The Observer

2025-07-20

Safe from harm

Author: Alex Preston

United Kingdom | Print | Article area 695cm² | Pages: 35

Ideas

Safe from harm

Seeking to expand the definition of sanctuary in her sprawling history, Marina Warner offers a powerful reminder that the persecuted have always been afforded refuge, writes Alex Preston

I started teaching English to refugee children a decade ago. Working with the charity Kent Kindness, I hoped to help these young people reach a level of English that would allow them to navigate their new country and make new lives here after arduous journeys from homelands beset by war or famine. Kent is the county where most small boats land, and at times its services have groaned under the pressure.

I thought about the squat, unlovely government reception centres where we held our lessons as I read Marina Warner's dazzling meditation on the idea of home, hospitality and refuge, *Sanctuary*. The clusters of prefab buildings scattered across the rolling Weald where I teach hardly resemble anyone's ideal of sanctuary, yet Warner's book seeks to expand and secularise such definitions. She aims "to identify principles that in the past underpinned ideas of refuge and home, and could perhaps be adapted to do so today". Over time, I came to realise that the most important thing I could offer to these children – many of them orphaned, witnesses to unspeakable things, who had lost and left so much – was a sense of welcome, to let them know they would be safe here. Warner sets this impulse in historical and literary context.

Sanctuary is structured in three parts. The first is a dense and brilliant consideration of the history of sanctuary, its laws and taboos. "Sanctuary can be found in a temple or a chapel, a glade or a grove, a temenos or place apart, somewhere that is hallowed, sacred," Warner writes. Her treatment of sanctuary begins with ancient Greek concepts of xenoi (stranger-guests) and xenia (hospitality). In Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, the blind, exiled king stumbles into a sacred grove outside Athens. Though initially challenged, he is finally granted refuge by Theseus, who respects the inviolable tradition of sanctuary despite Oedipus's terrible history. The play underlines how sanctuary, defined by ritual rather than physical walls, can offer purification and redemption, even for those carrying deep stains of guilt. Warner returns repeatedly to Troy as a place of sanctuary and – drawing on Euripides's *Trojan Women* – its violent violation.

Turning to Hebrew and Christian traditions, Warner examines the cities of refuge described in the Book of Numbers, appointed towns where individuals guilty of accidental killing could flee for protection from vengeance until a fair trial was conducted. These biblical examples inform later Christian conceptions of sanctuary as a sacred space that physically protects the accused from violent retribution. When the knights of Henry II stepped into Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 to murder Thomas Becket, their transgression was both legal and spiritual, violating the ancient right of sanctuary and committing sacrilege by spilling blood in a consecrated place.

Warner draws these ancient ideas of refuge into contemporary focus, citing the sanctuary movement during the Vietnam War, when American pastors sheltered anti-war protesters resisting the draft. She highlights how the refugee crisis has spurred new movements, leading universities such as Stanford, Dartmouth and Penn to declare themselves places of refuge from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Warner also praises grassroots initiatives, noting churches in Italy that have opened their doors to undocumented migrants, and closer to home in Eastbourne, where the Sanctuary community centre provides support to refugees – exemplifying a modern renewal of ancient traditions of welcome and protection.

Warner's work is deeply informed by theory – she draws thoughtfully on Paul Ricoeur, Giorgio Agamben and Hannah Arendt, among others – and offers a set of frameworks for understanding the world, a code

The Observer

2025-07-20

Safe from harm

Author: Alex Preston

through which we can read our age of emergency. The pleasure of the book is following the chains of ideas Warner links together, as she riffs on associations so loose you fear she might have wandered from the path altogether, only to return to her central thesis. She leaps from high culture to low, literature to visual art, deep time to the present. In a few paragraphs alone we encounter Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Harry Potter, the contemporary novelist Benjamin Myers and the artist Richard Wentworth.

The second section explores how ideas of sanctuary have been shaped through history. Warner shows how the story of the Holy Family's exile in Egypt, fleeing Herod, created a chain of sanctuaries through time. She writes perceptively on JM Coetzee's enigmatic late novels about the childhood of Jesus, and Warner visits the Casa Santa in Loreto where Jesus's home "was transported whole from Nazareth itself to offer a new Nazareth in Italy".

Warner is one of our great chroniclers of stories, especially folk and fairy tales. An academic who is also a fine novelist, she recently published *Inventory of a Life Mislaid*, a memoir of her own early life in Egypt and her Italian mother's peripatetic existence: she knows what it is to wander. It is when *Sanctuary* shifts from its (quasi-) literal investigation of sanctuary's history and practice to the refuge in stories, such as in Ali Smith's seasonal quartet and her latest novel *Gliff*, that the book moves into a powerful new register.

Storytelling, Warner writes, provides both "conviviality" – a shared life and culture – and "prolepsis", an anticipation of the future that is at once hopeful and precautionary. A superb chapter on no man's lands – those bleak "anti-sanctuaries" found at contested borders and demilitarised zones – draws upon philosopher Alfred Korzybski's distinction between the map and territory to suggest new ways of reading landscapes.

She notes how, on old maps, the label *terra nullius* (the land of nobody) marked territory left unattributed, reflecting the ignorance and colonial arrogance of the mapmakers who rendered native inhabitants invisible, particularly in North America and Australia. Historically, no man's lands were also places to be shunned: sites of execution and punishment. Warner brings the concept vividly up to date with contemporary demilitarised zones – like those that once separated North and South Vietnam or still divide the Korean peninsula. She draws attention to the conflict in Ukraine, where no man's land has re-emerged in the drone-busy space between Russian and Ukrainian frontlines, an ominous return to trench warfare. Her alternative cartography recognises frontiers and their brutal histories, capturing the Anthropocene poignantly as "the time of the wanderer, the unhomed, the fugitive, and the aspiring immigrant, the jobseeker".

In Sicily, Warner works with Stories in Transit, a charity that gives refugees the chance both to forge their own culture and to share their experiences. She describes helping the refugees shape and deliver their stories, understanding that narrative offers both escape and redemption – for them and for her. In response to the "liquid cemetery" of the Mediterranean, she wants to "inhale another, brighter air in relation to the strangers who come from elsewhere".

Sanctuary insists throughout on the transformative power of stories. At a time when ICE agents round up migrants in American cities, and when more than 120 million people around the world are refugees or displaced, Warner's book offers a manifesto for a better way of living together. This vision, she reminds us, provides a balm "not just for the seeker, but for the host, too".

Order Sanctuary from observershop.co.uk for £19.80. Delivery charges may apply

> *Warner captures the Anthropocene as the 'time of the wanderer, the unhomed, the fugitive, the jobseeker'*

Safe from harm

Author: Alex Preston

'A sense of welcome' is the most important thing we can offer those who have been displaced. *Getty*