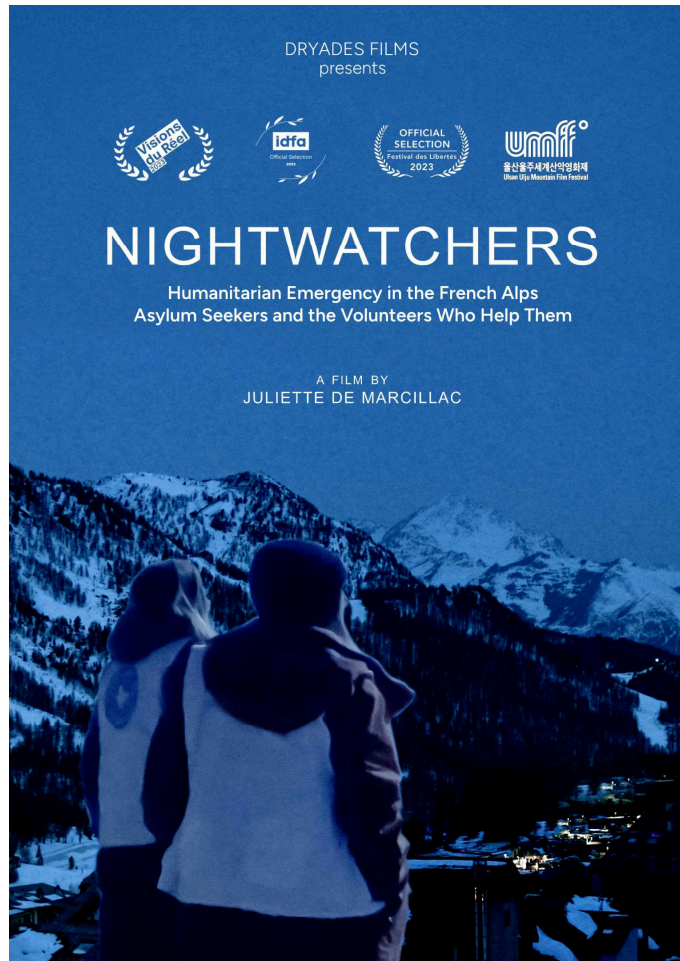




NIGHTWATCHERS



STUDY GUIDE

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Nightwatchers

Set against the backdrop of Montgenèvre, an idyllic ski resort on the French-Italian border, Nightwatchers unveils a starkly different reality hidden beneath its picturesque surface. While laws permit refugees to apply for asylum upon entering France, many are turned back to Italy by authorities without the opportunity to file an application. To continue their journey, migrants undertake increasingly perilous routes through the mountains, often risking their lives. On the French side, volunteers of all ages traverse these treacherous paths nightly, offering assistance and guiding migrants to safety further down the valley. The film immerses viewers in a single night's mission, highlighting the commitment of this invaluable network of solidarity.

Montgenèvre

Montgenèvre is a small village and ski resort located in the southeast of France, next to the Italian border. It has a population of a little more than 500 people and is at an elevation of about 1,800 meters. It is France's oldest ski resort, founded in 1907, when it was the site of the first international ski jumping competition. Larger towns located nearby include Oulx (19km away) and Briançon (11 km away).

Refugees

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people leave their homes and become refugees. These people leave for many different reasons including war, violence, or repressive governments in their home countries. UNHCR—the UN Refugee Agency—defines a refugee as, “Someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.”¹ According to UNHCR, 73 percent of all refugees come from five countries: Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan, Venezuela, and Sudan. It reports that Europe hosts just over a third of the world's refugees, which is 12.4 million people.

Asylum

Becoming a refugee typically involves seeking asylum. UNHCR explains, “When people flee their own country and seek sanctuary in another country, they apply for asylum – the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance. An asylum seeker must demonstrate that his or her fear of persecution in his or her home country is well-founded.”² Seeking asylum is generally recognized as a human right in nations around the world. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, every person has a right to seek asylum from persecution.

¹ <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>

² <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>

The Dublin Regulation

In some French border areas, the authorities send asylum-seekers back to other European Union (EU) countries, under the Dublin Regulation. This EU regulation is used to help decide which country is responsible for processing an asylum claim filed by a person who is looking for protection. In most cases, it dictates that this is the EU country that the person first arrived in. As a result, in some cases, asylum seekers who arrive in France are sent back to the EU country that they came from.

Refuges Solidaires

In 2017, the Refuges Solidaires association was created in Briançon, which is near Montgenèvre, for the purpose of helping newly-arrived refugees. On its website it states, “Considering that it is **unworthy to let men, women and children spend their first nights in France on the street**, a collective is organizing itself to meet their basic needs, the time of a necessary respite. The **association opens its doors to exiled people day and night**, all year round, to offer immediate shelter, three hot meals a day, access to hygiene and clothing, activities to create links.”³ The safehouse also provides medical care. From the safehouse, refugees typically continue on to their final destination where they intend to apply for asylum. In many cases, this is a city where they already have family members. According to recent reports, the safehouse has been overwhelmed by new arrivals in recent years, trying to fit hundreds of refugees into a facility designed to accommodate around sixty.

Doctors of the World

Doctors of the World is an international organization dedicated to health and human rights. It provides healthcare to refugees and other vulnerable populations. On its website, the organization explains its role in France, stating, “The vast majority of refugees and migrants seeking asylum in France **are not aware of their fundamental right to healthcare**. In addition, they often find it difficult to access care due to language barriers and lack of financial resources. At our health centers, they can receive the free health services to which they are entitled and in addition we provide information on French health laws and regulations. We also offer psychological support for those suffering from mental health issues such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety.”⁴

Refugees in Montgenèvre

According to some news articles, in Montgenèvre there is a marked contrast between volunteers, police, and others who are aware of the refugee presence, and vacation-goers who are oblivious

³ <https://refugessolidaires.com/>

⁴ <https://doctorsoftheworld.org/project/france/>

to the situation. For instance, one article quotes store owner Marc Ducrot, who says, "Customers don't notice anything. . . . They are on holiday, want to enjoy skiing."⁵

For those people who are aware of the refugee presence, there is disagreement over what the appropriate response is. In addition to believing that refugees should not be sent back to Italy, critics argue that when police pursue refugees, those refugees are more likely to take risks and hurt themselves. There is also tension over the actions of volunteers, with some reporting that they have been harassed.

Study Questions

1. Why are ambulances being called for the refugees, as shown in the film?
2. What are some of the risks the refugees face when travelling through the mountains?
3. What risks do the volunteers face?
4. What about the mental effects of volunteering?
5. What do you think motivates the volunteers to do what they do?
6. Why do you think some of the volunteers told one group of policemen that they were "more human"?
7. Why do you think so many of the refugees need medical care?
8. Do you agree with the statement made by one of the volunteers that trying to stop refugees only increases their chances of being injured, and does not prevent them from trying to come? Why or why not?

Additional Resources

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<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/30126/the-alps-will-not-stop-us-migrants-brave-kneedeep-snow-on-mountain-trek-into-france>
- Laury-Anne Cholez and Baptiste Soubra, "In Montgenèvre, Delighted Skiers and Invisible Migrants," Reporterre, March 16, 2024.
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<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/webdoc/141/in-briancon-migrants-and-volunteers-face-immense-pressure>
- Amanda Morrow with RFI, "Overwhelmed Migrant Shelter in Alps Accuses French State of Inaction," Radio France Internationale, August 30, 2023.
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- Elian Peltier and Eloise Stark, "Rescuing Migrants Fleeing Through the Frozen Alps," New York Times, February 22, 2018.

⁵ <https://reporterre.net/A-Montgenevre-des-skieurs-ravis-et-des-migrants-invisibles>

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- UNHCR, "Global Trends," June 12, 2025.
<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>

Contact

For inquiries, please contact:
EPF Media - info@epfmedia.com

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