

THE WANDERING FACES OF WAR: CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS PORTRAYING REFUGEES



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In *How I Learned Geography*, Uri Shulevitz (2008) offers an autobiographical Picture book account of his childhood. Although the title could conjure up thoughts of a child happily learning geography as part of the school day, the reality of Shulevitz's young life shows that this could not be further from the truth. Instead, the text points to a child whose geographical knowledge was spurred on during alternate times of seclusion and wandering as a refugee, in the midst and aftermath of World War II. Shulevitz was born in Poland in 1935. Four years later, The Blitz occurred, forcing the family to flee to Turkestan, a former Soviet city located in what is now modern day Khazakstan. In stark prose, Shulevitz describes the dark realities of this period: "When war devastated the land/ Everything we had was lost, and we fled empty handed" (n.p.). An illustration shows young Uri being led by the hand to a new place, all the while looking back over his shoulder at a homeland that is no longer his. In the pages that follow, Shulevitz uses an economy of words to give readers a taste of that time; one punctuated with transitions, hunger, living in uncomfortable circumstances, and being thrust into life in a house and culture that are not his own. Although painting a very bleak picture, Shulevitz does not leave readers without hope. Instead he tells of an unexpected moment of light in the midst of darkness. One day his father comes home with a large, brightly colored map of the world, which is posted on the wall of the family's small quarters. Initially maddened that his father brought a map instead of food, young Uri begins to derive a different type of sustenance from the map. The bright colors draw him in and the geographic images begin to give him a sense of hope that, in spite of current pain, there are new places to see and a future ahead for him in the world. The map is the springboard from which he launches his own budding artistic abilities; ones that will sustain him and shape his life in the future.

In many ways, through its rich interplay of words and illustrations, *How I Learned Geography* is a quintessential refugee narrative. Shulevitz captures the experience of being at once a wanderer and one who is vitally aware of the geography and significance of place. Though set in World War II, this book gives readers a glimpse of refugee life that is both timely and timeless. The poetic language and powerful illustrations invite readers to consider both the immediate

and long-term impacts of war not only in Shulevitz's story, but also the clear linkage between war and the plight of refugees during our current era. Picture books such as this one convey important information about war and related events. More than this, these texts serve as powerful tools for seeing impactful events through very human eyes. It is one thing to consider victims of war and displaced individuals. It is quite another to see the ramifications on life trajectories through an up close and personal perspective such as the one provided in Shulevitz's book. The purpose of our work in this article is to present and probe representations of war-related refugees in the pages of 21st century Picture books, to contextualize them against the backdrop of our current world situation.

REFUGEES, WAR, AND PICTURE BOOKS

Sadly, it seems that war and its effects are not only current realities in our world, but also ongoing ones. In 2015, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2015) reported that 59.5 million people were displaced because of war. Caryl Stern, CEO and President of U. S. Funds for UNICEF notes, "A staggering 1 in 10 of the world's children – or more than 230 million – currently live in countries and areas affected by armed conflicts. Children have the right to grow up happy and safe, and should not have to fear that they will be targeted by combatants... I have seen firsthand the devastating impact that living in a conflict zone – without protection or access to water, medicine, food and school – can have on children" (UNICEF, 2015). Clearly, armed conflicts and the fear, carnage, and displacement that accompany them, are worldwide issues. An astronomical number of children spend their daily lives navigating these horrible circumstances, and even more experience war and its effects vicariously through the 24-hour news cycle.

Although issues surrounding war have frequently been addressed in children's books, many of these books have dealt with wars in the past. Recently, there has been an uptick in the number of books that address more recent armed conflicts and the displacement and need to seek asylum that accompanies them (Dolan, 2014; Dooley, Tait, and Star, 2016). The overall tone and content of many of these books have also changed, shifting from an emphasis on the seemingly exotic experiences of refugees to a more grounded look at refugees

as ordinary, everyday people, who are living in circumstances that are extraordinarily difficult (Hope, 2008).

Perhaps, children's books about war-related refugee experiences can play an important role in highlighting the lives of young children caught in the violent turmoil of war as well as by providing coping strategies for those facing exile, escape from war, or prolonged relocation. Picture books provide models for realistic, yet hopeful, children's responses (Leland, Lewison, Harste, 2013) and are vehicles for learning about the world around us while offering comfort to children during stressful times (Crawford & Roberts, 2009; Crawford & Roberts, 2017; Roberts & Crawford, 2008; Short, 2009). Given the unprecedented number of displaced people due to armed conflicts and the changing landscapes of war-related children's literature, it seems appropriate to look deeply at the messages about refugees that are conveyed in the pages of 21st century picture books, in order to explore the complex and fluid journeys of war's refugees as seen through the eyes of children.

METHODOLOGY

Recent picture books depicting refugees of war were selected and analyzed for possible patterns in their portrayal of issues related to displacement due to war. Utilizing search engines through our university libraries, including the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database, and our local public libraries, we selected recently published available picture books which met the following criteria: 1) resulted from a search using synonymous keywords that included war, armed conflict, refugees, and displaced, 2) possessed a narrative arc in either a fiction or narrative nonfiction form, not purely informational text, 3) published after the year 2000, and 4) met the definition of authentic picture books as an interdependence of words and illustrations offered by Wolfenbarger and Sipe (2008). In beginning to examine these books, we were often struck by the complexities and multilayered issues within them. Each of these books explicitly includes concepts of war or armed conflict. Although some picture books address themes of poverty, hunger, and other issues which may be the result of war, we limited the current study to picture books that portrayed explicit impacts of war and armed conflicts, rather than books focusing on political dissidents or religious refugees, although certainly these topics often intersect with war.

After procuring and examining children's books that met our search, chapter books were excluded from our analyses. We then read and reread these recent picture books (2000 to present) in order to analyze how the plight of refugees as a result of war was portrayed for children. Furthermore, we were most interested in discerning what models and messages these picture books might offer to children in terms of action and empathy.

FINDINGS: KEY THEMES IN REFUGEE PICTURE BOOKS

After reading and reviewing the identified refugee-related texts, our overall takeaway is that picture books provide an outstanding forum for young (and not so young) readers to explore both the surface and more nuanced issues that surround the refugee experience. Words and illustrations combine to present intertextual messages that plumb the depth of experience, emotion, and reality that accompany the journeys of refugees. The most prominent themes to emerge across the books were those that addressed issues related to courage, hope, identity, and the power of the human connection. These themes are highlighted below, with descriptions of touchstone texts for each category provided. However, it should be noted that issues related to war and migration are complex and a number of books addressed multiple, interwoven themes.

COURAGE IS REQUIRED TO MAKE DIFFICULT JOURNEYS.

Through both words and illustrations, many of the books conveyed not just the harsh general realities of war, but also highlighted the courage that individuals needed to muster in order to face these realities in their lives. Through these texts, war becomes more than a collective challenge. Rather, it becomes the context in which refugees must make courageous acts on a daily basis.

Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey (Ruurs, 2016) is a book that embodies the need for courage in the journey, and provides tangible evidence of one family's great courage in making this journey. In this dual language children's book featuring both Arabic and English languages, both the author and illustrator tell a powerful tale through the use of words and unique photographs of rock art produced by an exiled family burdened by their heavy loads along their journey. A native Syrian and experienced sculptor gathered these rocks to tell the painful saga. The fly pages of random rocks provide an entree into pages of these gathered rocks depicting the hard, yet hopeful, paths provided by stepping stones. Sub-themes of enduring harsh circumstances, carrying treasured possessions, and persisting despite weariness and sorrow to find a bright new future are echoed throughout this beautiful picture book. The book ends on this positive note, "The lucky ones, they call us. New memories, new hopes, new dreams. Not of war, but of peace." (n.p). It has been a long, difficult journey.

Many of the most impactful parts of this book are the peritext features, including those endpapers, the rather lengthy forward explaining how the author discovered the rock art of illustrator, Badr, and the factual extensions afterward. Seeing an opportunity to highlight the sculptor's work while raising funds for Syrian refugees, the author and illustrator collaborated to share these important experiences of the refugees of war through the proceeds of this book. Young readers will be further moved to praxis on the final pages as the book reveals many avenues to "make a difference," in-

cluding the United Nations Refugee Agency, UNICEF, Doctors without Borders, and Oxfam; avenues that allow a small share of participation in helping others to gather courage for their journeys.

Eve Bunting's (2005) *Gleam and Glow* highlights the courage required to confront the many sad, dangerous, and frightening aspects of war. "Every day we heard distant gunshots and saw smoke rise into faraway skies," relays young Viktor and his little sister Marina, as this Bosnian family are forced into exile with their mother after their father goes to fight. In this sad, eloquent story of loss, the one affirmation of life is a pair of goldfish left to them by their original owner who abandoned his home fleeing the war: "An extra day or two of life is as important to a fish as it is to us." (n.p.). Later, when Viktor's family must also leave to stay ahead of the enemy, Viktor releases the fish to their pond. After a lengthy stay in a refugee camp and a weary journey home, not only are Viktor, Marina, and mother joyfully reunited with their father, but the fish have survived and even multiplied during the war. Sylveda's rich palette of oils depicting the bleak emptiness and destruction of war and Bunting's haunting and inspiring words sit in thoughtful contrast to the colorful pond full of fish who represent the hope of endurance and life.

WAR IS A HORROR, BUT HOPE REMAINS A NECESSITY.

Although sometimes tempered for the developmental needs of the intended picture book audience, the majority of the books explored clearly communicate the horror of war. War is depicted as a force that can hurt, wound, kill, and displace. Yet, in this darkness, some ray of light is still found. The characters, though forced to deal with the realities of war, also must somehow hang on to a sense of hope in order to move forward.

The Journey, written and illustrated by Francesca Sanna (2016), provides a strong example of this. Beautiful artwork and unique, almost whimsical fonts surround the story of those forced to face the unknown as they flee to a new home. This picture book encapsulates many true stories of refugees, based on the author's interactions with two girls in an Italian refugee center. The intensity of war torn areas with depictions of barbed wire-adorned walls is mysteriously captured as readers experience the melancholy of leaving home. Readers will appreciate both the motif of migrating birds and the effective use of black in both symbolic terms and in presenting the frightening details of running, escaping and hiding through black forests and across oceans presented on multiple, full-page spreads. The loss of refugees, as seen through the eyes of a child, reverberates with lines such as, "The further we go... the more we leave behind" (n.p.). Yet, Sanna's narrative sensitively and calmly offers children solid hope of a safe haven for a new beginning.

Another example of the prevailing power and need for hope can be found in the aptly titled *Brothers in Hope* (Williams, 2005), which explores the stalwart faith and persistent hope that the 'lost boys' of the Sudan maintained in the face

of one of the most violent wars in modern times. Recognized for a Coretta Scott King Honor Award, this powerful picture book opens with a forward that acknowledges that more than 2 million people, mostly southern Sudanese, were killed in this conflict. The author worked as part of a refugee resettlement agency and founded the Lost Boys Foundation in 2001 to raise both awareness and funds by telling the story of the Lost Boys, some 30,000 southern Sudanese children (mostly under the age of ten) who were forced to traverse nearly 1,000 miles seeking refuge. The dark tans, browns, greens, with occasionally magenta backdrops, provide forceful brush strokes that are able to capture simultaneously both the moods of danger and of desolation in the journey as well as the green growth of hope for the future. The narrative is told in first person from the viewpoint of Garang, as he leads a group of about 35 boys to safety. This account does not mince words as Garang tells his story to Tom, an aide worker, including the daily pain of no food, drinking their own urine to survive, mourning those who died along the way, and reuniting with his five year old little buddy, Chuti.

Tom insists that despite the difficulty of talking about loss, Garang must tell the story of the Lost Boys: "Your story can help prevent war from creating more lost children, and you can help find a home for yourself and your brothers. Your words can move caring people to help." (n.p.). Then, Tom leaves for years, yet Garang and others help by tutoring and feeding their Sudanese brothers. As the Lost Boys continue to endure unfathomable hardships, the book closes when Garang (now 21) and Chuti, who help, tutor, and feed other lost boys, are finally reunited with Tom who offers the lost boys a hopeful home in the United States. Again, this 21st century picture book is rife with helpful peritext features, such as maps of Africa to trace their unbelievably long journey, and an afterword describing the 2000 resettlement across America of 3,800 Lost Boys, with real photographic updates.

THE TRAUMA OF WAR, DISLOCATION, LOSS, AND VIOLENCE SOMETIMES NECESSITATES RE-CENTERING ONESELF FOR THE SAKE OF PERSONAL BALANCE.

In these stories, the characters cross many types of borders; physical ones as well as emotional ones. Although leaving home and adjusting to new physical surroundings can be daunting, navigating shifts in identity that come with these border crossings can be even more difficult. In a number of books, the protagonist is forced to answer the complex questions that surround the refugee experience: Who was I before? Who am I now? Where is my real home? Where do I belong?

The struggle to wrestle with these questions is exemplified in *Alfredo Flies Home* (Argueto, 2007), in which young Alfredo and his family return to their homeland in El Salvador, after fleeing four years earlier. The story presents Alfredo's complex weave of emotions; the excitement of finally going home, the joy of reuniting with loved ones, the comfort of familiar surroundings, and finally, the disso-

nance experienced when it is time to leave once again so that the family can return to the United States. *Alfredo* must struggle with questions about where he “really” belongs, and ultimately comes to realize that he has two homes. Although now living in the United States, he is still crossing borders in his heart.

A similar theme is evident in *The Colour of Home* (Hoffman, 2003). With Littlewood’s impressionistic watercolors in many full page spreads, readers are introduced to a young Muslim refugee. Hassan, who was displaced by Somalia’s violent civil war, is given art supplies by his new teacher and uses his artwork to remember both the realistic, beautiful scenes of the African village of his childhood as well as the realistic, horrifying nightmares of his recent scary past, including scenes of Hassan hiding under his bed with bullets whizzing all around. In this picture book, Hassan’s art is therapeutic for him as he moves from his gray and sad past to his colorful new life. Mary Hoffman’s poignant narrative closes on a positive note as readers clearly understand that Hassan now recognizes the beautiful colors of his new home. He is moving between worlds.

NEW LANDSCAPES ARE UNFAMILIAR, SCARY, AND UNPREDICTABLE, BUT THE POWER OF UNIVERSAL HUMAN CONNECTIONS BRINGS A NEW FAMILIARITY.

Refugee status thrusts children into a world that is not only different from what they’ve known in the past, but also one that is unsettling, frightening, and characterized by poverty, need, and the need to make unending accommodations. The picture books we explored show that the depth of this type of trauma is undeniable. However, many of them also point to a lifeline in the midst of this trauma: the human connection. Having a special friend or building new relationships can make all the difference in the world.

This theme is clearly evident in Williams and Mohammed’s (2009), *My Name is Sangoel*. As a Sudanese refugee, eight year old Sangoel comes to America with his mother and sister with few possessions, except his Dinka name bequeathed by his father who died in the war and his grandfather before him. Sangoel’s new experiences, from the “sky boat” transportation to the cold snow to escalators reinforce his homesickness, plus the fact that no one can pronounce his name just add to his loneliness in this new and confusing place. Stock’s soft watercolor illustrations and Williams’s powerful prose allow readers to feel his isolation and sadness. Sangoel learned some English in the refugee camp before the journey. He really wants to teach his new comrades to say his name, but it feels futile. Remembering an old man’s parting advice, “Remember, you will always be a Dinka. You will be Sangoel. Even in America.” (n.p.). With a t-shirt and markers, he draws a sun and a soccer ball, showing the students to say Sun-Goal! Eureka, his identity is both celebrated and maintained. A wonderful appendix of sorts that includes concepts about the importance of cultural names and Americanized names as well as statistics and facts regarding

refugees is included in the peritext of this heartfelt book. Recent immigrants, as well as young readers from all kinds of backgrounds, will respond well to the themes of belonging, fitting in, and being yourself that resonate in this outstanding picture book.

Four Feet, Two Sandals is another text written by the Williams and Mohammed (2009) writing team, that foregrounds the power of the human connection in the refugee experience and beyond. Set in a refugee camp in Peshawar, the story tells of two Afghani girls who each want to receive clothing when a relief worker comes to provide aid. Each girl emerges from the experience possessing a single sandal. After some thought, they decide to share the sandals, with one girl wearing the shoes one day and the other wearing them the next. Their new rhythm of friendship is interrupted when it is announced that one of the girls and her mother have been approved to leave the camp and go to the United States. What will they do with the pair of shoes? Which girl should get them? Eventually, they decide that although they value the sandals, they treasure their friendship to an even greater degree. They choose to split the pair of shoes, with each girl taking one as a special reminder of their relationship and the time they have shared. This is a powerful story that juxtaposes the very real tangible and emotional needs that all humans share, and serves a clear reminder of the way that one can draw hope for the future from past and present-day relationships.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As indicated in these rich and sensitive children’s books exemplifying those displaced and wandering through our world, war is indeed its own kind of nightmarish hell, especially because war brings harsh and often irrevocable consequences to families and children. In 1951, the United Nations created the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to address the increasing number of refugees which at the time was approximately one million. In 2008, this same UN office worked to address an estimated 33 million refugees which reportedly mushroomed to almost 60 million in 2015, and which continues sadly to grow (UNHCR, 2015). Although complicated and sometimes heartbreaking, these books highlighting the courage to make difficult journeys, the hope for a better life, the question of identity, and the power of human connections offer children in today’s diverse classrooms a way to move forward into productive adulthood despite an often unimaginable and devastating past. Throughout the years, Fred Rogers continued to give many children a sense of comfort and care, especially in frightening times. In his parenting book, Rogers (2002) strongly asserted, “And if we can bring our children understanding, comfort, and hopefulness when they need this kind of support, then they are more likely to grow into adults who can find these resources within themselves later on.” (p. 11). Likewise, children’s books, such as the ones highlighted in this study, are able to bring ‘understanding, comfort, and hopefulness’ in dark, confusing times. Moreover, Wolk (2013) notes that “Given how de-

structive the twentieth century was, with wars and genocide and poverty and ecological damage, teaching caring may be the most important..." (p. 38). Therefore, read-alouds, book groups, and voluntary reading with important books about the plight of refugees are imperative (Gangi & Barowsky, 2009; Lacina, Baumi, & Taylor, 2016).

When the world news produces crises surrounding war and its cruel impacts on vulnerable children and families, children's literature stands ready to offer hope where there seems to be none. The wars and armed conflicts represented in this study are some of the most violent and heinous, yet the portrayals of vulnerable refugee children within these beautiful, sensitive picture books contain an essential element to face our futures: hope.

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