

It's all about the story: Personal narratives in children's literature about refugees

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Abstract

Stories are one way that experiences, ideas and culture are shared with children in educational settings. Commercially published books are the standard means in schools for sharing stories. Qualitative content analysis was carried out on 30 personal narrative-based children's picture books. While the range of stories told in books is vast, our research focuses on refugee stories for children in light of the contemporary political and public focus on refugees and the forced movement of people around the world. Scholars have identified that books about refugees for children can be useful to explore the topic of refugees, but also caution that they can perpetuate simplistic and stereotypical understandings about forced movement in the world. In our research we examine personal narratives and propose that educators should use stories and books written and illustrated by children as a means to bring refugee children's voices into formal educational spaces. We argue that this is a respectful approach that counters a deficit model of refugee children; it highlights refugee children's authentic voices and stories told on their own terms. Additionally, it offers a counter-narrative to dominant refugee stories in the public sphere and

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presents understandings of forced migration and its legacies from children's perspectives. We suggest that to effectively examine refugee experiences through literature, educators should use a number of texts to begin conversations in classrooms, and stories by children who have experienced forced migration should be featured.

KEYWORDS

children as authors and illustrators, children's literature, refugee stories, stories by children

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The main issue that this paper addresses is how refugee stories are told in personal narrative-based picture books for children, and what possibilities they encompass for educational settings today, considering the large numbers of people forcibly displaced in the world and mixed political and personal responses to this global matter.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The main insight that the paper provides is the distinction between books authored by children and adults, and that published books by children with refugee backgrounds reflect the complexities of refugee experiences while also validating and respecting children's agency and self-expression.

INTRODUCTION

Stories comprise a large part of everyone's lives, they 'express the fundamental nature of humanity' (Huber et al., 2013, p. 214). We all have stories we tell, stories we love to hear and stories that define us. Yet, at times, some stories are lost, or not even shared at all. This is especially true for refugee stories, and even more so for child refugees who are generally not invited to share their stories in countries of resettlement. We argue in this paper for this to change. With the extent of forced migration around the globe today, this examination into how refugee stories are told is timely. The large numbers of people seeking safety in Europe from 2015 has been described as a 'crisis' often reported in numerical terms, which overlooks the people who are displaced (Parsons, 2016; White, 2019). Focusing primarily on statistics is inherently dehumanising, as is the exclusionary and border protection stance of some countries' responses to people seeking safety (e.g., Schwartz & Schwenken, 2020; White, 2019).

We came to this research as educators and scholars whose work crosses the fields of children's literature, education, cultural history and migration and refugee studies. We wanted to evaluate how picture books for children present refugee stories and refugee children. We were also interested in exploring the genre of personal narrative writing, examining refugee stories in books by children. In the twenty-first-century context of dehumanising responses to refugees, we wanted to consider if personal narratives could be an effective genre of expression to highlight how forced migration is experienced and understood for individuals, and the impact this has on people's lives.

The research questions driving this inquiry are: How do narratives in picture books reflect refugee experiences? And what possibilities do personal narratives provide for children reading refugee picture books? Before outlining the relevant aspects of the scholarly literature on refugee stories and personal narratives, we first define how we use the term 'refugee' in our work. We then detail our research methodology and our findings, as well as a discussion of them and the implications of this research.

DEFINING REFUGEES

The legal definitions and categorisations of people as refugees, internally displaced people, people seeking asylum, stateless people and migrants are significant because they determine the types of legal protection afforded (UNHCR, n.d.). Some of the distinctions fail to account for the risks to life that people face when they are forced to migrate, hence 'forced migration' is the term used in this paper (Amnesty International, 2020). Our focus here is on stories by children who have forced migration in their lives and family backgrounds. These children and close family members may fit into multiple categories listed here, and some may not be afforded formal protection but have been forcibly displaced. We also use the term 'refugee' in a broad sense to include all people who have experienced forced migration. The cycle of forced displacement is a dynamic process with a range of possible outcomes, rather than a linear progression from a 'dangerous' home to 'safe' resettlement (Martin, 2012). We focus on forced displacement, which results in resettlement in a third country, and note the medical scholarship that identifies stressors and trauma in this process (Fazel & Stein, 2002).

Scholarly literature on refugee stories and personal narratives

There is a body of scholarship that examines how refugee stories are featured in children's literature (Dolan, 2014; Dudek, 2018; Hope, 2008, 2018; Karam et al., 2019; Parsons, 2016; Vassiloudi, 2019; Ward & Warner, 2020). Children's asylum-seeker life writing has received less direct scholarly attention (Douglas, 2006). The development of RefugeeCrit and its application to children's literature and storytelling has opened new ways of examining how power, agency and authority are interrogated in the field (Strekalova-Hughes, 2019; Strekalova-Hughes et al., 2019; Strekalova-Hughes & Wang, 2019).

In the school context, Ladd and Melilli (2018) write that 'Refugee and immigrant experiences must be shared in all classrooms'. Through 'a thoughtful collection of children's literature', they suggest a 'rich discourse and dialogue' can be facilitated. They highlight how published books can 'speak to human experience', with 'the potential to nurture student unity in the classroom and diminish the inaccuracies often associated with child refugees and immigrants' (p. 57). While scholars have understood that stories can facilitate social change in education (Coulter et al., 2007; Huber et al., 2013, p. 213), as Arizpe (2019) notes, there has been limited in-depth research into the aesthetic and literary strategies that could enable such change for readers.

Using children's literature about refugees can help to validate those students who have similar life experiences (Arizpe et al., 2014; Hope, 2008, 2017, 2018). Teaching with refugee stories in classrooms for 8 to 12-year-olds can be an inclusive approach that supports children with refugee backgrounds. Hope (2008) highlights the potential for student validation in classrooms, citing research with Eritrean refugee children resettled in Sweden (Melzak & Warner, 1992). Encouraging personal storytelling can '[help] ... young asylum seekers to reestablish their sense of the past in relation to the here-and-now' (Baraitser, 2014, p. 29). But in doing this, it is important to not 'perpetuate assumptions that children from refugee backgrounds are defined entirely by their traumatic experiences' (Strekalova-Hughes, 2019, p. 34). Notwithstanding this caution, Parsons (2016) articulates the significant role that educators have in being open to stories their students tell: 'Listening to our students' stories, bearing witness to them, and responding in ways that validate children's realities and experiences are among the most important things teachers do' (p. 25).

There are ethical questions to consider when focusing on stories, histories and experiences of forced migration, particularly potential re-traumatisation for students with refugee backgrounds, imposing identity categories on students and the place of personal refugee stories in inclusive classrooms. Detailed analysis of how to best teach refugee students is beyond the scope of this paper and needs to be responsive to specific student cohorts. Approaches such as trauma-informed teaching practices (e.g., Tweedie et al., 2017) and material by organisations focused on supporting refugee children and families (e.g., UNHCR Austria/Sibert, 2019; Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2019, 2021) should guide teachers on their classroom practices and approaches (Barrett & Berger, 2021).

Personal narratives are a form of autobiographical expression that have great value in classrooms and beyond, where children can communicate events of importance to them with others (Bunning et al., 2018, p. 24). Hope (2008) suggests autobiography for people who have experienced forced displacement can positively impact on their sense of self, and for those with lived traumatic experiences 'autobiography may be particularly cathartic' (p. 299). More broadly, Hope identifies a 'spiral quality' of autobiography 'in that it can help others reconstruct their own memories too' (p. 299). Kearney (2003) proposes that 'The world is in the classroom. It can only be translated into new cultural webs if we enter into dialogues and explore people's lived experience' (quoted in Hope, 2008, pp. 302–303).

Bringing stories into the classroom which have been created by children with refugee backgrounds is an act that privileges the voices of children with these backgrounds, and simultaneously values children's cultural expression more broadly. Ward and Warren (2020) suggest that it is important to include firsthand refugee stories in classrooms. Students need to be able to 'find themselves represented in the texts available and privileged in the classroom' (p. 405). Scholars, however, have not examined published books by children with refugee backgrounds and this research aims to bring these books into scholarly focus. Texts used in classrooms have a privileged status, so including stories *by* children whose background includes forced migration expands the range of refugee stories that are valued in formal education. We argue these direct connections and representations by children with lived experience are important. Author and academic Rana Abdel Fattah (2020) notes the political significance of stories used in Australian educational settings, and how minority stories that are part of the formal curriculum are often written by white, mainstream authors and, therefore, culturally specific stories are mediated by the dominant culture.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To study how personal narratives in picture books reflect refugee experience, our research methodology began with first identifying published picture books about refugees, and then

undertaking a qualitative content analysis which was attentive to the insights of critical theories, particularly critical content analysis and RefugeeCrit (Short, 2017; Strelakova-Hughes, 2019; Strelakova-Hughes et al., 2019; Strelakova-Hughes & Wang, 2019). The criteria established for books initially collected were:

- First published in or after 2000.
- Picture book and/or highly visual format.
- Books for children, between approximately 8 and 12 years old.
- Personal narrative from the perspective of a child.
- Story is a realistic representation of the refugee experience, with an authentic voice.

Books were located from the researchers' experience in children's literature and literary representations of refugees, from database and library catalogue searches, discussions with academic librarians, reviews published in scholarly journals and online forums. The year 2000 was selected as a starting point because the researchers are based in Australia and the beginning of the twenty-first century saw the resurgence of a highly charged political discourse dehumanising refugees and people seeking asylum that focused on national security and border protection (Bleiker et al., 2013; Devetak, 2004; Manne and Corlett, 2013). More than 100 books were identified and read by the researchers.

The following questions were developed by the researchers, as part of an explicitly 'careful process' (Short, 2017, p. 18) and used to assess which of the 100 books were suitable for content analysis:

- Could readers learn about refugees and refugee experiences from this book?
 - Were experiences realistic and not 'glossed over' when depicting the context for leaving, refugee journeys and/or resettlement?
 - Was the ending realistic/complex rather than exclusively 'happily ever after'?
 - Did the characters reflect on their experiences?
- Did the story encourage a connection/engagement with the main character?

In applying these questions to our readings of the books, 30 were identified that responded positively to all these questions (see [the Appendix](#) for this list of books). These books were agreed upon by both researchers.

The qualitative content analysis of 30 published picture books involved multiple readings of all texts to identify how each text responded to the questions above, and to the second overarching research question (What possibilities do personal narratives provide for children reading refugee picture books?). This process, described by Short (2017), is centred around close readings, inferences and interpretations by researchers, which then creates a new scholarly narrative (pp. 13–14). This analysis was dynamic and involved the authors working independently and then together to refine and categorise our analysis of the books. We found all books could be useful for readers to examine forced migration, but some were more successful than others in exploring different aspects of refugee experiences and providing important possibilities for readers.

In the following sections we present a sample of seven commercially published books and examples from four community published books by children. These books selected as representative highlight different strengths and focal points of children's picture books in telling personal stories of forced migration. We make the distinction between commercially and community published books because of the dominance of commercial books and their use in educational settings. The commercial books were written by adults, while the community-based books were authored by children. We see this difference as significant in terms of how, and by whom, stories are told and shared.

FINDINGS

Mainstream commercial publications of refugee stories

Commercial publications telling fictional and non-fictional stories were identified as providing useful explorations of forced movement. In the case of some fictional texts, connections to personal narratives were highlighted in the peritext. The examples employ literary techniques including symbolism, metaphors, as well as different genre and styles of illustrations, to explore forced migration. The reasons for people leaving and the specific nature of refugee journeys, aspects of resettlement and ongoing legacies of forced displacement are all part of the picture books noted below.

A need for people to leave their home and travel to a refugee camp is considered in some texts. One text that focuses on a need to leave, subsequent refugee journey and camp life is Suzanne Del Rizzo's exquisitely illustrated *My beautiful birds* (2017). This story is about a boy named Sami who must leave his pet pigeons behind when fleeing war in Syria. It details the struggles encountered on the journey and in the refugee camp, which he identifies as his new home. When he meets some new pigeons at the refugee camp, he comes to terms with his new surroundings. One of the features of this book is the depiction of the difficulties Sami faces as part of his displacement. An initial refugee journey of displacement is told through the format of an alphabet book in *Anisa's alphabet* (2020) by Mike Dumbleton and illustrated by Hannah Sommerville. As is consistent in alphabet books the text is brief, written in rhyme, for example: 'B is for bombs, when the fighting began. C is for carrying all that we can. D is for danger, from which we ran'. The book describes the challenges Anisa and her family face and the illustrations reveal more detail about experiences than the written text alone in the family's journey to a refugee camp where the story ends.

Places of refugee resettlement, usually Western nations, are common settings for children's refugee stories. *My two blankets* (2014) by Irene Kobald and illustrated by Freya Blackwood tells one such story. In 2018 three bilingual editions in Arabic–English, Dari–English and Farsi–English were published, reflecting common languages spoken by refugee and asylum-seeking people in Australia at the time (Books & Publishing, 2018). A young girl, Cartwheel, is the main character in *My two blankets*. With her auntie, Cartwheel had to move from her home to another country which has a different language and culture. She finds comfort in her home 'blanket' of language, culture and life. She becomes friends with a local girl who teaches her new words. Cartwheel creates a new 'blanket' and sees the beauty and joy of where she now lives. The metaphor of blankets effectively represents different languages, alongside valuing the knowledge and experiences Cartwheel possesses and her capacity to learn. *A different pond* (2017) by poet and author Bao Phi and illustrated by cartoonist Thu Bui tells the story of a young boy and the very early morning fishing trip he takes with his father one day. The story is set in the context of refugee resettlement and is based on the author's experiences when his family fled from Vietnam to the United States in 1975. It shows the challenges his parents face regarding work and helping the family survive, alongside the happiness of the family. The author and illustrator notes at the end of the book help connect the personal narrative in the text to the experiences of the book's creators.

A picture book that focuses on a refugee journey and specifically objects of remembrance is *Grandma's treasured shoes* (2020), in which a child tells their grandmother's refugee story. It focuses on the challenges of the journey and the shoes she kept as a treasured object from her childhood. There is a section at the end of the book that discusses refugees in Australia as well as brief notes from Coral Vass (author) and Christina Huynh (illustrator). The book, published by National Library of Australia, includes archival photographs and information to place this fictional story in a historical context and Huynh's illustrations

were inspired by her family's refugee history, with the main character based on her mother (Huynh, 2019).

Non-fiction picture-based texts were part of the sample identified, and are more directly linked to lived experiences of forced movement. One example is *Stormy seas: Stories of young boat refugees* (2017) by Mary Beth Leatherdale and illustrated by Eleanor Shakespeare. It focuses on five children in different historical times as they escaped violence and persecution in Germany, Vietnam, Cuba, Afghanistan and the Ivory Coast. Personal stories are presented alongside contextual information and visual representations. This provides readers with an opportunity to explore forced movement in the past, and to identify common trends and issues in refugee histories. *Forced to flee: Refugee children drawing on their experiences* (2019), published by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), presents stories and drawings by child refugees from South Sudan, Central America and Syria, alongside information about these countries and refugee movements. As the title indicates, children explain their personal stories in both drawings and words. Suggested for readers over 14 by the publisher, this book highlights child refugee and asylum-seeker experiences within a Western humanitarian framework.

In this sample of commercially published books, all were written by adults *for* children. Even in *Forced to flee*, with children's drawings and words, children's expression is firmly framed by the UNHCR. Vassiloudi (2019) has argued that humanitarian endorsements construct 'the idea of the right book as a deterrent to the evils of humanity and as a tool for remedying injustice' (p. 39). Rather than positioning refugee children's expression in international humanitarian circuits, we propose that books which record and share children's personal narratives, where children's voices are respected and valued on their own terms, are better placed to directly humanise and individualise children who are forcibly displaced, demonstrate the skills and capacities of these children and potentially foster child-focused circuits of creativity, connection and learning for the children reading these books. It is to these books that we now turn.

Community published stories by children with refugee backgrounds

The stories by children with refugee backgrounds in this study were created in a series of workshops with children, young people and their families by Kids' Own Publishing (Australia) and Kids' Own Publishing Partnership (Ireland). Both organisations use an arts-based artist-facilitated process to support children and young people develop published books telling stories that the authors want to share (Kenny et al., 2017). This research examined books by children with a refugee background. The stories analysed here are short autobiographies or memoir texts, mostly less than one page, and have artwork that is usually created collectively by the authors. We came to these publications as researchers who were not involved in their creation but examined the published books.

The stories were developed, written, and illustrated by the children working with professional artists using an 'open-ended and non-directive way of working' to support children's active cultural citizenship (Kenny et al., 2017, p. 61). The books were formally designed, edited and published, with the intention of respecting the authors' expression, voices and culture. The children, as authors and illustrators, are visible in a range of ways; particularly notable is their presence in the peritext in names and photographs (Figure 1), signatures (Figure 2) and explaining the creative bookmaking processes undertaken (Figure 3). Marshall (2016) identifies counter-storytelling as 'a particularly helpful concept for theorizing life writing in picture book form because counter-stories emerge in image as well as in narrative' (p. 80). We see these peritextual examples as counter-stories because they render



FIGURE 1 The inside back cover of *Our African stories* (2014) showing photographs of the authors at work creating the book, as well as their names [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

visible children with refugee backgrounds as authors and illustrators against deficit understandings of refugee students (Arzubiaga et al., 2009; McCarthy & Vickers, 2014).

A key finding from this content analysis is that child-authored personal stories *directly* represent aspects of their experiences of forced migration in their own voices and in distinct styles. Collectively, these stories function as a counter-narrative to the dominant commercially published refugee narratives in the public sphere and provide insight into the legacies and understandings of forced migration from children's perspectives. Excerpts below highlight the themes of family and refugee heritage; connections and disconnections to place and family; context for forced displacement as well as children's agency and self-expression that we identified through the content analysis of stories by children.

Reflecting on how a refugee family heritage has been shared within a particular family is in the story 'My mum's journey from Vietnam to Australia', published in the book *Kids' own journeys* (2004). The author, a primary school student aged between 7 and 12, explains at the start of the short story what they knew about this family history: 'I knew they left by boat, but nothing else'. The author reveals the everyday setting for learning more. They had spent a day at their mum's work, 'I was bored and watching TV'. And then 'When we were driving home I asked her, "How did you get to Australia?" She told me'. The author recounts the details of their extended family's escape from Vietnam, 'from the Communists', in 1978. The family left at night, pretending to be fishing, during the escape they were spotted by soldiers and some family members were left behind. They were on the boat 'for, I think, 2 weeks' and then rescued by the crew of an English ship, who took them to Singapore. After waiting 6 months they were reunited with family members in Australia. The author conveyed the emotional elements of this exchange, their mum 'got sadder when she told the story', but that 'For me, if I was there I'd be scared'. This family storytelling moment, shared in published form, is interwoven into everyday life in Australia, driving home after spending a boring day at a parent's workplace. Here a refugee history is shared with both the author and then the readers, and the differing emotional impacts are revealed. While there is danger and sadness in this refugee story, details of a life in the family's country of resettlement are also revealed. This story provides opportunities for many conversations for readers, with

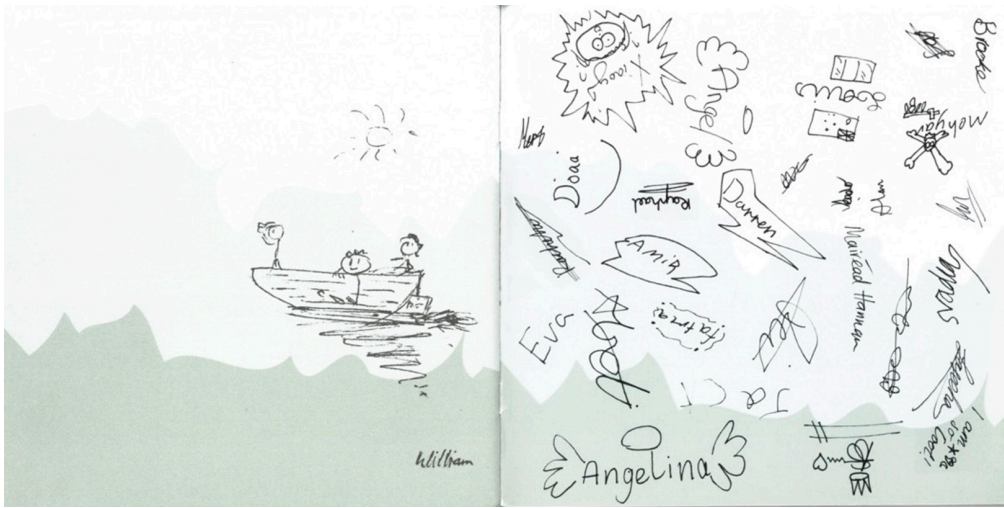


FIGURE 2 The inside back cover of *Kids' own journeys* (2004) highlights the individual authors through their signatures. More are included on the inside front cover as well [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

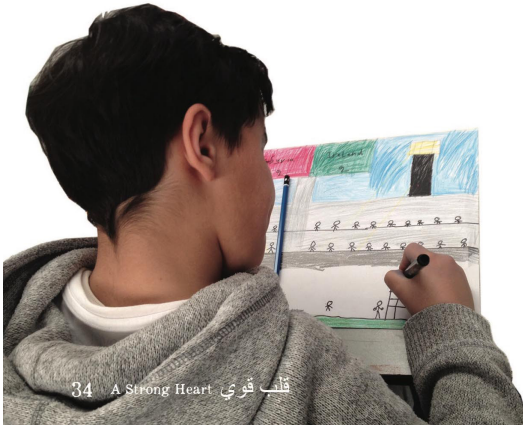
a significant one being how family histories are shared. This story has similar elements to the previously discussed *A different pond*. Both address forced migration from Vietnam, but the child's own family story does not have a sense of nostalgia, but rather is placed within a mundane drive home.

Another story which presents an author's refugee heritage is in the collection *Our African stories* (2014). The 11-year-old unnamed author introduces the story 'A really dry place' stating 'Hi, I'm gonna tell you a bit about my family'. Beginning this way, the author is clearly stating they are presenting a narrative to share, and the family story told is done so on their own terms, telling readers what they want them to know. The author explains the different locations where family members were born: the East African countries of Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt as well as Melbourne. The family narrative presented focuses on soccer skills, the scarcity of water in African countries and some details about the roles of the author's father and grandfather in conflicts. 'The president of Eritrea was really mean. My dad's dad was almost gonna shoot the president and now if we go there he will take us to jail maybe forever' (p. 10). This story connects to the BBC children's book *Hamid's story: A real life account of his journey from Eritrea* (2014), which was based on a child's experience but written by adults. Both stories reference violent struggles with government and the need to flee to safety. We see 'A really dry place' as potentially more meaningful than *Hamid's story* because of the author's expression, an authentic child's voice which moves between soccer skills and political conflict. In this example, family heritage and refugee history is valued as something to be shared, and reveals connections and disconnections across the world.

The reasons behind specific experiences of forced migration are represented in the book *A strong heart: A book of stories and dreams for the future by Syrian and Palestinian children living in County Mayo* (2018), which was created by children with different cultural and refugee backgrounds living in Ireland. The introduction explains: 'We are children who have fun together. We were born in Syria or Palestine before we came to Ireland. We all speak many languages, including Arabic' (p. 3). While stories in the collection cover a range of themes including sport, friends, family, food, weather and religion, it is the stories about refugee movement that are of relevance here. One, titled 'War and flight', is by 14-year-old Rahaf. She explains the context of war, where there was 'fighting to see who would be in

How We Made This Book

16 children invented this book. We met every Saturday for five weeks and three hours. We painted and coloured and made shapes and patterns.



How you make a pattern: You use lots of shapes to make a picture. Then you take a photo of it. Then you put it on the computer and ask the computer to repeat the picture over and over.

We enjoyed making this book, meeting new friends. We told our stories to Mary and she helped us. Vanya helped us with the art. We had lots of fun making this book.

Thank you... Ireland for the money to make this book; Vanya and Mary for helping us; Rachel and the Linenhall for the workshops.

By children participating on this project

FIGURE 3 An explanation of the bookmaking process, including photographs of the authors working on *A strong heart* (2018) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

power', why her family left Syria, the journeys they took and family separation. Rahaf explains: 'My family left in 2015, because the Government took my brother five times and when he came home he was not very well'. The family went to Turkey and 'After eight months ... the men who were going to bring us to Greece took the money and left us in the jungle. That was frightening'. Rahaf's brother then stayed in Turkey, and 'we have not seen our brother for two years'. The rest of the family was able to go to Greece, where they were 'in a bad refugee camp' and eventually a hotel because Rahaf 'was sick because I did not have enough oxygen, because of the wood fires at the camps'. This story concludes with family separation, but with hope for visiting: 'We still have a lot of our family in Syria and when the war is over, we will go for a visit' (p. 24). The narrative, points of detail and expression all showcase Rahaf's voice, clearly articulating how family separation is a key feature of forced movement and this separation is a realistic end point for the story. The connections between a home country and country of resettlement feature in another story in the book by Rahaf, where she reflects on her connection to both Syria and Ireland: 'I love Ireland because it's my other country. Syria is first and Ireland is my other country' (p. 11). She explains some physical problems she has and her uncertainty about recovery. These stories provide glimpses into

Rahaf's life and interweave her past with the present and future. They are strong examples of a child's reflection on connections and disconnections with a homeland and new country. While picture books like *My two blankets* cover similar themes, highlighting a child's direct experiences and voice through stories and illustrations makes them distinct in refugee literature for children.

There are nine self-portraits in *A strong heart* and one is included on the cover (Figure 4). The portraits are a visual form of humanising representation that feature throughout the book. Some fictional books include drawings by refugee child characters, but they have been created by the adult illustrators (e.g., for *Anisa's alphabet*). In the child-focused *A strong heart*, the self-portraits are strongly linked to the children as the creators of the book. In contrast to this, in *Forced to flee* (as noted above), children's artwork primarily serves a discourse of international humanitarianism rather than a direct humanising self-representation.

The actions of a child who did not want to leave his home country of Kenya are told by Kudamba Abaas in 'Missing my father' from the book *Donkeys can't fly on planes* (2012).¹ The story was recorded when Abaas was at primary school in the regional city of Traralgon, Australia. In a detailed account of departure, Abaas explains he 'did not want to leave the place I loved: the place where I was born'. During their resettlement journey, he and his

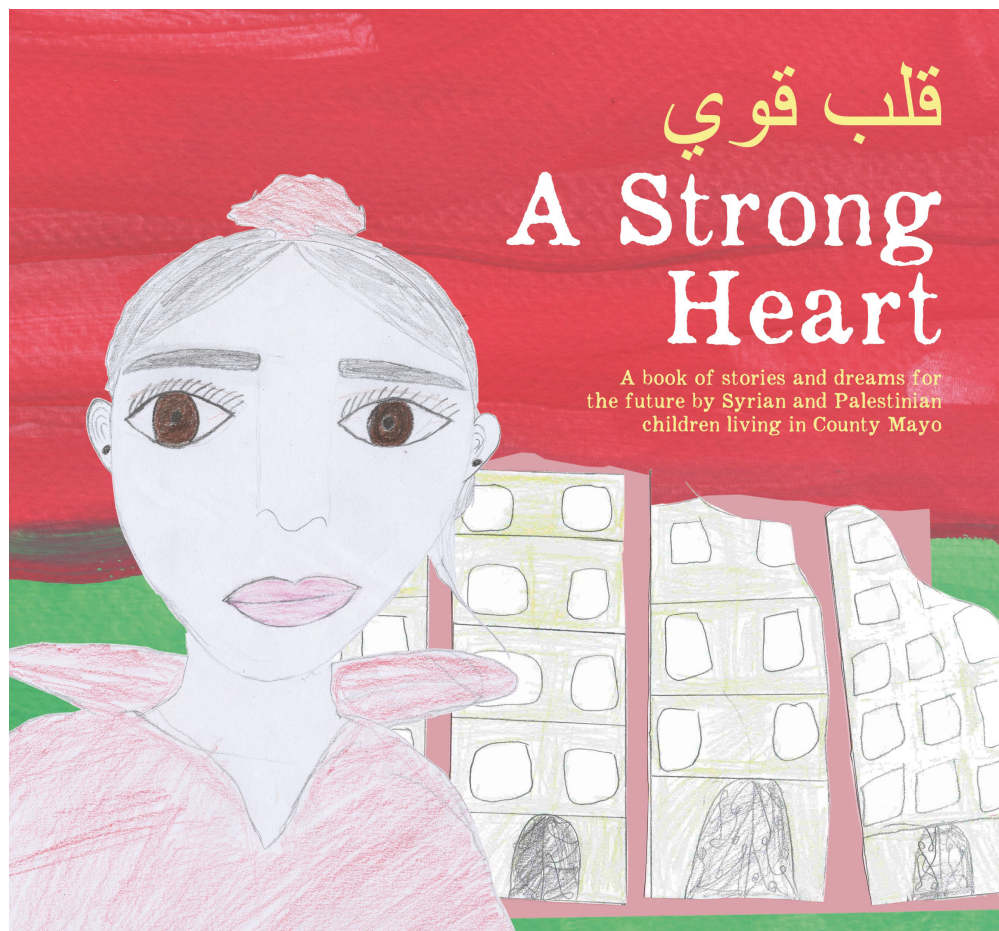


FIGURE 4 The cover of *A strong heart* (2018) with the short title of the book in both Arabic and English. The cover artwork includes illustrations that accompany Rahaf's stories, examined in this paper [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

mother had to take a bus to the airport. While waiting, Abaas 'decided I did not want to leave Africa and I ran away from my mother' and climbed a tree: 'I was good at climbing, so I started to climb up into the branches'. His mother and others found him and called him to come down. Abaas resisted. 'I looked down and thought, "No I am staying right here. In this tree. In Africa!"' (p. 40). A person climbed the tree to retrieve him, so 'I started to go up higher and higher. I went up, up, up until I ran out of tree to climb'. Abaas was not able to stay in the tree, and the person 'got me and took me down, down, down' (p. 41). While Abaas's quest was not successful, in this story readers learn of a child who does not accept the circumstances he finds himself in and uses his skills to attempt to change them.

Family separation is also a feature of the story Abaas has told. He explained that 'because of the war I did not know my dad very well' (p. 40). Abaas did not want to get on the plane to leave Kenya, and to coax him onto the plane, he says his mother said that they were going to visit his father. During the flight he said he kept asking his mother 'Where is my dad?', to which she replied 'We are nearly there'. Abaas said that when he realised they were not in Africa he 'just wanted to cry'. The story concludes that 'I want to go back. I want to see my dad. I don't know my dad' (p. 41). Here readers can see the impact of forced movement on the author, his desire to remain in a home country and to have connections with family and place. In commercially published children's literature family separation is depicted, and in some cases it is very neatly resolved [e.g., *Out* (2016)], but not always [e.g., *Ali's story ... journey* (2014)]. What is specifically valuable in books by children is the insights into children's feelings, the emotional impact of the experience and the realistic way that stories end without clear resolution.

Parental death is experienced by some people when they are young and is in another story from *Donkeys*, where Nyakaka Ruot tells of her mother's death and the ongoing connections she has with her in 'My beautiful mum'. Part of the story focuses on a child bringing the message to her at school that her mother had died. Ruot said: 'My ears did not want to hear this message and my head did not want to know it'. To avoid accepting the news, 'I thought if I kept working and if I ignored the girl, then this could not be real'. The artwork accompanying this story depicts Ruot running away from this news (Figure 5). Eventually Ruot sees her mother and said: 'I had to accept that she had passed away. My eyes were



FIGURE 5 Illustration accompanying Nyakaka Ruot's story 'My beautiful mum' in *Donkeys can't fly on planes* (2012) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

seeing it. My ears were hearing it. My heart was feeling it'. While Ruot wanted to resist her mother's death, she could not. Ruot and her younger sister later came to live in Australia with an older sister, where she maintains a connection with her mother through her dreams: 'My beautiful mother visits me in my dreams. Sometimes she brings my Grandma and my Grandpa. I did not know my grandparents when they were alive but I know them now' (p. 39). In this story, ongoing connection to family is through Ruot's interior and exterior life. While connections to family are revealed, the key emphasis of the story is not immediately linked to forced migration. This story, like Abaas's and others in *Donkeys*, reflects a diverse range of experiences of forced migration, refugee journeys and resettlement; they are stories that highlight how forced movement is not uniform.

The difficulties of her mother's death are one of the key features directly addressed in 'My beautiful mum'. Vassiloudi (2019) contends that in refugee children's literature many important issues, including the loss of family, 'are muted, if addressed at all' (p. 38). Of relevance here is loss in terms of death. Some commercial children's books do include death, but often without exploring the impact of this. For example, in *Hamid's story* (discussed earlier in this paper) readers learn of his father's death, but it is only mentioned briefly. In comparison, in 'My beautiful mum' there is a greater exploration of the impact of this on the author. And while this depth is not seen in all stories, in this case it provides valuable insights which are not readily canvassed elsewhere. Vassiloudi also notes that 'Happy closure' is 'another common narrative structure that most stories have' (p. 39). While a peaceful, happy resolution is a common feature of children's picture books it is not necessarily the reality of all people's lives, and both Ruot's and Abaas's stories here highlight loss of a parent as part of their life experience.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our focus in carrying out this research has been to consider the nature of authentic personal stories told in picture books about forced movement and refugees, and the implications of their use in educational contexts. We see stories as starting points for complex and possibly difficult conversations where a range of experiences, histories and opinions can be shared. Following Short (2017), our analysis and interest in these books is multifaceted, because they are connected to issues that matter to us as researchers and educators, and they are also issues that impact on young people in their lives and as readers. Picture books can provide useful introductions about aspects of refugee experience in the past and present, but we contend that books created by those with direct connections to experiences of forced migration expand the range of voices and stories that are shared within the formal educational space of school classrooms for 8 to 12-year-olds. As children's author Jacqueline Woodson said: 'I realized that no one but me *can* tell my story' (Woodson, 2003, p. 43) and when this is facilitated through a published book, significant possibilities emerge.

Crucially, when stories are written and illustrated by children, sharing authentic personal narratives with other children, child-centred connections can be made, which is a means through which children's voices can feature in educational settings. We see this as adding to an important conversation that Arizpe (2019) calls for in paying greater attention to the aesthetic and literary strategies that 'could ... promote empathy, change perspectives and lead to social action' (p. 3). While our focus on personal narratives and the possibilities for fostering connections between children in the form of published books is not the same as Arizpe's work, we believe the literary approach of showcasing books by children could be an avenue that supports children's greater understanding of forced migration and its impacts (see relatedly Arizpe et al., 2014; Hope, 2017, ch. 9). This is not a simple task, as stereotypes and hierarchies of power can remain unquestioned and to read such texts effectively

and develop dialogues, students require teacher support to develop critical literacy skills so the stories are not read as neutral representations (Dolan, 2013; Karam et al., 2019). In suggesting this, our intention is not to restrict people who have experienced forced movement to a 'refugee story', or to unproblematically reinforce 'stories about refugees as traumatised, vulnerable, and voiceless' (Strekalova-Hughes & Wang, 2019). Additionally, we also note that there are ethical questions to consider about engaging students in such an exchange; as Hope (2018) has shown, children with migrant backgrounds can have mixed responses when refugee stories are read in class (pp. 317–318). We note the concerns and difficulties some teachers have in this area (Hope, 2017; Watkins et al., 2019, pp. xiv–xv); examining these is beyond the scope of this research and could form the basis of subsequent research.

The community published stories in this paper come from children in their own voices, which often move between the past and present; they express difficult experiences in direct ways that do not mask the challenges and sadness, while simultaneously always presenting themselves with agency through their storytelling, actions and beliefs. Parsons (2016) argues for the significance of stories because 'we are the stories we hear and the stories we tell' (p. 21). While the media's focus on forced migration is often depersonalised, picture books and stories by children can work against this. Family stories feature in the autobiography and memoir text that children have shared in published books examined here. Solórzano (1997) and Marshall (2016) highlight the approach of sharing family stories from communities, in preference to those by commercial publishers.

Strekalova-Hughes's (2019) analysis of picture books about refugees argues for an increase in the diversity of representations of refugee experiences, suggesting 'Families and children could add their own representation in the stories for authentic purposes' (p. 37). The stories in the books we are focusing on are a type of representation that Strekalova-Hughes calls for. What many of these books lack, however, is a sustained engagement with the context for forced movement. In the books examined in this paper some of the authors have, in different ways, addressed this. These are, however, usually brief, and teachers could focus more on this as part of the critical engagement with the texts in the classroom. While there are many complexities involved in understanding the political and historical reasons behind conflict and forced movement, it is important to have contextual understandings for the stories told and read. We would also argue that the types of stories chosen, and the way they are used within educational settings, are significant; this needs to be considered locally by teachers, with their specific students placed centrally.

In educational settings and educational research, refugee children are often viewed from a deficit position (Karam et al., 2019; Loerke, 2009 in Emert, 2014). We argue that collecting, publishing and sharing stories by children with refugee backgrounds is a direct act that challenges a deficit-orientated discourse. This also applies to the picture books by adults with refugee experiences in their own families and childhoods. Inherent in children with a refugee background telling their own stories, which are published and distributed, is a respect for children's voices and their expression. This positions children as knowledgeable and agentic. This is not to suggest that any one child's story will provide a complete refugee story. Instead, any of the stories included here should be considered as 'a starting place' for conversations, investigations and reflections that are essential for critical literacy exploring power, inequalities and the storyteller's perspective (Dolan, 2013; Karam et al., 2019; Short, 2019, pp. 7–10; Ward & Warren, 2020). As Baraitser (2014) writes: 'Literature has the ability to help us reconstruct ourselves through learning to retell our stories in a self-enhancing way. The "self" constructed by story-making allows a young person to feel safe' (p. 61). We suggest that bringing stories by children into formal education is a significant step that will enable a more genuinely diverse learning context to be created, where children's expression, histories and experiences are valued. In arguing for stories by children who have experienced forced migration, it is important to consider how the child author is understood and constructed for readers, and the impacts of the story for readers as well. We see the forced

movement of people around the world as simultaneously a political, humanitarian and personal issue, and to highlight the personal and human impact of this, stories by children for child readers are one means educators could use to humanise refugee experiences in classrooms.

CONCLUSION

We found, in response to the questions that all books were read against, that stories by children with refugee backgrounds were more explicit in their depictions of difficult experiences and emotional responses to these experiences were clearly expressed. It is because of this we see them as holding significant value for use in formal educational settings. We do not suppose that books by children should be the only stories to be used, but we would argue that they should firmly feature in how forced migration is discussed in classrooms. We are wary of the implications of commercially published refugee children's literature's general failure to account for the political and historical reasons behind forced movement. The impact of this is creating a simple and inaccurate binary distinction between some countries as safe and others as dangerous (Strekalova-Hughes, 2019), and war being 'mostly portrayed as a self-created condition' (Vassiloudi, 2019, p. 3). While many of the stories examined here do include references to the places people left and why, the stories themselves do not provide a detailed engagement with this context. This is where teachers do need to support their students to understand these stories within the historical and political settings of war, conflict and people's forced movement, so that simplistic stories of refugee escape and resettlement are not conveyed. As Mickenberg and Nel (2011) state: 'Neither children nor literature for them can be extricated from politics' (p. 445), and teachers should not resist this, but rather create classroom environments where politics and power are discussed. When this is done, the potential for children's literature to be an 'important vehicle for ideas that challenge the status quo' (p. 445) can more readily be realised, and particularly stories by children can be placed centrally in this project.

In this paper we have advocated for a realistic way to listen to the voices of children with refugee backgrounds and facilitate their stories being more widely read. There are several resources teachers could use in their own classrooms to empower their students to tell their stories, with varying degrees of formality. There are dedicated publishing apps for print and ebooks (e.g., Common sense education, n.d.), commercial organisations that publish books (e.g., Classroom Authors, 2020; Liv & Blue Publishing, 2020; Schoolmate Publishing, 2020; Studentreasures, 2017) and resources about how to create short books that are folded by hand and published using a photocopier (e.g., Kids' Own Publishing, 2020). These are useful for teachers to explore the possibilities for their students to create children's books in the spirit of those we examined in this paper.

Publishing a child's story validates their voice as well as refuting the more dominant and sometimes stereotypical refugee stories that circulate. Whether children are from Eritrea, Somalia, Syria, Central America or anywhere else in the world, all children deserve to share their stories and have their experiences validated and respected. While commercially published children's literature can provide exposure to some of these issues, children's actual stories are a distinct and direct means for children to see themselves in stories, as well as to understand what others may have experienced. And this is what children's literature should embrace as a part of its genre; stories about children, written by children, to share with children.

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No ethics approval was required as all research materials are formally published and available in the public domain.

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Permission to reproduce material in figures 1, 2 & 5 was kindly granted by the publisher, Kids' Own Publishing, Abbotsford, Australia. Permission to reproduce material in figures 3 & 4 was kindly granted by the publisher, Kids' Own Publishing Partnership, Sligo, Ireland.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this paper as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Kudamba Abaas's family name is published as 'Abas' in *Donkeys can't fly on planes*.

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APPENDIX

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