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# KIDNAPPED ASYLUM

Book 1 of the Asylum Seekers Series

**OFFICIAL READING GUIDE**

by Brandi Parsons

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# About This Guide

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This official Reading Guide for *Kidnapped Asylum* has been designed to support book clubs, classrooms, community organizations, library events, author presentations, and individual readers who want to explore the novel at a deeper level. Whether you are reading the book for personal enrichment, academic study, or as part of a group, this guide offers rich context, character insight, thematic analysis, and carefully crafted discussion questions that will bring the story to life.

Brandi Parsons wrote this novel out of a profound desire to shed light on the harrowing journey that asylum seekers undertake from crisis in their homeland to the bewildering labyrinth of immigration bureaucracy in the United States. This guide honors that intention by encouraging readers to engage not only with the narrative, but also with the real-world realities that inspired it.

## ■ How to Use This Guide

Each section can be used independently or as part of a complete curriculum. Discussion questions are open-ended and designed to spark reflection rather than prescribe right answers. Facilitators are encouraged to adapt questions to their audience. Activities and research prompts are suitable for middle school through adult learning contexts.

# About the Author

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**Brandi Parsons** is an author committed to telling stories that matter stories grounded in real human experiences. Her work reflects a strong sense of purpose, often inspired by direct conversations and lived realities.

Her decision to tell Christel's story emerged from a personal interaction with an adult English learner whose journey demanded to be heard. This foundation gives *Kidnapped Asylum* authenticity, emotional weight, and social relevance.

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## Academic & Professional Credentials

Degree / Credential	Institution	Year
Master's — Educational Technology	MidAmerica Nazarene University	2008
B.A. — Elementary Education	Central College	2003
Iowa Teaching License: PK–K, K–6, K–8 Spanish, K–12 ESL	State of Iowa	Active

# Book Overview & Synopsis

<b>Title:</b>	Kidnapped Asylum
<b>Series:</b>	The Asylum Seekers Series — Book 1
<b>Author:</b>	Brandi Parsons
<b>Genre:</b>	Literary Fiction / Political Fiction / Social Justice
<b>Setting:</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo · Rwanda · Uganda · United States
<b>Publisher:</b>	EBooks2Go
<b>Available At:</b>	Amazon · Barnes & Noble (Nook) · Google Play · Kobo · EBooks2Go
<b>Author Website:</b>	<a href="http://www.brandiparsons.com">www.brandiparsons.com</a>

## Synopsis

Political activist and peace-builder **Christel Kisongo** has dedicated his life to promoting non-violent conflict resolution in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Working for the *Paix Programme* a joint initiative of the Quaker Church and the Church of Emmanuel alongside his trusted UN colleagues **Caleb** and **Sara**, Christel navigates the dangerous terrain of rebel militia territory, serving as the indispensable local guide and cultural bridge between worlds.

When Caleb and Sara venture into the bush alone for a single day the one day Christel cannot accompany them they vanish. Within days, the grim confirmation arrives: they have been kidnapped and killed. The discovery shatters Christel's world and immediately endangers his own life. As a local who helped draft explicit UN reports documenting international war crimes committed by the national army and rebel forces, Christel has become a target.

With only a cryptic text message "*Go to Uganda embassy*" and the backpack on his shoulders, Christel makes a desperate flight: by foot through the forest, by mid-sized ferry across Lake Kivu from Bukavu to Goma, through safe houses and covert networks, across Rwanda, and finally to Uganda. The harrowing journey is only the beginning.

Once Christel reaches the United States and applies for asylum, he is thrust into a bewildering, dehumanizing, and politically volatile immigration system. The novel unflinchingly explores whether a man who survived war, loss, and flight can also survive the bureaucratic machinery designed in theory to protect him.

*"Promoting peaceful resolution to conflict was his life's calling — until he had to flee his country with nothing but his backpack."*

# Historical & Geopolitical Context

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To fully appreciate the stakes of Christel's journey, readers benefit from understanding the real-world landscape in which *Kidnapped Asylum* is set.

## The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The DRC has experienced decades of civil conflict fuelled by competition over vast mineral resources, the legacy of Belgian colonialism, and the presence of dozens of armed militia groups. The eastern provinces — including North Kivu, where Goma is located, and South Kivu, home to Bukavu — have been particularly ravaged by violence, displacement, and atrocities. The UN has maintained a peacekeeping mission (MONUC / MONUSCO) in the DRC since 1999, but the situation for civilians and humanitarian workers has remained persistently dangerous.

## The 1994 Rwandan Genocide

The novel references the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide, in which an estimated 500,000 to 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed in approximately 100 days. The refugee crisis that followed spilled into eastern DRC and fundamentally reshaped the region's political dynamics. Francois, the forest-dwelling man Christel's team helps at the novel's opening, likely lost family in this event.

## The Paix Programme & UN Peacekeeping

The novel's fictional *Paix Programmed* mirrors real-world faith-based and international peacekeeping initiatives. The Quaker Church's American Friends Service Committee and similar organizations have long maintained a presence in conflict zones, working to mediate between armed groups and protect civilians. UN staff members operating in such zones face genuine personal danger, as the novel dramatizes with the deaths of Caleb and Sara.

## The US Asylum System

Asylum law in the United States is governed by the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, incorporated into US law through the Refugee Act of 1980. To qualify, an applicant must demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. The process is notoriously slow, underfunded, and subject to political interference themes that form the second arc of Christel's story.

## Languages of Central Africa

The novel authentically depicts the linguistic landscape of the region. Characters speak Kinyarwanda (Rwanda's official language), French (the colonial language shared across the DRC, Rwanda, and Congo), Swahili (a trade language widely spoken in East and Central Africa), and English. Sara's role as multilingual interpreter is not merely narrative convenience it reflects the real communicative complexity of the

region.

# Full Character Guide

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The characters of *Kidnapped Asylum* are richly drawn, each representing a distinct facet of the conflict, the peace-building mission, and the refugee experience. Below is a comprehensive guide to every named and significant character in the novel.

## Christel Kisongo

**PROTAGONIST — DRC**  
**Political Activist & Asylum**  
**Seeker**

Christel is the moral and emotional center of the novel. A wealthier, educated Congolese man from Kisanga, he is one of few in his community who owns a car and a house, and wields the cultural authority to cut through the lies that armed men tell. He is the indispensable cultural and linguistic bridge for the UN team. When his colleagues are killed and his country becomes unsafe, he flees with extraordinary courage, resourcefulness, and spiritual awareness pausing to pray even while in flight. His name, Kisongo, signals his rootedness in the land he is forced to abandon. His journey to the United States and navigation of the asylum system forms the emotional backbone of the series.

**Key traits:** Calm under pressure · Culturally authoritative · Deeply empathetic · Spiritually grounded  
· Strategically aware

## Caleb

**UN PEACEKEEPER —**  
**Global Studies & Conflict**  
**Resolution Specialist**

Caleb is an American working for the UN, recruited originally by the Quaker Church where he worked for a long time. He holds a degree in global studies and conflict resolution. Caleb is warm, personable, and committed he carries water and dried fruit for the people he meets in the bush, an act that reflects his practical compassion. He learns the vernacular of the languages spoken, not the textbook versions, and does a great deal of listening. He bonds with villagers through laughter. His death at the hands of kidnappers in the DRC is the catalytic tragedy of the novel.

**Key traits:** Personable · Linguistically adaptive · Practically compassionate · Mission-driven · Quietly heroic

## Sara

**UN INTERPRETER &**  
**PEACEKEEPER**

Sara is the linguistic lifeline of the trio, fluent in Kinyarwanda, French, Swahili, and English. Without Sara, the team could not communicate effectively with communities like the one Francois represents. She is present, attentive, and professional. Her question to Caleb "Do you see these people as human beings or animals?" is one of the novel's most morally charged moments, revealing her own fierce commitment to the humanity of those they serve. Like Caleb, she is killed during the kidnapping that triggers Christel's flight from the DRC.

**Key traits:** Multilingual · Morally direct · Professionally disciplined · Compassionate · Courageous

## Francois

**SURVIVOR — Rwandan  
Genocide Survivor Living  
in the Jungle**

Francois is the man the team first encounters at the novel's opening a voice from the shadows of the canopied forest, malnourished, exhausted, and deeply traumatized. He speaks Kinyarwanda, French, and Swahili, with a preference for Swahili. His physical condition speaks to years of survival in the bush: skin overlapping skin, inset eyes, the visible marks of starvation. His story is almost certainly connected to the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, and his family is presumed killed by the Rwandan government. Through the team's patient, weeks-long relationship-building, Francois is eventually guided through the "underground railroad" system to be reunited with what remains of his family in Rwanda.

**Key traits:** Traumatized · Guarded · Resilient · Multilingual · Deeply weary but not broken

## The UN Secretary (Receptionist)

**SUPPORTING  
CHARACTER —  
Gatekeeper Figure**

The UN secretary at the regional office is the person Christel approaches after discovering that Caleb and Sara have not checked in. Her simple statement that she has not seen them and they have not called in over 24 hours is the moment the novel's tragedy crystallizes into confirmation. She represents the institutional face of the UN, the administrative layer that exists between crisis and response.

**Key traits:** Institutional · Matter-of-fact · Unwitting bearer of devastating news

## Christel's Neighbor

**SUPPORTING  
CHARACTER —  
Lifesaving Informant**

This unnamed neighbor plays a brief but crucial role: sending Christel a warning text message in time for him to exit his house and hide in the bushes before those coming to harm him can find him. Without this neighbor's alertness and loyalty, Christel's story would end before it truly begins. The neighbor embodies the quiet heroism of ordinary people in extraordinary times.

**Key traits:** Alert · Loyal · Courageous · Community-minded

### The Armed Guard on the Ferry

**ATMOSPHERIC  
CHARACTER — Symbol of  
Uncertain Authority**

During the four-hour ferry ride from Bukavu to Goma across Lake Kivu, Christel notices an armed guard and cannot determine whether this person is a friend to those fleeing or a threat. This character represents the pervasive ambiguity of authority in conflict zones, where those bearing weapons may be protectors or predators.

**Key traits:** Ambiguous · Powerful · Silently threatening

### The Safe House Hostess in Goma

**SUPPORTING  
CHARACTER —  
Underground Network  
Agent**

This woman provides Christel with towels, hot tea, a warm meal, and a bed upon his arrival in Goma the first safety he has experienced since fleeing his home. Before dawn, she wakes him and directs him onward to Uganda through Rwanda. She is part of the covert network that moves people to safety, a modern underground railroad operator. Her brisk efficiency is born of necessity: lingering is dangerous.

**Key traits:** Efficient · Compassionate · Clandestine · Decisive · Trustworthy

### Christel's Brother

**DECEASED CHARACTER  
— Personal Loss &  
Narrative Catalyst**

Though never seen alive in the narrative, Christel's brother's death is the reason Christel was in Kisanga on the fateful day he could not accompany Caleb and Sara into the bush. The brother's absence creates the gap through which tragedy enters. His vacant house near Christel's own stands as a symbol of the layers of loss the protagonist carries.

**Key traits:** Symbolic · Absent but central · Catalyst for grief

# Themes & Motifs

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## 1. Humanity in Crisis

At the heart of *Kidnapped Asylum* is a persistent, urgent question one that Sara poses directly to Caleb: "Do you see these people as human beings or animals?" Parsons forces readers to sit with this question throughout the novel. From Francois in the jungle to Christel in the US immigration system, the novel insists on the full humanity of people whom systems political, bureaucratic, military tend to dehumanize. Caleb's immediate, unequivocal response ("I see them as human beings, like you or me") establishes the moral standard against which all other characters and institutions are measured.

## 2. Flight, Exile & the Loss of Home

Parsons renders Christel's flight from the DRC with devastating specificity. The backpack he carries "the only trace of home he carried with him" becomes a powerful symbol of everything that cannot be packed: family, safety, identity, belonging. The novel traces the universal experience of the refugee: the moment the familiar becomes lethal, and the unknown becomes the only path forward. Every sensory detail the stink of Bukavu like a "rotten tomato forgotten in a refrigerator," the smell of fish in Lake Kivu anchors displacement in the body.

## 3. The Underground Railroad — Networks of Solidarity

The novel explicitly invokes the Underground Railroad as a metaphor for the covert networks that move endangered people to safety. Christel's journey through safe houses, border crossings, and clandestine networks is made possible by a web of anonymous helper's neighbors, hostesses, guides who risk their own lives for strangers. Parsons celebrates these acts of solidarity without romanticizing the danger they involve.

## 4. Institutional Failure & Political Asylum

The US asylum system, into which Christel is eventually thrust, represents a second "kidnapping" this time by bureaucracy. The novel's title operates on multiple levels: the literal kidnapping of Caleb and Sara, Christel's forced flight, and his captivity within a system that should protect him but may instead crush him. Parsons, as a K–12 ESL educator who has worked with immigrants, brings authentic understanding of the barriers non-English speakers face within American institutions.

## 5. Language as Power & Bridge

Language is never neutral in this novel. Characters navigate Kinyarwanda, French, Swahili, and English and the ability or inability to communicate is literally life-or-death. Sara exists in the story because language gaps would otherwise be fatal. Christel's first word to Francois ("Qui es-tu?" "Who are you?") is in the language of the colonizer, and Francois's preference for Swahili over French signals a quiet assertion of

African identity. Parsons, a trained ESL educator and Spanish teacher, understands that language instruction is an act of empowerment.

## **6. Faith, Grief & Resilience**

Christel says a small prayer as he flees his house. He sheds tears "for the second time that month" a detail that marks grief as rare, controlled, precious. The novel acknowledges faith not as miraculous salvation but as a source of interior steadiness. Grief is woven through every chapter: the loss of Caleb and Sara, of Christel's brother, of Christel's home and country. Parsons does not offer easy consolation but insists that the will to survive is itself a form of grace.

## **7. Surveillance, Trust & Paranoia**

Christel's movements throughout his escape are characterized by constant evaluation of risk: he checks his phone only when certain no one is watching; he sits on the ferry without sleeping; he blends into crowds; he pauses when something seems suspicious. Parsons renders the cognitive load of living as a target with extraordinary precision. The reader feels the exhaustion of hypervigilance alongside Christel.

# Chapter-by-Chapter Discussion Framework

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The following framework organizes the novel's known narrative arc into discussable segments. Because *Kidnapped Asylum* is structured around Christel's journey, discussion leaders may find it useful to organize sessions around the major geographic and emotional stages of his experience.

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## Act I — The Mission (DRC: The Forest & the Villages)

The opening section introduces us to the world of the Paix Programme through the encounter with Francois. We see the team at work patient, respectful, multilingual, willing to sit in the dirt for hours. Key questions: What principles guide this team? What does Francois's condition tell us about life in conflict-affected Central Africa? How does trust get built in this environment? The act culminates in Francois's successful transit to Rwanda a rare victory that makes the tragedy ahead more devastating by contrast.

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## Act II — The Disappearance & Flight (DRC: Kisanga to Bukavu to Goma)

The pivot of the novel. Caleb and Sara's kidnapping forces Christel into immediate danger. His escape sequence from the bushes outside his house, through the crowded streets of Bukavu, onto the ferry across Lake Kivu, to the safe house in Goma is rendered in tense, sensory prose. Key questions: What does Christel's composure reveal about his character? How does the body experience fear and flight? What role does the safe house network play, and who built it?

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## Act III — Through Rwanda to Uganda (The Border Crossings)

Christel's journey continues through Rwanda to Uganda, a route chosen for practicality even though Rwanda holds its own dangers. This section explores the geography of risk in Central Africa and the complex politics of neighbouring nations. Key questions: What does it mean to flee through a country that also frightens you? How does Christel manage his physical and emotional exhaustion? What does "asylum" mean before it becomes a legal category?

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## Act IV — The US Asylum System (America)

The second half of the novel turns its lens on the United States' immigration system. The "kidnapping" of the title now operates metaphorically: Christel is held by a system that processes rather than protects. Key questions: How does the asylum process compare to Christel's expectations? What barriers linguistic, cultural, bureaucratic does he encounter? How does the political climate of the US shape his prospects? What is the human cost of prolonged uncertainty?

# Discussion Questions

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The following questions are designed for book clubs, classrooms, library events, and author presentations. They range from close-reading questions to broader ethical and political reflection. No single session needs to address all of them choose the questions that best fit your group and your time.

## Opening the Conversation

### Question 1

*The novel opens in a forest, with an unseen voice asking "Qui es-tu?" "Who are you?" Why do you think Parsons chose this as her opening? What does identity mean in a context where people are hiding from danger?*

*Follow-up: How does the question "Who are you?" echo through the rest of the novel?*

### Question 2

*Before we meet Christel as a refugee, we see him as a confident, culturally authoritative peace-builder. Why is this important? How does it change the way you experience his later vulnerability?*

### Question 3

*Caleb packs water and dried fruit every day. What does this small, practical detail tell us about who he is and how he does his work?*

*Follow-up: Can you think of someone in your own life who shows care through small, practical acts?*

## Going Deeper — Character & Relationship

### Question 4

*Sara asks Caleb: "Do you see these people as human beings or animals?" Caleb answers immediately and without hesitation. Why is the speed of his answer significant? Do you think most people in positions of power, in government, in humanitarian work would answer as quickly?*

*Follow-up: What does it cost Sara to ask this question out loud?*

### Question 5

*Francois prefers to speak Swahili over French. What might this preference signal about his identity and his history? What does it mean for a person's dignity to be spoken to in the language they prefer?*

### Question 6

*The unnamed neighbor who texts Christel to warn him saves his life. Why does Parsons leave this character unnamed? What does anonymity do in this scene?*

### Question 7

*Christel says a small prayer before stepping out of his house into the unknown. What role does faith play in his character? Is his prayer a sign of hope, of grief, or of something else entirely?*

## The Journey — Place, Body & Survival

### Question 8

*Parsons describes Bukavu as smelling "like a rotten tomato, forgotten about in the bottom of the refrigerator." How do sensory details like this one shape your experience of Christel's escape? What does it feel like to flee a place you once called home?*

### Question 9

*The ferry ride from Bukavu to Goma takes four hours. Christel does not sleep. He "never relaxed." He sits in silence. What is the author communicating about the physical and psychological experience of displacement?*

*Follow-up: Have you ever had to stay alert for a long period of time? What did that feel like?*

### Question 10

*Christel's backpack is described as "the only trace of home he carried with him." If you had to flee with a single backpack, what would you put in it? What would that tell you about what you value most?*

### Question 11

*The novel references an "underground railroad" system to move endangered people to safety. Why does the author invoke this specific historical metaphor? What does it connect to in US and world history?*

## The Asylum System & US Politics

### Question 12

*The novel's title, *Kidnapped Asylum*, works on multiple levels. What is being "kidnapped" in the US section of the novel? In what sense is the asylum system itself a form of captivity?*

### Question 13

*Christel writes UN reports documenting war crimes and this is what makes him a target. What does this tell us about the relationship between truth, power, and danger?*

*Follow-up: Can you think of real-world examples of people who have been endangered because they documented or reported atrocities?*

### Question 14

*How does the political landscape of the United States affect Christel's chances of receiving asylum? Do you think the system is designed to protect people like Christel, or to exclude them?*

### Question 15

*Parsons is a trained ESL educator who has worked with diverse immigrant communities. How does her professional background shape the way she writes about language, identity, and the immigrant experience?*

## Closing Reflections

**Question 16**

*What do you think Parsons most wants readers to take away from this novel? Did the book change or challenge any assumptions you held before reading it?*

**Question 17**

*If Christel could speak directly to a US senator or immigration judge, what do you think he would want to say?*

*Follow-up: What would you want to say, on his behalf?*

**Question 18**

*The novel is the first in a series. Where do you hope Christel's story goes in Book 2? What questions do you most want answered?*

# Writing Style & Craft

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## Immersive Sensory Detail

Parsons anchors her narrative in the physical world. The smell of Bukavu, the feel of damp dirt in the forest, the weight of a water bottle, the sound of leaves crunching underfoot these details make Christel's world viscerally real. For readers who have never been to Central Africa, Parsons's sensory writing is a form of transportation.

## Dialogue as Characterisation

Parsons uses dialogue economically but to powerful effect. A single exchange, "Do you see these people as human beings or animals?" tells us everything about Sara's moral compass. The stutter in Francois's introduction of himself ("F-f-f-ran-cois") conveys trauma without explanation. Parsons trusts her readers.

## Tension Through Restraint

The escape sequence is rendered without melodrama. Christel's movements are described as "timed with gracefulness and awareness." He doesn't panic; he evaluates. Parsons's restrained prose mirrors Christel's discipline, making the tension more profound for being unspoken.

## Multilingual Authenticity

The use of French, Swahili, and Kinyarwanda throughout the text is never merely decorative. Language carries identity, power, and history. Parsons's fluency in Spanish and her work as an ESL educator lend her linguistic choices a confidence that enriches the novel's world-building considerably.

## The Architecture of Time

Parsons moves through time deliberately. The two weeks it takes to build trust with Francois is rendered as time well spent; Christel's four-hour ferry ride is four hours of held breath. The author understands that the refugee experience is, above all, an experience of time waiting, fleeing, waiting again.

*"Parsons trusts her readers — a rare and generous act for a debut novelist."*

# Activities & Further Exploration

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## Activity 1: Map Christel's Journey

Using a physical or digital map of Central and East Africa, trace Christel's escape route: from Kisanga to Bukavu by foot and road; by ferry across Lake Kivu from Bukavu to Goma; from Goma through Rwanda to Uganda; and onward to the United States. Research the actual distances and border conditions at each crossing. What surprises you?

## Activity 2: Research the US Asylum Process

Visit the USCIS website ([uscis.gov](http://uscis.gov)) and research the steps required to apply for asylum in the United States. How long does the process typically take? What documentation is required? What are the most common grounds for denial? Compare your findings to Christel's experience as depicted in the novel.

## Activity 3: Language Exploration

Learn five words or phrases in Swahili, French, and Kinyarwanda three of the languages spoken in the novel. Reflect on what it would mean to navigate a crisis in a language you were still learning. For ESL educators and students: discuss how language learning changes when one's safety depends on it.

## Activity 4: Interview a Refugee or Asylum Seeker

With appropriate sensitivity and consent, arrange for a guest speaker a refugee, asylum seeker, or immigration attorney to speak with your group. Prepare questions drawn from the novel's themes. Many local refugee resettlement agencies welcome community partnerships.

## Activity 5: Write Christel's Letter

Imagine you are Christel, and you have been asked to write a letter to a US senator explaining why you deserve asylum. Using details from the novel, write a first-person letter that presents Christel's case in full. What evidence would you include? What emotions would you allow yourself to show?

## Activity 6: Explore the Real Paix Programme

Research real faith-based and UN peacekeeping initiatives operating in the DRC. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), MONUSCO, and Caritas International all have documented presences in the region. What do their field reports tell you about the conditions in which Christel and his colleagues worked?

## Activity 7: Comparative Reading

Pair *Kidnapped Asylum* with one or more of the following: *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah (child soldier memoir, Sierra Leone); *Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue (Cameroonian immigrants in the US); *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid (allegorical refugee novel). What does Parsons's approach share with these works, and where does she diverge?

# Connect with the Author

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Brandi Parsons welcomes contact from readers, book clubs, educators, and event organisers. She is available for author visits, virtual Q&A sessions, school and library presentations, and panel discussions on immigration, literacy, and social justice.

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*“Her ultimate dream is to write a best-seller — and with Kidnapped Asylum, she is well on her way.”*

*This Reading Guide was produced for Brandi Parsons by an independent editorial team as an official companion to Kidnapped Asylum, Book 1 of the Asylum Seekers Series. All rights to the novel and its characters belong to Brandi Parsons. Reproduction of this guide for educational, non-commercial use is encouraged with attribution.*

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