Refugee Tales was born out of the work of a charity, Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group. To start with the background. GDWG is a charity in Crawley that has 70 volunteer visitors who befriend and support people held in immigration detention. If you’ve ever flown out of Gatwick you may not even have realised there are two immigration removal centres on the south perimeter road. They’re built on a category B prison model and the people inside aren’t there because they’ve committed a crime and there is no judicial oversight of the process to detain them. They are held for administrative convenience and there is no time limit to the length of detention. If you’ve committed murder or you’re a terror suspect, you know the length of your sentence. But if you’ve come to the UK to seek sanctuary, you can be held indefinitely. The longest I know someone to have been detained is nine years. The indefinite nature of the incarceration has a terrible affect upon the mental health of those detained and we often visit people who are depressed, suicidal, self-harming and who have given up and have no hope.

People in detention told our visitors in whispered conversations in the visits room that they wanted their stories to be heard. They felt invisible. They felt that many people in the UK were unaware of the reality of indefinite detention. We had to think of a way of sharing the reality of their experiences but we couldn’t just pick up the phone and call a journalist for the stories to become newsworthy. People in detention didn’t want to tell their stories in the first person because they felt detention was a stigma – often they made up reasons why they disappeared from their family units (dad’s working away or even dad’s visiting a sick relative). If they were asylum seekers they had come to the UK for a reason and didn’t want their country, community or family to know where they were to keep safe. And finally, while their cases were being assessed, they didn’t want to draw attention to themselves speaking out about systemic injustice. They feared reprisal from the Home Office caseworkers working on their case. I’m not saying there would have been reprisals, but that’s what they feared.

Our experience of awareness raising at that time involved school talks, inviting local councillors, local Bishops, local MPs to visit our office and meet people who were experts by experience, and running theatre events to celebrate Refugee Week. The people who came to those were largely our supporters. The events boosted the morale of our volunteers but they didn’t spread the word. I can remember having the idea of using Chaucer’s great work, from the middle ages (1343 AD) The Canterbury Tales, as a model of journeying and sharing stories. It was a work I’d read parts of at school that embodied tales being shared in community by those from varied backgrounds – from The Knight’s Tale to The Miller’s Tale. It was the sharing of stories at that point that appealed – it felt as if this honoured the requests we were receiving from the visits room for the detention experience to be shared. And the walking would take us beyond our home patch. When the idea was conceived we saw the walking as a means of getting from A to B. We had no idea how central it would become.

Five years on, we have made four long walks with another to come in July from Brighton to Hastings. These are held in July. The first was along the North Downs, along a pilgrim route, from Dover where there was a detention centre, to Crawley near the centres at Gatwick. One walk started in St Albans with a nod to Saint Alban the saint who was good on welcoming the stranger. Another started at Runnymede as we referenced Magna Carta. Every year we have a core of full walkers – people who complete the whole route, sleeping on the floors of village halls and churches each night – and they are joined by day walkers, or people from local towns and villages who come just to attend our evening readings of the tales that are free and welcome to all. Crucially, as half of those held in detention centres aren’t removed from the UK but are released back into the community, we include people who have experienced detention among our walkers. We provide them with mattresses, sleeping bags, toiletries, water bottles, sun caps and waterproofs and sometimes walking boots too.

When people are released from detention they aren’t allowed to work. They are sometimes released with no financial support at all and ‘sofa surf’ between friends or are released to be street homeless. If people are given financial support it is £35 a week in the form of money on a card. This card can only be used in certain main supermarket outlets. So it can’t be used on public transport and it can’t, for example, be used in markets that might be cheaper than supermarket prices. It is also a public and physical manifestation of difference. People feel at best embarrassed presenting the card at the checkout of supermarket and at worst they feel humiliated. The affect of people surviving on little or no money is that they are held outside the money economy. They often stay in their rooms. They don’t have the money to travel. Refugee Tales makes people who have experienced detention visible in the landscape. We see a line of people in blue Refugee Tales tee-shirts on the horizon of the highest hills or walking the streets of London to Westminster. People are physically visible in a way they aren’t everyday hiding in their accommodation or sleeping under bridges if they are homeless. Offering our walkers train fares to come and walk with us breaks their cycle of invisibility. We found that people who had experienced detention described a feeling of relief at being taken away from the place where they were living as destitute people. When one man joined us he kept saying his face hurt, his face hurt. We worried he had toothache. It turned out he was smiling and the pain was the stretching and unusual use of his smile muscles. For some, the changes are felt in spiritual terms but this is a walk for those of all faiths and none and as in the Canterbury Tales, we fuse the spiritual and the secular.

The sense of relief at leaving the everyday existence behind became familiar to all the walkers, not just those who had experienced detention. Changing routine and plunging yourself into a communal life without the comforts of home wasn’t easy but it was a relief to leave responsibilities, possessions and routines behind. One Buddhist actor who walked with us said after her first walk that when she went home, she looked in the mirror and couldn’t believe she looked the same. She felt so different.

For people who had been in detention (and I use that phrase carefully) they were no longer ex-detainees or former-detainees, they were walkers. They were stronger than some of us and helped load up the van as well as becoming walk leaders and taking responsibility for leading the walkers. There was an equality in all of us taking on the new role of being walkers. This is common to all pilgrimages, I’m sure, and for us because people who had experienced detention were coming from destitution, from feeling marginalised in society, from experiencing race hate, from feeling invisible and held outside the culture, the equality of all living together, sleeping on the same floors, and walking together had a special power. One person who had experienced detention who we thought carefully about including on the walk because his mental health was so poor and his cocktail of medications so complicated, and because we knew he slept so badly and we didn’t know if he would have the energy to walk though lack of sleep and we didn’t want to set him up to fail. We gave him the benefit of the doubt and several days in he stopped taking his medication. We didn’t know this at the time. He stopped his cocktail of drugs because he said Refugee Tales was like medicine and he slept for the first time since fleeing Eritrea, his country of origin.

And the equality manifests in that we all learn, UK born walkers learn hugely form the inspiration of those who have walked across countries to survive. And those who tell us about their traditions and about walks in their own lands share with us that they haven’t seen a horse before or a thatched roof. I remember a man who said to me he had never walked across a bridge ‘in my county we swim across rivers’. All pilgrimages bring people together in a shared experience who have diverse lives and the impact of those meetings is rich. For us, the diverse experiences are particularly far apart. They are continents far apart. For our UK born walkers, it’s a time to look again at things that are often taken for granted. Not just the creature comforts but freedom of speech, healthcare, the rule of law, and safety and life that is not in a time of war. We make audible and mobile, people who are locked out of due process and indefinitely detained.

So our walkers who had felt held outside the culture were given a space in it through the sharing of the tales. Just to highlight how that worked…because people in detention are frequently trauma survivors and because detention is such a harsh environment where no therapeutic interventions can effectively support people, we felt we couldn’t go into detention and ask people to share their tales. That kind of sharing can trigger post traumatic stress and going back to a cell with symptoms of PTSD and being unsupported could have terrible consequences. So we worked with people who had experienced detention and been released. We invited them to meet writers in meetings in a public place with a chaperone and the meetings would often be recorded and last for a couple of hours. After the meeting we would support the person who had shared their tale daily, weekly, then monthly, to make sure the sharing did not take a negative toll. But usually those who share their tales describe the relief at being believed, the feeling of strength that the tale is going to be used for a positive reason and also a relief in handing it over to the writer who has listened.

The writers then draft the tale and show the tale to the subject of the tale. There is a process of talking through the detail to make sure no detail could make the subject of the tale unsafe. Often countries of origin and the places where people are living now are changed or disguised, dates are removed. This is all before the editorial process that you’d have with any tale. The writers read the tales in the evening events. Usually the subjects of the tales wish to be present. And the tales are then published in anthologies of tales by Comma Press. Our third anthology comes out on 23 June. And we take the writers and tales to events around the country at literature festivals. The book is taught in universities all over the world, in Brazil, Italy, Canada, the USA, Denmark and at 16 universities in the UK. Sometimes it is departments of medieval studies that look at Refugee Tales alongside their studies of Chaucer.

Finally the book is used as a tool for conversations with parliamentarians. We don’t campaign in a traditional sense of waving banners and shouting slogans but we take the books to people in parliament as gifts and talk to them about the tales also describing our experiences as visitors to those in detention. And we do find that people connect viscerally with the power of the tales in a way that they wouldn’t necessarily connect with the facts and figures of the issue. Humanising the issue through story has had extraordinary success developing cross party support for an end to indefinite detention.

So all this sounds very interesting, and you may be thinking that to come on a walk is worthy. That walking in solidarity with those in detention, in the shoes of those who have fled persecution is a focus on the tragedy and difficulty. You may think that what we are doing is necessary but that that hearing all the desperate and hopeless tales every evening is at best depressing and at worst like refugee porn. We feared all of this before our first walk though we had to give it a go. What we have found is something quite extraordinary that we didn’t predict. Every evening as well as the tales we have a host in the manner of the Canterbury Tales. This may be a journalist, actor, comedian… this year we have Niamh Cusack who is a great RSC actor and she is followed by Tim Robertson, CEO of the Anne Frank Trust and the novelist Kamila Shamsie and journalist Anita Sethi. And the tales are broken up with music by musicians of all kind – world music, jazz, folk, blues. This year we have a Syrian oud, a klezmer band, a folk duo. And after the terrible tales, we literally have to warn people now… we sit through dark tales of implied violence and terror and then two notes in after the musicians have stood up, everyone is dancing. We have congas around the church halls to steel band music. It’s bizarre and for those who don’t walk and who come from the village or town where we’ve arrived to listen, it may be unfathomable. What it is, is joy in community.

Let me take you back to the visits room and those whispered conversations. Our visitors manifest welcome, hospitality, they listen in an intense way, they offer a hand of unconditional friendship and they show acceptance. In the toxic environment of a detention centre these are radical acts. The basic values they show carry through to Refugee Tales where the listening happens on many levels. It happens between the writer and the subject of the tale, it happens in every conversation between walkers on the walk and it happens in the evening events where the tales are shared. The same values that our visitors manifest are manifested in community on the walk and the sense of community that I’m sure you have on every pilgrimage is intensified in our story telling essence. Alongside the tragedies are impossible humour, limitless hope and joy in community that carried on after the walk to our monthly day walks that we hold through the year.

Refugee Tales captures the spirit and purpose of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. Chaucer set his tale outside the shores of England and the Refugee Tales has tales set in the UK but the framing of the tales in the walk creates a borderless setting that is welcome to all. There is a textual hospitality. The Refugee Tales is both text and action. Helen Barr writes in the Journal of Medieval Worlds that it is a realization of Chaucer that makes The Canterbury Tales real with engaged ongoing participation. With Refugee Tales, the journey has not ended as we still call for an end to indefinite detention. We reach back to Chaucer’s community of fellowship and common purpose and provide hospitality to migrant narration. The social spirit and openness of Chaucer is mirrored in our embracing of diversity.

Ali Smith quotation from our website.