

New and Transformed Places: Representations of Home in Books for Children and Adolescents

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More than a decade ago, I was in my first month of work at a new school, as a middle and high school librarian in southeast Louisiana, when Hurricane Katrina upended the lives of thousands of individuals, many of them students displaced from the houses, towns, and schools that were their homes. I spent some time that fall getting to know a handful of high school seniors, who came to us from New Orleans, as they struggled to cope with the upheaval and establish a sense of home in a new environment. From their stories came my fascination with the concept of home and its multifaceted, complex meanings.

Home is a notion that is perhaps only reflected upon when it is lost or threatened. When life goes as planned and home is reliably there at day's end, it is easy to take for granted. When it becomes unreachable, though, home's importance becomes painfully obvious. We often do not recognize the depth of our feelings until home is lost or altered, forcing us to redefine it or recreate it elsewhere. It is then that we step back and take a look at what, exactly, makes a place a home.

Among the many layers of meaning in the concept of home we can find some constants, or at least near constants. First, at its most basic level, home is a place—whether it is our place of origin or the place we lay our heads at night, it is a spot on the globe that we can identify as ours. But we can certainly feel at home in other locations as well. We often describe home as “where the heart is.” It is the site of emotional attachment, a place where we feel a sense of belonging and rightness. This sense of belonging might come from being surrounded by people who make up a home—family, friends, loved ones. It might come from holding a cherished family heirloom, or hanging family photos on the walls of a new house—objects infused with memories, traditions, or associations that make us feel at home. It might come from immersing ourselves in familiar activities—sports or music, for example—that were a central part of life in our previous homes. Whatever the particulars of a definition of home, it is at its core an emotion-laden concept. We have feelings for the places that are home to us, and we feel certain ways when we are there—we feel needed, comforted, safe, we feel that we belong—and we feel differently when we are away or when our homes are threatened.

In the novels, picture books, and works of nonfiction reviewed in this issue, various components of home are lost, found, experienced, and grappled with by characters both fictional and real. We meet a championship-winning high school robotics team comprised of undocumented immigrants to the U.S. from Mexico in the nonfiction *Spare Parts* (Davis). In the face of daily struggles with a new culture and language, how might teammates and a shared goal

help establish a sense of belonging and home? In *I'm New Here* (O'Brien), younger, fictional immigrant children strive to feel at home in a new school environment. O'Brien juxtaposes the emotional and practical difficulties of adjusting to a new place with flashbacks to harmonious lives in their homelands, revealing feelings of fear, confusion, and apprehension perceived by first grade students of the reviewer. Stone shows us the creation of a groundbreaking form of home in *The House That Jane Built: A Story about Jane Addams*—a place where rich and poor could form a reciprocal community, living together and learning from one another in the vision of founder, activist, and reformer Jane Addams. The novel *Serendipity's Footsteps* (Nelson) reveals the presence of home in an ordinary, everyday object: a pair of shoes hidden in the floorboards of a home left behind in *Kristallnacht*, shoes that serve alternately as a safe receptacle for treasured heirlooms, a focal point of memory, and a tool for finding the way home. Finally, in *This Way Home*, Moore and Goodman portray the transformation of a home once thought to be a place of safety and refuge into a threat to a successful future, a place to be escaped.

As librarians, teachers, and parents, we will undoubtedly encounter young readers who grapple with notions of home, children and young adults who are faced with the prospect of rebuilding their lives in a new place. For young people who have faced a loss of home, such works of literature as those reviewed here can offer the assurance that they are not alone in their experience. Reading the experiences of these characters has the potential to provide comfort to young people who seek ways to reconnect with lost homes and recreate a sense of home in a new locale. Our reviewers point out that these books can help young people who have not lived the experience of displacement as well, to develop insight and empathy for those who struggle with notions of home—both peers they know directly and those seen in global news coverage. The novels, picture books, and works of nonfiction reviewed in this issue present characters negotiating a range of powerful emotions and highlight the fact that home is multifaceted, and that there are many ways to recapture, reestablish, or rebuild home. We would like to thank our reviewers for sharing their opinions and reactions with our readers.