where she'd hoped to establish herself as a journalist after graduate study at Columbia, studies which had been cut short by aggressive cancer when she was still just in her twenties. If the cancer that nearly took her life wasn't enough of a blow to her sense of self, she found herself recovering alone after a heart wrenching end to the relationship she thought was "the one."

On the evening she met Hadhi and her daughters on the train, Thebarge was a broken woman, looking to pull the pieces of herself and her life back together, to start anew. Across from her, Hadhi sat with exhaustion washed over her face, her girls cuddling her, struggling to share her lap. In an instant of sudden and intimate understanding Thebarge found herself welcoming the youngest daughter into her lap, playing with her, checking in with Hadhi with just a nod of gratitude for her kindness. Despite Hadhi's inability to speak much English, Thebarge managed to get Hadhi's address, promising to check in on her and her daughters later in the week.

Thebarge acknowledges in her memoir the brazenness of such a move. She doesn't know

what compelled her to ask; she doesn't know quite what she will or should do with the information. But eventually she visits, taking with her the small toy Hadhi's daughter had left in her hand while they played on the train. She finds Hadhi with five daughters, no furnishings to speak of, and next to no food in the apartment. Near starvation and abandoned by her husband, Hadhi and her daughters welcome Thebarga into their home. As her elder daughters translate, Hadhi shares a bit of her story with Thebarga. Thebarga promises to come back. She brings food and some household things. She plays with the girls. She visits again and again, each time bringing support for a mother who is on her own half a world away from the culture she knows and a network of people who share that culture with her.

While Thebarga provides a link to American culture, Hadhi and her girls provide Thebarga with a link back to life. She had been in Portland for a year before meeting Hadhi; she had friends, a job, and a home. But it is in the family she finds with the little girls, and the way they help her understand parts of herself that haven't been always clear for her or easy for her to face, that she finds life meaningful again. She regains confidence and courage of conviction, which had been shattered just a few years earlier. She comes to new understandings of herself, and she commits herself to the education of these young girls, knowing that this is their best chance for a good life. It is that commitment that inspired the writing of this book.

The structure of the book interweaves Thebarga's own story of cancer and loss of faith with this story of friendship, hope, and renewed sense of purpose. The chapters move forward and back in time between the two formative periods of her life, and Thebarga interjects stories from her childhood and youth, growing up as the daughter of a fundamentalist pastor, which sets the context for her own reactions and reflections. The temporal fluidity of the narrative, coupled with lucid prose and a touch of humor, provides needed balance for what might otherwise make for excruciating reading.

This book would be a rich and moving source of dialogue about a number of issues touching university students. There are clear intercultural issues of communication, faith, culture, and politics. With the backbone of and inspiration for the memoir being the intercultural friendship of two women who are seeking to thrive in the world, readers are taken on a journey in which their experiences of fundamentalism and the oppression of women give them commonality despite all the ways in which they struggle to understand their differences. This very human backdrop casts a difficult conversation into a framework of empathy and compassion. For a community in need of opening up these dialogues, such a humane starting point would be invaluable.

I also think it will be very meaningful for students to engage with an author who is close in age to them. As much as it is a story of intercultural friendship, communication and understanding, *The Invisible Girls* is also a coming-of-age story, yet it's a coming-of-age story which will appeal not only to a traditionally-aged student population, but to the growing non-traditional student population at so many institutions. For a woman in her late 20s, Sarah Thebarga has lived a life filled with a lot of transitional moments. She highlights in particular, about a third of the way through the book, the transition of going across the country to college. As one of the formative touch points in youth, this moment provides a context for understanding Thebarga's drive, determination, and spirit of independence prior to cancer, which is a vivid platform for the deep and tragic sense of loss she experiences as a result of it. Both the contextual moment and the moment of loss would provide faculty and programs opportunities to engage students about turning points in their lives and discuss how attending a university might be one of those moments for each of them.

In Thebarga's personal journey of loss, students will be touched by the perspective of a cancer survivor; however, this perspective will also create the challenge to institutions which choose this book to ensure that adequate support services are made readily available to students who might be coping with losses, both recent and impending. I believe partnering with campus counseling services and campus chaplains, where applicable, would be a necessary component of programming

support for selection of this book as a common reading text.

A particular challenge as I contemplate use of the book for our own program is how it might be integrated into our overall new student programs. As a public comprehensive university, with a commitment to globalizing the curriculum and engaging students in service and community, I thought that the intercultural relationship would form the groundwork for a rich community conversation. Addressing the student learning commitments of our institution is another selection criterion for us, so the book easily ticked another box for me; however, I came to see the story as an even richer ground for a conversation about faith, culture, and interfaith dialogue within this context. I know at my own public institution, interfaith conversations have not and do not happen on a large scale. While it may be time, this would, for us, be a challenging discussion to frame, having no articulated or common point of departure in terms of faith. Because the book so engagingly, candidly, and heartwarmingly provides a platform from which to have interfaith discussions, I certainly do not think this is an impossibility either. I do think it would make an ideal book for a private religious institution with similar learning commitments.

Overall, I found *The Invisible Girls* an engaging, moving, thoughtful, and memorable book. I believe, partnered with the right institution able to provide adequate programming support for the more difficult elements of the discussions it would raise, this would be a rich and meaningful common reading selection for new students.