Halfway through *The Marsh Birds* I could hardly bear to read on, such is the heartbreaking intensity of this story of a young Iraqi caught up in Australia’s immigration system. But Eva Sallis is a highly skilled novelist as well as a passionate advocate for human rights, and I was compelled to follow Dhurgham al-Samarra’i as far as she chose to take him, through his occasional highs and frequent lows.

This kind of novel must be based on scrupulous research, so as not to be open to accusations of exaggeration and bias. Eva Sallis is better qualified than many Australians to represent the point of view of an Arab refugee. She knows the language, for a start. She acknowledges a wide range of sources, both written and personal. Although Dhurgham is fictional, much of his story and many of the incidents in the novel are based on real events. As Sallis says, ‘All are the creative product of research.’

Dhurgham is a happy, innocent Baghdadi twelve-year-old from a middle class family when his father decides they must leave Saddam’s Iraq. What happens next is never clear: the boy’s memory is patchy, and Sallis never steps in with narratorial authority to fill in the details. But the result is that he is alone in Damascus, waiting in vain for his family to join him. The fate of a twelve-year-old child alone on the streets of any city is not difficult to imagine. The two years in Syria are a shameful and unmentionable blur to Dhurgham, and the fact that he is unable to account for this time will count against him when he comes to seek asylum in Australia.
His Syrian ‘benefactor’ eventually realises the boy will soon become a liability, and hits on the expedient of sending him away with a people-smuggler, or ‘travel agent’. Tall for fourteen, Dhurgham is suspected of lying about his age as well as his history, and is kept in a detention centre in the Australian desert for more than two years. Sallis occasionally shows the point of view of Australian officials, sympathetic but harassed, and quotes interviews to show how Dhurgham’s story is given different shades of meaning depending upon who is listening.

Dhurgham, although an appealing character, is no hero: he sometimes lies, and as he grows up he begins to behave violently when upset. Perhaps the most powerful unspoken message of *The Marsh Birds* is that the inestimable damage done by detaining people who were already desperate will not be neutralised by imprisonment and deportation. Even leaving aside humanitarian arguments, is it not worth pondering the effect of returning disillusioned, psychologically damaged people to inhospitable countries? Are they likely to remember Australia and Australians kindly? We can only hope they remain depressed and ineffectual, because otherwise one can foresee a fertile breeding ground for the sense of injustice that gives rise to terrorism.