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## **"So Many Hopes": A Qualitative Content Analysis of Children's Picture Books that Portray Refugees**

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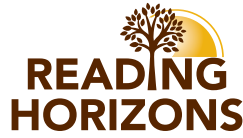
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## “So many hopes”: A qualitative content analysis of children’s picture books that portray refugees

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### Abstract

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Researchers used content analysis to analyze 40 award-winning and “best of” children’s picture books that portray refugees to answer the questions: How are refugees depicted in picture books? What messages are embedded in those depictions? Results show patterns and themes regarding depictions of trauma and violence in conjunction with setting as well as the portrayal of the arts as a vehicle for refugees to ignite personal agency in coping with the trauma they experienced. Implications for practice are discussed.

**Keywords:** *children’s literature, refugees, content analysis, picture books*

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As of May 2022, “the number of people forced to flee violence, conflict, human rights violations, and persecution crossed the milestone of 100 million for the first time on record, propelled by the war in Ukraine and other conflicts” (Siegfried, 2022, para. 1). News outlets share stories of local communities offering support amid images of refugees fleeing their homes. For example, in just 3 months, nearly 10,000 residents in New York applied to sponsor displaced people from Ukraine (Blau, 2022). In August 2022, Oregon announced its offer of “\$2.8 million for groups to help Afghan refugees find jobs and housing, access to health care, as well as mental health, legal and educational services” (Sunnicks, 2022, para. 1). PBS Wisconsin Education invited quilters to create quilts to donate to its Backpack Project, which aims to provide “a backpack filled with enrichment and learning opportunities for recently resettled refugee children... [that will] also contain a comfort item such as a plush toy or handmade quilt” (Lovdahl, 2022, para. 2).

Despite this recent outpouring of support, the United States has a history of being wary of those who are different in general and of refugees in particular. From the late 1800s, with an influx of refugees from Italy, Greece, Poland, and China, to today, citizens have been hesitant or even hostile toward newcomers. According to a 1946 Gallup poll, for example, 59% of U.S. citizens “disapproved of a plan to accept those displaced by the war—including Jews, who had survived the Holocaust” (Elving, 2015, para. 15). A similar lack of support was expressed for refugees from Vietnam in the 1970s, Cuba in the 1980s, and Haiti after the earthquake of 2010. Former President Trump’s 2017 Executive

Order 13769: Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States (also called the “Muslim ban”) and support for it was just one more example of widespread fear and lack of acceptance of those who are different, despite their circumstances.

Currently, there are over 26 million refugees worldwide, with nearly half of those under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2022). Despite this large number, due to COVID-19 both the UNHCR and the United States temporarily suspended “all resettlement departures worldwide” (National Immigration Forum, 2020, para. 5) in 2020, arguably exacerbating the refugee crisis across the globe. However, travel restrictions are decreasing, and President Biden increased the annual refugee admissions cap to 62,500 for fiscal year 2022 (up from the all-time low of 15,000 set by former President Trump) (Biden, 2021). Moreover, on September 8, 2022, President Biden announced in the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions that the United States would have a target of 125,000 total refugee admissions for fiscal year 2023. This is the highest target for admissions since the 1990s (Biden, 2022). As a result, there is more potential for children from refugee backgrounds to be enrolled in schools across the United States and in other countries granting asylum to displaced people and refugees.

Refugees are more than the traumas they have experienced. Research on the depictions of refugees in children’s picture books has shown that this collection of books tends to focus on the “perilous journey,” showing just one highly traumatic part of a refugee’s lived experience, and that more books are needed that share varied experiences (Ward & Warren, 2020). We agree with the need for more representations of refugee children focusing on a more nuanced depiction of their lives, not just the perilous journey. However, we also believe it is important to look specifically at how children’s picture books depict representations of trauma so we can make prudent decisions regarding how, when, and why we might put a book that portrays trauma in a child’s hands.

Unfortunately, studies show that nearly half of all refugee children have experienced at least one trauma (Erol & Secinti, 2022; Stewart, 2011). While these experiences are not all of who these children are, they have a tremendous impact on their lives and can affect their experiences with peers and in schools. For elementary school-age children specifically, exposure to trauma often manifests itself in changes in behavior, such as “aggression, anger, irritability, withdrawal from others, and sadness, trouble at school, trouble with peers, fear of separation from parents, and fear of something bad happening” (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d., para 2). Research indicates that these behaviors can make it difficult for children to make and keep friends, resulting in an unfortunate cycle, as children need supportive, caring friendships and to be able to observe and model behaviors from their classmates in order to be more likely to achieve academic success (Stewart, 2011; Zacarian et al., 2017). Further, studies point to the fact that seeing representations of one’s own lived experiences, regardless of how unspeakable they may be, can help children to feel less alone, to feel empowered to share their own stories, and to use strategies characters in books have offered in the management of their feelings connected to their traumatic experiences.

Unfortunately, children who are not refugees may be exposed to misinformation about refugees in the classroom, in the media, or at the kitchen table, without fully understanding the complexity surrounding the topic. These same children may be learning and playing with classmates who are refugees and who need their encouragement and friend-

ship as they navigate a new school, country, and perhaps language. With the vast array of opinions regarding refugees, it is essential to spend class time discussing this topic in a safe space moderated by a knowledgeable adult. While sharing children's picture books that portray refugees may be one powerful vehicle to introduce youth to current events and what it might be like to be a refugee, what if those books unintentionally promulgate stereotypes, fear, or othering?

In this study, we sought to answer the questions: How are refugees depicted in picture books? What messages are embedded in those depictions? We specifically looked at the representations of trauma and violence (in both words and images) and reflected on how those depictions may impact young readers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We framed this study in both refugee critical race theory (RefugeeCrit) and reader response theory. A relatively new theory, RefugeeCrit “foregrounds counter-storytelling as a methodology that brings forward what refugee children are experiencing and what else they could” (Strekalova-Hughes et al., 2018, p. 1). Further, RefugeeCrit “invites educational researchers to untangle stories of refugees that, left unstudied, could function as self-fulfilling mechanisms of oppression” and “offers a pointed interpretation of refugee-flight representations and related assumptions about children from refugee backgrounds. This framework can support teachers in text selection and meaningful critical literacy discussions” (Strekalova-Hughes et al., 2018, p. 1).

In addition to RefugeeCrit and because we are interested in how children, both those who are refugees and those who are not, will experience this collection of books, we also drew from reader response theory, which focuses on the reader and how the reader experiences a literary work (Rosenblatt, 1935/1995). Young readers learn about the world through the images and text in picture books. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) coined the phrase “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” to capture how literature affects a reader. A book that is a mirror allows readers to see themselves reflected in the book. In other words, readers connect to the characters because the experiences and characteristics are similar to theirs. A book that is a window allows readers to see someone different from themselves in the book. That is, readers discover life experiences different from theirs. A book that is a sliding glass door invites readers to learn of a different experience, and that new knowledge is the catalyst for readers to transform. The transformation can be simple, such as thinking differently about a topic or concept than they did before reading the book, to a more complex transformation in which an action takes place. Combined, these two theories guided our analysis of representations of refugees in children's picture books.

Research suggests that reading can impact not only knowledge but also attitudes, empathy, and perspectives about people who have different lived experiences from the reader (Cartledge et al., 2009; Freeman & Lehman, 2001; Hwang & Hindman, 2014; Kurkjian & Livingston, 2007; Monobe & Son, 2014; Rosenblatt, 1935/1995; Soter, 1999). Moreover, scholars propose that reading global literature can “effectively foster empathy and perspective-taking” (Parsons & Rietschlin, 2014, p. 131; Monobe & Son, 2014) and that “interacting with literary fiction creates relationships that should be considered real experiences that are part of a person's history and dynamic interactions with

the world” (Medina, 2010, p. 42). Using children’s picture books that portray refugees in the elementary classroom can help students empathize with those who have had different experiences while concurrently offering knowledge about various cultures, countries, histories, and the complexity of the refugee crisis. Simultaneously, it might also combat the isolation refugee students often feel from their classmates (Finnerty, 2015; Mosle, 2016).

However, simply sharing texts about refugees with children is not enough. Negative consequences may occur if care is not used in the classroom to select and use books that portray the refugee experience. Psychology shows us that “fearing outsiders is one of our oldest, built-in psychological tendencies,” that “when we begin to fear outsiders, we dehumanize them,” and that “when we fear outsiders, our brains exaggerate their threat” (Resnick, 2017, para. 9). We also know that stories can help combat a fear of others and help us develop empathy, understanding, and interest in those who are different from us. As such, it is crucial to discern how children’s books represent refugees to prevent unintentional reinforcement of negative stereotypes, fear, and othering and to help foster understanding, empathy, acceptance, and celebration of all who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Thus, in this research project, we examined award-winning and “best of” children’s picture books to determine both how refugees are depicted and the messages embedded in those depictions.

### **Review of Refugee Representations in Literature**

While there has been more research on refugees’ representation in literature in recent years, it remains a largely unexamined field. Some studies shared book recommendations to help children and/or adolescents understand the refugee experience (e.g., Darragh, 2017a; Emine, 2018; Hope, 2008, 2017; Hwang & Hindman, 2017; Lilliss, 2013; Monobe & Son, 2014); other studies offered teaching ideas about global issues including war, conflicts, and refugees through picture books (e.g., Hwang & Coneway, 2017; Monobe & Son, 2014). Only a few articles (e.g., Darragh, 2017b; Strelakova-Hughes et al., 2019; Ward & Warren, 2020) extensively and critically analyzed the collective body of children’s picture books portraying refugees.

In their analysis of children’s picture books and chapter books, Ward and Warren (2020) found that 32 of the 45 books published between 2013 and 2018 portrayed refugees focusing on the journey aspect of the refugees’ lives, while only nine focused on “making a new life after the journey had been made” (p. 408). Moreover, they “noted an overall emphasis across the texts on aspects of the refugees’ journeys best described as perilous” (p. 410) and argued that it is essential to “seek multidimensional ways of describing the dynamic nature of the refugee experience” (p. 410). Likewise, Strelakova-Hughes et al. (2019) analyzed 43 picture books that portrayed refugees. However, they focused on representations of the fathers in the books and how they are “attending in particular to embedded assumptions regarding who enacts power and agency” (p. 10).

Analyzing adolescent, not children’s, literature, Darragh (2017b) utilized a critical multicultural analysis in her study regarding refugees’ representations in young adult literature on the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People lists from 2011 to 2015. Similar to the above studies that focused on children’s literature, this study found that in the 15 young adult novels, there was a focus on the sometimes horrific challenges

that refugees must face. In addition, Darragh indicated that all books depicted outside support (e.g., governmental, relief organizations) for the refugees, that schools were portrayed as mainly a negative experience for the refugees, and that all books analyzed “depict some sort of trauma, often extreme, experienced by the refugee protagonists” (p. 18).

Focusing on books published in the United Kingdom, Hope (2017) found a correlation between the refugees entering the United Kingdom and the books published about refugees, with a substantial increase in books from the 1990s to the 2000s. While in the past, she explained, narratives about refugees focused on conflicts from many years ago, such as World War II, recent books usually share the current refugee experience. Hope shared that contemporary literature has focused more on current refugee crises, with children’s books published in the United States depicting more variety regarding “temporality, geographical spread and linguistic variety” than books published in other countries (p. xi). Similarly, focusing on German children’s literature, Feldman (2020) explained that they have “seen an efflorescence of recent children’s books about young refugees” (p. 130). Likewise, Emine (2018) noticed an increase in Turkish children’s literature highlighting social issues, such as immigrants and refugees, explaining that children’s books about refugees “are seen to be written by considering the social acceptance of refugees to create a social awareness” (p. 487).

In sum, the scholarship on the representation of refugees in children’s picture books, regardless of the publication location and specific to those picture books that children are most likely to come across in schools and libraries, is limited. To address this issue, we investigated children’s picture books that portray the refugee experience to answer these questions: How are refugees depicted in picture books? What messages are embedded in those depictions? We located no research focusing specifically on depictions of trauma and violence in conjunction with refugee literature. As such, we intentionally analyzed these portrayals (in both words and images) in the collection of books identified. To conclude, we offer suggestions for adults who would like to introduce children to the refugee experience through children’s literature.

## **Methods**

### **Positionality**

It is important to acknowledge that neither author comes from a refugee background. As such, we come to this work from an outsider’s perspective, doing our best to respectfully speak out for and to honor the lived experiences of refugees across the globe. Janine began volunteering with refugee resettlement in 2011, serving as both an English tutor and a liaison between refugee families and the K–12 schools their children attended. Since then, she has served as a mobile mentor for teachers in Kakuma Refugee Camp, facilitated workshops, and conducted trauma-sensitive teacher trainings for educators of refugees in Ukraine, Italy, Lebanon, and Syria. Having spent the past 11 years working with, learning from, and supporting these teachers of some of the world’s most vulnerable learners, she has a particular passion for and interest in this topic.

Starting in 1988, Jane began teaching English as a second language to refugee

children who relocated to the United States from Cambodia, Guatemala, Vietnam, and Laos. The influx of non-English-speaking refugees was problematic for her small school district, where the educators did not have the experience with or instructional resources for the students. Jane was given a corner in the school library to serve as a makeshift classroom, so children's picture books became the cornerstone of the curriculum. During the summers, she convinced the school district to offer summer school for the students, consisting of field trips to the local library, grocery stores, and city parks. After a few years teaching ESL, Jane moved to a different state and began teaching in the general classroom, where she often still had refugee students. She learned many lessons from her time spent with refugee students, and these experiences serve as a guide when teaching students of all ages today.

## **Book Selection**

Our unit of analysis for our qualitative content analysis was representations of refugees in children's picture books. We used the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database, Amazon, educational websites, and colleagues' recommendations to identify books for this study. Our initial search terms included "refugee" and "picture book," which yielded over 100 titles. To narrow our corpus, we filtered books by those that had won awards or honors, or had been identified on a "best of" list. Further, we excluded out-of-print and self-published titles. While we realize this may eliminate some quality texts that children may read, we decided to narrow our analysis to books that teachers and libraries most likely have on their shelves, such as award-winning titles. Thus, the criteria used to establish our short list were as follows: (1) picture books with characters portraying the refugee experience, (2) nonfiction or realistic narrative fiction, (3) books that won awards/honors or are on a "best of" list, (4) books still in print, and (5) books produced by traditional publishers (not self-published). This search yielded 40 books with publication dates spanning from 1988 to 2019 (see Appendix).

## **Approach to Data Analysis**

While our data analysis was a qualitative content analysis, because we were looking at the data through the lens of both reader response and RefugeeCrit, we also borrowed elements of critical multicultural analysis (Botelho & Rudman, 2009) and critical content analysis (Short, 2017) as a research methodology. Botelho and Rudman (2009) explained that critical multicultural analysis "is a way to understand the hegemonic relations, as well as considering ways of resisting dominant messages" (p. 117). Thus, critical content analysis (Short, 2017) sets forth procedures that locate and unpack the dominant discourses and how those discourses position us as readers. "A critical stance focuses on voice and who gets to speak, whose story is told, and in what ways" (Short, 2017, p. 5). Our guiding questions were: How are refugees depicted in picture books? What messages are embedded in those depictions? Using a qualitative content analysis approach (White & Marsh, 2006), we first did a general read of each book, then did multiple close readings of the books, analyzing the illustrations with reference to Marsh and White's (2003) taxonomy for relationships between images and text, making notations of emerging themes.



## Coding Process

Along with demographic elements such as the refugee's age and gender, we also coded for setting and the refugees' homeland to the country they settled in. In addition, modeling Darragh's (2017b) study on the representation of refugees in young adult novels, we coded for whether the refugee received outside help, whether and how school was depicted, whether the refugee had lost anyone, and whether the refugee had experienced personal violence. As we began coding books, using a constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) more patterns emerged; therefore, we added depictions of peer and family relationships, instances of loneliness and isolation, depictions of hope and joy, and the arts as an outlet for the trauma and violence the refugees experienced to our coding chart. We read and coded a sample of books individually and talked through the codes identified to ensure reader reliability. In all instances, the codes matched, so we split the remainder of the books, discussing individual books when questions about coding arose. After identifying and coding key aspects of the books, one key theme emerged: depictions of trauma and violence.

Gathering the books again, we did a second round of coding, focusing specifically on the portrayal of trauma and violence, identifying whether trauma and/or violence appeared in each book and, if so, in what ways. We analyzed both the text and the visuals depicted connected to trauma and violence as well as depictions of how the characters coped with and healed from the trauma they experienced, constantly referring back to our theoretical framework in order to focus on how these images might impact both readers who are refugees and those who are not. We utilized Marsh and White's (2003) taxonomy to identify and analyze the relationship of the illustrations to the text on the pages that portrayed trauma and violence. For our sample, in all cases, the illustrations served as "functions expressing close relation to the text" or "functions that go beyond the text" (Marsh & White, 2003, p. 653), so we coded accordingly (e.g., does the illustration describe, exemplify, contrast, parallel, complement the text and in what ways). For example, we focused on the use of color, placement of the protagonist, and size of focal images on each page and how these connected and contrasted to both the text and the representations of experiencing and coping with trauma.

## Findings

### Depictions of Genre, Protagonist, Homeland, and Themes

In this research project, we sought to determine how refugees are depicted in award-winning and highly recommended realistic or nonfiction narrative children's picture books. We found a variety of representations, with most of the books (75%) being nonfiction or based on or inspired by a true story. In most of the books analyzed (85%), the refugee was the protagonist, and there was a fairly even split with regard to the gender of the refugee protagonist, with 22 males and 15 females (three books had both male and female refugee protagonists). The refugee characters came from various countries and represented multiple time periods, from as early as 1621 to the present-day Syrian conflict. Twenty-seven of the books (68%) take place from 1975 to the present (typically focusing on refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, Sudan, or the Middle East), 11 (28%) take place prior to 1975 (most taking place during World War II), and two books



had unspecified settings, and we were unable to determine the time from the illustrations and text.

Looking beyond themes at categories that emerged as most prevalent, most books (93%) presented feelings of hope and joy. Upon further analysis of hope and joy representations, we found that 14 books (35%) depicted refugees' joy coming from participation in the arts (e.g., poetry, dance, music, creating art). In these cases, refugee characters used the arts as a positive outlet to resist oppression and cope with their trauma and grief.

### Depictions of Trauma and Violence

Nearly all the books analyzed (95%) portray trauma, depicted through words, illustrations, or both. Through multiple readings of the books focusing on the trauma specifically, another pattern emerged: representations of trauma in the form of violence in conjunction with the setting of the text. For this analysis, we used the American Psychological Association's (APA; 2021, Trauma) definitions of trauma and violence to differentiate between the two. Trauma is defined as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident... or natural disaster" (para. 1). Violence is defined as "the expression of hostility and rage with the intent to injure or damage people or property through physical force" (APA, 2021, Violence, para. 1). Specifically, if the book depicted an immediate threat to life (e.g., guns, knives, bombs) and/or blood or dead bodies in words or pictures, we coded it as violence. For example, in *The Whispering Cloth: A Refugee's Story*, Shea (1996) writes, "Little Mai slept between her mother and father, who were very beautiful even though blood dripped from their heads." The accompanying illustration is in the form of a story cloth. In the top left corner of the needlework illustration, the mother and father are covered in blood, lying in the hut. There are soldiers shooting guns, and bombs are being dropped on the homes. The images clearly reiterate the text. Due to both its words and images, we coded this book as depictions of violence.

Conversely, we coded Patricia Polacco's (2013) *Blessing Cup* as depictions of trauma, not violence, as the book describes, "Suddenly in the middle of night Anna was startled awake to terrible sounds.... Anna's papa ran to the temple. When her papa got there, it was too late. The temple was in flames." The accompanying illustrations show a mother and two children clinging to each other. Through the barn window, the readers see a shadow of a soldier holding what looks to be a rifle. The two-page illustration spread is black and white except for the child's head scarf. The turned-down faces of the mother, child, and even the sheep amplify the characters' terror. While a traumatic event is being portrayed, it does not meet the APA's definition of violence. Though the books that portrayed violence also depicted trauma, we coded each book as either trauma or violence to differentiate between the two. In total, 21 books (53%) portrayed trauma and violence, 15 books (38%) portrayed trauma (no violence), and four books (10%) portrayed neither violence nor trauma.

### Depictions of Geographic Locale

When looking at the inclusion of violence regarding setting, all the books (100%) that portray violence take place in what we determined to be modern day, 1975

to the present. Specifically, the books set before the Vietnam War do not convey depictions of violence, while 21 of the 27 books about modern times (78%) include violence through words and/or visuals. These depictions of violence become even more problematic when considering the trends we identified in the text set. All the violent descriptions were in books with modern settings and with refugees from the Middle East, Africa, or Asia. When students see depictions of violence in picture books, coupled with images they might see on television, it can collectively further “other” those who are refugees. Moreover, what happens when these depictions of refugees and the violence and trauma they have experienced are the sole entry points a child has into the life of someone from a different culture, a different country, a group of people, or individuals who may already be marginalized?

For example, *Half a Spoon of Rice: A Survival Story of the Cambodian Genocide* (Smith & Nhem, 2010) shares a young boy’s horrors when the Khmer Rouge army comes to his town and starts shooting. The book describes the violence:

There is gunfire and I hear screaming.... “The Americans are going to bomb the city,” claims one of the soldiers... he yells at us, his rifle pointing upward. I feel like I can’t go any further. But when we approach what looks like a dead body, I find new strength to keep moving.... I see some terrible things, and I do not want to die.... People start to leave the camps to look for their families. We are shocked to see so many dead bodies along our route. To safely cross parts of the path, we sometimes walk on top of the bodies to avoid stepping on a mine.

The accompanying illustration is a full-page depiction of soldiers in uniforms with guns pointing at families as they flee in chaos. Belongings are scattered on the ground, and the focal family is collecting those items, terror on their faces, while four soldiers surround them, their raised guns at the center of the page, where the eye is drawn to them. Graphic descriptions of atrocities coupled with illustrations such as dead bodies, soldiers grabbing children, and photos of children in labor camps and the killing fields can deeply upset children and promulgate fear regarding people from other countries in general and refugees in particular. As such, we feel adults must be judicious when presenting books like this to children. Teachers and parents might prepare young readers ahead of time, offer nonviolent representations of people from Cambodia, and be prepared to answer questions and have courageous conversations with readers regarding this horrific part of history.

While not as graphic in its descriptions, the bilingual (English and Arabic) book *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family’s Journey* (Ruurs & Badr, 2016) also describes violence, in this case, violence enacted on Syrian refugees:

Not everyone made it safely across. We said prayers for those whose journey ended at sea.... A river of strangers in search of a place where bombs did not fall, where people did not die on their way to market. A river of people in search of peace.

The accompanying artwork, images created from stones by a Syrian artist, show, for example, a family in a cage, bombs falling, and a family running. On the one hand, we believe it is essential to share the truths and horrors associated with being forced to leave one’s home and realize that refugees still exist today. On the other hand, the overrepresentation of violence in the refugee picture books set from 1975 to the present could

bolster negative stereotypes about a refugee's life and potentially fortify a nationalistic perspective that other countries are scary, evil, violent, and bad.

### Depictions of the Resettlement Country

Children's books that romanticize locations where refugees fled to can unintentionally accentuate nationalism. For example, *Leaving Vietnam: The Journey of Tuan Ngo, a Boat Boy* shares the true story of Tuan's experience leaving Vietnam with his father:

We are going to America and we are going to help save the rest of our family from the Vietcong soldiers.... America at last! My grandparents told me America was a country of gold where people were happy. And now I am here. (Kilborne & Sweet, 1999)

The illustration on this page emphasizes the joy and relief Tuan feels. The background is all yellow. Tuan is smiling in his father's arms. People are wearing colorful clothes of red, green, purple, and blue. This contrasts with the illustrations on the previous pages. During the journey, Tuan and his father are both dressed in all black. They are not smiling, and their faces are often blurry. Once they arrive at the camp and receive news that they will be able to come to the United States, the illustrations reflect and reiterate the optimism the father and son feel. Similarly, in *My Name Is Sangoel* (K. L. Williams & Stock, 2009), Sangoel is a refugee from Sudan who comes to the United States and observes, "America was big and open and free. There was no barbed wire to keep them in." The illustrations complement the text that shares Sangoel's experiences in the United States. The characters are all wearing bright colors. The backgrounds are bright, with most of the pages having yellow as a backdrop to the images of children. One page in the book is dark, all in gray tones. The accompanying text reads, "That night Sangoel slept on a rug on the floor instead of in his American bed. He had bad dreams about war and running and hiding." This one dark page contrasts Sangoel's past in Sudan and his present in the United States.

In *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (M. Williams & Christie, 2005), Tom, a white volunteer from the United States, helps the boys. In one illustration, Tom is standing tall in a white shirt with his hands raised among a sea of Sudanese children. The children are all looking up at Tom, their dark brown hair and heads contrasting with Tom's bright white shirt and face. In another illustration, Tom is standing with his hand raised, and all the children are running to him, to safety. The text enhances this white savior depiction: "'It's safe, it's safe!' I cried. Tom has come to save us!" In these examples, we echo Ehst and Hermann-Wilmarth's (2014) caution to teachers about not unintentionally emphasizing the concept that refugees require help and that Westerners must be the helpers. Further, like Monobe and Son (2014), we acknowledge that reading books set around the world can help students consider different perspectives, develop empathy, and understand the complexity of various global issues. However, adults must cautiously present refugee literature so as not to position refugees as helpless. As Hope (2017) argued, when sharing the trials and tribulations of refugees, acknowledge their resiliency with positive images that inspire young readers "rather than patronizing pity or destructive self-pity" (p. 157).

## Depictions of Friendship

We identified four books with modern settings focused on friendships providing a counternarrative to refugees' homelands being rife with violence. For example, *Lubna and Pebble* (Meddour & Egnéus, 2019); *The Banana-Leaf Ball* (Milway & Evans, 2017); *Four Feet, Two Sandals* (K. L. Williams & Mohammed, 2007); and *Joseph's Big Ride* (Farish & Daley, 2016) all focus on friendships and sharing something the refugee child protagonists love, be it a special pebble, a ball, shoes, or a bicycle. In each of these books, primary colors are used in the illustrations, and the focal images are of the child refugee protagonists. The children are wearing colorful clothes and smiling on the backdrop of bright pages. In *Lubna and Pebble*, for example, the very first spread is Lubna's face. Taking up both pages, she is smiling, and her eyes are sparkling. She is holding a pebble, her "best friend" that is "shiny and smooth and gray." Each page of the book has a central focus on either Lubna or her new friend, Amir. The children and their friendship, which culminates with Lubna leaving the refugee camp with her family and giving her pebble to Amir, are clearly the book's focus, showing the power of these two characters and their friendship. Similarly, in *Four Feet, Two Sandals*, Lina, dressed in hues of red and pink, is the only face we see on the page among the feet of many adults as she finds and puts on a bright yellow sandal with a turquoise flower. Another young girl, Feroza, dressed in bright green, has found the other sandal. The girls decide to take turns wearing the pair of sandals. Each page focuses on the smiling faces of the two girls as their friendship grows, and the yellow background exemplifies hope and shines on the beautiful friendship that has developed despite their challenging circumstances. These stories provide a more nuanced look at the lives of refugees, centering them as important, agentic individuals and demonstrating that there are indeed similarities among children worldwide. In these cases, the refugee children help one another by sharing their special belongings and offering friendship. Using books like these in conjunction with books that focus more on violence and trauma can give young readers a fuller picture and deeper understanding of what life might be like for a refugee.

## Depictions of Participation in the Arts

Finally, in this study, we found that many books depicted characters participating in the arts as a form of resistance and coping with their trauma. According to Bell and Desai (2011),

The arts can help us remember, imagine, create, and transform the practices that sustain oppression as it endures across history and locality. When tuned to that purpose, the arts play a vital role in making visible the stories, voices, and experiences of people who are rendered invisible by structures of dominance. (p. 288)

For example, in *The Roses in My Carpets* (Khan & Himler, 2004), the protagonist from Afghanistan shares his love for the art of carpet weaving: "When I am weaving I can escape the jets. The nightmares. Everything. It is as if with my fingers I can create a world the war cannot touch." Throughout the book, the illustrations are dark and shadowy with either blurred faces or people frowning. In contrast, the pages that depict the protagonist weaving are bright and parallel the text:

Green is the color of life. Blue is the sky. One day it will be free of jets. Everything in camp is a dirty brown, so I do not use brown anywhere in my carpets. Red is my favorite. Red is the color of the blood of martyrs. But it is also the color of roses.... I make sure there are plenty of roses in my carpets.”

In these pictures, the protagonist is the focal illustration, holding the red thread, smiling, in front of a background of yellow and pink. The book concludes with a two-page spread of strikingly contrasting images. On the left side, the page is brown and gray and black, amplifying the text: “While running, we find a space, the size of a carpet, where the bombs cannot touch us. Within that space there are roses.” The picture on the right side of the page has no text. It shows the mother, sister, and boy dancing on a carpet of roses under a bright blue sky with white doves flying above them. This contrast shows the peace, hope, and escape that the arts, in this case weaving specifically, can provide in unspeakable times.

Similarly, in *When I Get Older* (K’naan & Gutierrez, 2012), K’naan sets a poem his grandfather wrote for him to music and “asked my friends from different countries and my friends from Canada if they wanted to sing my grandfather’s poem with me. I wasn’t afraid anymore. Grandfather was right. Music made me safe.” In this case, the poem gave K’naan courage and strength to move forward. He ultimately was able to share the poem in the form of a song with his new friends and perform it for the whole school. The corresponding images reflect K’naan’s journey from fear and sadness to joy and healing. The page where K’naan’s grandfather gives him the poem has a gray background. There are shadows of men carrying guns that center on the page. K’naan and his grandfather are encircled in crimson splotches that look like blood. Grandfather looks to be crying, holding K’naan in his arm. K’naan has his hand over his mouth, clearly distressed, which contrasts strikingly with the book’s last page, where K’naan and his friends are singing his grandfather’s poem-turned-song. K’naan is in the center of the page, wearing a bright purple shirt. His face is outlined in yellow, and he is smiling. The background is bright yellow with smiling cartoon faces and flags in bright primary colors encircling K’naan. The visuals clearly depict K’naan’s transition from fear and sadness to joy, and poetry and music were the vehicles that ignited this healing.

Also using art to cope with and heal from trauma and grief is Reicherter and Hale’s (2018) *The Cambodian Dancer: Sophany’s Gift of Hope*. This book shows the Khmer Rouge invading Sophany’s homeland and the Cambodian people needing to hide their culture and traditions, such as their ancient way of dancing. After many years of living in the United States, Sophany noticed that Cambodian American children seemed sad: “It was as if the children were growing up as shadows too.” On this page, the images reflect sadness and shadows. The only colors used are shades of brown, grey, and blue, and the pages are of literal shadows of children, walking hand in hand on what appears to be the globe. Then Sophany remembers how much she loved the ancient dance and she decided to teach this art form to the girls in her community: “The energy of the dance shone light into the shadows.... The dance gave the girls energy, the dance gave Sophany energy, too. Watching the girls, Sophany smiled. Now the shadows are gone. Now there is dance again.” Unlike the previous pages, these pages are full of vibrant colors. The girls are dancing with smiles, wearing red, yellow, blue, lavender, and white outfits. The backdrop for these pages is a sunny yellow, reflecting the joy and energy described. This contrast between the darkness of a life with no dancing and the joy of dancing and

sharing that love with others clearly shows the healing quality that the arts, in this case dancing, brings to Sophany and the future generation of Cambodian girls.

Also set in Cambodia, Lord and Arihara's (2015) work of narrative nonfiction, *A Song for Cambodia*, shares how music helped Arn manage the trauma he faced as a child in work camps, where he learned to play the *khim*, a wooden string instrument: "Over the years, Arn's nightmares transformed into a dream—a dream of helping his homeland. With his heart once again full of sweet sounds, Arn vowed to return to his country... to help others with his music." While the illustrations up to this point in the book are dark, in shades of brown and green, this page has a bright yellow backdrop. Arn is smiling, wearing a bright blue t-shirt, and teaching others how to play instruments. The accompanying text reiterates his joy: "In time he began to play for other people and learned to talk to them about his life in Cambodia. Through playing his music and telling his story, Arn slowly began to heal on the inside too." As an adult, Arn later achieved his goal, founding the Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development and the Children of War organization. The transition from despair to hope, as depicted through both text and illustration, corresponds to Arn's rediscovered love for making music.

In *My Beautiful Birds* (Del Rizzo, 2017), the Syrian refugee protagonist is given paints at school. He

remember(s) filling my pigeon's food bowl, then—in a flash—my neighborhood and all that was home... gone.... One day we are given paints, paper, and brushes. I try to paint my beautiful birds.... But the wisps turn to black. Smoky black smears from edge to edge swallowing everything underneath. I tear my painting piece by piece. Black paint stains my hands and my clothes. My stained heart is torn to pieces too.

In this case, art allows the protagonist to share his anger, fear, and grief. The corresponding illustration amplifies this pain. The left side of the page is completely black, and the right side shows the top portion of the painting of a bird, with the bottom of the painting covered over in black paint. The background on this page is brown, again emphasizing the darkness inside the protagonist as he struggles with his trauma. Later, and again through art, the reader sees how the boy is healing from the trauma he has experienced:

I paint feathers of yellow, rose, and turquoise. Mixing my pigeon-gray paint, I use just one dab of black. Our kites zigzag and zoom in a game of tag. The sunbeams flicker through the whirl of kites, making the gritty sand sparkle. Today is a good day.

This two-page spread of illustrations shows children, including the protagonist, smiling and flying kites. The backdrop is a sky of lavender, yellow, and white, and the brightness of the page contrasts strongly with the darkness of the previous pages. Authors presenting refugee characters using the arts as a form of resistance to oppression and as an outlet for trauma provide young readers with strategies for how the arts can help them express emotions, find comfort, and gain power in situations where they may feel they have none.



## Discussion and Implications

Collectively, the award-winning and “best of” picture books shared various refugee stories. Like Ward and Warren (2020), we found that most books depicting the refugee experience focused on the often perilous and traumatic journey rather than providing a fuller portrayal of the refugee characters and their lives before and beyond. However, our most significant finding was the depictions of violence in the books, specifically regarding the setting; this perhaps overrepresentation of violence in conjunction with the modern-day refugee has implications for teachers and the young readers they support.

We acknowledge that one characteristic that makes refugees different from immigrants or migrants is that refugees are forced to leave their homes because it is unsafe for them to be there. Unfortunately, being unsafe typically is connected to violence, be it war or personal, and it would be a disservice not to include this aspect of a refugee's life in children's literature. Indeed, as Youk Chhang, executive director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, explains in the foreword to *Half a Spoon of Rice: A Survival Story of the Cambodian Genocide*:

Although educating and talking to young children about the Khmer Rouge regime will always remain a difficult task, this book and its endearing story will help many parents introduce the subject to their children. The heartwarming story and vivid illustrations do their best to balance the horrors of genocide with its rare moments of humanity and kindness. This book is important for both its accessibility to children and its role in facilitating dialogue between the survivor generation and their children and grandchildren.

We believe that educators should share refugee stories and that children need to know what has been and is still going on in the world today regarding the refugee crisis. Speaking specifically of Holocaust literature, Elizabeth Goodenough (2000) explained, “The stories we tell about at-risk and risky children model our public understanding of victimization and trauma” (p. v). We need to expose children to “literature of atrocity” if we want to acknowledge, validate, and honor those who have gone through horrific events. Says Baer (2000) about children's books about the Holocaust:

The creation of a literature of atrocity for children, and the presentation of that literature, calls upon us to recognize and convey the evil that is new in the post-Holocaust world. . . . It calls for a consciousness on our part of the crucial need to confront the evil, to contextualize it, to warn children and to provide them with a framework for consciousness, for making moral choices and for taking personal responsibility. Finally it calls upon us to recognize the seeming paradox of the Holocaust as being at once “unspeakable” and yet something that *must* be spoken about, not necessarily to make it meaningful but to make its reality imaginatively possible so that the next generation is vigilant about the hatred inside all of us. (p. 391)

We extend this concept beyond the Holocaust to the books analyzed in our text set and believe the stories of refugees, no matter how painful, should and must be shared and that children's picture books are a powerful vehicle by which to do so. However, educators must use extreme care when selecting books to offer to children. While refugees are likely to have experienced trauma and violence and therefore those depictions offer



authentic portrayals, they can be upsetting for young readers and can trigger previous traumas and/or cause secondary trauma.

When selecting books for classroom use, teachers must use care and consideration. Book selection becomes even more important when teachers choose books about vulnerable populations. As mentioned above, educators must be thoughtful and intentional when selecting books, or they may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes, create fear, retraumatize, and isolate or “other” those from underrepresented groups. Regarding children’s picture books that portray refugees, we recommend that attention be given not just to including one refugee experience. Teachers can share books that take place in different periods and different countries to help children understand that while refugees existed in the past, there are still refugees today and they come from many different countries, leaving their homes for many different reasons.

Moreover, books that do not focus solely on the journey should be included with those that give a more nuanced view of a refugee’s life. Since many modern refugee narratives depict violence, it is important to select books that push back against a narrative that the places where the refugees originate, and any places outside of the United States, are scary, violent, and difficult. A teacher with the best intentions might inadvertently present the refugee experience as otherness and reinforce the concept that Westerners are the “helpers” and the refugees must be “helped.” As such, it would be essential to include stories beyond the refugee experience so that a given cultural group is not associated only with their hardships. Teachers might, for example, identify nonrefugee stories with characters from Cambodia, Syria, Laos, and Sudan. They might teach about the geography and culture of these countries. If available, teachers can look to their community for resources that will help educate students about the countries and cultures represented in the picture books shared. Inviting guest speakers to come in and talk about their time in a country can help students recognize the diversity in their communities and see similarities among people from different cultures. Moreover, various books, including those focusing on universal qualities like friendship and family, can help students better understand what it means to live with refugee status.

Although it is vital for educators to be critical selection connoisseurs, it is equally important for educators to teach their students how to read critically. Yenika-Agbaw (1997) asserted that reading is for pleasure and social change: “In a society that sanctions inequality, it is the teacher’s responsibility to show children how reading the word can affect how students read the world” (p. 452). For example, when reading books about refugees, educators must first introduce students to immigration complexities and then guide readers as they unpack the messages embedded in the stories through both words and visuals. At the same time, teachers must remember that readers have varied backgrounds and be aware that students will have multiple readings of a text.

Of the utmost importance, as always, is for teachers to know their students. While seeing themselves and their lives represented in literature is important, students from refugee backgrounds and/or who have experienced personal violence in their communities may be retraumatized by seeing depictions of violence and death in refugee narratives. Teachers can mitigate the potential for retraumatizing students by providing support to readers. They may give a content forecast of the book they will be sharing and an explicit message that all students are safe here. If teachers know that they have stu-

dents who come from contexts of trauma, they may be even more judicious in their book selection, perhaps choosing one that is less explicit in the violence portrayed. They can intentionally select books that show refugees living, not just refugees dying, books that do not just show refugees surviving but thriving.

Finally, many books in this study depict art as a vehicle for emotional healing. Incorporating the arts in conjunction with the books shared with students can offer them coping mechanisms they can use throughout their lives. Students can paint, dance, play instruments, and sing songs, just as the book characters did to express their emotions. They might track what activities and practices bring them comfort and peace so they can access these resources when needed. For example, teachers can guide students in creating and keeping a comfort journal, where they log times of joy and things that make them smile each day. If a student is distressed, they can refer to their comfort journal and take action, whether talking to a friend, going for a run, or listening to music. This socioemotional learning will benefit students not just in the classroom, but throughout their lives outside of the classroom as well.

### Conclusion

This study sought to answer these questions: How are refugees depicted in picture books? What messages are embedded in those depictions? We found that refugees, especially in the past 40 years, are overwhelmingly depicted as victims of violence and trauma. We acknowledge that experiencing violence and trauma is, unfortunately, often a reality for people from refugee backgrounds; however, we feel it is important to share with young readers depictions of refugees living full and happy lives before and beyond their traumatic experiences, both to honor all aspects of a refugee's life and to combat unintentional fear harboring and othering when learning about those who are different. Moreover, when sharing stories of trauma, teachers and caregivers should acknowledge that violence and trauma can be a part of anyone's life. Yet it is important to go one step further and talk with children about positive ways to cope with and manage the trauma they may have experienced through activities like participating in the arts, talking with friends, and practicing breathing and relaxation strategies.

The book *Where Will I Live* (McCarney, 2017) concludes with the statement, "So many questions. So many hopes. After such a long journey, and such a long wait, I hope someone smiles and says 'Welcome home.' I hope that someone is you." In this time of what seems to be pervasive uncertainty and divisiveness, it is even more important for children to learn about, empathize with, appreciate, and honor the lived experiences of those whose lives are different from their own. Raising refugee voices is a balance of selecting books of atrocity that show refugees' struggles and horrors with selecting books of hope and universal qualities while supporting young readers in understanding, advocating for, and welcoming newcomers into their communities and lives.

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### Appendix of Picture Books Analyzed

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