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Arizpe, E. (2021) Introduction to special issue on childrens' books. *Migration Studies*, 9(2), pp. 311-316. (doi: [10.1093/migration/mnab012](https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnab012))

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# Introduction to Special Issue on Childrens' Books

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Introduction to Special Issue on Childrens' Books

## Introduction

*Where there is change*

*there is hope.*

*Where there is hope*

*there is life.* (Tan 2019, 12)

These words appear in a small book edited by The International Centre for the Picture Book in Society, *Migrations Open Hearts Open Borders* (2019) that contains some of the hundreds of images of birds and messages sent by children's book illustrators around the globe for 'Migrations', an exhibition held in Bratislava in 2017. Shaun Tan—an artist who has won the most prestigious awards in the children's literature world—writes in the introduction that these images and words can 'help sustain the will to imagine a better world, for adults and especially for children, for whom the positive inspiration of art and story can never be underestimated' (Tan 2019: 9). It seems this 'will to imagine a better world' is behind the increasing numbers of children's and Young Adult (YA) books about migration and refugees published each year, with authors and illustrators working to raise an awareness of the issue of forced displacement and support the development of a more welcoming attitude to refugees. It is surely a commendable enterprise, yet many might ask themselves how [AQ3](#) [AQ2](#) and whether these are just quixotic ideas and books can really be catalysts for change. [AQ4](#)

Philosopher and educationalist Maxine Greene argued that through releasing the imagination the arts can shift inherited perspectives and encourage a kind of thinking that allows students to have an impact on their world. It makes empathy possible because it allows access to the worlds and viewpoints of others (Greene 1995). This implies a connection between the art and story and discovering and embracing cultural diversity. In their different modes, words and images have the potential to open a space for encounters between the culture they portray and the cultural context of the reader. Through the acts of reading and viewing, we meet fictional characters with a range of experiences: in some cases, those experiences mirror our own, in others, they open windows to unfamiliar vistas. Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor of 'mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors' (1990), which she uses in the context of books for children, works well when discussing fiction about migration and refugees not only because of the way texts work as mirrors and windows but also because the experience of reading can also lead to stepping out across the threshold in order to take some form of action. Like other forms of literature and art children's and YA literature can spark change because it can be a 'vehicle for ideas that challenge the status quo and promote social justice,

environmental stewardship, and greater acceptance of difference' (Mickenberg and Philip Nel 2011: 445). It can be argued that its 'transformative energy' (Reynolds 2007: 1) may be greater than that of other literature because these often subversive ideas can be embedded in books that are easily overlooked or dismissed because they tend to be short or contain pictures or because it is believed that children and young people are not capable of reading between the lines.

The best children's literature provides different points of entry to complex topics for the least and the most experienced readers and offers multiple levels of meaning, creating space for alternative interpretations and thus appealing to a range of ages and capacities. They are able to do this through the use of multiple material and aesthetic modes. Children's and YA books are at the forefront of publishing innovations, experimenting with the use of non-traditional Western sizes and formats (triangular books or codices); paper engineering (with pop-ups and movable parts) and different materials (textured paper, cloth, transparencies). They can be written in prose, verse or a combination of them. They offer unusual combinations of words and images and even texts with no words at all. The latter ('wordless picturebooks', as they are known), are a good example of how stories seemingly intended for pre-literate young children can circumvent language barriers and welcome all readers to co-author and bring their own words to the stories that raise or deal with intense emotional experiences.

However, is still often believed that stories for children should not deal with emotionally disturbing issues because the perception that childhood should a place of innocence persists, even when millions of children around the globe are growing up having to confront serious problems, sometimes without any adult support. While adults are now perhaps more familiar with YA literature that directly addresses harrowing or dystopic themes such as terminal illness (e.g., *The Fault in our Stars* by John Green, 2012) or reality show killings (e.g. *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, 2008), it can come as a surprise that literature apparently for younger readers such as poetry and especially picturebooks also touch on injustice and atrocities, such as war, disaster, violence, abuse, environmental disaster, poverty, and hunger as well as forced displacement. Most of them tend to do so in a sensitive manner by offering alternatives that avoid ending on a note of hopelessness. Crucially, however, as Reynolds notes, they encourage readers to ask 'Why are things as they are?' (2007: 3).

Given the potential of children's and YA literature for raising questions about migration, forced displacement or refugees and thus perhaps preparing the way for change, bringing these books to the attention of adults involved in research, education, care, and activism around this topic, is a valuable undertaking. Not that these are new topics: many 'classics' of children's literature are set in notorious historical periods of forced displacement such as Nazi Germany (e.g. *The Silver Sword* by Ian Serrailier 1957; *I am David* by Anne Holm, 1963 and *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* by Judith Kerr, 1980, among many others). More recently, less well-known historical events of forced displacement are being told, such as *A Long Walk to Water* by Park (2010) set during the armed conflict in Southern Sudan in the 1980s. Another example is the story of the evacuation of children of Republican families from Spain to Mexico in 1937: the sea voyage is portrayed in *Mexique* (2017), a picturebook in verse by Ferrada and Penyas, using some of the original photographs of the 456 children who never returned to Spain or saw their parents again.

The series of reviews commissioned by *Migration Studies* brings some of these publications, with their representations of refugees in contemporary children's and YA fiction to the attention of readers of this journal. The selection of books covers a range of geographical contexts where forced displacement has occurred, from Cuba to Syria, as well as unspecified or fantastic ones, with authors and artists from eight different countries: Australia, El Salvador, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Mexico, Switzerland, and the USA. While the books represent only a very small sample of the publications on offer, they highlight an array of narrative approaches and art forms, from the word-based YA novel to the wordless picturebook. There is also scope in the extent of their didactic intent, with some clearly aiming to inform and others using more symbolic and metaphoric languages to create a space for deeper

introspection and encouraging more affective responses.

Each of the selected texts portrays different moments and circumstances in the refugee journey, with some being explicit about the reasons for characters having to leave home and country and others only hinting at them, such as *The Arrival* by Tan (2006) which uses shadowy dragon's tails to symbolize the dangers in the nameless protagonist's place of origin. The characters set out with their families or alone, often ending up traveling in the company of strangers and experiencing the anxieties of separation from families and friends, as well as fear, loneliness, loss, and grief. As they travel by foot, by car, by boat or train, they endure physical hardships that bring hunger, thirst and pain. In most of these stories, the main characters reach an apparently safe destination, however, three of them offer either more ambiguous endings or the uncompromising certainty of death. In Greder's *The Mediterranean* (2017), the death of refugees who are also nameless is part of the vicious cycle of conflict, arms-trade and forced displacement. With the exception of both *The Mediterranean* and *The Arrival*, the other reviewed books have children or young people as protagonists and focalizers, a device that allows harsh realities to be seen and interpreted through their eyes even when they themselves may not fully comprehend the situation. This strategy draws the readers in, inviting them to bear witness, not only to ask questions about why the events are happening but also to imagine what they would do and how they would feel in similar circumstances: Where would they go? How would they travel? With whom? What would they have to leave behind? What would they take with them?

While the word-based texts allow for more introspection into the character's minds and feelings, the visual affordances of the picturebooks and graphic novels provide readers of different literacy levels and languages greater accessibility, as well as space to imagine the thoughts and feelings of characters. They also offer more scope for exploring different levels of meaning through their material and aesthetic elements, for example, through unusual perspectives, visual flashbacks, or the use of different types of art media, including polymer clay. In the case of picturebooks for younger children such as Del Rizzo's *My Beloved Birds*, the darker events are portrayed through the use of these visual devices leaving it to the reader to interpret the realities they can cope with. Because picturebooks, especially wordless ones, level the playing field in collaborative reading experiences, when reading with a child, the adult needs to engage more fully in the meaning making process and in the dialogue, a participation which may create an opening for reconsidering set opinions about refugees.

However, while it is encouraging to consider the innovative ways in which authors and illustrators attempt to raise awareness and create empathy, some well-intended representations of refugees require a critical alertness because, as Nel has pointed out in his introduction to a special issue on children's literature about migration, "a work's propagation of prejudice can be both subtle and overt. Art is often ideologically ambivalent, humanizing in some ways and dehumanizing in others" (Nel 359). It is also easy for children's books fall into the trap of using plots and tropes that unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes (García-González 2017) and continue to position refugees as 'others', either distancing and exoticizing them, positioning them as passive and vulnerable people in need of 'saving' or integrating them in a way that encourages an erasure of their cultures and backgrounds.

Selecting which books to use, especially for the classroom or the library, therefore requires a careful examination of the portrayal of the experiences of refugees. In addition to considering the aesthetic features and the way they are used to convey messages about forced displacement, it is crucial to ask questions about diversity, inclusion, agency, power, privilege, and vulnerability, as well as hope. Similar care should be taken when considering how these texts are read and used with young people, as a decontextualized focus on the journey or on the arrival often means the historical and political circumstances that led to displacement in the first place are ignored and a discussion about the underlying injustice, racism, colonialism, and other issues are avoided. If the books are used merely to study refugees as a curriculum topic or to raise awareness as part of charitable activities, readers will be positioned either at an

objective distance or as ‘saviours’ (Tomsic 2018 and Deery 2019), leaving little or no space for considering the ‘ethics of care’ that is often missing from discourses that claim to promote a welcoming of cultural diversity (Dudek 2018). As well as being careful in the selection of texts, educators, and others need to go beyond using them to raise awareness about the plight of refugees and explore ways of reading them with children and young people that open difficult conversations, supported by meaningful activities based on the arts and on their own family histories which can lead to action or, as Greene puts it, ‘the reflective taking of initiatives’ (p. 177).

There are mixed views on providing and reading books about refugees with children and young people who have themselves experienced forced displacement. On one hand there needs to be an awareness of the sensitivities of reviving strong emotions or reminding them of events they may want to forget. On the other hand, reading about similar experiences can validate their own and be reassuring because they are not isolated in these experiences. Of course, it is essential that they are offered plenty of books on other topics and some that are just for fun and entertainment. However, research has found that when books on migration or refugees are read in spaces where refugee children feel supported and safe to express their opinions and share their experiences and where their response to the books can be expressed through arts-based activities, there is potential for a reflection that can help in the reconstruction of self through narratives (Arizpe, Colomer, and Martínez-Roldán 2014).

Another study that involved both new arrivals (including asylum-seekers and refugees) and locals in primary schools in Glasgow reading and responding to children’s books about forced displacement, found there were benefits for both groups. Discussion and arts-based activities helped to broaden the intercultural knowledge base of the local children and increased their understanding of the issues around this topic in an affirmative and compassionate manner. Their responses indicated empathy for the characters and a transformative urge as some of them began asking about what they could do to help refugees. On the other hand, for the new arrivals, the reading helped to reconstruct and validate their own stories and share them with others. It seems fitting to end this introduction with the words of one of the children who participated and was excited to see his experience transformed into book (X) that everyone could read:

See, I’m a refugee person, so [from the book] I got lots of information about it and what did the other refugees do and that. I haven’t had any story about it. And so it tells people that are not refugees how we have to survive to get to a new country and to be safer and happier. (cited in McAdam et al 2014: 30)

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