

The Terrorist's Son: A Story of Choice

by Zak Ebrahim with Jeff Giles

About the Book

Zak Ebrahim was only seven years old when, on November 5, 1990, his father, El-Sayyid Nosair, shot and killed Meir Kahane, the leader of the Jewish Defense League. While in prison, Nosair helped plan the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. In one of his infamous video messages, Osama bin Laden urged the world to “Remember El-Sayyid Nosair.”

For Ebrahim, a childhood amid terrorism was all he knew. After his father’s incarceration, his family moved more than twenty times, haunted by and persecuted for the crimes of his father. Though his radicalized father and uncles modeled fanatical beliefs, the hateful ideas never resonated with the shy, awkward boy. The older he grew, the more fully Ebrahim grasped the horrific depths of his father’s acts. The more he understood, the more he resolved to dedicate his life to promoting peace.

In this book, Ebrahim traces his remarkable journey to escape his father’s terrible legacy. Crisscrossing the eastern United States, from Pittsburgh to Memphis, from a mosque in Jersey City to the Busch Gardens theme park in Tampa, *The Terrorist’s Son* is the story of a boy inculcated in dogma and hate—a boy presumed to follow in his father’s footsteps—and the man who chose a different path.

Prereading Discussion Questions

The questions below align with the following English Language Arts Common Core Standards: (SL.9–12.1)

1. What is terrorism? Does its definition depend on your country, culture, or religion?
2. Discuss examples of terrorism you have read or heard about in the news. Why do you think people become terrorists? How might their friends and family react, and which reaction(s) do you think are the most common? Do you think their family members share their beliefs and support their actions?

Discussion Questions

These discussion questions align with the following English Language Arts Common Core Standards: (RL.9–12.1, 3) (SL.9–12.1)

1. What does Zak remember about the day his father shot and killed Meir Kahane, the leader of the Jewish Defense League? According to Zak, why did his father target Kahane?

2. Describe how Zak's parents met and discuss their relationship and early religious convictions. How does this flashback to El-Sayyid Nosair's years as a young man contribute to the story?
3. What events in his personal life and in global politics led El-Sayyid to embrace increasingly fanatical views? According to Zak, how does his father's story illustrate how extremists are born?
4. Zak says of his father's incarceration, "The fact that my father went to prison for an unfathomable crime when I was seven just about ruined my life. But it also made my life possible." What does he mean?
5. Zak narrates how he was bullied mercilessly in school and recounts his first and last attempt at bullying others. What did Zak do and how did he feel about it afterward? How did this contribute to his epiphany that "empathy is more powerful than hate"?
6. Characterize Zak's mother. Is she someone you admire? Why or why not? What choices did she make and what consequences did they have? What questions would you ask her if you had the chance?
7. Describe Zak's memories of visiting his father in prison. How did Zak's feelings toward his father change with time?
8. Zak remembers visiting a shooting range with his father. What impression did this trip have on Zak? How does this scene contribute to the reader's understanding of Zak's character and how his beliefs about his father evolved?
9. Who was Abdullah Yusuf Azzam? How did his death affect Zak's father?
10. Zak's stepfather forces Zak and his brother to take summer jobs to help pay the family's bills. They both find work at Busch Gardens in Tampa, and it turns out to be a surprising turning point in Zak's life. Why?
11. At one point in the story, Zak's mother says, "I'm so sick of hating people." What prompts her to say this, and how does it affect Zak? How does the family's life change afterwards?
12. What does Zak mean by "... using nonviolence to resolve conflicts doesn't mean being passive." How is that possible? Provide examples.
13. As Zak matures, he comes to understand the horror of his father's acts. Identify and discuss key events that contributed to Zak's beliefs about the kind of man he wanted to become.

14. At the end of his story Zak says, “I respect believers of all kinds and work to promote interfaith dialogue, but my whole life I’ve seen religion used as a weapon, and I’m putting all weapons down.” Why does Zak make this statement? What do you think about his claim?

15. When and why did Zak’s mother become a Muslim? How does her faith experience compare to Zak’s? How do Zak, his mother, and other Muslim characters in the book reinforce or contradict the images of Islam in popular culture and on the news?

16. It isn't only terrorists, and certainly isn't only followers of one particular religion or ideology, who express bigotry. Have you or someone you know ever experienced the type of bigotry that Zak describes?

17. To what extent do you think Zak's experiences are unusual and extraordinary, and to what extent are they universal? Do you relate to anything in his journey?

Extension Activities

These activities align with the following English Language Arts Common Core Standards: (SL.9–12.1, 4) (W.9–12.1, 7, 9)

1. Conduct a short investigation of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Share your findings in a small group. Prepare a group presentation in which you discuss what Zak’s story contributes to your understanding of the bombing, both in terms of its causes and its profound and far-reaching effects.

2. Zak describes how he believes an individual becomes a terrorist: “You find someone vulnerable—someone who’s lost his confidence, his income, his pride, his agency. Someone who feels humiliated by life. And then you isolate him. You fill him with fear and fury, and you see to it that he regards anybody who’s different as a faceless target . . .”

Watch Maajid Nawaz’s TED Talk, “A global culture to fight extremism” by clicking here: http://www.ted.com/talks/maajid_nawaz_a_global_culture_to_fight_extremism. How do Nawaz’s personal story and his views on the origins of terrorism compare to Zak Ebrahim’s?

The film *Paradise Now* (Warner Brothers, 2005) is a story of two Palestinian youths drawn to terrorism. Watch the movie and discuss whether or not you think it reflects Nawaz’s and Ebrahim’s views of the reasons people may be drawn to extremism.

3. Research the United States’ relationships in the Middle East. What events in the last few decades have created tensions? Write an essay in which you argue for steps the United States can take to reduce tensions. In your opinion, which are most important and why?

4. Organize a debate in which one side argues the need for military force against terrorism and the other argues for alternative, nonviolent measures. Each side should provide examples to support its position.
5. Watch or read the world news for two weeks and maintain a journal in which you summarize and respond to terrorist behavior. Discuss the events and your responses daily with classmates, paying particular attention to the impact terrorism has on innocent people.
6. Research Muslim leaders' reactions to the Islamic State and other recent extremist organizations. Why and how are many Muslim leaders publicly denouncing the extremists? How does it echo the experiences of some of the local religious leaders in Zak's childhood?

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