

“One Day We Had to Run”: The Development of the Refugee Identity in Children’s Literature and its Function in Education

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Abstract In the last two decades there have been significant numbers of children’s books written about various aspects of the refugee experience. Previously authors had tended to approach this sensitive area principally through an historical perspective. However as the number of refugees in British schools increases, books dealing with contemporary conflicts are published in greater numbers. How do children view this growing body of literature? A short ethnographic study attempts to interrogate the importance of autobiography and personal testimony in the construction of refugee identities in children’s books, and the article discusses the validating role of these texts and their purpose as educative tools in our classrooms. I conclude by considering potential areas within the current curriculum for using story to highlight the situation of those for whom “One day we had to run!” (Wilkes, *One Day We Had to Run!* London: Evans Bros Ltd., 1994).

Keywords Refugee · Identity · Refugee experience · Asylum seeker · Autobiography · Personal testimony · Migration · Validation · Empathy

Introduction

When *The Silver Sword* by Ian Serraillier (1956) was first published it was not readily welcomed into the existing “canon” of children’s literature. On being made into a television serial in 1957, “many people wrote to the head of BBC children’s television protesting that war was

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not a suitable subject for children—that it was not right to show them this terrible chapter of human history.” (Jane Serrailier Grossfeld, 1993, p. 192) In fact *The Silver Sword* can claim to be the first widely known children's book, written in English, where the refugee experience¹ is the major theme of the narrative. The last 50 years have seen a change of attitude regarding the suitability of challenging subject matter for young people, including forced migration, to the point where today the stories of children seeking asylum are an increasingly common preoccupation amongst authors. How, therefore, is the refugee identity constructed, and what is its purpose in children's literature? How can educators use this developing genre to good effect?

Much has been written about children's literature that deals with war, and specifically the holocaust, but there has been little research about the portrayal of the refugee experience in children's books, which is now itself developing into a significant genre. The rapid growth in these books, which are aimed at all ages, has not been documented separately and yet there are compelling messages that derive from them about citizenship, tolerance, respect and integration, as well as the enduring nature of the human spirit in the face of terrible circumstances.

Since the 1950s, it is possible to identify numerous books written for children in English, or translated and available on the UK market, which explore the refugee experience and embrace stories set in locations as far afield as Bosnia, Somalia, Nigeria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam, targeted at an ever-younger readership (Hope, 2007). As expected, these books reflect the waves of migration experienced by western countries in recent years, as conflicts escalate and globalisation, as well as improved travel, leads to a growing number of people claiming sanctuary in other countries. In 2007, there were as many as 14,000,000 refugees worldwide (USCRI, 2007) and this newly emergent genre in children's literature reflects this reality.

Refugee Stories for Children: An Emergent Genre

The Silver Sword gives us the refugee experience in the form of an imagined adventure story: children crossing borders to escape, travelling thousands of miles in dangerous conditions, and finally being reunited with their parents. The fact that it has lasted as a class reader in schools for 50 years is testimony to the compelling nature of the subject matter, although its current appeal has been called into question. Nevertheless children are still attracted to the idea of young people taking control of their destiny and depending on each other without adult support. As well as being full of dramatic tension and vivid images, it does arguably translate to present-day situations and makes “the suffering of refugees accessible to readers when filtered through the literary restraints of the time” (Agnew and Fox, 2001, p. 172).

The 1960s and 1970s saw the publication of two seminal books addressing the refugee situation, *I am David* by Anne Holm (1965), first published in Danish in 1963, and *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* by Judith Kerr (1971), creator of the famous “Mog” books. The former, an impressive piece of fiction which has been made into a feature film, is deliberately mysterious and unfathomable. Its political and historical location is unique in that it is set in the Cold War, and deals with a boy escaping from a Bulgarian labour camp, under the then

¹ According to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is someone who has left his/her country and cannot return to it “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” An asylum seeker is someone who has crossed an international border in search of safety and refugee status in another country. For the purpose of this article refugees and asylum seekers will be considered together under the term “refugees,” as their situations are very similar.

Communist regime (Jill Marshall, [undated](#)). None of this is explicit and, for children, it is merely an adventure story, which also deals with the psychic world of a child who has been incarcerated for most of his life, as he struggles to make sense of normal life and interact with people he encounters on his journey. The latter deals with the author's lightly fictionalised experience of escaping Nazi Germany, and fleeing to Switzerland, France and then England. As Gillian Lathey ([1999](#), p. 51) notes, "Kerr writes with feeling about the frustration of being unable to express herself in a new language."

Again, the theme of Jewish refugees escaping Nazism during World War II is the subject matter of Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* ([1989](#)), and Michael Morpurgo's *Waiting for Anya* ([1990](#)), set in Denmark and southern France, respectively. The support of the general population for those in flight to Sweden (Lowry) and Spain (Morpurgo), makes for dramatic and compelling subject matter, but the picture is still of the refugee experience as something belonging to the past, rather than a living reality for present day children in our classrooms. Finally, in the 1990s, the stage widens to encompass contemporary conflicts, and the number of refugees arriving in the UK is paralleled by a dramatic increase in related books, beginning with Elizabeth Laird's *Kiss the Dust* ([1991](#)), the story of an Iraqi Kurdish girl and her family. The 1990s saw the publication of nearly twenty books on the topic and, since the millennium, we have seen a dramatic opening up of this newly emergent genre.

Recent Books, Current Themes

While many children's books about refugees have focussed on the experience of flight in an historical context, maybe with the intention of distancing the experience, what is interesting to note is that much recent literature on this topic now looks at current themes, growing out of present conflicts and modern life experiences. This strikes a chord with the contemporary view that refugees should be seen as ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances (Rutter, [1991](#), p. 4). Literature for children about the refugee plight can highlight many different situations and locations, historical and geographical, adding insight to individual events, and taking selective parts of the refugee experience, or attempting to deal with it in its totality. In this way it is a perfect vehicle for disseminating information about diverse experiences, adding depth and understanding to what otherwise tends toward generalisation, homogeneity and stereotyping (Rutter, [2006](#), p. 5). As Agnew and Fox put it:

Late twentieth-century children's novels present their protagonists not as heroic or saintly figures, but as ordinary people caught up in terrible events. ... Above all they demonstrate the inner strength, resourcefulness and determination of ordinary people, rather than the glamorised heroics of earlier novels. ([2001](#), p. 56)

We now have books dealing with conflict in many areas of the world, and constructing a more contemporary picture of children as refugees. Some deal with the former Yugoslavia (e.g. *Zlata's Diary* by Zlata Filipović ([1994](#)) and *No Gun for Asmir* by Christobel Mattingley ([1993](#))). Some look at children fleeing from the Taliban in Afghanistan (e.g. *The Breadwinner's Daughter* trilogy by Deborah Ellis ([2001–2004](#)), *Boy Overboard* by Morris Gleitzman ([2003](#)), and *My Forbidden Face* by Latifa ([2002](#))). Others focus more on what happens to refugee children when they come to this country, as, for example, *The Girl in Red* by Gaye Hıçyılmaz ([2000](#)). Another angle is to detail the shift from the refugees' home country, through their experience of flight, to deal with what meets them in England. This is the subject matter of the celebrated *The Other Side of Truth* ([2000](#)) and its sequel, *Web of Lies* ([2004](#)) by Beverley Naidoo, and of Elizabeth Laird's previously mentioned *Kiss the Dust* ([1991](#)), which

follows a Kurdish girl from her wealthy life in Iraq, up into the mountains, over to Iran, and from there to England. Following on logically, some books have then looked at campaigns to fight deportation, such as *A Fight to Belong* (1999) by Alan Gibbons and Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* (2001). Finally, there are now also picture books for the younger market addressing the refugee experience, such as *The Colour of Home* by Mary Hoffman and Littlewood (2002) and *Petar's Song* by Pratima Mitchell (2004).

Understanding the Refugee Experience

Refugee children can be said to experience “a culmination of loss, trauma and change” (Rutter, 1994, p. 89). Refugees lack stability and security and if, as is often the case, they have left at short notice, they can arrive in a host country feeling disoriented and bewildered. They are unable to interact satisfactorily with others because of language barriers, and their previous lives are unknown or do not translate across cultures. Refugees, both young and old, may thus be isolated and friendless. However the “traumatisation” of the refugee situation has dominated research to the extent that it has presumed a homogeneity amongst refugee children, an assumption which needs to be broken down (Rutter, 2006, p. 5).

Nevertheless, with greater migration and the creation of more refugees, new hybrid identities are developing that sometimes involve a strengthening of ethnic and religious affiliation. For example, after the war in Bosnia, a refugee narrative was constructed by survivors mobilising a collective memory (Asikainen, 1997). The purpose of this was to share experiences, create a sense of togetherness in exile, and help to foster a new identity as a refugee. This is often necessary for self-recognition and survival (Dobson, 2004). Moreover, research by the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture (Melzak and Warner, 1992), based on interviews with Eritrean refugee children in Sweden, found that they valued teachers who asked about their experiences and included them in the curriculum. Refugee children need to know that they are not unique in their struggle to make friends and integrate into what is often a hostile or, sometimes indifferent school environment.

As Bill Bolloten and Tim Spafford (1998, p. 109) state, “Raising awareness of what it means to be a refugee ... is a vital step in understanding the needs of refugee children.” Such awareness is important both for the teachers of refugee children and also their classmates, who are often called upon to perform a welcoming role, and whose friendship will be crucial to the acceptance of such children into the school and local community. Rainey and Campbell (1997) found that young adults without any social contact with refugees displayed superficial sympathy but no identification, refugees' backgrounds and situations being seen as belonging to another world. The use of personal testimony is important in stressing to youngsters that refugees are ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, and techniques such as “Forum Theatre” (Day, 2002) and drama workshops (Watts, 2004) have proved effective in countering commonly held perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers, often gleaned from the tabloid press. Such activities “emphasise the part that children's literature plays in the development of children's understanding of both belonging (being one of us) and differentiation (being other),” as Margaret Meek (2001, p. x) puts it.

Many writers have addressed the dual role of literature in offering insights into our own and others' lives (Cullingford, 1998, p. 205). Readers need to see themselves represented in books to affirm their place in the world (Bishop, 1992). But equally, through books we can visit geographical and historical locations that are different from our own (Lathey, 2001, p. 9) and this can develop tolerance and understanding, as well as clarifying our own cultural identity. The educative effect of children's stories can operate through developing the imagination to

increase understanding of “the common pool of humanity” (Britton, 1993, p. viii). Fostering empathy is not achieved in an instant, though. Neither is it measurable, but that does not mean that it is not a vital part of the educative process.

The Role of Autobiography

Children's literature about World War Two very often has an autobiographical flavour. As Carol Fox (2001, p. 45) says, “Those who write after the war is over look back on real events and interpret them as stories on behalf of generations who were not there.” Nowadays there is a strong feeling that young people should know about the cruelty of human beings, so that they can learn lessons from the past. The individual childhoods we meet in these books are sometimes those of the authors themselves, or people they knew. Telling the story may also be an important act for writers, resolving something in their own experience. “In this regard,” as Agnew and Fox (2001, p. 138) put it, “the narratives have a unique intensity.” Be that as it may, there is a sense in which all reflection about the self is cathartic and, in this way, there is a universality in the autobiographic act which resonates for us all. As Harold Rosen expresses it:

We all offer each other moments from our lives which may perhaps be brief memories of our childhoods or narratives of other kinds of personal experience, significant in some way. (Rosen, 1998, p. 1)

He argues that the riddle of personal identity is inextricably linked with the fluidity of contemporary society, and this is particularly pertinent in the case of migrants. When individuals have crossed borders, their past is left behind and so autobiography is a way of helping them remember and refresh their concept of self. Memory rescues us from any confusion we might have about who we are. If the experience is traumatic, involving persecution or the horrors of war, autobiography may be particularly cathartic, as already discussed. Moreover, autobiographical engagement has a spiral quality, in that it can help others reconstruct their own memories too. As Rosen (1998, p. 17) puts it, “To speak of one's past is always an invitation to others to think about and possibly speak of their own.” If sensitively managed in the safe environment of the classroom, a refugee child can find the personal testimony of others therapeutic.

Children's Perspectives: A Short Ethnographic Study

As Margaret Meek (1987, p. 113) asserts, we need studies of children's literature that include the opinions of today's young readers. Adults writing about the subject bring the sum total of their experience to the text, and can have a closed view of the impact of a book; thus “we need to see children ‘performing’ meaning under the influence of texts and learning to *traffic in possibilities*.” I would like to think that my chosen method of research goes some way towards achieving this.

I identified five children of differing ages (see Table below), two of whom were refugees. I asked all five to read a range of texts, dealing with the various aspects of the refugee experience as previously discussed, and gave them a prior indication of the main questions I would be asking. After they had read the books I interviewed them in an open, conversational style, investigating their responses to two areas in particular: first, the importance of autobiography and personal testimony in the construction of the refugee identity; and second, the usefulness

of refugee texts for refugee and non-refugee children alike, both in validating lived experiences and as educative tools.

Of course, such a small study is only suggestive, but it is nevertheless interesting to extract some general themes from these interviews. The children sometimes said what I had expected, and sometimes not. Often they noticed things that surprised me. Usually the interview took unexpected turns, and several times participants seemed to be organising and developing their thoughts during the interview, as when B (see below) said, “I think I *have* got a stereotype of refugees who struggle to get here.” However, despite individual interpretations, the commonalities emerge very strongly.

Interviewee	Age	Country of origin	Title of book	Name of author
A	10	Afghanistan	<i>Mud City</i>	Deborah Ellis
			<i>Boy Overboard</i>	Morris Gleitzman
			<i>My Forbidden Face</i>	Latifa
B	12	Britain	<i>When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit</i>	Judith Kerr
C	14	Australia	<i>No Gun For Asmir</i>	Christobel Mattingley
			<i>Zlata's Diary</i>	Zlata Filipović
D	15	Britain	<i>The Girl in Red</i>	Gaye Hıçılmaz
			<i>Kiss the Dust</i>	Elizabeth Laird
E	16	Angola	<i>The Other Side of Truth</i>	Beverley Naidoo

The Importance of Personal Testimony

Four of the interviewees commented on the superiority of autobiography over fiction in providing authenticity to the stories. For A, *My Forbidden Face* conveyed an intensity of feeling that the other two texts she read did not. She noted the value of autobiography, not just for her own identification with the book, but to validate the experience in the eyes of others. Personal testimony was seen as important for B in the way that it conveyed the vividness of the experience. B felt she had a “front row seat into people’s lives. Not just a bunch of people. How it was for *them*.” C also expressed a clear preference for autobiography as opposed to fiction “in the first person” when reading about Zlata’s own first-hand and terrifying experience. Written by an 11-year-old girl, the power and authenticity of this book was partly seen to lie in its detail.

In contrast to these three, D thought that fiction *could* convey the power of such experiences, but only if it was well-researched and sensitive, written with sufficient emotional intensity to do the subject-matter justice. Similarly, A felt that even though Deborah Ellis was not Afghan, she had researched her book thoroughly, and it rang true. She felt that texts did not need to be autobiographical to be of value, but they must be as close to first-hand experience as possible. It was for this reason that A did not give Morris Gleitzman the same praise as Ellis. As Nikki Gamble (2001, p. 86) puts it, “Humour is one of the ways he [Gleitzman] engages children, stimulating laughter through his use of hyperbole and absurd situations,” and this young reader felt that the Gleitzman formula did not combine well with the subject matter. She found his characterisation implausible and patronising, and felt that he did not adequately reflect the respect Afghan children show their parents, as well as the amount of work they would be expected to undertake in the home. Furthermore, she felt that the ignorance of the main characters did not ring true: “Children in Afghanistan know a lot about the world.”

Validating the Lived Experience

In my research I also wanted to investigate the relevance of this literature to those who were themselves refugees. Reader A appreciated reading books about Afghanistan, and recognised similarities with her own situation, especially in the autobiographical text. She emphasised the importance of validating people's lived experience: "If it was hidden, they'd (refugees) feel lonely and they'd think people don't understand." For E, the book he read had helped him recognise his own story in another place, which had been cathartic. As he put it, "It's useful to bring back the memories. It's not too painful." In fact it prompted him to remember more details, and to share his story more than before, as Rosen suggested it might. E shared with me the details of his last day in Angola, and his feelings about his dad, the person he missed most and had never seen again. It was a moving moment.

Texts as Educative Tools

All of the five interviewees had ideas about the use and function of these texts to help others understand the refugee situation. Interviewee A mentioned the possibility, as a refugee, of being "made fun of" at school. Her belief in the power of reading to change points of view and foster empathy was emphatic, and the ethos of the school was seen as crucial. B noted that the historical perspective was potentially useful in challenging stereotypes of refugees, to show that refugees can be wealthy and come from near as well as far. Differences were noted too: *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* had left the impression with Reader B that refugees in present times face far more hurdles than their predecessors, which was an unexpected observation.

At C's school the ethos was not overtly welcoming, which he felt was probably a factor in the treatment of refugees, but he also pointed to the role of upbringing in attitude formation. C made the vital point that not all refugee experiences are the same—a point emphasised by Rutter (2006)—and a variety of texts is probably the best way of dealing with a complex range of reasons for flight. E felt that for those who hadn't had to leave their own country, books such as these performed a crucial role: "then kids can see the other side of truth." As he was at pains to spell out, they would understand other people's stories better and it would help to break down barriers of racism.

D felt that information about the country and background, and the use of maps, would be useful as a prologue to books dealing with geographical displacement and flight. For her, literature which portrayed refugees in their original home situation, and explained clearly their reasons for leaving, had a fascination. These texts could serve to illuminate the stories of friends and classmates, and develop tolerance and understanding. Again she felt that the stereotype of the poor refugee could be challenged through good quality literature, as the original status of the refugee might be surprising.

Refugee Stories in the Curriculum

So what is the relevance of children's books about refugees as teaching tools to challenge stereotypes and counter racism? In a related study, the celebrated children's author Beverley Naidoo (1992) spent a year with a class of young white people engaged in reading literature from perspectives strongly indicting racism. She wanted to investigate changes in attitudes of these young people over the year. Sara Goodman Zimet (1976) had shown that literature had a limited effect in tackling prejudice, and that people read books in a way that reinforced their

existing viewpoints. However, Naidoo felt that, during the year, work around the books had brought about instances where children had been opened up to “difference.” She also felt that the effects of the learning experience might not be apparent until some time later. As an author, the power of imagination is keenly felt by Naidoo (1992, p. 17):

I hope to take my readers into narratives and on journeys which will involve them in asking questions and challenging injustice, at least mentally, through being absorbed in a story.

Hence, although she was dealing primarily with racism, her findings would seem to have implications for the study of refugee stories in school, too.

English lessons are the obvious vehicle for the introduction of children's literature about the refugee experience, and Sadia Habib (2008) discusses the importance of choosing class novels of contemporary relevance, such as *Refugee Boy*, for the secondary classroom, through which teaching English can become a political activity. But another area where the genre is at home is in the Citizenship and PSHE curriculum. Some professionals in the field have already identified this as a niche. For example, *A Welcome Experience* (Herbert, undated) uses a series of children's books related to the theme of migration to highlight the refugee situation for all children in mainstream classrooms. Its aims are explicit: to relate the refugee experience to common feelings that all can share, and to reassure children that change can be positive, so that, more particularly, refugee children can recognise and deal with their own reactions. In this way such texts support the UK Government's “Every Child Matters” agenda with its concentration on supporting the emotional well-being of all children.

Clearly there are other opportunities for interrogating the potential of such literature. Drama is a classic area where emotions such as empathy can be given maximum exposure, and the work of Laura Day (2002) and Michael Watts (2004) demonstrates the strengths as well as the limitations of confronting refugee issues through the medium of drama. Other subject areas, such as art and music, offer potential sites for this work and use it as a stimulus for creative expression. The links with history and geography are also clear, but also whole-school initiatives, such as Refugee Week, can exploit the tremendous educative potential of these books, giving them the context for discussion to have maximum impact.

Conclusion

“The more connections all children make with each other's experience, the more ‘normal’ will be the refugee child's presence in school,” as Bolloten and Spafford (1998, p. 123) state. It would seem that children's literature about the refugee experience is an ideal context for sharing the stories, feelings and fears that many children have had to deal with in their relatively short lives, and expose stereotypes and media myths at the same time. However, many of these books remain on the sidelines, destined often for an audience with prior interest only. A few have managed to break through into the mainstream of children's literature. How to overcome this marginalizing of the refugee experience is a challenge for all educators, whether they be parents, teachers, librarians, authors or publishers.

What is clear is that schools have the potential to welcome, absorb and normalise the refugee situation. Challenging prejudice is difficult but necessary. As refugees become more competent in English, and have more education and skills, we are bound to encounter more autobiographical accounts, giving us their authentic voice. First-hand experience channelled into a narrative form is the optimal medium, as we have seen, and sharing these testimonies is an important part of the educational process. It may even lead to the sharing of more personal

stories offered up from the children around us. As Chris Kearney (2003, p. 8) expresses it, “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.” In this article I have shown how this can be done for all too many of those forced to declare, “One day we had to run!” (Wilkes, 1994).

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