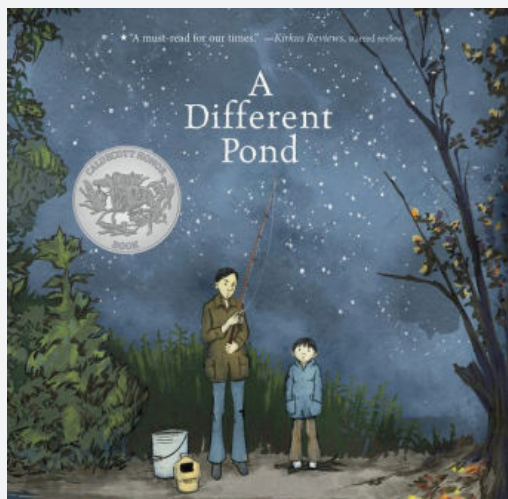


## Second Reaction: Difference as Impetus for Compassion in *A Different Pond*

Bao, Phi. *A Different Pond*. Illustrated by Thi Bui, Capstone Publishing, 2017.

*Michelle Greene*



My seven-year-old daughter, Madison, and I found *A Different Pond* to be a rich prompt for discussions about refugees. Because the story is told from the perspective of a young child, it lends timely accessibility to children who may be learning about the current worldwide refugee crisis. I appreciate that the focus of the story centers on one refugee family's daily life, normalizing their experience and inviting readers to consider ways to express compassion and humanity to those who may have different experiences or perspectives from our own. This lesson, for my daughter and me, surfaced in some unexpected ways, which I'll expand upon in this reaction piece.

Madison read the book a few times on her own before we read it aloud together. She first interjected while reading a line on the dedication page: "For my family, and for refugees everywhere" and queried, "What's a refugee?"

I wasn't expecting her to seek clarification as soon as the dedication page, yet her simple question prompted me to consider how politically laden the word *refugee* has become. Paying attention to her curiosity about the fundamental meaning of the word *refugee* helped to frame my understanding of the story through her eyes. From my adult perspective, it might have been tempting to focus on the socio-political connotations of the word; I had to pause to acknowledge to myself that the very concept of someone needing refuge cannot be assumed as innate knowledge. I attempted to frame an impromptu definition with objectivity.

“That’s a great question,” I responded. “Refugees are people who have to leave their home because of some sort of difficulty . . . sometimes there’s not enough work or there’s a war or it’s unsafe for them to stay where they live, so they have to leave their home and find *refuge* somewhere else. So, *refuge* means safety, and a *refugee* is someone who is looking for a safe place to stay.”

Madison, who is serious by nature, took a deep breath in and, as she exhaled, I watched her brow furrow, signs that she was working through understanding something new to her.

Throughout our shared reading of the story, I could sense Madison’s natural alliance with the refugee family, likely influenced by my own feelings of alliance. We began the story and abruptly stopped at a passage early on: “A kid at school said my dad’s English sounds like a thick, dirty river. But to me his English sounds like gentle rain” (Phi 4). This small passage stirred something in Madison when we read it. I saw the furrow in her brow return and with indignance in her voice, she blurted out, “That’s so mean of him to say that his language sounds dirty!” When probed to consider what the kid meant by “thick and dirty,” Madison paused, then thought, “Well, he probably meant that [the way the father used English] was hard to understand . . . like if a river is dirty, it has lots of mud in it, so it’s hard to see what’s in it. So that’s sort of like it’s hard to understand something, like maybe his English was hard to understand.”

Me: But the son thought his father’s English sounded like gentle rain . . . what do you think that means?

Madison: Well, probably that it’s soft and easy to listen to.

Me: Hmmmm . . . I wonder why the kid at school and the son heard the man’s English so differently.

Madison: I think it’s because the son loves his dad and he hears him talking every day. And the other kid probably hasn’t learned how to listen very well yet. It’s like how, at first, I couldn’t always understand my [native Spanish speaking] teacher, but now I do understand her.

Me: Ah, that makes sense. So, spending more time listening to Spanish has helped you to better understand Spanish?

Madison: Well, when my teachers and friends talk at school—we sometimes use Spanish and sometimes use English and . . . we have to say stuff in different ways to understand each other. (Greene)

Madison’s bilingual schooling experience perhaps uniquely positions her to recognize that the more time we spend in difference, the more opportunities we have to understand and be understood. My initial observations of her takeaways were ones the author might have intended for readers: Madison makes a connection between the implied language differences of the story’s characters and the ways in which she, her teacher, and her friends work to negotiate meaning making with their different languages. She remarks on the love between the boy and his father, intuiting the importance of relationship as a connective piece to compassion and understanding.

What’s more striking to me is that Madison personally applies this idea—that connection leads to understanding—to an unlikely character in the story. When she paused to express her anger at the character’s comments about English sounding like a dirty river, it prompted me

to consider the everyday comments she and other children may hear in public spaces, many of which are laced with negative connotations about immigrants and refugees. Madison has a layered response to the character in the story who ridiculed the father's English; initially, she only recognized the behavior/comment as "mean," but later added that the kid probably doesn't understand his English and "probably hasn't learned to listen very well yet." What began as outrage at the character's behavior softened as she worked to understand why he might have acted in the way he did.

It reminded me of Nobel Prize laureate and children's rights activist Kailash Satyarthi's 2015 TED Talk, "How to Make Peace? Get Angry." in which he shared:

Anger is within each of you, and I will share a secret for a few seconds: that if we are confined in the narrow shells of egos, and the circles of selfishness, then the anger will turn out to be hatred, violence, revenge, destruction. But if we are able to break the circles, then the same anger could turn into a great power. We can break the circles by using our inherent compassion and connect with the world through compassion to make this world better.

Admittedly, when I first read this passage from Satyarthi's talk, I aligned with his assertions and assumed he had a specific target audience in mind; one which consisted of people who are not engaged in fighting injustices, non-sympathizers, non-supporters, and non-advocates for people who experience marginalization, disenfranchisement, underrepresentation, and/or malalignment. In other words, I assumed the talk was *not* aimed at people like me. It didn't occur to me until I reflected on Madison's evolved reading of this small passage that the "narrow shells of egos" described by Satyarthi live in all of us; live in me.

Madison's display of compassionate reasoning offers a humbling reminder that, in our pursuits for understanding multiple perspectives, we must put effort towards understanding even, and maybe especially, unwelcoming attitudes. We must use the power behind our anger to enact our "inherent compassion" (Satyarthi) and engage in efforts to understand those with whom we disagree.

Given the increasing prominence of volatile rhetoric and incivility in current socio-political discourse, this is challenging and highly sophisticated work. But Madison's response to the passage in the story leads me to believe that it is work children are capable of doing. In this read-through, our conversation led to an effort to understand an unexpected "other"—the non-sympathizer in the story. It was as if the refugee family in the story and the readers, Madison and me, were allied together in working through the complex motivations and perspectives of someone who says or does something "mean."

In reviewing the transcript of our exchange, I saw that I employed a few common sentence starters such as: "What do you think about . . ." and "I wonder why . . ." to probe Madison's thinking. This is a fine place to start, but I'm compelled to reflect on other ways I can more deeply engage conversations with children about how to respond when they are confronted with positions that differ from their own, a skill I know I, too, need to practice and hone. I want

to acknowledge *and* model that anger is a natural and legitimate emotion to experience, while cautioning that acting out in anger is harmful and counterproductive. While this wasn't an anticipated reading response to this book, I find this reading event to be an encouraging reminder for how fluid a text can be.

After reading the book, Madison, a self-proclaimed artist, drew a picture of her favorite part of the story. She depicts the young boy asleep, dreaming of a pond with lots of fish in it, similar to the last page of the story. In her version, the boy's mouth is curved upward, indicating peacefulness, contentment. Unlike the fish in the original illustration, the fish in Madison's drawing are all different sizes and colors and they are swimming in different directions. She explained that the boy is dreaming of a pond in which there are plenty of fish—enough for everyone to catch and eat so no one is hungry. The pond is also a place where “all different kinds of fish can swim.” I think this kind of idealistic reality is possible and that it might result from the challenging work of living with and trying to understand difference.

### **Works Cited**

Greene, Madison. Personal interview. 16 June 2018.

Satyarthy, Kailash. “How to Make Peace? Get Angry.” TED Conference, Mar. 2015, British Columbia. [https://www.ted.com/talks/kailash\\_satyarthi\\_how\\_to\\_make\\_peace\\_get\\_angry](https://www.ted.com/talks/kailash_satyarthi_how_to_make_peace_get_angry) Accessed June 2018.

### **About the Author**

**Michelle C.S. Greene** is a visiting clinical assistant professor at Indiana University's School of Education in Indianapolis, IN, where she supports practicing educators and pre-service teachers in understanding the unique social and academic needs of immigrant students and English language learners. Her courses include Understanding Second Language Acquisition, Developing Second Language (Bi)Literacy, and Effective Instruction and Assessment Strategies for English Language Learners. Michelle is a mother to two young daughters, both of whom are students in a public, dual-language immersion program for Spanish and English and eagerly contribute their ideas to Second Reactions.