

# OUR LIVES CHANGED FOREVER: Refugee Stories

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"I live with my family in a city close to the sea. Every summer we used to spend many weekends at the beach. But we never go there anymore, because last year, our lives changed forever...The war began" (Sanna, 2016, unpagged). So begins a children's book (*The Journey*) about the life of a young refugee.

Children's books about refugee children are now becoming more prevalent. This article will discuss 12 of such recently published books. Why the influx of refugees in children's literature? The statistics behind refugees are staggering. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), there are 65.6 million people around the world who have been forced to leave their homes. Among them are nearly 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18 (Figures at a Glance, 2017).

It is important for children who are refugees to see books that are written about their experiences. Readers need to see themselves in books to see that they have a place in the world (Bishop, 1992). Indeed, Hope (2008) found in her ethnographic study of refugees and literature that "first-hand experience channeled into a narrative form is the optimal medium, . . . and sharing these testimonies is an important part of the educational process" (Hope, 2008, p. 302).

For children who have not had the refugee experience, reading about refugees is critical to develop empathy and to build a picture of what other children are going through. Developing empathy in books is important so that we can increase the understanding of "the common pool of humanity" (Britton, 1993, p. viii).

Rosenblatt's (1994) Literary Transactional Theory of Reading stances, efferent (gaining information) and aesthetic (feelings and emotions) are important in developing empathy in readers also. Kidd & Costano (2013) described Theory of Mind as the way we understand our thoughts and feelings and the way we understand that others have different thoughts and feelings than our own. Kidd & Costano (2013) support the use of literary fiction to enhance the Theory of Mind and report that reading fiction increases self-reported empathy. Literary fiction is defined as "fictional works that offer commentary on larger social issues, political issues, or focus on the individual to explore some part of the human condition" (Cain, 2015, p. 69).

There is a continued effort on the part of the education system to expose students to social and emotional learning. According to Elias, et al. (1997), social and emotional competence is "the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life" (p. 2). Inclusive of this is a sense of social awareness. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2013) defines social awareness as "the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and support" (p. 10). As part of this learning, exposing students to both fiction and nonfiction texts that exemplify and encourage awareness and empathy can lead students to think beyond themselves and connect with the diverse world around them.

The below annotated bibliography focuses on picture books that speak to the impact of war on children, providing an insight for children on life as a refugee. This curated list also provides suggestions for teachers on extended lesson ideas that utilize the literature as mentor texts.

Danticat, E. (2015). *Mama's nightingale: A story of immigration and separation*. Ill. by Leslie Staub. New York: Dial.

The author's choice of a first person perspective beautifully connects the reader to this heart-wrenching story of a young girl, Saya, and her father living in America while fighting against the imprisonment of Saya's mother, an undocumented immigrant from Haiti. With empathetic influence, the story follows the impact of her mother's absence on Saya, as well as the persistent fight her father wages in advocacy for his wife's release from prison. In the end it is the power of Saya's story that appeals to the media and eventually an immigration judge that allows Mama to return home to her family.

The author's note shares the influential story of her own separation from her parents and her infatuation with having "the right papers". She also makes it aware to the reader that

over 70,000 parents of American-born children have been jailed and deported in recent years due to lack of these “papers”.

With a focus on the power of Saya writing her own story in advocacy of her mother’s release, students can use the emotional impact of this book to engage in honest and open discussions and writings on the significance of immigration reform on families in the United States.

Del Rizzo, S. (2017). *My beautiful birds*. La Vergne, TN: Ingram Publishers.

A young boy is forced to leave home to escape war and move to a refugee camp. He misses his birds until birds arrive at the refugee camp and he gets a sense of “normalcy” in his displaced life.

The author’s note talks about life as a refugee in Jordan’s Za’atari camp. This camp has close to 80,000 refugees. At the time of the printing of this book, “6.5 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes; half of those displaced are children” (Del Rizzo, 2017, unpagged).

Students could write about what they would miss most if they were displaced, especially things in nature around where they live. Is there a special animal, tree, bush, etc. that comes to mind?

Kobald, I. & Blackwood, F. (2014). *My two blankets*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

A young girl and her Aunt flee their home country in an effort to escape civil war. The girl struggles to adapt to her new and unfamiliar surroundings, especially with the “strange” language. She chooses to envelop herself in her old blanket made of her familiarities. The power of friendship opens her to the language, sounds, and experiences of her adopted country as she begins to create a new blanket filled with her new experiences.

Inspired by the friendship between the author’s daughter and a little girl named Atong, this text weaves impactful prose with symbolic imagery, allowing for the reader to connect to the struggles and fears of those immigrating to a new life in foreign countries.

Students could create their own blanket of old and new experiences.

Kuntz, D., & Shrodes, S. (2017). *Lost and found cat: The true story of Kunkush’s incredible journey*. New York: Crown.

One late summer night in 2015, Sura, with her four daughters, son, and beloved pet cat, Kunkush, flee their home in Mosul, near the Iraq and Turkey border. This true story follows the journey of this hopeful and enduring family as they are smuggled from their home through forests, mountains, and the sea to an island in Greece. Upon reaching the island, Kunkush gets loose and embarks on his own tumultuous jour-

ney. Through the help of impassioned volunteers and social media, the family’s treasured cat finds his way back into their loving arms.

The authors include a map and photographs of this family’s remarkable journey to safety, as well as photographs of the emotional reunion. The book is not only dedicated to the “tens of millions of people throughout the world who have had to flee their homes in search of a safe haven, [but also] the thousands of volunteers who came from all over the globe to help them” (Kuntz & Shrodes, 2017, unpagged).

Students can use this text to inspire research projects on the smuggling of refugees to safer countries, as well as the volunteer organizations helping these families.

Pinkney, A. D. (2014). *The red pencil*. Ill by Shane W. Evans. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Amira lives in a Sudanese village that changes drastically when the Janjaweed arrive. Forced to travel to a refugee camp, Amira is in despair until hope arrives in the form of a red pencil. The pencil transforms her life. Written in free verse poems, this is a powerful story of a young girl’s optimism in light of horrific events and the power of poetry.

Pinkney writes in the Author’s Note at the end of the book: “The Red Pencil’s illustrated poems follow one child’s journey through grief and possibility. Part novel, part sketchbook, this story celebrates the power of creativity, and the way that art can help us heal. It is intended to be a book about hope, the resilience of the human spirit in the wake of devastating circumstances, and how artistic expression can transcend the wounds of war” (Pinkney, 2014, unpagged).

Free verse poems could be written to help students deal with other difficult issues or students could write in the voices of refugees they have learned about.

Polacco, P. (2013). *The blessing cup*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Patricia Polocco shares the story of her great-grandmother Anna and her life as a Jewish child forced to leave her home near Tver in Russia. Taking with them only essential belongings, Anna’s mother insists on taking the family’s one luxury, a tea set given to her on her wedding day. The tea set is said to bring blessings of love and joy. During their journey to America, Anna’s father becomes ill and the family, seeking assistance from a town doctor, also finds shelter and warmth in his home. The family forms a deep bond with the doctor, sharing the blessings of their tea cups with him. When the family is again forced to flee their home due to the fascist regime, the doctor sacrifices a treasured object of his own for the safe travels of Anna’s family to America. In return Anna’s mother leaves her precious tea set, but one cup, to share her blessings with him.

The author depicts the journey of this one saved blessed cup, brought from Russia and passed down from generation to generation, bringing love and joy to all that take it in its care. Combined with the beautiful, detailed illustrations Polocco is known for, this story reminds the reader of the journeys and hardships our ancestors have gone through in order to provide a better life for their future families. Students could research and write about how their own families immigrated to America and discuss any family heirlooms or cultural or religious traditions that they may have brought with them.

Ruurs, M. (2016). *Stepping stones: A refugee family's journey*. Ill. by Nizar Ali Badr. Victoria, British Columbia: Orca Book Publishers.

Children's book author Margreit Ruurs was moved by a piece of art she saw on Facebook and eventually contacted the artist - Nizar Ali Badr, a Syrian artist. Together the two of them created a story about refugees, a family leaving their safe home to escape war that is told in English, translated in Arabic, and transformed with artwork done with stones by Badr. Of their journey, the book says "On we walked, but now we walked across lands free from war, free from guns and bombs, free from fear. Now we walked in hope" (Ruurs, 2016, unpagged).

The end of the book has a page of many links where readers might go to offer help to refugees, such as Doctors Without Borders ([www.doctorswithoutborders.org](http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org)) and the United Nations Refugee Agency ([www.unhcr.ca](http://www.unhcr.ca)) Sanna, F. (2016). *The journey*. New York: Flying Eye Books.

Forced to leave their home in the middle of the night, the family travels by car, wagon, and eventually by foot as they escape their war torn country. "The further we go... the more we leave behind" (Sanna, 2016, unpagged). The young girl notices the birds along the way that seem to be following them and hopes: "I hope one day, like these birds, we will find a new home. A home where we can be safe and begin our story again" (Sanna, 2016, unpagged).

In the author's note, Sanna talks about meeting many refugees and hearing their individual personal stories. "This book is a collage of all those personal stories and the incredible strength of the people within them" (Sanna, 2016, unpagged).

Students could contact local agencies and ask if refugees might come to class to talk about their experiences.

Simon, R., & Simon, T. (2015). *Oskar and the eight blessings*. Ill. by Mark Seigel. New York: Roaring Book Press.

Oskar is a young Jewish refugee escaping Nazi Germany. Sent by his father to New York City to stay with his aunt, Oskar must walk 100 blocks down Broadway to his aunt's house. Along the way, though scared, he experiences eight acts of kindness from strangers. He remembers his father's

parting words to him: "Oskar, even in bad times, people can be good. You have to look for the blessings." (Simon & Simon, 2015, unpagged).

Later in the author's note, the authors close with this thought:

"Oskar has lost everything, but from his despair he awakens to his freedom: the choice to see the good in his new world. I like to think that this orientation of optimism is the key to our survival, as individuals and as a species" (Simon & Simon, 2015, unpagged).

Students could keep track of acts of kindness they have experienced or acts of kindness they offer in one day, encouraging them to make it to at least eight.

Tan, S. (2006). *The arrival*. New York: Scholastic.

Filled with symbolism, this wordless picture book depicts the story of a man who leaves his home country, in pursuit of a better life for his family. Leaving his wife and daughter behind in a city with what is portrayed as dragon shadows roaming the streets, the father sets sail on a ship for many days and nights until he reaches the harbor of a foreign land. Tan characterizes this unfamiliar world with foreign symbols as words and numbers and alien-like creatures, machinery, and buildings illustrating the man's relationship with his new surroundings. Through his journey to find work and earn enough money to bring his family to their new home, the man meets many others who have immigrated to this unfamiliar land, sharing stories of their own emigrations to safety.

The author ends this exquisitely detailed book with the man's family arriving at their new home and his little girl giving a new arrival directions around, a now familiar to her, city.

Using the history of their own culture, students can use detailed illustrations to tell their stories.

Wild, M. (2017). *The treasure box*. Ill. by Freya Blackwood. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

Forced to leave their home, a young boy is told along the journey that the small iron box that his father is carrying contains a book about his people and that "it is rarer than rubies, more splendid than silver, greater than gold" (Wild, 2017, unpagged) thus, a treasure box. As his father dies along the journey, the young boy keeps the treasure and abandons other things he is carrying. Eventually he has to leave the box to cross the mountains, so he buries it by a special tree near a village. Years later, the boy, now a man, returns and finds the box, donating the now very old book to a library that has been built in his old reconstructed hometown.

Students could write about what one item they would bury in a treasure box if they weren't able to carry one of their possessions with them on a long journey. Where would they bury it?

Young, R. (2015). *Teacup*. Ill .by Matt Ottley. New York: Dial.

Using limited, but poignantly chosen words, the author tells a story of a boy forced to leave his home and begin an unknown journey with nothing but a bag filled with a book, a bottle, and a blanket and a teacup holding earth from “where he used to play”. The boy’s journey alone through the vast ocean is filled with uncertainty, hope, and a longing for his home, in sweet connections between the sounds he hears and his memories. At one point the author connects an incoming storm to “how things can change with a whisper”. The boy’s pilgrimage leads him to a new land where he builds a home for himself and awaits companionship.

The beauty in the linguistic prose and enchanting illustrations provides the reader with a jumping point for discussions on perseverance and embracing the uncertainty of life.

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