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Review of *Refugee* by Alan Gratz. Scholastic Press, New York 2017

Like the traumatic events that compel three refugees to keep moving until they reach a safe haven, a fast-paced narrative and plenty of cliff-hangers keep readers of Alan Gratz' most recent novel going until the end of the book. Alternating between the stories of three refugee protagonists drawn from different decades and different countries, the threads that connect them across history and geography are gradually revealed by the American author in a clear and accessible style. While the families are swept along by uncontrollable forces, when moments of crisis occur, in each story, the children suddenly find the courage and stamina to take decisions that put them in charge, even if only for that one moment, and these acts of agency have consequences for the rest of their own and others' lives. Similarly, the author seems to urge readers to act once they've arrived, feeling both shocked and relieved, at the end of their emotional vicarious journey, by presenting a separate section of the book entitled: 'What You Can Do'.

The three 'kids' (as the blurb on the dustjacket flap refers to them) are Josef, Isabel and Mahmoud, all on the verge of adolescence but forced to take on the responsibilities of adults as their families begin to fall apart due to the political situation in their countries of origin: Germany in 1938, Cuba in 1994 and Syria in 2015. The last few years have seen the publication of a number of similar novels (not to mention picturebooks), on the theme of migration that target young readers, and not just in English. In the UK, readers can access now-classic books on Jewish refugees such as *The Silver Sword* by Ian Serraillier (1956) and a growing number of authors are choosing to write about the more recent waves of refugees, including Benjamin Zephaniah, Beverley Naidoo and Berlie Doherty. Some focus on the events that force displacement, some describe the journeys, while others explore what happens upon arrival, some deal with all three. Recent titles, *The Bone Sparrow*, by Zana Fraillon (2016) and *Welcome to Nowhere* by Elizabeth Laird (2017), are set in the limbo of refugee camps, the former for Rohingyas in Australia; the latter for Syrians in Jordan.

In Gratz' book, Mahmoud's family avoids the refugee camps and attempts to get across the Mediterranean directly to Europe. Narrowly avoiding drowning, they have to hand baby Hana to strangers and realise they may never find her again. Isabel loses her best friend to a shark attack in what would have been a relatively quick crossing of 90 miles of the Atlantic had they a proper boat. As for Josef's family, they manage to leave Nazi Germany, but his father is lost to madness caused by the torture he witnessed during six months in Dachau. Gratz does not refrain from describing the torture and other violence in detail, clearly meaning to persuade readers that for these children and families, escape was really the only possible way forward.

Some will find it disproportionate to draw parallels between the Holocaust, Bashar al-Assad's war crimes and Fidel Castro's dictatorship. One could argue that from the perspective of the children involved, the loss and dangers they flee from are equally terrifying, whether it is the loss of family members or of their homes. Yet there is no doubt that the risk of death for Jews in Nazi Germany, or for a young man in contemporary Syria, was and is certainly much higher than for a young person in Fidel's Cuba. To some extent, the difference between the situations is reflected in the unexpected and harrowing ending of Josef's story. Mahmoud and Isabel do manage to reach respective havens, although the recent popularity of the far right in both Germany and the US increasingly reveal cracks in these supposed 'safe' places for anyone who is not really perceived as belonging to these societies.

The explanation of the context behind the stories found in the Author's Note at the end is an important aspect of this book which seems to be directed mainly at young readers in the US (the

population of Syrian refugees is compared to the size of certain US states, for example). The 'What you can do' section within the Note encourages readers to help refugee families by donating money to international organizations such as UNICEF. However, Gratz misses the chance to suggest readers could engage with more local and direct action or to point to steps they could take in their schools and communities, which could be as simple as learning how to say 'welcome' in other languages and putting up posters in schools or supporting local refugees or migrants (for example, from Central and South America).

One of the commonalities between the stories Gratz tells is that they all involve sea crossings and this connection is echoed by the visual image of waves and far-off mountains that recurs throughout the book. Part of Mahmoud's story also takes place on land, as the family travel from Athens to Munich, encountering violent border guards, traffickers and hostile tourists. Yet not all encounters during the refugees' journeys are negative. Gratz has taken care to depict the captain of the *St Louis*, the ship that did historically carry Jewish refugees to Cuba (and then back to Europe when they were not allowed on the island), as a decent man who treated his passengers with respect. Concerned tourists in The Bahamas bring food and drink to Isabel's boat when it is blown off course by a storm and Mahmoud's family is warmly welcomed as they cross into Austria, Germany and finally, into the home of a foster family in Munich, where the elderly lady's identity proves to be the link between all three stories.

Perhaps the most important thread running through all the literature on migration -whether for children, young people or adults - and which Gratz has woven into this novel, is the issue of visibility and the effect this has not only on refugees, but also on those who come across them in person, on the screen or on the page. This is reflected in the change of Mahmoud's thoughts and actions:

Being invisible in Syria had kept him alive. But now Mahmoud began to wonder if being invisible in Europe might be the death of him and his family. If no one saw them, no one could help them. And maybe the world needed to see what was really happening here. (214)

It was better to be visible. To stand up. To stand out [...] Mahmoud was invisible as long as he did what he was supposed to do and as long as he was invisible he was safe, and [the Hungarian soldier] was comfortable. It was time for both of those things to change. (283)

Research has found that children's literature with visual and/or mental imagery about the refugee experience increases understanding and empathy among young readers (Arizpe *et al* 2014). Gratz makes his characters visible through conjuring strong mental imagery. This visibility can thus increase awareness and compassion and lead to civil action to counter the growing nationalist-nationalist sentiments and anti-migration stances around the world. As long as *Refugee* and other books about migrants continue to make visible these disturbing stories and insist on representing individuals that stand out positively in the reader's imagination, there is hope that things can change.

Arizpe, Evelyn, Bagelman, Carly, Devlin, Alison M., Farrell, Maureen and McAdam, Julie. (2014) Visualising Intercultural Literacy: Engaging critically with diversity and migration in the classroom through an image-based approach, *Language and Intercultural Communication*. 14(3), pp. 304-321