



Ben Rawlence

Topics

Common Reads/FYE, Global Affairs, Journalism

Travels From

United Kingdom

Bio

Ben Rawlence is the author of *City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World's Largest Refugee Camp* and *Radio Congo: Signals of Hope from Africa's Deadliest War*. Born in the UK, Ben worked as a policy advisor and speechwriter to the Liberal Democratic Party before running for office himself. His political work brought him in contact with serious human rights violations in Zanzibar and led to him join the Human Rights Watch as a researcher on Africa. During 7 years with the organization working all over the continent, he became fascinated with the Dadaab refugee camp, a place that would later become the topic of his 2016 book, *City of Thorns*. For HRW, Ben researched reports, lobbied governments, and appeared on radio and TV across the world. In 2013, Ben left his job and devoted himself full-time to writing and speaking. Most recently, Ben won the inaugural National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine's "Schmidt Awards for Excellence in Science Communications."

SPEECHES

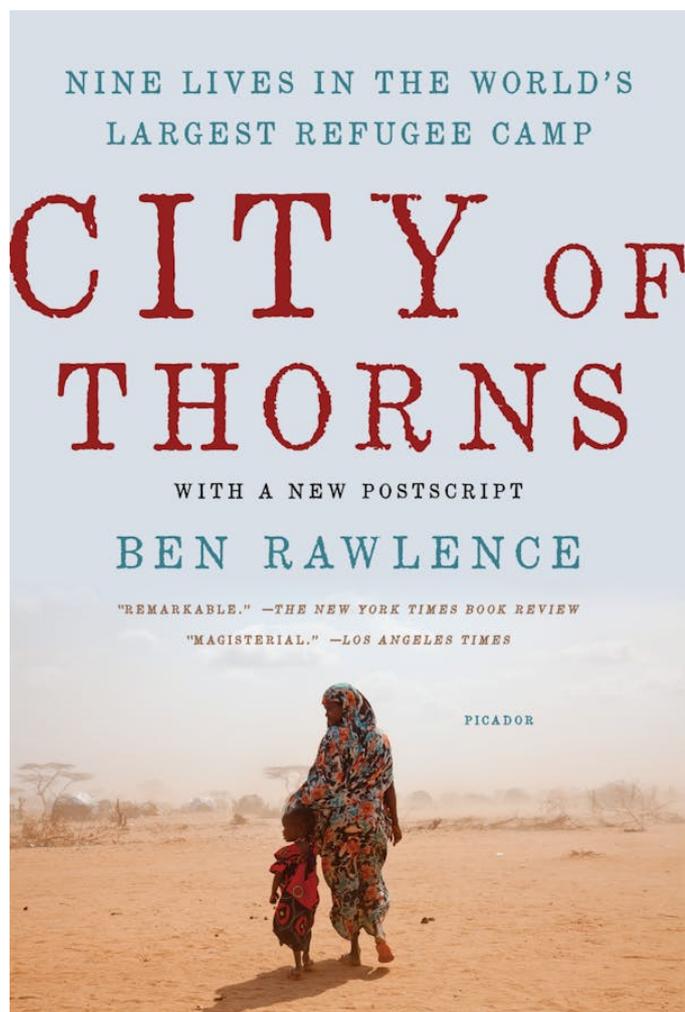
The coming storm: lessons in adaptation from the Arctic Treeline, where climate change is already history. We know that the world is changing but what to do in the face of disruption is less clear. Drawing on his tour of the latest science and up close personal view of the massive earth system changes underway, Ben can speak with authority and clarity on what this new era means for individuals, communities, businesses and institutions. He has a provocation for how to rebuild our broken relationship with the forests, and the world, that sustains us. **What to tell the kids? Parenting in a time of extinction** Parenting, like culture, is about transmission, but transmission of what? Our children are inheriting a very different world from the one bequeathed to earlier generations. The continuities of seasons, certainties, geographies are shifting. This makes what to tell the kids an urgent question that many people are asking. Ben does not have all the answers but as the founder of a new experimental liberal arts college devoted to climate change, he has wrestled with this question and can share his insights. **Nine Lives in the World's Largest Refugee Camp: what surviving in limbo can teach us all** For 4 years Ben followed nine residents of the (then) world's largest refugee camp, a tented city in the desert of 500,000 people. Surviving on hopes and prayers and little food, the life of the camp is like a world of its own making. What he learned there about how humans cope with extreme situations has profound lessons for us all. **The craft of non-fiction writing (see masterclass video)** The lines between fact and fiction are increasingly blurry. All story-telling is about story. Non-fiction writers are keenly aware of the dynamics of story because, unlike novelists, they are not able to make things up! They have learned the iron rules of narrative the hard way.

BOOKS

[City of Thorns](#) **Nine Lives in the World's Largest Refugee Camp**

Picador

Situated hundreds of miles from any other settlement, deep within the inhospitable desert of northern Kenya where only thorn bushes grow, Dadaab is a city like no other. In *City of Thorns*, Rawlence interweaves the stories of nine individuals to show what life is like in the camp, sketching the wider political forces that keep the refugees trapped.



PAPERBACK

REVIEWS: "Thank you so much for a fantastic talk on Monday night. It was very scary, as well as being incredibly interesting. That part of the world is both so unknown and so crucial. It must've been an extraordinary journey researching it and you gave us a fantastic presentation as well as an enormous amount of information."

--Baroness Rose Boycott

Praise for *City of Thorns*:

"[Rawlence] has done a remarkable job, bringing home the reality behind those statistics by telling us what life is really like inside one of those camps... Rawlence's description of the camp economy is fascinating and shocking... A masterful account. Next time someone refers derisively to a 'bunch of migrants,' get them to read this book."

? *The Sunday Times* (London)

"[A]remarkable book.... Like Dadaab itself, the story has no conclusion. It is a portrait, beautifully and movingly painted. And it is more than that. At a time when newspapers are filled with daily images of

refugees arriving in boats on Europe's shores, when politicians and governments grapple with solutions to migration and erect ever larger walls and fences, it is an important reminder that a vast majority of the world's refugees never get as far as a boat or a border of the developed world. They remain, like the inhabitants of Dadaab, in an indefinite limbo of penury and fear, unwanted and largely forgotten."

? *The New York Times Book Review*

"[An] ambitious, morally urgent new book."

- *The New York Times*

"Magisterial....We see Dadaab through an accumulation of vivid impressions....[The book] moves like a thriller."

? *Los Angeles Times*

"The most absorbing book in recent memory about life in refugee camps... Mr. Rawlence's major feat is stripping away the anonymity that so often is attached to the word "refugee" by delving deeply into the lives of nine people in the camp. By doing so, he transforms its denizens from faceless victims into three-dimensional human beings. Along the way, Dadaab emerges from the ever-present heat and dust to become much more than a refugee camp. It is a real, if very peculiar, city."

? Howard French, *The Wall Street Journal*