

Forging Truth from Facts: Trauma, Historicity and Australian Children's Picture Books

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Though they can find themselves constrained by the imagined “demands of children’s literature as sanitary, benign, and didactic” (Tribunella 102), children’s picture book authors and illustrators regularly attempt to engage with “unimaginable, unspeakable, and unrepresentable horror” (Trezise 43). Whether it be in the form of genocide, war, persecution or displacement, they tend not to shy away from the atrocities of history when searching for subject matter. However, the balancing of the sanitary with the unimaginable demands a compromise. Authors and illustrators invariably soften, perhaps even distort the horror in their efforts to be morally instructive. In their creation of a “parable of war” (MacCallum-Stewart 177) they explore the underlying humanist principles of the stories they tell, rather than historical perspectives. This approach transforms historical particularities into “universals of human experience” (Stephens 238). Trauma is sometimes directly confronted, but this is the exception rather than the rule (Kertzer, “Anxiety” 208). Kidd contends that at “least some of the children’s literature of atrocity turns away from rather than confronts the difficulties of its subject matter, opting for simplistic narratives of character empowerment adapted from self-help literature” (185). For in any battle between hope and trauma, or at least the ones played out in children’s literature, the former usually emerges triumphant. As a result, books such as the three analyzed in this article are often very successful in exploring broader issues of personal morality, but they make for dubious history. The critical and commercial success of works that adopt this approach suggests that the book buying public share this preference for morality tales over historical accuracy.

This article will explore how three teams of Australian authors and illustrators position the plight of prisoners of war (POWs) (*The Happiness Box: A Wartime Book of Hope*, 2018), Indigenous servicemen (*Alfred's War*, 2018), and refugees (*Ziba Came on a Boat*, 2007) as a series of individual traumas grounded in specific historical events. Only the first is ostensibly a work of nonfiction, though the latter two make an explicit claim to be truthful to the experience of a marginalized group. In particular, this article will focus on how the authors and illustrators, all of them skilled practitioners, have used historical events and individual trauma as a didactic opportunity. Specific historical details become a secondary consideration to generating an empathetic response from the reader. The books therefore become a barometer of contemporary attitudes and values. Trauma may find a place in the story but like the actual historical event, it is shaped, manipulated, and distorted to serve a didactic purpose.

In the Australian marketplace, the exploration of historical trauma has been aided by a cultural context that characterizes history as a “wound or scar that leaves a trace on a nation’s soul” (Twomey, par. 17). Yet as historians are only too aware, whether events “find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic . . . depends upon [their] decision to configure them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or mythos rather than another” (White 83). Children’s literature is therefore always ideological, for it makes an important contribution to the formation and maintenance of a “national soul” (Hazard 111). In the case of war in the Australian context, this ideology is inherently conservative and pervasively hopeful:

Though war is positioned as a national and personal trauma, it is also revered as a creative force that has shaped our personal and national identity. It is this distinction that allows the authors and illustrators to produce work that is overtly anti-militaristic, indeed almost pacifist in its intent, yet studiously avoids any

criticism of the soldiers themselves. War might be futile, but the sacrifice of Australian soldiers is not. (Kerby et al., "Australians" 310)

Yet any discussion of the place of trauma in Australian history must confront the widespread acceptance of war as the bedrock of national achievement and identity. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Anzac story was in a "state of terminal decline, anachronistic, patriarchal, militaristic and irrelevant" (Beaumont, "Second War" 7). Just as Australia "became less British, more multicultural, less militaristic, [and] more open to feminine influence" (Kelly par. 5), the Anzac story enjoyed a startling reinvigoration. Central to this process was a discarding of the now anachronistic beliefs about racial identity and martial capacity, which had once been central to the mythology. In their stead was an exploration of trauma, suffering, and empathy in which the soldier as a warrior par excellence was transformed into a kinder, gentler figure (Holbrook 19). Given that children's literature is an important indicator of contemporary attitudes and morals (Flothow 157), it is hardly surprising that authors and illustrators have adopted this new imagining of conflict with considerable gusto.

Though trauma as a literary and historical trope is very much in step with contemporary expectations, at least for an Australian audience, the larger question of whether any literary or artistic creation is capable of communicating an individual or group trauma is still far from settled. Caruth believes that any attempt at explaining a trauma hinders the "force of [its] affront to understanding" (154). Edkins goes even further, arguing that trauma is "beyond the possibility of communication. There is no language for it" (7). Yet even if Caruth and Edkins are unduly pessimistic, there is an ethical consideration to "engineering a monument and evoking a nightmare" (Argiris, Namdar, and Adams 48). Writing in the context of the Holocaust, which is now considered a "traumatic event for all of humankind" (Alexander 6), Theodor Adorno believed that writing poetry after Auschwitz was nothing less than "barbaric." He considered it abhorrent that an artwork or a piece of literature might give

pleasure to the viewer or that it might impose “meaning on the otherwise meaningless, of form on the formless, or of familiarity on the radically unprecedented” (Adorno, “Can One Live After Auschwitz” 34). Though he later conceded that “suffering . . . also demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids” (Adorno, “Cultural Criticism” 252) the tension between the historical and the aesthetic remains a very real one. For as Kenneth Kidd observes of the Holocaust, though it can be equally true of other traumas, “it must be spoken about but remains inaccessible: this is the necessary paradox of Holocaust writing” (182).

If the question of whether trauma can be communicated is disputed both on practical and ethical grounds, its place in children’s literature should be uncertain at best. Yet far from being dismissed as the least appropriate forum for the exploration of trauma, there are those who believe that children’s literature is in fact the most appropriate. Tribunella for one sees considerable value in what he characterizes as a “melancholic maturation,” which

both pains and protects the reader. Children’s literature of traumatic loss is used in effect as a way of inoculating children against material traumas or the painful exigencies of everyday life. To inoculate is both to expose to a disease and to protect against it. (104)

In reading a picture book neither a child nor adult reader would expect to encounter “graphic details of mass tragedies and wanton violence” or to confront the “clash of ideologies and the complex national and global problems that trigger these conflicts.” Yet the authors and illustrators of children’s picture books are increasingly speaking to both adults and children “separately or together, in words and images that not only delight but shock, provoke, and, perhaps, enlighten” (Cech 198). In exploring the parameters of this enlightenment Cech recognizes the value of including an opportunity for readers of picture books to grapple with more complex issues:

What we may well ask is whether or not these books matter, or will matter, to our own lives and to our children's. If we cannot protect our children from a violent world, perhaps we can at least equip them with the political insight and the moral courage to recognize and to act to change some of these conditions. (Cech 206)

In addition to the specific value of a literary exploration of trauma, these picture books offer a host of potential benefits for young children ranging from the creation of a framework for building empathy, tolerance, and friendships, reinforcing social-emotional wellbeing, problem-solving, and the acquisition of conflict resolution skills (Kemple). Yet as Avery argues it is unrealistic to demand that picture books also meet exacting standards of historical scholarship; they serve a different purpose and cater to a different demographic. Significantly, the "commitment to depicting trauma apparently exists in an inverse ratio to [the] willingness to probe the historical details that directly contribute to the trauma" (Avery 209). This reticence to provide specific historical context often exists in tandem with the promise that trauma can be overcome (Kertzer, "Anxiety" 208). Yet across children's literature generally, fiction is often "specifically identified as telling the truth" (MacCallum-Stewart 178). People use this "truth" to construct narratives by which they can make sense of their lives but they "do not exist in a vacuum." Instead, they are "shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives" (Webster and Mertova 2). For example, Avery (95) contends that picture books reveal what "parents and teachers desired for children . . . and the faults they sought to correct." Children's picture books potentially have a much wider reach than the work of academic historians and are therefore able to make a significant and often unchallenged contribution to social and political discourse. The hand that rocks the cradle may not rule the world, but it can shape the nascent views of those who eventually will.

The Happiness Box: A Wartime Book of Hope—Very Unwarlike Warriors

The Happiness Box: A Wartime Book of Hope (Greenwood and McLean) is a nonfiction work that documents the true story of Sergeant “Griff” Griffin, an Australian POW who wrote a children’s picture book in 1942 while he was a prisoner of the Japanese. He intended to offer it as a Christmas gift to the children incarcerated in a nearby camp “to chase away fear and give [them] hope.” It contained what he believed were “secrets to happiness” such as friendship, kindness, compassion, generosity, loyalty, faith, courage, and hard work. Mark Greenwood tells the story of Griffin’s capture, his decision to write the book, and the risks that he took when he hid it from the Japanese when they attempted to confiscate it. They believed it contained secret messages as one of the characters (a monkey) was named Winston, which the Japanese believed was somehow linked to the then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. However, as Greenwood explains, the prisoners managed to bury it and return it to Griffin at the end of the war. In 1990 Griffin donated it to the State Library of New South Wales. The book subsequently toured Australia with other iconic cultural artifacts as part of the 2005–7 national exhibition tour of the National Treasures from Australia’s great libraries.

The choice of POWs as a topic for a children’s picture book shows just how malleable the mythology of war continues to be. In contrast to the First World War, defeat or surrender became two of the dominant experiences of Australians during the Second World War (Beaumont “Anzac Legend”; Nelson). Over 22,000 Australians became prisoners of war of the Japanese, most of them at the capitulation of Singapore in February 1942. Before being liberated in 1945, 8,031 servicemen and women had died in captivity, over one-quarter of all Australian combat related deaths. Their suffering and mistreatment did not immediately find a place in the Anzac mythology due to an ambivalence over their status as defeated soldiers held captive in appalling squalor by an enemy long demeaned as racially inferior (Twomey,

“Prisoners”). In recent years, however, there has been an increased focus on the suffering of the POWs, one which aligns with “shifting perceptions of the meaning of trauma . . . and the rise to cultural prominence of the traumatized individual coinciding exactly with the reinvigoration of war memories in Australia” (Twomey, “Prisoners” 325). This sense of victimhood makes the story both intensely personal and broadly universal because we can all experience suffering and through that “shared sense of pain, we become one” (Twomey, par. 19). Where war was previously seen as a great unifier, it is now trauma that plays that role. Unlike the strict parameters imposed by nationality, trauma recognizes no boundaries.

Australian picture books dealing with war generally follow one of three paths—ignore the enemy (Kerby et al., *Voices from the Trenches*) mention him in a cursory manner bereft of judgment or analysis (Everett and McGuire, *The House That Was Built in a Day: Anzac Cottage*), or portray him as a fellow sufferer of trauma (Jorgensen and Harrison-Lever, *In Flanders Field*). As Greenwood and McLean explore the barbaric treatment of Australian POWs by the Japanese during the Second World War they have little choice other than to identify, however reluctantly, the Japanese as the perpetrators. They could not be ignored or portrayed as fellow victims of war or trauma. To mitigate the potential ramifications of this identification, they adopt an approach that is not governed by the same rules that frame the work of a historian. For Greenwood argues that he is driven by a desire to blend “history and story to create picture books with resonance,” ones that are both “meaningful and important” (Cwikel para. 6), an approach that also pervades McLean’s artwork. This blending of history and story does not, however, lend itself to historical accuracy.

Though the opening two pages of *The Happiness Box*, which deal with the fall of Singapore, contain images of multiple Japanese soldiers, vehicles, and flags, the word “Japanese” does not intrude on the story until the penultimate page. Even then, the reference is to the Japanese surrender, and though their role in the suffering of Australian prisoners is

implied, it is never explicitly stated. This approach is problematic. Writing about the literature of the Holocaust, Kertzer identified a similarly “well-intentioned impulse to construct an unambiguous hopeful lesson” (“My Mother’s Voice” 245). This approach shields both the authors and children “from having to deal with many troubling issues” (Sokoloff 177). Being intentionally vague about the cause of the prisoners’ suffering and those who caused it creates a more tolerant message. Indeed, the page that includes mention of cholera and starvation is positioned above an overview image of fifty prisoners and their guards, thereby avoiding individual identification or association with the perpetrators.

However, the book is certainly not devoid of detail. In describing the conditions in the camp, Greenwood acknowledges that “disease flourished. Medical supplies dwindled. Hardship lurked in every corner of the overcrowded barracks.” In contrast, however, the following page includes images of the prisoners playing football and staging concerts. Neither page includes mention of the Japanese. Indeed, other than the initial rounding up of the soldiers and the later assessment of the book by a Japanese officer and two of his aides, no image includes a depiction of an identifiable, individual Japanese soldier. When there is heroism and endurance, Greenwood personalizes it in both word and image. Suffering and barbarism, however, are strangely disembodied as the narrative is used to “soften the depiction of trauma and thereby negate the likelihood of secondary traumatization” (Kertzer “Anxiety” 207). For example, the description of women and children being herded through the iron gates of Changi Prison is softened by Griff yelling to them “Keep your chin up” as he marched past to his own uncertain future. This sense of disembodiment is emphasized in the illustration that depicts the khaki clad prisoners marching into captivity in the foreground with the women and children in colorful clothes in the background entering the civilian prison. The two groups are separated by the guards, who stand nonchalantly with bayonets fixed. The visual

separation of the prisoners from the normalcy of civilian life is a poignant, though understated comment on what both groups are about to endure.

Greenwood and McLean, like all authors and illustrators, have made compromises. A different series of choices would merely have raised different issues. Had Greenwood declined to soften his narrative and instead chosen to include an unstinting exploration of the horror of imprisonment at the hands of the Japanese, this would not necessarily have ensured greater historical accuracy anymore than it would be inherently more appropriate. It might well have served only to overwhelm the reader's sensibility, thereby becoming a sensationalist device in its own right by amplifying the outrage it otherwise seeks to criticize (Rhoden 5). A confrontation with trauma is not always, in and of itself, the only, let alone the best approach. Kidd argues that "Denial and suppression may be problematic but are not always necessarily so, and coming to terms with trauma nearly always involves a mix of acknowledgement and denial, remembrance and forgetting" (184). Horror can be a suspect literary device, one that merely represents the flip side of the 'they lived happily ever after' approach:

The coinage has been worn so thin that its value seems only marginally greater than "Glory", "Sacrifice" or "Pro Patria", which "horror" condemns as counterfeit. The phrase "horror of war" has become so automatic a contention that it conveys none of the horror it is meant to express. (Dyer 27)

The Happiness Box ends with a celebration of survival, both of Griff and the book that he helped to create: "After the liberation, Griff's mates . . . dug up a box. Inside was a handmade book. The print was smudged, the colour had faded, but *The Happiness Box* had survived." The final image is of a peacetime audience looking at the book alongside two iconic items—the bushranger Ned Kelly's armour and the cricketer Sir Donald Bradman's

blazer, all protected in glass cabinets. Greenwood assures us that “now everyone can discover the secrets The Happiness Box contains.”

***Alfred's War*—Australians by Blood and Service**

The compromises demanded of authors and illustrators when dealing with historical trauma are significant. Too overt an identification of the perpetrators of atrocities, for example, risks demonizing specific national, ethnic, racial, or religious groups. Conscious of the need to create morality tales with broad appeal, authors and illustrators often unmoor traumas from their specific historical context. Human agency, at least when it is the cause of suffering, is thereby muted or even absent. Universal failings in human nature become a literary scapegoat, one that implicates everyone and no one. No matter how well intentioned, it can leave the victims at risk of being written out of the story of their own trauma. This diminishing of the actual historical event is then often exacerbated by a superficial engagement with the experience of trauma. It must be sanitized and made safe, even if it has pretensions to being part of a revisionist approach. For example, *Alfred's War* (Bin Salleh and Fry) explores the experience of an Indigenous serviceman during the First World War. Alfred is an Aboriginal itinerant worker in pre-1914 Australia who “lived outside,” both literally and metaphorically. At night he camps on the “outskirts of town [as] there were many places Aboriginal people weren't allowed to go,” but this is only one example of a life lived on the periphery of mainstream society. When war breaks out in 1914 Alfred enlists and sails “off with thousands of other soldiers to fight across the sea.” Bin Salleh and Fry do not explore Alfred's experience “across the sea” and instead the text moves almost immediately to his return home after being wounded. Traumatized by his war service and grieving for his lost friends, he is again a marginalized figure. On Anzac Day he unobtrusively stands at the rear of the mourners gathered in the nearest town; his outsider status is reinforced by the ephemeral nature of this engagement.

Alfred's War is, in effect, an unofficial companion piece to the now iconic *And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda* (Bogle and Whatley), which prior to its release as a children's picture book in 2015 was a ballad acknowledged as "one of the greatest Anzac songs ever written" (Keane, par. 2). Both begin in rural Australia, where the protagonists enlist, serve overseas, are marked horribly by the experience, and then return to an Australia that is cognizant neither of the nature of war or their responsibilities to those who have fought. Bogle's protagonist is also an itinerant rural worker, but unlike Alfred he "lives the free life of the rover." Bogle's portrayal of the freedom of rural living in pre-war Australia, at least for white Australians, is a less than subtle use of the familiar image of the itinerant rural worker, who with the bushman, is the "presiding deity" and "noble frontiersman" of Australian literature (Ward 223; Bennett 158). Bin Salleh also calls upon these literary constructs which have "largely remained static in the Australian imagination" (Anderson and Trembath 139). Alfred, "always with his hat on, his billy tied to his swag and holes in the soles of his shoes," walks "from town to town looking for work":

It is a powerful image not because it disrupts our national mythology but because it extends it to include an otherwise marginalised character. Alfred is not a threatening "other." He is appealing, unthreatening and his later suffering stirs our compassion because we see ourselves in his journey, and perhaps our complicity. (Barton 179)

Bogle's unnamed soldier enlists against the backdrop of a population "so animated by jingoism and the promise of national glory that they send their young men to war amidst cheers and flag-waving" (Kerby et al., "A War Imagined" 205). Alfred merely writes to his family and informs them that he "has signed up for adventure and travel." Bin Salleh thereby separates him from the actual prosecution of the war. Any acknowledgment of individual agency would have been at the expense of his victimhood, one grounded in the dispossession

of his people by a British invader. Yet in adopting what might be termed a white Australian construct, Bin Salleh and Fry sacrifice something of the resonance the book might have enjoyed as a distinctly Indigenous story. Native survivance stories, as Vizenor observes, are “renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry” (vii). Far from renouncing the dominant white Australian literary framework, *Alfred’s War* mimics it, thereby diluting its potential to disrupt it. Alfred is a victim, a tragic figure traumatized in war and in peace. The reader is reassured, however, by the embrace of a framework widely linked to national identity and achievement. It is a better world now, or so the reader can believe, and though Alfred did not live to see it, his suffering is now part of our history.

In direct contrast to earlier representations of the Australian soldier, what Alfred does is not as important as what is done to him. Bogle also adopts this approach but his protagonist does not begin life as a victim, for he is not a member of a disenfranchised group. His war trauma gives him a place of honor in the national mythology rather than leaving him an outsider seeking a belated inclusion. Bogle’s soldiers are indeed “butchered like lambs at the slaughter” in a “mad world of blood, death and fire.” His protagonist does return home crippled and disillusioned to the point that in old age he laments the lack of understanding of this “long forgotten war” and its commemoration on April 25 each year. This “heresy” (Kerby et al. “A War Imagined” 205), however, is permitted because it conforms to the modern incarnation of the mythology that posits that the rank and file who fought and suffered were not “larger-than-life hero[es] going into battle.” Instead, they are very human survivors left “reflecting on the meaning of it all” (Rickard 71). Like noted historian Bill Gammage, with whom he became good friends, Bogle abandoned “grand, national, identity-building narratives, or those relating military strategies, in favour of human stories in which one is encouraged, perhaps unusually, to consider the role of the soldier as victim” (Walsh 243). By adopting this approach for an Indigenous soldier, however, Alfred is rendered a

victim before, during, and after the war. The opportunity for any act of agency or evidence of empowerment is thereby surrendered. His narrative can only be understood within the parameters of a mythology that for much of the last century ignored him.

Though Alfred is cast as a victim in both war and peace, the cause of his suffering is obscure. The treatment of Indigenous Australians is only hinted at, while Alfred's experience in battle is covered in one double page image of the Western Front with silhouettes of three aircraft and a tank; notably there is no attempt to include any text or even a single soldier. Trauma is explored, though in so gentle and restrained a manner that it loses much of its power. Alfred returns home physically whole with only a "gammy leg" to act as a physical reminder of war. His greatest wound is psychological: "Every so often, Alfred could hear the never-ending gunfire in his head and the whispers of young men praying. On those days, he curled into a ball and slept in the shadows." Again though, there is no mention of an enemy, nor even where the battles that so traumatized him were fought. The ostracism of Alfred in peacetime is an additional trauma, though it too is generalized. The focus remains firmly on the individual. When suffering from flashbacks, the accepted sign of trauma in the public mind, Alfred enters "the world of shadows." There he remains until he hears the lament of the bugle on Anzac Day "and then he quietly joined the people gathered in the morning light." Though the point is not made explicitly, Alfred has been denied the succour of mateship, the central pillar of the Anzac mythology. Yet for this brief shining moment, that changes. Alfred is now part of the story. Hope emerges into the sunlight with Alfred as its companion, if only momentarily.

There are difficulties in exploring Indigenous service beyond the obvious ambiguity of linking war, which is by its nature destructive of people, landscape, and institutions, with the birth of a nation. Indigenous soldiers served as members of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in defense of an empire and a nation that at that time did not recognize them as citizens

and was even then engaged in dispossessing them of their land (Kerby et al., ‘War Memorials’). Yet any attempt to link the Indigenous struggle against European settlement, which is now usually referred to as the Australian frontier wars (1788–1934), and overseas military service after Federation in 1901 is, in Padraic Gibson’s view, “fundamentally mistaken . . . [as] there is a real danger of the proud tradition of Aboriginal resistance to British invasion being used to bolster the militaristic, nationalist ideology being carefully cultivated through the ANZAC centenary” (par. 6). Other scholars argue that the study of a “cohesive historical narrative in which both the frontier wars and Gallipoli feature as key moments in Australian history can create new and constructive understandings of our past” (Bailey and Brawley 33). Both views warrant consideration, though it is the latter one that informs *Alfred’s War*.

Though the decision to seek inclusion in the national mythology for their protagonist rather than mounting an outright challenge is an understandable approach, it serves to weaken the potential impact of the narrative. A reader might assume that Alfred’s plight was an oversight rather than reflecting deeply entrenched views about race. For Bin Salleh notes that though “Alfred had fought in the Great War . . . his bravery was not a part of the nation’s remembering. He was one of the forgotten soldiers,” but who forgo him and why is a question not explored. In reality, he was not forgotten, he was ignored, which is hardly the sin of omission Bin Salleh describes. As other Australian writers and political commentators have found, the pressure to accept the war mythology can be intense. It is not surprising that *Alfred’s War* concludes with the restrained observation that “it would take years” before Indigenous servicemen were “acknowledged and valued.” This reassurance strips Alfred’s story of much of its contemporary relevance. In addition, Alfred’s trauma is softened, perhaps diluted, by the author and illustrator’s efforts to show that he is an Australian by blood, as a descendant of the original Australians, by the rights of citizenship that service should have

conferred, and by qualities of character. Alfred is not a threatening “other.” He is Australian by birthright, values, and an endured trauma. It was *his* war, though, which author and illustrator explored. The wider context is purely decorative.

For all its neat sidestepping of controversy, Bin Salleh and Fry’s book does play its part in challenging the “great silence,” which has seen Indigenous and non-Indigenous history dealing with issues such as invasion and massacres ignored or forgotten (Stanner 1). Stanner describes this approach as one which through “habit and over time [has turned] into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale” (1). Yet one suspects that a school age reader might well consider the treatment of Indigenous Australians to be something akin to schoolyard bullying rather than an assault on a people that many consider genocide. Indeed, some of the errors in minutiae in *Alfred’s War*, which might otherwise escape censure, are in fact indicative of bigger issues. Fry’s artwork, which was rightly complimented for its delicate, dreamlike quality, is clearly infused with a Vietnam War sensibility in terms of uniform, most notably the American style helmets and jungle greens. This construct is a literary imagining shaped by other cultural artifacts quite separate from the experience of Indigenous Australians, or indeed, the events themselves. Yet this does not detract from Bin Salleh and Fry’s efforts to engender compassion and empathy. The very familiarity of the story makes it seem authentic because it conforms to a preexisting world view and ends in the survival of its protagonist and a postscript that reassures the reader that wars might be futile, but the courage and resilience of people such as Alfred always has meaning.

Ziba Came on a Boat - Australians Not by Blood but by Character

In the years leading up to and during the centenary of the First World War there were so many releases of war themed picture books in Australia that one reviewer described it as a

‘torrent’ (Lawn, par. 1). Though not quite a torrent, children’s picture books dealing with refugees are nevertheless also part of what is clearly a burgeoning genre (Hope). Those published in Australia include *My Two Blankets* (Kobald and Blackwood), *Ships in the Field* (Gervay and Pignataro), *My Dog* (Heffernan and McLean), *Dancing the Boom-Cha-Cha Boogie* (Oliver), *A Safe Place to Live* (Walker), *The Treasure Box* (Wild and Blackwood), *Home and Away* (Marsden and Ottley), *Refugees* (Miller), and *Teacup* (Young and Ottley). Each conforms to the pattern established across the genre and the framework adopted by authors and illustrators dealing with the First World War—a celebration of the innate qualities of character in the face of traumatic experiences not of the individual’s making. As is the case with the patterns in the broader literature dealing with refugees, they also advocate for a shift in focus, one that emphasizes resilience, strength, and coping abilities in order to promote a more balanced, holistic view (Bath; Hart; Pieloch et al.) Moore and Begoray characterize this approach as the harnessing of survivorship, in contrast to the portrayal of refugees as victims who are unable or unwilling to exercise agency (175). This has the advantage of being a familiar construct:

By positioning refugees as the victims of personal, ethnic, or national traumas who are compelled by circumstance to display courage and resilience, they offer readers a familiar narrative. These new arrivals are Australian, not yet by blood, but by the qualities of character. They are presented as different in the peripherals, but not the essentials. (Kerby et al., “Australians” 317)

The focus on resilience avoids a patronizing pity or destructive self-pity (Hope), a reminder that the books are also intended to be read by refugees themselves.

An excellent example of this approach is Liz Lofthouse and Robert Ingpen’s book *Ziba Came on a Boat*, which is the story of a young Afghan girl and her mother’s escape

from the Middle East to Perth in Western Australia. The book is framed by a three act structure—home life disrupted by war, the flight to freedom, and the arrival and adaptation to a new life. Like *Alfred's War* the narrative moves the protagonist from peace to war before returning the now traumatized survivor back to peace, though it is a less innocent world now that it has been touched, however gently, by trauma. Both texts accept as an article of faith that the world becomes increasingly dangerous the further one is from Australia. Yet it is this familiarity that allows the absence of contextual detail to pass almost unnoticed. Both the publisher and reviewers celebrate the book's literal accuracy and make much of its status as a "true" story. The reality is, however, somewhat different; it is a compilation of a number of stories that Afghan refugees shared with the author. The variety of this source material contributes to its emotive impact just as it detracts from its historical credentials. The portrayal of Ziba's life before she was forced to flee to Australia is a case in point. It has a certain lightness about it, perhaps in an effort to characterize violence as an anomaly. The reader is thereby encouraged to see Ziba's life as a mix of the familiar and the unthreateningly exotic. These include Ziba reading her schoolbooks and helping to set the dinner table balanced against those that are more culturally specific, such as carrying water jugs back to a mud-brick home, or "help[ing] her aunties prepare the flatbread cooked in the tandur, and tast[ing] the cool, smooth texture of the goat's milk yoghurt her mother made." The reader is thereby reassured that the arrival of refugees will not be injurious to Australian values. There is some disconnect, however, between text and image. In contrast to Ziba's idealized home life as it is constructed by the text, in Ingpen's "beautiful paintings, the visual mood is consistently dismal, coloring the homeland grim throughout" ("Ziba Came"). The "incongruity" between Ingpen's "haunting illustrations" ("Ziba Came") and Lofthouse's text suggests that at least in this case, trauma is more comfortably explored through visual cues rather than the written word.

The unevenness in what is otherwise a fine book is more than a matter of the balance between word and image; it is also an issue of engagement with the events that created the trauma. The flight to freedom, the central event of the book, is driven only by implied threats of violence. Disembodied “angry voices” and “gunfire” send Ziba and her mother on a desperate quest for “Azadi” (freedom). If fear is the refugees’ constant companion, for the reader it is hope. In the refugee boat Ziba “shivered, and huddled closer to her mother in the crowded hull. Her mother’s eyes were full of hope and her lullaby sweet as honey.” Ziba draws comfort from her memories of home, as do the readers, when “she sat with her father, playing with the doll he had given her.” This nostalgia again serves to emphasize the trauma of displacement, yet it is always balanced or softened by the reassurance that the journey will end with Ziba and her mother reaching safety. For in spite of the many qualities of the book, author and illustrator balk at the final moment by opting for a simplistic denouement, one grounded in notions of character empowerment and hope. For in this new land, Ziba “would be free to learn and laugh, and dance again.” U. C. Knoepfelmacher would characterize this as survivorship fantasy. As Jane Yolen observed in the afterword to her Holocaust novel *Briar Rose*, “Happy-ever-after is a fairy tale notion, not history” (241). In reality, Ziba’s escape to freedom and safety is far from being representative of the refugee experience. It is an anomaly and not the predominant reality of being a refugee trapped in an overcrowded camp or perishing on the journey to Azadi.

Though there is much to admire about Lofthouse and Ingpen’s effort to give “voice to the voiceless” (Hope 157), there are times when their book does not even tell the full story of its own protagonists. As is evident in the nature of this silence and the agenda driving it, the most corrosive of all forms of censorship is self-censorship (Moorcroft and Taylor 43). For though not identified as such, Ziba and her mother are members of the Hazara ethnic minority, an overwhelmingly Shiite group that makes up nine percent of the population of

Afghanistan. Victims of persecution by the Sunni majority, they have also been the target for multiple documented massacres and human rights abuses at the hands of the Taliban. To offer these details would challenge the broad focus on the trauma suffered by the protagonists.

Naming Muslims as both victims and perpetrators would also threaten the very foundation of this approach. In discussing ways such texts can be read Hope cautions against this illusion that “readers can have a purely personal response, while ignoring the political and ideological currents that they are part of, both explicit and implicit” (“Soldiers” 305).

Though it might detract from the story’s status as history, the lack of historical context does not prevent an emotional engagement on the part of the reader. As Annette Wieviorka observes, this is the age of the witness, one in which “the individual and the individual alone [becomes] the public embodiment of history” (97). The incompleteness of their ‘testimony’ gives it the ring of authenticity, though it comes at a cost. For this approach can strip it of its “radical political and ethical force” (Goldberg 229). Social and political background can be explored but too often it relies heavily on knowledge brought by the reader. For example, Debra Dudek has used an ethics of care paradigm to explore a range of Australian picture books that “depict the situations of people who suffer under foreign regimes, who continue to live precariously in Australia, and who might eventually flourish due to the relational well-being that can arise out of the caring acts of strangers who may eventually become friends” (364–65). Her coverage of the picture books themselves is impressive but the real strength of her analysis is contextual. She grounds her work in Australian domestic politics, particularly during two periods, 2002–6 and 2014–17, and explores the link between the release of children’s picture books and the refugee policies of two conservative governments. In spite of this strength, she perhaps overestimates the importance of context in the stories themselves. Quite rightly she lauds the books for their capacity to “encourage readers to see the human faces of the stories within the books and

beyond” and “consider how they would act under similar circumstances, and to think about the friendships we offer, both personally and civically.” Yet there is some overreach when she opines that the books will also allow them to “bear witness to stories about families who have suffered and persevered under extreme conditions *brought about by political powers in their home countries and in the country where they seek refuge*” (Dudek 375) (authors’ italics). Certainly in a text such as *Ziba Came on a Boat*, a reader may well bear witness, but theirs will be an incomplete testimony.

One reviewer sees the “lack of geographic detail” in the story of Ziba creating a “confusing desolation rather than the attempted emotional mix,” offering only “obscure impressions and dark vagueness” rather than deep understanding (“Ziba Came”). This is a harsh judgment, for though there is a vagueness, as researchers such as Dudek know, this does not inhibit an emotional response; indeed, it helps generate it. For by universalizing the experience of the refugee and presenting it in terms of a personal trauma rather than one existing within the parameters imposed by historical detail, author and illustrator have created a book that resonates powerfully with readers at an emotional level. This is something that Lofthouse recognizes, for she openly acknowledges that Ziba’s story “inspire[s] us with [her] courage and determination.” Reviewers also acknowledge, if unwittingly, that it is not a history of the refugee experience, nor is it even representative; rather at a didactic level it imparts “empathy, humility, and understanding” (Brownless, par. 5).

The pervasiveness of trauma as a motif is hinted at in another review that celebrates the book as “a tender story of hope [that] is timeless” (Penguin, par. 4). Whether *Ziba Came on a Boat* shows itself to be timeless is a matter of conjecture, but in the Australian context, it certainly explores themes that have displayed considerable longevity. By adopting the same rhetoric and tropes that dominate Australian war literature, Lofthouse and Ingpen encourage their readers “to welcome these arrivals at a literal level as new citizens and symbolically as

inductees into a familiar and pervasive construct of Australian identity” (Kerby et al., “Australians” 309). It also meets with official approval, with the book shortlisted for the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards, the Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children’s Books, the Children’s Book Council Book of the Year Awards, and winning the Western Australian Premier’s Book Awards in Children’s Books in 2007. Yet like the other authors and illustrators whose work is analyzed in this article, Lofthouse and Ingpen made compromises in the quest to balance explorations of individual trauma and the didactic imperative.

Conclusion

What is not necessarily recognized among readers of picture books (both children and adults) is that whatever their claims to historical truth, they offer “constructs” or imaginings of events. While not necessarily false, these constructs are shaped by both the layers of cultural understanding gathered over time (Badsey) and the authors and illustrators own agendas as they “respond to and represent a political climate in which they are produced” (Dudek 364). In the Australian context, the grand sweep of history has been distilled by children’s picture book authors and illustrators into a series of personal traumas that are often remote from the historical events in which they have grounded them. Across children’s literature generally, some have argued that there has been a shift in focus from the management of trauma to “the profound emotional and psychological effects of trauma—even the impossibility of recovery” (Kidd 183). Yet for all of Kidd’s confidence, children’s picture books do not confront trauma in quite so an unflinching manner, as the preceding discussion has shown. Picture books such as those analyzed in this article can indeed resonate deeply with their readers. They can facilitate an exploration of human qualities such as courage and compassion, thereby illuminating what it is to be human. Yet it is important to recognize that they, like any record, have limitations. They are profoundly ideological. Whatever their claims to veracity,

audience and genre considerations inevitably guide, and can limit, their engagement with issues such as trauma. They can communicate a truth, but not the whole truth.

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