



Visit their reality

'Illegal aliens' did not just fall to earth without a history

By **GAIL FORRER**

OVER a cup of coffee I told my friend about the profound effect a book I was reading, *The People Smuggler*, by Robin De Crespigny, was having on me.

Briefly I described how, through no doing of their own, some people live through circumstances so dreadful that we, the lucky ones, need to keep this in mind. My coffee companion said she thought most us did keep that in mind.

Once, I would have made the same reply. But that was before I read *The People Smuggler*. Now I don't think we do keep it in mind.

We don't keep it in mind because we don't know the people, their place of birth, the street they were brought up in, the children they played with or the first person they fell in love with.

We don't know their reality and, mostly, we will never know their dreams. We don't know how they have been beaten black and blue, their experience of war and death.

Sometimes, when you are so lucky, it seems the unlucky ones just fell to earth, without a story, nothing to define them as fellow human beings.

They simply become illegal aliens.

The People Smuggler changed that for me. This book introduced me to one "illegal alien", the person Australian authorities convicted and jailed as a people smuggler and who others describe as "the Oscar Schindler of Asia".

Ali Al Jenabi, the human

being, was the man I met. He was born in Iraq and now he lives with a temporary bridging visa in Australia. The Australian film-maker, Robin De Crespigny, met him in 2008 and, after eight months of struggling with the means to tell the story, she decided on the book form.

"The epic breadth of his story is so great," she said.

And it is. Ali and his family's story covers thousands of miles, a myriad of cultures, military conflicts and international law.

"I made the decision to write this book in the first person to enable the reader to experience Ali's life at first hand by being placed in his shoes," she says.

Ms De Crespigny not only placed me in Ali's shoes, she fitted them so perfectly I took a metaphorical walk in them.

In the early '70s Ali Al Jenabi was born in Iraq into a happy middle-class family, the eldest of nine. One day Saddam Hussein's secret police received a report his father had said. "Saddam Hussein is a bastard". These five words shattered the lives of one family forever. Great chunks of life spent in Abu Ghraib—the most horrific of Hussein's prisons and life on the run.

While this story details the imprisonment and torture of his father, himself and brothers, death and duplicity at all levels of society in many countries and winds up in Sydney, this man's own core being of love and loyalty miraculously remains intact.

The book took three years to write and during that time

the author travelled from listening to event descriptions to gaining an insight into the qualities that let him survive, when others didn't.

As Ms de Crespigny said, "He is an Arabic Muslim man and I am an Eastern agnostic woman.

"I didn't expect to connect on all levels. I came to see his great moral fibre, his sense of humour, his depth of self-awareness," she said.

"It was unexpected."

Throughout the book you, too, are treated to the unexpected and his ability to understand the mind and soul of the disposed and deported.

Referring to some of the refugees when they squabbled in the midst of their terrifying journey, he said, "They behaved badly, but they have come from decades of brutality and war, which brings out the best and the worst in people."

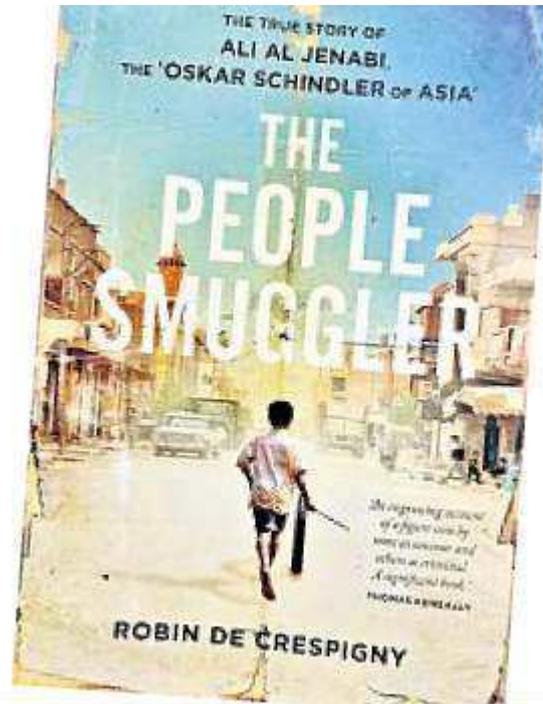
Ms de Crespigny said she saw it as a straightforward story, but one that would challenge the government's attitude to the relatively small amount of people who risk life and limb to make the perilous journey to come to Australia.

She hopes one day the government will stop using people such as Ali Al Jenabi as political footballs.

"Australians are kind, caring people," she said. "I think they will ask themselves what they would have done in those circumstances."

I hope politicians like Chris Bowen, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott will read this book.





NOOSA LONGWEEKEND

Author Robin de Crespigny will be interviewed about her book, *The People Smuggler*, by ABC Coast FM's Mary-Lou Stephens on Tuesday, June 19, at 10am at The J Theatre. Tickets are \$25. Event details and ticket prices can be found on the festival website, noosalongweekend.com.



AUTHOR: Robin De Crespigny.