

APPLYING REFUGEECRIT TO RECENT MIDDLE GRADE/YOUNG ADULT CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ABOUT REFUGEES

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For the past 15 years I have been researching children's literature about the refugee experience, identifying early on the exponential growth of books in this "emergent genre."¹ By the time of the publication of my book *Children's Literature about Refugees: A Catalyst in the Classroom* in 2017, I could include an appendix of 250 titles on the subject published in English in the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and since then more titles are continually appearing, with several books achieving considerable attention in recent years.² Until the 1990s, the few refugee narratives written for children looked back to World War II and its aftermath, but the publication of Elizabeth Laird's *Kiss the Dust* in 1991, which depicted the story of an Iraqi Kurdish family's flight to Iran and thence to the UK, heralded a turning point in focusing on contemporary conflicts. From then on, children's and young adults' books mapped forced migration around the world. For example, the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s generated a few texts, including the compelling 1994 *Zlata's Diary*, recording first-hand the experience of living through the siege of Sarajevo.

Since the millennium, however, there has been an ever-increasing outpouring of such narratives following the vicissitudes of child refugees traveling mainly from across Africa and the Middle East—and especially Afghanistan since 2001. Particularly since 2015 there has been a focus on Syrian children, with the escalation of conflict there contributing to the world's largest refugee crisis in decades.³ Recent middle grade/young adult children's books (targeted at 8- to 18-year-olds) published in the UK include *The Bone Sparrow* (2016) by Zana Fraillon and *Boy, Everywhere* by A.M. Dassu (2020), which I will discuss in detail below, as well as *Welcome to Nowhere* by Elizabeth Laird (2017), *The Boy at the Back of the Class* by Onjali Q Rauf (2018), *Boy 87* by Ele Fountain (2018), and *A House Without Walls* by Elizabeth Laird (2019). However, none of these particular middle grade/young adult texts have been the subject of academic discussion and critique, as the focus has been more on the rapid growth of picture books about the refugee experience authored and illustrated in recent years.

Over the years, I have looked at how these books are authored, studied in the classroom, mediated by teachers, read by refugee and non-refugee children alike, and received by academic writers. Mainly, the response has been rapturous, with unquestioning claims that these books stimulate empathy for the refugee situation. However, Christine Wilkie-Stibbs notes that, although not a homogeneous category, much middle grade/young adult literature of this kind could well be described as "docu-novels ... whose priority is to narrate a social circumstance, or which have a message to tell."⁴ As such, I suggest they follow a formulaic representation of the refugee experience. The story often begins in a stable, peaceful setting in the protagonist's country of origin, while disruption, violence, and often warfare

begin to encroach, and the family moves slowly and reluctantly toward a decision to leave their home. Sometimes the story starts at the point of displacement, and sometimes the first move is internal, perhaps to relatives elsewhere, before making a long and horrific journey, full of drama and tension, to a “safe haven” in the West. Often the book finishes with a rescue by Western “helping hands” or some semi-miraculous intervention by a powerful “white saviour” who sorts out the situation, thereby moving toward the expected “happy ending.”

However, as authors search for new angles on the usual story, I have recently noticed a trend toward increasingly grim and explicit depictions of the suffering of refugee children, especially those trapped in refugee or detainment camps. Middle grade and particularly young adult texts are generally moving in this direction, with increasing interest in tackling difficult and challenging issues, in the form of highly explicit social realism, generating much debate. Christopher “Chris” Myers, illustrator and son of Walter Dean Myers, several times winner of the Coretta Scott King Award for books representing the African American experience in children’s literature, talked at the 2019 Bologna Children’s Book Fair of some authors engaging with the humanity of migration, but others competing to produce what he termed as “tragedy porn,” which seemingly strives to ask “how sad can we make this story?”⁵ There is a sense in which we are in danger, when depicting the refugee experience, of sliding down a very dark tunnel into an ever more vivid and shocking depiction of human suffering, at the expense of provoking real engagement and empathy.

As already mentioned, refugee narratives for children focus, with a certain amount of time-lag, on waves of forced migration and the conflicts that produce them, moving through various geographical locations as they become relevant. Originally, many authors had had personal experience within the area generating refugees, usually through travel or living in the location, sometimes working with local people and establishing relationships. However, very few were refugees themselves or had direct experience of displacement, and this is still the case, despite a few writers with closer links to refugee populations or coming from a refugee background tackling the topic. As interest in the subject matter increased, more mainstream and famous authors started to take up the mantle, and in so doing broadened out the readership of such books to increase understanding and engagement. However, I have started to question their perspective as outsiders, often with limited understanding of refugee experiences, which creates a romanticized portrayal of the refugee narrative.

At the same time the genre of refugee narratives for children has been widening to include other forms—graphic novels, poetry, free verse, short story collections, some by refugee children themselves, and examples of paired writing between a refugee and a Western author. But the “docu-novel” still reigns supreme as the preferred medium and is distinct in its almost formulaic treatment of refugee narratives, as outlined above. Furthermore, middle grade/young adult texts have largely not been the subject of recent academic study, as attention is mostly focused on the burgeoning genre of picture books about the refugee experience. By focusing on books for an older age group, this chapter aims to fill an important gap in the scholarship.

Drawing on critical content analysis, in this chapter I examine in depth two middle grade (8- to 12-year-olds)/young adult (12- to 18-year-olds) texts, *The Bone Sparrow* and *Boy, Everywhere*, both of which have been published in the last five years and received public acclaim.⁶ The massive flow of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar is the background to *The Bone Sparrow*, while the ongoing conflict in Syria is the context for *Boy, Everywhere*. Both texts address contemporary refugee displacements and are mainly or partly set in refugee and detainment camps, which is a new development in the genre. Furthermore, both are highly recommended by the UK charity Booktrust for readers aged between 9 and 11, although this targeted age-group specification could be questioned, due to the incredibly grim circumstances portrayed in the texts.⁷ I argue that examining these two books using a RefugeeCrit framework, which I elaborate in the next section, provides a more nuanced approach for critically analyzing these books’ depiction of the refugee experience, the profile of the protagonist, the positionality of the author, and the role of the reader.

Theoretical Approaches to Middle Grade/Young Adult Refugee Narratives

It was not until the turn of the millennium, and the attendant growth in refugee narratives, that an academic analysis of children's literature, and by extension middle grade/young adult texts, about refugees began to emerge. Initially, writers did not recognize the sub-genre and tended to focus on war-time narratives of flight more broadly.⁸ Gradually, however, the emerging genre began to attract attention in its own right, with Beverley Naidoo's award-winning *The Other Side of Truth* (2000) having merited the most discussion.⁹

Academics and literary critics have struggled to theorize this emergent genre within an encompassing framework. Did it come under postcolonial studies, with its emphasis on "othering"? While "othering" of refugee children is indeed a problem, this seems to miss other crucial aspects with which to critique the genre, such as a sensitive representation of the refugee experience, often seen as a three-stage process.¹⁰ However, when Wilkie-Stibbs applied "outsider theory" to several middle grade/young adult refugee narratives, she seemed to build on critiques of "othering," pointing out that none of the books were written by refugees or asylum seekers, but instead speaking for them and intended to help their privileged Western or Westernized young readers to believe in, sympathize with, and even be angry about such children's unnecessary misfortunes.¹¹ Furthermore, Grzegorzczuk discussed three key middle grade/young adult refugee narratives within the context of a postcolonial discourse, depicting how "marginal subjects" have been dismissed, ignored, and threatened by an unaccommodating Britain, alluding to them somewhat enigmatically as "The Empire Within."¹²

The interdisciplinary field of critical refugee studies (CRS) also offers many relevant concepts that can be applied to the study of children's refugee literature. Aihwa Ong emphasizes the importance of acknowledging refugees' multiple displacements under both war and outside a linear story of resettlement, especially with reference to the current Rohingya Muslim refugee crisis.¹³ Y en L  Espiritu considers the myth of "the nation of refuge," particularly relating to Vietnamese refugees, who are encouraged to see the U.S. as giving what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls "the gift of freedom" to the grateful refugee.¹⁴ Gratitude is a familiar theme in children's books, but CRS sees the refugee instead as resilient, productive, and having agency: "a social actor whose life, when traced, illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war and global social change."¹⁵ Furthermore, Thy Phu and Vinh Nguyen outline how CRS works with memories and narratives to construct a personal point of entry to the lived experiences of those who have had to seek or are seeking refuge, and how they are linked with various social, political, and cultural forces.¹⁶ Refugee narratives for the young are clearly located in CRS but in texts for children the wider contexts compelling forced migration are not usually fully explored.

A newly emergent framework, "RefugeeCrit," pioneered by Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes, combines elements of CRS and Critical Race Theory (CRT), to be applied specifically to children's literature.¹⁷ RefugeeCrit stipulates that "imperialism, colonialism, and racism are endemic to society, contribute to refugee flight, and reveal themselves in legal and economic mechanisms that influence life experiences of children and families from refugee backgrounds."¹⁸ In the same vein, Vassiliki Vassiloudi looked at a number of refugee narratives, mainly picture books promoted by Amnesty International, the UK Red Cross, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and found that generally they depict refugee children as victims of politically sanitized global disasters, without background explanation of the causes.¹⁹ Similarly, Strekalova-Hughes analyzed 45 picture books featuring first-generation children from refugee backgrounds as main characters, to interrogate how refugee flight is represented and to question its purpose.²⁰ She also found that the deeper reasons behind refugee flight are mostly veiled, denying refugees agency as they reactively leave their homes, and she advocates for empowering counter-narratives, presenting refugee characters with complex identities. Both writers find contrasts with "safe" places, like Europe and the United States, built into the story, which "pathologizes some countries and privileges others."²¹ Moreover, by ignoring the socio-historical and cultural complexities that form part of the background to conflict "only their aftermath can be a target for the readers' actionable empathy."²²

Echoing the previous points made by Wilkie-Stibbs, Vassiloudi found many stories follow an almost formulaic structure, “fixing the reader in the position of the Western benefactor ... in order to foreground an implicitly comforting faith in Western charity and happy narrative closure.”²³ Moreover, most narratives are dominated by a focus on the refugees’ long journeys with a warm reception at the end, but do not address the hostility, homelessness, loss of family, identity and safety, and exposure to exploitation that is common. A further feature of RefugeeCrit is the idea that writing, publishing, and reading the “right books” has the power to influence empathetic attitudes toward refugees, heal trauma, and mitigate against injustice. Vassiloudi notes that some books have accompanying notes that detail the author’s involvement in workshops with refugee children or of their participation in refugee relief work, with the aim of adding authenticity and providing evidence of robust research.²⁴ Readers are often urged in postscripts to explore ways of helping to “make a difference” through various refugee organizations or are informed that the proceeds from buying the book will do this for them. Encouraging readers to engage in acts of humanity while failing to address the root of the problem positions refugees as having no agency, and results in “their objectification as the weak other.”²⁵ Furthermore, Western child readers are problematically exhorted to realize and be grateful for their good fortunes, while urging them to become the “friendly, caring hands” reaching out to refugees from the construct of the West as the “Promised Land.” In this way, refugee narratives actually construct a clear binary between the displaced and the non-displaced child as well as promote the idea that awareness is the solution—functions that RefugeeCrit seeks to interrogate.

In this chapter, I will draw on and further develop the RefugeeCrit framework to consider the following in regards to middle grade/young adult refugee narratives:

Depiction of the refugee experience:

- Origins—Is the location prior to flight disclosed? Does the book suggest the cause of the conflict? Is it seen as self-created? Is the wider political and possibly imperial/colonial past touched on?
- Journey—Is the journey the main focus of the book? Is it long and perilous? Is it depicted as an exciting adventure at any point? Is the West seen as the desired destination throughout—the “promised land”?
- Rescue—Is the protagonist rescued from their situation? If so, by whom? Is there a “white saviour” involved? Are refugees the recipient of charity from a Western benefactor?
- Arrival—Is this part of the experience depicted? If so, where is the protagonist received? Do they receive a warm welcome? Are they helped by good people, perpetuating the myth of Western philanthropy?
- Ending—Is there narrative closure and a happy ending? Does this encompass a binary of safe/unsafe countries?

Profile of protagonist:

- Does the book “other” the refugee characters? Is the protagonist portrayed as a victim? Are they defined by their suffering or flight? Do they have an agential voice? Could they be admired? Do they have skills, abilities, and cultural resources? Do they have a complex identity?

The role of the reader:

- Who is the “implied reader” of the book? Could a refugee child derive pride from the story? Does the book encourage the reader to feel empathy? Does the book tend the reader towards “pity”? Does it provide ideas on ways to “make a difference”? Does it suggest the reader should feel grateful for what they have?

The positionality of the author:

- What is the author’s background? In what ways are they qualified to write about this subject matter? What research have they conducted? Do they include cultural references surrounding the refugee? Do they implicitly reinforce myths of Western supremacy?

In the following sections I discuss two books, *The Bone Sparrow* and *Boy, Everywhere*, through the prism of RefugeeCrit, analyzing the depiction of the refugee experience, the profile of the protagonist, the positionality of the author, and the role of the reader.

The Bone Sparrow

Subhi, the Rohingya protagonist of *The Bone Sparrow*, was born in a refugee camp which provides the setting for the whole story, probably on Nauru or Manus Island, where refugees to Australia are off-loaded.²⁶ He lives in the section called “Family,” where forty or more people share each tent, with his ailing mother, who appears to be dying of depression, and his sister Queeny, who becomes increasingly angry about their situation. They wait interminably for their poet father who was arrested by the Burmese authorities but has actually been killed. Subhi, and the reader, is briefly told of the background to Rohingya persecution by the mother. Moreover, at the end of the book is a three-page Afterword, which gives information about the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, particularly by the Australian government, as well as the genocide of the Rohingya people by the Buddhist majority in Myanmar. However, the tone and language imply that the Afterword is written for a much older reader than the book itself, possibly an adult. Furthermore, no reference is made to the British Imperial involvement in the region, and subsequent wars of independence, as well as the treatment of the Rohingya as a political football between the British and Japanese forces during World War II. This challenging political context has been left mostly unacknowledged, while weaving this much depth into the text would be difficult, leaving it unsaid “whitewashes” the narrative.

In this text there is also no journey as such, but the conditions in the refugee camp are exposed in chilling clarity. The camp guards, called “Jackets,” agents of Australian state control, routinely persecute the inmates. Meanwhile, the refugees are living in terrible unsanitary conditions, although when Human Rights Watch observers visit, the cuisine suddenly changes dramatically, and all guards are on their best behavior. Mental illness abounds, with accounts of adults self-harming, attempting suicide, or just giving up on life, as Subhi’s mother appears to be doing. When a group of men sew their lips together and decide to go on a hunger strike, it could be argued that a line is crossed into territory which is conventionally too bleak and violent for a middle grade/young adult reader to empathize with, as the novel traffics in graphic representations of refugee pain and suffering.

A riot begins in the camp that grows to epic proportions, with all interior and exterior fences collapsing and the inmates escaping. In the confusion Subhi witnesses his friend Eli being battered to death by a Jacket, a scene described with a searing and drawn-out clarity that is intensely challenging. In the terrible aftermath of the riot and subsequent fire, “Outside people” arrive to ask questions and Subhi is approached by someone supposedly named Sarah, and who gives Subhi’s mother a letter which is hinted at being a way for them to finally leave the camp. In such a final, mysterious twist of fate, it seems that a “white saviour” has been helicoptered in as a “deus ex machina.” With Subhi’s mother singing again, a “happy narrative closure” is hinted at, but there is no realistic depiction of the next stage of their lives—how they are received and how they adapt to life beyond the confines of Nauru or Manus Island, often racialized as “outside” the West. In sum, a strong binary of safe/unsafe countries is upheld.

In *The Bone Sparrow*, the 12-year-old Subhi’s resilience can be admired, and due to the use of first-person perspective, the reader has access to his thoughts and feelings, albeit written in “broken English,” which is arguably “othering.” While Subhi is clearly a victim of circumstance, defined by his suffering, and lacking in a complex identity, he does display agency and has skills and abilities. However, he is also “othered” by the curious revelation that he does not speak Rohingya, as his mother has told him it is better to learn English, which is an unlikely scenario. There are a few mentions of life in Burma/Myanmar told in stories or by his sister, and the use of “maá,” “ba,” and a reference to “tarana” songs, but there is no sense of any language, customs, and traditions in common with other refugees in the camp, and this leaves Subhi and the reader lacking any associated linguistic and cultural heritage.

The author Fraillon's connection with the refugee experience is unclear, and it seems she has no direct experience of life in refugee camps, although she has worked as "an integration aide and teacher in schools."²⁷ Her website shows that she has undertaken extensive research and she details specific events, articles, and videos that inspired her to write *The Bone Sparrow*. However, this personal disconnect both from the country of origin of her featured family, and the location where the entirety of the book is set, is problematic, and the lack of background cultural fabric, noted above, is regrettable. The dedication at the beginning of *The Bone Sparrow* finishes with, "You will make a difference. And to the rest of us, so that we may learn how."²⁸ In the book's "Acknowledgements," Fraillon writes poetically: "Thank you also to everyone who has ever had to walk their journey to peace. With you, we are a stronger, more beautiful, wiser and more just society."²⁹ If this is aimed at the refugee reader, then an "us vs. them" binary is there from the outset, raising the question of who is included in the "we"?

Elsewhere Fraillon has outlined what inspired her to write *The Bone Sparrow*, asserting: "We can walk in the darkest places imaginable in a book and experience a taste of someone else's reality."³⁰ Again the "implied reader" is clearly a non-refugee "outsider" who is expected to feel empathy with, and maybe pity for, Subhi's situation. Since the tone of the text is unquestionably grim, it is difficult to imagine a refugee reader deriving pride from the story. Furthermore, the disconnect between style and suitability is problematic and its designation by Booktrust to be of interest to readers age ten, given the brutal and harrowing content, is also questionable.³¹ As such it is perhaps more suitable for a young adult readership (12- to 18-year-olds), preferably beyond thirteen, although the tone and content might not be pitched to this cohort. The National Literacy Trust acknowledge on their website that the book "can present young people with challenging perspectives and uncomfortable realities."³² Nevertheless, they provide a long and detailed resource sheet for teachers to support learning for 11- to 14-year-olds, with the following warning: "Please note: this document contains images that some people might find upsetting."³³ Amnesty International UK endorses the book and provides information about human rights, some questions to apply to the text, some actions to take "if you want to stand up for human rights," and links to the Amnesty website. In so doing, RefugeeCrit would argue that responsibility is passed to the child reader, and the need for those in a position of power to be accountable to refugee subjects is bypassed.

Boy, Everywhere

Damascus, the capital city of Syria, is the opening setting for *Boy, Everywhere*, begun in 2015 in response to the humanitarian crisis caused by prolonged civil war since 2011, but not published until 2020, and winner of the "Little Rebels Children's Book Award" in 2021.³⁴ In an "Author's Note" at the end of the text, Dassu is at pains to explain her motivation for writing the book: she wanted to show that Syrian refugees had not just come for "a better life," but most had enjoyed comfortable to wealthy lifestyles in Syria and would never have left until forced by violence and unrest to take extreme measures.³⁵ This background is abundantly clear in the first 50 pages of description of 13-year-old protagonist Sami and his family, home, and world prior to flight. Proactive, high-achieving, full of confidence, and described as a "compelling character" by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, Sami may be more relatable to young readers than Subhi, as his life prior to flight might be one that they could recognize.³⁶ He also demonstrates pride in his own resilience and is not presented as an object of pity, important criteria in the depiction of refugees in terms of RefugeeCrit. The narrative is full of Sami's interior emotion that the reader is privy to as he faces the situation his family is in and reluctantly accepts that they have to leave their home, country, and life behind them.

Boy, Everywhere begins with Sami sitting in his English class when a bomb goes off in Damascus. The location is overtly identified on the second page of the story, clarifying that this is in Syria. In *Boy, Everywhere*, the choice of "To Kill a Mockingbird" as the class text deliberately highlights the presence of English-speaking culture and, arguably, of cultural imperialism. The school, with children all collected by car, is part of the wider context of Sami's life of elitism and privilege, which is gradually

exposed as the story moves forward, detailing the high level of access to technology, Western consumer durables, and Western food and drink that this wealthy family enjoys in Syria. They also live in a gated community with a chauffeur and a maid, the house they live in being described in lavish terms, with a marble dining table, a grandfather clock, a water fountain, and a pool, as well as an orchard with olives and apricot trees, with a picture of Western/Middle Eastern fusion emerging. At the same time, the portrayal of Syria is deliberately multi-denominational, with Sami being a Muslim and the Islamic Mosque as dominant, but also Christian churches and Christian characters, such as Sami's best friend Joseph, being prominent in the story. Nevertheless, the text is scattered with Arabic words: "habiti" (my love), "maqluba" (food), "yalla" (let's go), which add context, richness, and depth.

Early in the book there is a short explanation of the political background to the protests that sparked civil war in Syria, but in very crude and supposedly child-friendly terms, with no real exploration of the cause of the protests. As Sami says: "I didn't understand it all properly—I knew that everyone was fighting and the whole country was in a mess" with the president, his people, and rebel groups in conflict without reason, and lacking any historical roots—a clear problem for *RefugeeCrit*.³⁷ Later, Mama gives a fuller explanation of the background to the civil war, but this is still confined to a contemporary timeframe and internal responsibility. It is only the grandmother Tete who hints at a wider panorama: "If it wasn't our government attacking us, it was the rebel groups, and if it wasn't them, it was a foreign government that had nothing to do with us."³⁸ In placing the blame almost exclusively on the shoulders of the Syrian regime, the text ignores other power interests at play. For example, there is no direct acknowledgment of the part played by European colonialism, in the form of French occupation, which created the Syrian state from a diverse mixture of peoples with inherent tensions, the importance of Syria as a Russian ally during the Cold War, and Turkey's anti-Kurdish interest in the region. It is difficult to imagine how such a tangled web could be explored in a children's book, but in ignoring the imperial/colonial past and the present geopolitical power plays, *RefugeeCrit* would suggest that *Boy, Everywhere* presents a misleading and dangerous narrative.

The journey taken by the family takes up about a quarter of the book, with a long and fragmented trip out of Syria via Beirut, Istanbul, and Athens. Locked in a basement with thirty other people while waiting for a boat to take them to Greece, this is indeed a steep descent from luxury to deprivation, experienced by many refugees. But rather than being rescued by a "white saviour," as with the previous book, Sami's family are in the hands of people smugglers—"criminals trying to make money out of desperate people"—and they must sell their jewelry to pay for their journey.³⁹ Throughout the book other stories of flight are integrated into the text via different characters, with details of families being split up, boats overturned, and many drowning at sea. This provides depth of understanding of the various forms that forced migration can take. For Sami's family, England is always the desired destination throughout, with the "promised land" of the West featuring strongly as a trope.

Finally reaching Manchester by plane, Sami's father claims asylum on entry to the UK and the police are called. The family is arrested and taken directly to a detention center. Rather than arrival in the UK providing an ending to the book and an implied resolution to all problems—as in *The Bone Sparrow*—*Boy Everywhere* is greatly concerned with depicting the reception that asylum seekers encounter as far from welcoming. Here the detention center is run by the prison service in the airport, with men and women separated into different sections, refugees' body searched, and locked in their cells. Sami is horrified and asks, "Wasn't this how police treated criminals?" while the contrast to his previous life in Syria could not be stronger.⁴⁰ After a prolonged stay of several weeks in this frightening environment, where the family members are separated and Sami and his father are attacked by another inmate, their lawyer, Miss Patel, sorts out their paperwork, and David, a guard from a Jewish refugee background, tell them they are free to go. Again, there are no "white saviours," the diverse cast of characters portraying a much more complex picture than other books. The only white characters at this point are the police and detention center guards. Similarly, when the family is taken in by other Syrians, they encounter a mixed reception—kindness from Uncle Muhammad, but hostility from his wife and his son Hassan, who persecutes Sami in every way he can, again providing a more complex picture.

It is when attending school in the UK that Sami encounters the first friendly and supportive white people—as is so often the case for refugees—Mrs Greenwood, the headteacher, Mr Williams, the form teacher, and Mrs Palrey, the class teacher who challenges bullying and open racism. He is also defended by his new friend, Ali, a Pakistani boy who takes him under his wing and back to his house to eat samosas—again, not a “white saviour.” Ali briefly explains the group “Britain First” to Sami—“you know the kind that don’t like brown people or just anyone from abroad”—which serves to set the school racism within a wider national context.⁴¹ It is here that Sami delivers a key explanation of his former life in Syria to Ali, and one that underpins the whole book: “It’s not all like what you see on the news, you know We’re not dangerous or evil. We’re educated, we go to schools, universities. We’ve got libraries and bookshops . . . coffee shops, restaurants, cinemas. We had lives, just the same as everyone in Manchester. Proper lives. These people who don’t want us here They should know that we don’t want to be here either.”⁴² RefugeeCrit applauds such depictions of refugee critiques of white saviorism.

In the UK, Sami is reunited with fellow traveler Aadam, another Syrian, and here we are offered a counternarrative that serves to widen understanding of the refugee experience, as not one “single story.”⁴³ Aadam had arrived at the Calais “Jungle” and, after several unsuccessful attempts, had managed to board a moving truck that got him to the UK. The contrast with Sami’s family’s journey is startling, and Aadam found himself homeless on arrival and reduced to sleeping on the streets. However, when Sami brings him back to Uncle Muhammad’s house, they are all thrown out by the family, having to find a place in a hostel, where “helping (presumably white) hands” meet their basic needs, but in order to stay together they sleep on the floor of the cafeteria.

Sami longs to return to Syria, and plots to jump into the hold of an airplane to Turkey: “I’m never going to settle here Damascus is where I belong.”⁴⁴ He is prevented from doing so by his friends, Aadam and Ali, maintaining the strong message throughout the book, that it is (non-white) friends that help you through these difficult times. The story ends with a successful narrative closure, as the family are given “leave to remain in the UK,” a technical and bureaucratic passport to stability and permanence.⁴⁵ This new status as officially accepted refugees is the key to their lives changing dramatically. Baba is able to resume working as a doctor, but at a lower level, and the family is able to rent their own house, which they spend much time and effort making habitable, showing determination and agency. Finally, Sami is able to make contact with Joseph, his best friend in Syria who has now moved to Qatar (a contrasting non-Western haven), and his new optimism, laced with ongoing challenges, is relayed to the reader via this communication. Sami’s ongoing closeness with Joseph, even though separated by great distances geographically and sustained over time, is a realistic depiction of the importance of long-term and supportive friendships across the diaspora, especially for refugee children.

Credited in “The New Arab” as “the British Muslim children’s author leading the charge for representation in books,” Dassu is descended from a mixed heritage originally from Iraq, India, Burma, and Pakistan, with her father born in Tanzania.⁴⁶ In the previously discussed “Author’s note,” Dassu refers to her “own family’s story of cross-cultural relocation and immigration,”⁴⁷ and during an online “Meet the Author” event, it emerged that both her Middle Eastern and South Asian families settled in Africa, Uganda, and Tanzania, respectively, and were forced to leave as refugees when local and national feeling turned against these communities. However, Dassu commented that although her families fled with nothing, they were able to start again in the UK and established businesses with funds they had transferred. In her own admission, this experience in her background clearly informed Dassu’s perspective when depicting the character Sami.

At the beginning of *Boy, Everywhere* there is a dedication: “For everyone who had to leave everything behind and start again.”⁴⁸ While this highlights the refugee situation from the outset, it is notably not “to” but “for” refugees, not as an “implied reader” who may possibly be “othered” by this sentence, but instead depicting aims to be inclusive. Meanwhile, although the “Author’s note” briefly addresses the origins of the civil war in Syria, it does not seem to be aimed at middle grade/young adult readers in its tone and language. Sentences such as “Our constantly informed world shared their plight, but people soon became desensitized to their story” are beautifully expressed and emotive, but not directed

at young readers.⁴⁹ As with the “Afterward” to *The Bone Sparrow*, the choice of words could be viewed as “othering” to refugees, with its use of “we/us/our” and “they/them/theirs” throughout. However, the “Author’s note” concludes with a stirring exhortation that complicates stable binaries: “In a world where we are told to see refugees as the ‘other’, I hope you will agree that ‘they’ are also ‘us.’”⁵⁰

Conclusion

This chapter seeks to question the motivations of authors of middle grade/young adult children’s literature about refugees, the messages of such stories, and the images of refugees proffered by these books. By applying RefugeeCrit to two books, *The Bone Sparrow* and *Boy, Everywhere*, I hope to provide a useful framework to shed light on these questions. If we are “to promote international understanding through children’s books,” we need to be wary of certain tropes that are repeated time after time in the narratives discussed above—“the Western gaze,” and the refugee as “othered” and as a “victim” in need of a “white saviour” with “helping hands.”⁵¹ With so many children’s refugee texts being published in recent years, we are somehow moving to a body of work that could be described as “tragedy porn,” with the intention to shock and horrify, ostensibly to foster empathy and spur readers into some sort of action. The difference between these books and those in other genres, such as horror, fantasy, or futurism, is that these situations are being endured by children now, in our world, in our time, often with no hope of “happy narrative closure” or even an ending of any kind. How we manage this knowledge and mediate it for children and young people is a concern of writers, publishers, reviewers, teachers, and parents. Looking into root causes and calling for political change is a challenge for children’s books, often avoided and resulting in “half-truths and watered-down stories.”⁵² This is a global problem, and there are few individual life lessons that children can draw from them, other than to be encouraged to welcome new arrivals into the classroom and question dominant discourses about refugees arriving on our shores.

RefugeeCrit provides us with an opportunity to re-evaluate such texts, moving away from blanket approval to a more nuanced critique that can inform how they are used in the classroom and discussed in more informal settings. This relatively new framework can be applied as a critical perspective both to the production and consumption of such texts. However, in contrast to recent protest movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, there is still a sense that refugees are being spoken for, rather than speaking for themselves, in part because of their precarious status and continuing persecution, and particularly in regard to children’s literature. While #OwnVoices, a movement to promote authors from marginalized groups writing about their own experiences from their own perspective, is beginning to include the voices of refugees in adult literature, my hope is that this can extend to books for youth. If so, refugee narratives for middle grade/young adults, and younger children too, can move toward becoming a mouthpiece of the refugee experience, rather than a mere reflection of it.

Notes

- 1 Hope, “One Day We Had to Run,” 296.
- 2 Hope, *Children’s Literature about Refugees*.
- 3 “Syria Emergency.”
- 4 Wilkie-Stibbs, *The Outside Child*, 12.
- 5 Myers, “Black Books Matter.”
- 6 Johnson, Mathis, and Short, *Critical Content Analysis*.
- 7 “Books about Refugees and Asylum Seekers.”
- 8 Agnew and Fox, *Children at War*; Lathey, “Autobiography and History.”
- 9 Pinsent, “Language, Genres and Issues”; Wilkie-Stibbs, *The Outside Child*, 12; Giles, “What Is the Other Side of Truth?”; Grzegorzcyk, *Discourses of Postcolonialism*.
- 10 Fazel and Stein, “Mental Health of Refugee Children.”
- 11 Wilkie-Stibbs, *The Outside Child*, 37.
- 12 Grzegorzcyk *Discourses of Postcolonialism*, 50, 37.

- 13 Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding*.
- 14 Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 2; Nguyen, *Gift of Freedom*.
- 15 Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 11.
- 16 Phu and Nguyen, "Introduction: Something Personal."
- 17 Strekalova-Hughes, "Unpacking Refugee Flight."
- 18 Strekalova-Hughes, Peterman, and Lewman, "Legally Scripted Fictions," 15.
- 19 Vassiloudi, "International and Local Relief Organizations."
- 20 Strekalova-Hughes, "Unpacking Refugee Flight."
- 21 Strekalova-Hughes, "Unpacking Refugee Flight," 35.
- 22 Strekalova-Hughes, "Unpacking Refugee Flight," 36.
- 23 Wilkie-Stibbs, *The Outside Child*; Vassiloudi, "International and Local Relief Organizations," 36.
- 24 Vassiloudi, "International and Local Relief Organizations."
- 25 Vassiloudi, "International and Local Relief Organizations," 40.
- 26 Fraillon, "For Readers."
- 27 Fraillon, "For Readers."
- 28 Fraillon "The Bone Sparrow," no page.
- 29 Fraillon "The Bone Sparrow," 289.
- 30 Fraillon, "Zana Fraillon on Writing about Refugee Children."
- 31 "Books about Refugees and Asylum Seekers."
- 32 "The Bone Sparrow Teaching Resource."
- 33 "The Bone Sparrow Teaching Resource."
- 34 "Little Rebels 2021 Winner."
- 35 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 280.
- 36 *Reflecting Realities*, 10.
- 37 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 24.
- 38 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 52.
- 39 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 71.
- 40 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 135.
- 41 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 226.
- 42 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 227.
- 43 Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story."
- 44 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 209.
- 45 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 270.
- 46 Zatat, "Meet A.M. Dassu."
- 47 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 281.
- 48 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 1.
- 49 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 280.
- 50 Dassu, *Boy, Everywhere*, 283.
- 51 "What Is IBBY?"
- 52 Vassiloudi, "International and Local Relief Organizations," 39.

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