

2022 Notable Books for a Global Society Research Award Winner: Heroes among us: Refugees and Immigrants in Award-Winning Children's Literature

Jan Lacina

As a young teacher in Dallas in the mid-1990s, I loved learning from my students. They were from diverse countries around our world, such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Honduras, and Mexico. The 1995–1996 school year will forever be a year I remember because of what I learned from Sara (a pseudonym). Sara arrived midyear to my school. She was a tall first grader with beautiful curly brown hair. Sara was a refugee from Bosnia as the war was coming to an end. Because Sara was not speaking in school, and as the Bosnian language was noted on her home language survey form, my principal requested that I begin teaching her as I was the pull-out ESL teacher for grades 1–6. I began working with Sara to help her develop English language proficiency. Over the span of a few weeks, Sara began trusting me and sharing her story through art first and then verbally. As Sara began to talk, I learned that she was proficient in English and did not need ESL services. At the time, educators often made assumptions about refugees when more than one language was noted on a child's home language survey, and/or when that child was also a refugee. In this situation, assumptions were made about Sara's language ability based on her refugee status and ethnic background. As I learned more from Sara, I was able to visit with her grade-level teachers to discuss Sara's unique strengths and ways to support her.

I also learned that Sara was deeply traumatized by the Bosnian War as her father was missing and presumed dead. Her art featured big tanks and machine guns as well as bullets being fired at people as they collapsed in death. I made an appointment with the school counselor and sought services for Sara. That year, Sara progressed not only academically, but she began to heal from trauma. Despite the devastation she endured, Sara possessed hope and an internal drive to survive. She taught me so much that school year about perseverance and hope—even in the most difficult situation. Sara was one of my heroes that school year.

Not every school has a student like Sara, but schools across our world welcome new children who are faced with similar challenges, such as adapting to a new culture, language, and country of residence; yet, many children are still dealing with the trauma of war. Within the school walls, teachers can prevent further trauma by avoiding assumptions about a child's language and literacy abilities. Teachers can also provide a nurturing environment and incorporate children's literature into their classrooms that engages children in many ways—for pure reading enjoyment and to better understand others. Children's literature also functions as windows into experiences that children may never know and helps readers understand their own experience and how those experiences relate to others (Bishop, 1990). Picture books offer teachers opportunities to begin critical conversations (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007), especially during a world refugee crisis or in a time of war (Crawford & Killingsworth Roberts, 2018). Picture books should be read to children that portray perseverance and hope through the portrayal of refugee families who persevere with courage as they transition from threats of hunger and violence (Killingsworth Roberts & Crawford, 2019). Young children can be inspired by heroic characters and encouraged when they see their stories represented.

The purpose of a broader research study was to examine the refugee/immigrant protagonist within award winning children's literature; the research team was interested in learning more about the character's role in such books to support students. The research was conducted as a content analysis (Beach et al., 2009; Schreier, 2014) of award winners from 2001 to 2021. Sixty-one books from a 20-year span were

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studied. Our research questions for the study included: What is the protagonist's role in books that feature immigrant or refugees as protagonist; what type of archetype does the protagonist hold? In what way is the character portrayed—as stereotypical female roles in contrast to a male role as described by the literature. We based our work on the research work of Cherland (2008) and Gritter et al. (2017) research to better understand gendered archetypes and identities in texts. In this column I focus on the Hero archetype as it was the most represented archetype identified within the 61 books.

The Hero archetype was the most represented archetype identified in the collection of books we studied, and there are several reasons why this archetype may be more prevalent in books that feature refugees or immigrants as protagonists. The hero in a picture book often overcomes great odds to complete acts of strength, courage and/or goodness. Most of the protagonists depicted in the texts were children. They represented children who had to endure a challenge, or face an obstacle, to reach their goal; these heroes were children who were sometimes in the difficult situation of being forced to move to a new location or new country. Despite great challenges along the way, the character persevered and found hope even in the most difficult situation. These stories also provided an active plot for readers to follow. The character traits create an engaging storyline for children to read, and the active qualities of the Hero archetype trait are popular among children's books. Over the past year, I learned so much from reading children's picture books that featured refugees and immigrants as protagonists. I am also pleased to see how authors and illustrators use unique and innovative ways to engage readers within these award winning stories, such as through exquisite artwork and the crafting of language to entice readers to keep reading. What follows next is a description of award-winning books, including the ILA Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group (CLR SIG)'s Notable Books for a Global Society (NBGS) that represent the Hero archetype. I end the column with pedagogical implications and insights about how these picture books may benefit readers.

Heroes among us in Children's Literature

Heroes are found throughout the pages of award-winning children's literature, I highlight the following 2022 NBGS award-winning book first as children are currently waiting

at the U.S./Mexico border to find a home. Their voices are often lost, or ignored, by both political parties, as politicians and the media focus on the politics. *Hear My Voice/ Escucha mi voz: The Testimonies of Children Detained at the Southern Border of the United States* (Binford, 2021) is written in Spanish and in English. The book is a first-

person account of children's experiences in detention beginning in 2017—and we hear the stories of 61 child-heroes, from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Ecuador, and Mexico. This book shows courageous children as they persevere against great odds living in a detention center while separated from their parents. They must use a toilet in a public holding cell without any privacy, and they are scared and sometimes hungry. These children have so much uncertainty, anxiety, and hurt; yet they hope for a better future with

their family. The book is beautifully illustrated by 17 Latinx artists, including Caldecott Medalist and Pura Belpré Illustrator Award-winning Yuyi Morales and Pura Belpré Illustrator Award-winning Raúl the Third. This book is painful to read, but it must be read to hear the stories of these courageous children.

Another award-winning book, *The Paper Boat: A Refugee Story* (Lam, 2020) is an inspiring wordless picture book that follows the journal of a young girl and a colony of ants fleeing Vietnam. In an author interview, readers can learn more about the background and inspiration for this story: <https://www.amazon.com/vdp/c2fa053b64024175aa853a5b94d60471>. The author, Thao, was two when she fled Vietnam with her family on a homemade boat, and landed in Malaysia to stay at a refugee camp for 6 months. She then moved to Canada. Thao overcame hardship and discusses how perseverance impacted her journey as a refugee. This hardship included a harrowing journey by boat with difficult weather, predatory birds, and dehydration. Thao's parents did not talk about the journey fleeing Vietnam because of the trauma of the experience. As a child, Thao's mother would leave a bowl of sugar water out to capture the ants. On the night the Lam family left, a group of ants Thao followed led them to the boat that was to take them out of Vietnam. The author explains that she began to research about ants for her book as ants are very similar to refugees, with traits of hard work and a determination to save their family.

Lubna and Pebble (2019), written by Wendy Meddour and illustrated by Daniel Egnéus, is a 2020 NCGA award-winning

PAUSE AND PONDER

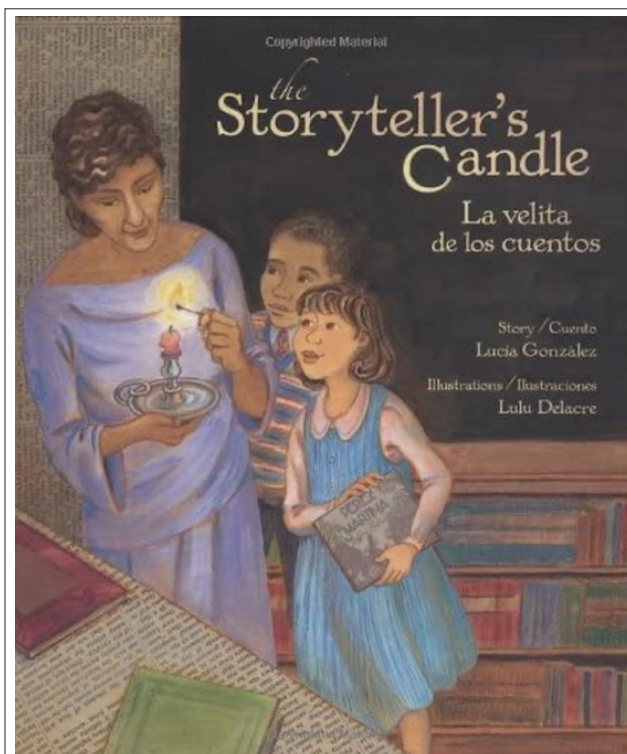
- How would you describe your classroom library?
- How do you ensure that the books in your classroom reflect your students' backgrounds and experiences?
- What award winning books do you have in your classroom library that also reflect your students' backgrounds and experiences?

picture book. Lubna is a refugee. As Lubna traveled to find a place to live, she found a pebble. While sad and scared, the pebble became Lubna's best friend. Lubna and her dad finally arrived at a World of Tents, and she held tightly to both her father's hand and her pebble. She knew they would both keep her safe. Just like any best friend, Lubna told Pebble everything about her life—such as about her brothers, her home, and about the war. When winter came, the tents began to flap, and Lubna began to worry again. A new boy soon arrived to the tents, and his name was Amir. Lubna and Amir became friends. One day, Lubna's dad let her know that they are moving as they have found a new home. After much thought, Lubna decides to give Pebble to Amir. Lubna explained how Pebble can be a friend and listen to Amir when she is no longer living in the tents. Lubna is a hero as she is courageous through hardship; she is honest and inspirational while befriending a new friend, Amir. It is through her courageous example that Amir also endures while living in a refugee encampment.

A 2022 NBGS award winner, *The People's Painter: How Ben Shahn Fought for Justice with Art* (2021) is a beautiful book written by Cynthia Levinson and illustrated by Evan Turk. Ben is a hero, and his story is told in a poetic way, with the beauty of sing-song language, upbeat tone, and exquisite illustrations. This is the biography of influential Jewish artist and activist Ben Shahn. Ben grew up in Lithuania, and he loved to draw everything in his life—but after his father was banished by the Czar to Siberia for demanding workers' rights, Ben developed an interest in seeking justice. Ben and the rest of his family immigrated to America, and as he grows, he begins to represent justice through his art. Many of his classmates bullied him because he was Jewish, yet, Ben uses his art to seek justice. Courageously, he urges the U.S. government to pass Depression-era laws to help people find food and jobs. He creates artwork to promote labor unions, voting rights, and a ban on nuclear bombs. In the 1960s, he portrayed heroes of the civil rights movement through his art and also designed anti-war images. In this beautiful picture book, an artist, immigrant, and activist is a true hero.

In the *Storyteller's Candle/La velita de los cuentos* a 2009 Pura Belpré Award winner written by Lucia Gonzalez and illustrated by Lulu Delacre (González & Delacre, 2012; See Figure 1), Hildamar and her cousin Santiago moved to New York from their native Puerto Rico on a very cold day in 1929. Hildamar and Santiago are sad about the loss of their warm home in Puerto Rico, and they are nervous about their future in New York City. However, their insecurity about their new home wanes when they meet a wonderful storyteller and librarian named Pura Belpré. When the librarian is invited to their classroom, the cousins begin

Figure 1
Cover of *the Storyteller's Candle/La Velita de los Cuentos*



Note. From *The Storyteller's Candle/La velita de los cuentos*, by Lucia Gonzalez, 2012, Children's Book Press. Text Copyright 2012 by Lucia Gonzalez and illustrations Copyright 2012 by Lulu Delacre. Reprinted with Permission.

to understand just what a library means to a community. This beautiful picture book is a tribute to Belpré and the positive impact she had on the city of New York. Hildamar and Santiago are heroes in the book as they face the challenge of moving to a new city that was very different than their home, yet they find hope and happiness. Pura Belpré is also a hero in this book. She was the first Puerto Rican to be hired by the New York Public Library; she was an advocate for the Spanish-speaking community by creating a bilingual story hour, buying Spanish language books, and developing library programs based on traditional holidays.

In the award-winning book *Sugar in Milk* (2020), written by Thrity Umrigar and illustrated by Khoa Le, a young girl is worried she will never find a place in America, and she misses her culture and home. As the girl takes a walk with her aunt through a park, the aunt tells her an old myth. That myth involves a group of refugees who arrive to a new land. The local king met them, and they were refused

their request for refuge. However, there was a language barrier. The king filled a glass with milk and pointed to it as a way of saying that the land was full and they could not accommodate the strangers. Then, the leader of the refugees dissolved sugar in the glass of milk. This provided a message to the local king: just like sugar in milk, our presence in your country will sweeten your lives. The king embraced the refugees, and welcomed them to his country. The folktale depicted in this book was a part of author Thrity Umrigar's Zoroastrian upbringing as a Parsi child in India. The refugees created a happy and peaceful life in India, and the moral to the story is to not give up when faced with such hardship; perseverance and hope can help people get through the hardest of times.

The Day War Came (2018), by Nicola Davies (See Figure 2), is a story describing the events of a refugee schoolgirl who lost her family and home to war; everything and every person she loved, she lost. She travels alone until she finds a new country and new school. At that school, she struggles to find a place to sit, until she meets a boy who becomes her friend. He is someone just like her. Nicola Davies' book is a poetic narrative with beautiful illustrations that feature a young refugee girl on a hopeful journey.

Imagine (2021), by Juan Felipe Herrera and illustrated by Lauren Castillo (see Figure 3), is a beautifully written, award-winning picture book about the author when he was very young. The book begins with Juan's experiences. Juan picked flowers and let tadpoles swim across his hands in a creek. He slept outside and learned to say good-bye to his friends each

time his family moved to a new town. Juan was a hero as he faced obstacles in his life, such as not speaking the dominant language of a new homeland, and moving to a new city. He taught himself to read and write English, and he loved to write as he walked down the street after school. When Juan grew up, he became the United States Poet Laureate. From there, Juan read his poems aloud on the steps of the Library of Congress. This is a beautifully illustrated poetic book where the author shows that dreams can come true for children, even when you have to move to a new country and learn a new language. Juan is a hero as he shows readers that they too can face an obstacle in life and also succeed, just like he did.

My Beautiful Birds (2017), by Suzanne Del Rizzo, is a 2018 NBGS award-winning book and a beautiful story of refugees during the Syrian civil war. The main protagonist, Sami, views the Syrian skyline as it is full of smoke. He follows his family and all his neighbors in a long line, as they travel to escape the bombs. Sami continues to think of his pet pigeons—and he worries whether they will be able to escape Syria. The group of refugees eventually reach a tent camp, and are safe. Sami does not forget his birds and what his family has left behind. One day a canary, a dove, and a rose finch fly into the camp. They fly around Sami and rest on his arms. These birds help Sami begin the healing process from the trauma he experienced in leaving Syria. *My Beautiful Birds* explains the ongoing refugee crisis as it affects children. The book shows the reality of the refugee camps, and how people have to adapt and carry on in life. The book also shows the struggles refugees face as they struggle to find a new place to call home.

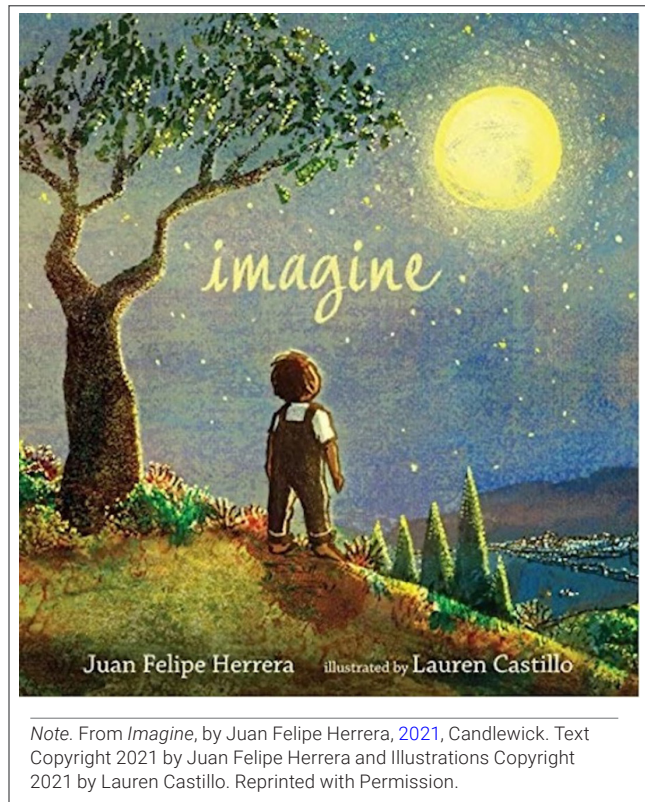
Figure 2
Cover of the *Day War Came*



Pedagogical Implications

When teachers develop text sets, which is a collection of books focused on a specific topic, teachers are supporting a comprehensive study of immigrant experiences (Cummins, 2016; Tschida & Buchanan, 2015). Text sets may include a variety of genres, such as fiction, nonfiction, poetry, as well as media. The goal of using text sets is that the text set aids in building a student's knowledge and vocabulary, and the primary goal is scaffolding students into reading and understanding more complex texts over time. Texts sets are an excellent way for teachers to weave in a study of immigrant and refugees as heroes, while including a variety of genres for children to explore. From the books described earlier in this article, readers meet diverse heroes from around the world who faced obstacles in their young lives, but most found hope and happiness through courage, hard work, and perseverance. For example, *Hear My Voice: The Testimonies of Children Detained at the Southern Border of the United States* (Binford, 2021) offers a firsthand account of immigrants' experiences today; while *Imagine* (Herrera, 2021)

Figure 3
Cover of *Imagine*



offers a memoir life story that is inspirational. Providing books with current accounts as well as stories from the past provide an opportunity to critically discuss the immigrant/refugee experience over time and to make text-to-text and text-to-world connections.

Many teachers organize text sets around a central text with additional texts that support the theme. Most importantly, reading and discussing a variety of books that portray immigrants or refugees will show diversity of the refugee and immigrant experiences, in contrast to one text representing an entire group of people. Themes that highlight the varying stories of immigrants and refugees are important (Crawford & Killingsworth Roberts, 2018; Killingsworth Roberts & Crawford, 2019). When children read texts that feature a collection of narrators, viewpoints, and settings within a wide range of picture books, students learn the many ways that individuals experience immigration (Lacina et al., 2022).

I would like to end this column by returning to my own teaching experiences in Dallas, and what I learned from Sara. Sara was a hero to me. She persevered in school in her new home country despite facing incredible strife in her life as a refugee. As a young teacher at the time, this was my

first experience learning about the traumatic experiences of war that some refugees faced, and continue to face today. Including award-winning children's books in your classroom through text sets which feature refugees and immigrants as protagonists validates students' backgrounds and experiences, and, including such books provides all children an opportunity to be inspired by heroes, just like Sara.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

Funding Information

No funding was received for this work.

Ethics Approval Statement

ILA ethics statement were followed.

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Permission is granted.

TAKE ACTION!

Text sets expose students to multiple perspectives on a topic. Novelist Chimamanda Adichie's provides a powerful TED talk about the dangers of a single story. Adichie explains how she found her authentic cultural voice and warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. Teachers should create text sets that challenge their students to consider a variety of experiences and perspectives. Texts sets provide an opportunity for students to read books that portray the diversity of the refugee and immigrant experience, in contrast to one text representing an entire group of people. To create text sets in your classroom, consider the following steps:

1. Organize text sets around a central text with additional texts that support the theme. For example, a theme could be Heroes.
2. Select a rich variety of literature, such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and film that represent heroes.
3. Consider using the award winning picture books described in this article in your text sets. Consider your students' perspective and experiences as they read and reflect on the text sets.

Data Availability Statement

ILA policies were followed.

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