

“Let Us Pick Up Our Books”:

Young Adult Literature and the Refugee Experience

“Let us pick up our books and our pens,” I said. “They are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world.”

—Malala Yousafzai, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, p. 262

The complex and often controversial issue of the plight of refugees has been a hot-button topic of late. From local, national, and world news sources to Presidential debates to social media, one can find passionate opinions on both sides of this matter. In my work with preservice and inservice teachers of English language learners, I have heard multiple stories of how these often-polarizing opinions about refugees play out, sometimes in unfortunate ways, in the lives of the students they teach. With the wide array of opinions regarding refugees in the United States today, it is essential to spend class time discussing this topic in a safe space moderated by a knowledgeable educator. But how does a teacher even begin to broach the subject? Children’s and young adult (YA) literature that portrays the refugee experience may be just the place to start. In this article, I share a research project in which I sought to answer the question *How is the refugee experience portrayed in middle and high school literature included on the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People lists of the past five years?* I follow this analysis with ideas for classroom implementation and other available resources for classroom use.

Review of Related Literature

“Mother says,
People share
when they know they have escaped hunger.
Shouldn’t people share
because there is hunger?”
(Thanhha Lai, *Inside Out and Back Again*, p. 93)

Bishop (1990) speaks of how literature can act as a window or mirror for its readers. In seeing mirror reflections of their own lives in the literature they read, for example, teens may not feel so alone in the world; literature might validate their lives as interesting, important, and of consequence to others. Conversely, reading literature that portrays lives different from one’s own can serve as a window into the unknown. Students can see beyond their personal experiences, communities, and daily lives. Reading about lived experiences different from our own can help us to “pierce the balloons of old thought to allow prejudice to dissipate . . . [to] deflate our self-importance, making room for other perspectives” (Miller, 2014, p. 31). Indeed, scholars propose that reading global literature

can “effectively foster empathy and perspective-taking” (Parsons & Rietschlin, 2014, p. 131) 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).

Reading literature that portrays characters who are refugees can yield dual benefits. First, for students

who have not had the refugee experience, these texts can offer knowledge about different cultures, countries, and histories, as well as provide a vehicle for readers to vicariously live through the characters portrayed. Engagement with this firsthand experience can help students gain empathy and understanding about the long-standing complexity of the refugee issue and the challenges their classmates who are refugees might have faced and still be facing. Second, students who are refugees

can see their lives and experiences represented in the literature and, as a result, might not feel as isolated, different, and alone from their classmates, as refugees often do (Finnerty, 2015; Mosle, 2016).

Eritrean refugee Fitsum Berhe, now living in Boise, Idaho, shared, “My first time in high school, I didn’t like it. I didn’t like any white students, because they didn’t understand me. I was from a different culture. In my country, when you talk to people, you don’t have eye contact with them. Everything is different” (Mosle, 2016). Iraqi refugee Zahraa Naser, also currently living in Boise, Idaho, shared similar thoughts. She explained, “My friends are mostly refugees. I also have American friends, but I only talk to them at school. I think for Americans, if they talk to you once, if they see you out somewhere, anywhere else outside of school, they just act like they don’t know you. I know; I’ve tried it a lot” (Mosle, 2016). As evidenced by these examples, students should read literature that portrays the refugee experience because it represents the diverse society in which we live.

Similar to reading and discussing YA literature on topics like poverty, race, and sexuality, fictional works portraying refugees can offer students and teachers a common and safe reference point for discussing a topic about which students may have conflicting thoughts and/or misperceptions. This is important work with implications that extend beyond the classroom. In today’s information-saturated society, it is increasingly important for students to critically analyze global and societal issues and to develop their own informed positions on a variety of topics. Parsons and Rietschlin (2014) posit, “Many adolescents learn about global issues through mass media or video games that focus on ‘catastrophe, terrorism, and war’ (Short, 2012, p.13), resulting in superficial understandings and fear-based perspectives. However, adolescents may develop deeper connections and understandings through engagement with global young adult (YA) literature” (p. 130). Literature about refugees may serve as a vehicle to impact both knowledge and empathy. Moreover, while it may be difficult or uncomfortable for students to share personal opinions about refugees, they may be more compelled to grapple with those thoughts and discuss their feelings in class when talking about a fictional character in a book. The results of doing so can be powerful, serving as “part of a personal-cultural transformation that can help student readers become more empathetic, thoughtful, and communicative citizens in, as Friedman refers to it, our ‘flat’ globalized world” (Kuo & Alsup, 2010, p. 22). YA literature that portrays the refugee experience has the ability to do all that and more.

Methods

“Around the lunch table everyone seems to have given something up—dairy, meat, gluten, sugar, carbs. Only in a land of plenty could people voluntarily go without so much.”

(J. C. Carleson, *The Tyrant’s Daughter*, p. 62)

As a professor of YA literature, secondary English methods, and ESL teacher preparation, I am always looking for titles and ways in which to incorporate literature that portrays the English language learner experience, in general, and the refugee experience, in particular, into my teacher education courses. Embarking on this project, my goal was to analyze the

**[F]ictional works
portraying refugees
can offer students and
teachers a common and
safe reference point for
discussing a topic about
which students may have
conflicting thoughts and/
or misperceptions.**

representation of immigrants and refugees in children's and YA literature. I quickly realized I needed to narrow my search parameters if I ever wanted to complete the task. While multiple book awards and lists could provide an effective sample, I chose to analyze books on the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People lists of the past five years to see what titles were included and in what ways the immigrant and refugee experience was portrayed. I used this list for a variety of reasons. First, it was a source with which my students, both preservice teachers and practicing teachers, were familiar. Second, when I shared my interest in looking more closely at YA literature that portrays the refugee experience, this list came up several times as a recommendation from colleagues, librarians, and teachers. Finally, because the list was published by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), these titles had already been identified as being quality works for teaching K–12 social studies concepts that could easily be tied to Common Core State Standards. As such, I felt they warranted further analysis.

Regarding text selection for the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People lists, the NCSS website explains that:

The selection committee looks for books that emphasize human relations, represent a diversity of groups and are sensitive to a broad range of cultural experiences, present an original theme or a fresh slant on a traditional topic, are easily readable and of high literary quality, and have a pleasing format and, when appropriate, illustrations that enrich the text. Each book is read by several reviewers, and books are included on the list by committee assent. (NCSS, 2015)

For each identified book, the list provides a recommended reading level [P: Primary (K–2); I: Intermediate (3–5); M: Middle (6–8); H: High (9–12)] as well as thematic strands of the NCSS curriculum standards for social studies (NCSS, 2010). While lists are available from 2000–2015, I chose to focus on the identified books of the last five years (2011–2015) for this project in order to analyze the most recent trends. In total, there were 532 books on the combined lists. Of those 532 titles, 39 (7.3%) feature protagonists who are immigrants or refugees. Of those 39 books, 25 are intended for student readers at the middle or high school levels.

As I began reading, analyzing, and charting the identified texts, it became clear to me that I needed

to separate the texts that portray immigrants from the texts that portray refugees. While the definition of an immigrant is “a person who has come into a foreign country in order to live there” (Cambridge, 2016), refugees are unique in that they are *forced* to leave their homes because it is unsafe for them to stay where they are. Because of the prevalence of trauma and the lack of choice and autonomy refugees often experience, their stories are uniquely different from other newcomers to a country; as a result, recurring patterns and themes emerged from the texts portraying refugees that were different and/or absent from the books portraying immigrants.

With this new focus in mind, I used the Department of Homeland Security's definition of refugee to identify texts: “People outside of their country who are unable or unwilling to return home because they fear serious harm. Refugee status or asylum may be granted to people who have been persecuted or fear they will be persecuted on account of race, religion, nationality, and/or membership in a particular social group or political opinion” (Department of Homeland Security, 2015). As such, texts like *Between Shades of Gray* (Sepetys, 2011) and *Copper Sun* (Draper, 2006), while on the NCSS lists, were not included in this study; the characters, though forced to leave their home (e.g., deportation, slavery), did not fit into the determined refugee definition. While I only looked at titles on lists from the past five years, I included all works that portrayed refugees, regardless of setting and/or genre, because I wanted to give as complete a picture as possible. Because different formats appeal to different readers, nonfiction, fiction, and novels in verse were all included. Moreover, reading historical fiction about refugees can offer a point of reflection regarding the commonalities of the refugee experience throughout the years. In total, 15 books were analyzed for this study (see Appendix A).

Results

“It was hope that enabled me to survive in Africa in the face of abuse, starvation, pain, and terrible danger. It was hope that made me dare to dream, and it was hope that helped that dream take flight.”
(Michaela DePrince, *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina*, p. 243)

Characteristics of Books

TIMES AND PLACES

While there are different reasons people become refugees, war and political conflicts yield the largest

***The Red Umbrella*
(Gonzalez, 2010), *Waiting
for Snow in Havana:
Confessions of a Cuban
Boy* (Eire, 2003), and
*Learning to Die in Miami:
Confessions of a Refugee
Boy* (Eire, 2010) . . . share
stories of the Cuban
Revolution and Operation
Pedro Pan, offering
different perspectives on
a subject about which
many students may be
unfamiliar.**

numbers of people garnering refugee status. Of the 15 books identified and analyzed for this study, three books share stories of characters whose experiences during World War II led them to become refugees. *My Family for the War* (Voorhoeve, 2012), *Prisoner B-3087* (Gruener, Gruener, & Gratz, 2013), and *Now* (Gleitzman, 2010) offer different perspectives on what it meant to be a child during the Holocaust, the after-effects of the trauma, the very different reasons for leaving one's country, and the different places the characters went. In *My Family for the War*, Jewish protagonist Franziska learns about the *kindertransports* from her friend and shares the information with her family members. She says:

I . . . answered lots of [my family members'] questions: where to sign up (at the Jewish Community Center), who paid for it (the Refugee Children's Movement, an organization that was founded in England just to help us), how many trains were leaving (one or two each week, from different big cities each time), and how old the children had to be (at least four, no older than sixteen). (Voorhoeve, 2012, p. 51)

In both *Prisoner B-3087* and *Now*, the Jewish protagonists survive the Holocaust and then take advantage of the vouchers provided to war survivors who no longer feel safe in their home countries, choosing to relocate in the United States and Australia, respectively. Collectively, these three novels extend readers' thinking about the historical aspects surrounding refugees; how war and conflict contribute to the need to flee one's country; and the long-lasting physical, emotional,

and psychological distress that can result from being forced to leave one's home.

My Havana: Memories of a Cuban Boyhood (Wells & Fernandez, 2010) and *90 Miles to Havana* (Flores-Galbis, 2010) also share a historical look at the refugee experience, in this case connected to the Cuban Revolution of 1961. Author Enrique Flores-Galbis shares his experiences as a nine-year-old participant in Operation Pedro Pan, the "largest recorded exodus of unaccompanied minors in the Western Hemisphere" (Operation Pedro Pan Group, 2009) in his book *90 Miles to Havana*. For decades, no one knew about Operation Pedro Pan, an effort in place "from December 1960 to October 1962, [when] more than fourteen thousand Cuban youths arrived alone in the United States" (Operation Pedro Pan Group, 2009) to escape the Cuban government. Currently, efforts are being made to identify children who were part of Operation Pedro Pan, and as a result, more and more stories like these two books are emerging. While not included on the NCSS lists, *The Red Umbrella* (Gonzalez, 2010), *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy* (Eire, 2003), and *Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy* (Eire, 2010) are other YA texts that share stories of the Cuban Revolution and Operation Pedro Pan, offering different perspectives on a subject about which many students may be unfamiliar.

Several books on the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People lists provide a more current representation of refugees. *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan* (Dau & Akech, 2010) and *The Red Pencil* (Pinkney, 2014) share stories of refugees from Sudan. *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina* (DePrince, 2014) begins in war-torn Sierra Leone. *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (Yousafzai, 2013) and *The Tyrant's Daughter* (Carleson, 2014) offer experiences from the Middle East. Two nonfiction pieces, *Children Growing Up with War* (Matthews, 2014) and *Outcasts United: The Story of a Refugee Soccer Team That Changed a Town* (St. John, 2012), provide stories from refugees across the world, including Sudan, Liberia, Kosovo, Somalia, Burundi, Bosnia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Rwanda. Of particular note, *Children Growing Up with War* is a powerful nonfiction text written by photojournalist Jenny Matthews, who details her experiences in various worn-torn countries from 1994 to

2013. Matter of fact and somehow hopeful despite the unspeakable situations, the book shares stories and photos of loss, bravery, courage, and joy and includes a “Map of Conflicts” in the back of the book to provide visual context so students can see the extent and effects of war across our world.

AGES AND GENDERS

My analysis of the NCSS titles revealed much variety with regards to age and gender of the refugee protagonists as well as the genres of the books (see Appendix A). The ages of the refugee protagonists range from 6 to 80, with many of the books spanning multiple years of the refugee’s life. Gender composition was fairly evenly split. In 8 books, the refugee protagonist is female; in 5 books, the refugee protagonist is male; and in two books, both male and female main characters are present. Relative to genre, 5 of the texts are nonfiction, with the remaining 10 works being fiction. Among the fictional works, 5 are based upon or inspired by true experiences, often those of the author and/or coauthor. Additionally, 2 of the books are novels in verse, a format that is often more accessible for English language learners due to the shorter chunks of text, less complicated sentence structures, repetition, and the cultural familiarity it often contains (Robertson, 2015). For example, 10-year-old Ha from *Inside Out and Back Again* explains her experiences learning English:

She makes me learn rules
I’ve never noticed,
Like *a*, *an*, and *the*,
Which act as little megaphones
To tell the world
Whose English is still secondhand.
The house is red.
But:
We live in **a** house.
A, *an*, and *the*
Do not exist in Vietnamese
And we understand
Each other just fine. (Lai, 2011, pp. 166–167)

The experience of learning English and its various grammatical conventions is something to which many English language learners can relate. Additionally, the novel in verse format provides a unique style that students can explore and practice in their own writing.

Thematic Patterns

OUTSIDE ASSISTANCE

Across all of the books analyzed in this study, outside help was provided to the refugees, often through governmental support and/or that of other relief organizations. Such portrayals are critical in helping students see not only the multitude of ways in which one can serve those in need, but also how desperately that support is needed. For example, the United Nations provided food and helped set up schools in the Kenyan refugee camps for the lost boys and girls of Sudan in Dau’s and Akech’s (2010) inspiring narrative. Protagonist John, 13, explains:

The next day was over 100 degrees. The ground was so hot that blisters formed and burst on the bottoms of my bare feet and the dry air made me very thirsty. I tried to keep going, finally I had to stop . . . We were too thirsty and hungry to keep going, and too tired to care. I thought I would die. As if by a miracle, a UN truck arrived that day to bring water to the line of Lost Boys. I ducked my head in the truck’s water tank and took a big gulp. . . . I found the strength to keep moving. (p. 86)

In this case, outside support literally saved lives.

Other organizations, such as the Refugee Children’s Movement and Operation Pedro Pan, are referenced in Flores-Galbis’s *90 Miles to Havana* and Voorhoeve’s *My Family for the War* as evidence of support for the safe transfer of thousands of children. At the individual level, families provided temporary and forever homes for refugee children in several of the titles, including Voorhoeve’s *My Family for the War*; Dau and Akech’s *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan*; DePrince’s *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina*; and Railsback’s *Betti on the High Wire*. The nonfiction text Matthews’s *Children Growing Up with War* includes a page dedicated to providing Web addresses of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world that provide assistance to displaced people. The message that it is our civic responsibility to stand up for and support the vulnerable and that this support can take place in multitudes of ways is an important and powerful one for teens to consider.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

The refugee protagonists’ experiences in school are represented in 9 of the 15 books analyzed. Unfortunately, school is not often depicted in a flattering light. While 5 of the texts describe somewhat positive

school experiences for the refugees, the others show students struggling, mostly in the form of bullying from their classmates, and feeling different. For example, protagonist Frances in Voorhoeve's *My Family for the War*, explains, "My school career had so far consisted mainly of pushing, fighting, and being made fun of" (p. 100). Ha, of *Inside Out and Back Again*, is also a victim of bullying at her school:

A pink boy with white hair
on his head
and white eyebrows and
white eyelashes
pulls my arm hair.
Laughter. (p. 145)

These negative depictions of interactions with peers—quite the opposite of what so many of the characters

**[B]ooks like these can
inspire discussions
of both the value of
education and the notion
that access to free
education should be a
basic human right for all
people.**

desperately want—offer prime discussion opportunities for all students. What was school like in the character's home country? How does that compare to education in the United States? Why is school such a negative experience for the character? What changes could be made at the district, building, and classroom levels to make school better for students who are refugees in schools across the country today? These are

just a few questions that can help students to begin to consider perspectives on schooling that are perhaps different from their own.

Other negative school experiences endured by the protagonists ranged from being placed in classes with much younger children to not being safe in their school. Matthews's *Children Growing Up with War*, for example, shares statistics regarding girls in Afghanistan having acid thrown in their faces as they try to go to school, as well as schools being bombed and burned down. This denial of the opportunity to go to school at all offers much for adolescent readers to consider. As Malala explains in her story, "Though we loved school, we hadn't realized how important

education was until the Taliban tried to stop us. Going to school, reading and doing homework wasn't just a way of passing time, it was our future" (Yousafzai, 2013, p. 121). For many students in the US, the idea that school is a desperately desired commodity will be a new concept, and books like these can inspire discussions of both the value of education and the notion that access to free education should be a basic human right for all people.

VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

Unfortunately, trauma is a part of being a refugee, and all of the books analyzed here depict some sort of trauma, often extreme, experienced by the refugee protagonists. In 13 of the 15 books, the character loses a loved one, and often the character witnesses that person's brutal death. For example, though only three-years old at the time, Michaela DePrince vividly recalls the murder of her beloved teacher:

"NO-O-O!" I shouted as they surrounded Teacher Sarah . . . The leader then raised his long, curved knife above his head. When I saw what the debil was about to do, I threw myself on Teacher Sarah. The debil leader laughed at me, picked me up by my shirt, and flung me aside as though I were no heavier than a bug. Then he slashed downward with his knife and cut into Teacher Sarah. Blood spurted everywhere, covering me from head to toe. The debil reached inside of Teacher Sarah and pulled out her unborn baby . . . He then tossed the infant into the bush on the side of the road. I ran into the bush to try to save the baby. If I couldn't save my teacher, at least I might rescue her child. (DePrince, 2014, pp. 54–55)

Graphic, horrifying realities like these help illuminate the terror and trauma that, unfortunately, all too many refugees have faced. While displaced people may come to find a safe home in another country, the memories of their past will likely haunt them forever.

In 12 of the books analyzed here, the character sees violence enacted on another person, usually a family member or close friend; in 11 of the books, the character experiences personal violence (see Appendix A). Sudanese refugee John Dau describes trying to escape the Ethiopian army:

Smoke and dust filled the air, and shells exploded on the ground. Boys were running for their lives all around me. Some fell as bullets fired from the far shore tore into their bodies. I ran too, until I was out of range of the guns and mortars. Fortunately for us, the Ethiopian army would not cross a crocodile-infested river . . . I still have bad dreams about crossing the Gilo River. I still wonder what war does

to people to make them shoot unarmed children. (Dau & Akech, 2010, p. 71)

While not at war, Malala was the target of a violent attack that led to her ultimately leaving her beloved Pakistan and gaining refugee status in England. Shot in the head by the Taliban “because of her pioneer role in preaching secularism” (Yousafzai, 2013, p. 216), she describes the last thing she remembers while riding in a van on a school field trip:

I didn’t see the two young men step out into the road and bring the van to a sudden halt. I didn’t get to answer their question “Who is Malala?” or I would have explained to them why they should let us girls go to school as well as their own sisters and daughters. The last thing I remember is that I was thinking about the revision I needed to do for the next day. The sounds in my head were not the *crack, crack, crack* of three bullets, but the *chop, chop, chop, drip, drip, drip* of the men severing the heads of chickens, and them dropping in the dirty street, one by one. (Yousafzai, 2013, p. 202)

While these violent depictions can be troubling for students to read, it is important for them to know that this is a reality for refugees. Recent reports indicate that “half of refugees are experiencing psychological distress and mental illness resulting from trauma [and that] one-fifth of refugee children are also suffering from PTSD” (Finnerty, 2015). It is also important for students to know that arrival to a new, seemingly safe country does not necessarily mean “happily ever after” for refugees. Indeed, a multitude of new and different challenges are just beginning, and once trauma is over, the effects remain.

Moreover, unexpected events may serve as triggers for refugees who have experienced trauma. For example, in DePrince’s memoir *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina*, Fourth of July fireworks bring back haunting memories of danger, war, and violence. Michaela DePrince recalls:

On our first Fourth of July in the United States, Papa and Mama took us to watch the fireworks. We didn’t know what fireworks were, so Mama drew us each a picture of them and sprinkled glitter on them . . . When it was dark, Papa pointed to the sky. I looked up, expecting to see glitter. What a shock it was to hear an explosion and see the real fireworks. “Bombs! Bombs!” Mia and I screamed. I thought the war had followed us to America. (p. 112)

Betti and George, refugees from an unnamed war-torn country in Railsback’s *Betti on the High Wire* (2011) have a similar experience on the Fourth of July:

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM! The sky flashed with color . . . Gray smoke filled the air. My body froze and my heart practically stopped. BOOM BOOM BOOM! I plugged my ears. I squeezed my eyes shut. No, no, no. No one was even ducking on the ground! I covered my whole head with my arms. I remembered everything. The circus camp shaking, the helicopters making dust storms, the soldiers hollering and running in big boots through the village and the woods. “Help . . .” I said in a muffled, tiny voice. (Railsback, 2011, pp. 257–258)

In reading stories like these, young adults may reflect on their own lives, making connections to their own fears. Holidays and other occurrences that might seem like cause for joyous celebration for some can bring back painful memories for others. Refugees in particular are bound to have invisible scars from the trauma they have experienced, and empathy gained from reading refugee accounts may yield more compassion, patience, and understanding for all who are different, both in and out of the classroom.

Pedagogical Implications

“I have fought many, many times to stay alive, and I have won that wrestling match every time. I am blessed. Today, living in America, I sing my new song of joy and hope.”

(John Bul Dau, *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan*, p. 156)

YA novels that portray characters who are refugees can be used in varied ways in the classroom. One way is to create intentionally grouped literature circles with different students reading different books. For example, a teacher might choose to use ability-leveled groupings using books that take place during the same time era. In sharing these different stories, students can get a fuller picture of the refugee experience at a specific time period; in addition, reading different books can provide differentiation opportunities in conjunction with developmental reading levels. Teachers might also want to have students read multiple texts from multiple eras. By first reading a book about Jewish refugees leaving their homes during World War II, then reading about Operation Pedro Pan and the mass exodus of children from Cuba during the Revolution, followed by a more current text sharing refugee stories from countries like Sudan, Iraq, and Pakistan, students can start to analyze the historical trends regarding

refugees and identify similarities and differences across the refugee experience.

In leading class discussions on these texts, teachers might want to refer to Ehst and Hermann-Wilmarth's (2014) article, "Troubling the single story: Teaching international narrative through a critical literacy lens," as it offers suggestions for how to use critical theory in the classroom in an effort to avoid "the pitfalls of tokenism" (p. 24). The authors explain:

In well-meaning attempts to understand the tragedies represented in these texts, it is possible that teachers reify notions of difference and Western superiority—"we" are the helpers and "they" are the helped. As teachers, we must be careful to disallow the tendency to characterize certain countries or ethnic groups only by their greatest tragedies and struggles. (p. 27)

The authors go on to offer guiding questions that can be useful in discussing literature that reflects international identities and that can be particularly helpful in discussions about refugees, including: "How does each reader's race, class, and gender influence the way they understand history?" and "What kinds of difference do we tolerate? What kinds of difference do we marginalize?" (p. 27). Questions like these can spark courageous conversations about issues of refugees, ethnicity, difference, and acceptance.

YA texts that portray the refugee experience also lend themselves to student research opportunities. These books may introduce students to new worlds they have only seen on the news, places like Sudan, Somalia, Cuba, and Poland. This research can inform students not just about unfamiliar settings, but also about unfamiliar historical events, such as the *kindertransports* used during World War II or Operation Pedro Pan of the 1960s. Many of the books include an author's note explaining the research that was done in writing the book, the parts that were true or inspired by truth, and the parts that were imagined. Students could model this practice and conduct their own research to inform a fictional narrative. The possibilities are endless.

Digital Resources

"Today, tomorrow, sooner or later, you will meet someone who is lost, just as you yourself have been lost, and as you will be lost again someday. And when that happens, it is your duty to say 'I've been lost, too.'

Let me help you find your way home."
(Katherine Applegate, *Home of the Brave*, p. 253)

Beyond the literature mentioned here, there are many electronic resources available for teachers wanting to explore the topic of refugees with their students, and many of these provide current information regarding the refugee crisis in places like Syria and Sudan. For example, popular YA author John Green has a nine-minute vlog episode entitled "Understanding the Refugee Crisis in Europe, Syria, and around the World" that gives a succinct, easy to understand overview of this topic (Vlogbrothers, 2015). Similarly, broadcaster Katie Couric provides a four-minute clip in her *Now I Get It* series that explains the distinction between people who are migrants and those who are refugees, focusing on the current Syrian crisis (Foley, 2015). Rochelle Davis, Associate Professor in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, has created a blog entitled "Teaching about Refugees: Curriculum Units and Lessons." This site offers sample lesson plans and resources for teachers to use in the design of a unit about refugees and forced displacement. As described by the author, the project originated from field research completed in Jordan and Lebanon during May and June 2013. The lesson plans on this site are intended for secondary students and focus on current events. Adding reading and discussion of YA texts like Yousafzai's *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (2013) and Matthews's *Children Growing Up with War* (2014) from this study would pair well with the lessons provided.

Teachers can also draw upon resources from places outside of the United States that not only offer wonderful teaching tools, but also show that the refugee crisis is a concern for countries outside of the United States as well. For example, the British website BBC.com includes an interactive activity entitled "Syrian Journey: Choose Your Own Escape Route" that provides students with a hands-on opportunity to consider the multitude of decisions that a refugee must face in trying to find safety. The site explains, "The routes, options and outcomes in this Syrian journey feature were based on real stories uncovered by extensive research as part of a BBC Arabic digital project exploring migration from Syria" (BBC News Services, 2016), reminding students that this is not

an exciting game; it is a dangerous reality for so very many people across the world.

Similarly, Oxfam offers a unit of study for teachers entitled “South Sudan: The Unseen Emergency” that contains a variety of activities, PowerPoints, visuals, and teaching guides to introduce the plight of Sudanese refugees to students (Oxfam Education). These resources would be a great introduction to refugee novels like Dau and Akech’s *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan* (2010) and Applegate’s *Home of the Brave* (2007)—a novel in verse about Sudanese refugee, Kek, that makes an appearance on an earlier NCSS list—as they provide some background information and context for the settings and scenarios that are described in these texts. UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, has a website of stories (written and video recordings) about refugees. These stories can be used as companion narratives to the chosen novels and provide a “real world” face and story to put to the crisis. Additionally, documentaries like *God Grew Tired of Us* (Quinn, 2006), based on author John Bul Dau’s journey to the United States and referenced in *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan*, and major box office films like *The Good Lie* (Schwartz, 2014) can provide a different narrative format for comparison and analysis.

While it is important to look globally at the refugee crisis, it is every bit as important to look nationally and locally as well. According to the United States Department of State:

American communities welcomed 84,995 refugees in Fiscal Year 2016. The refugees admitted under the program come from 79 countries. Over 70 percent fled five countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Burma, Iraq, and Somalia, where protracted conflicts have driven millions from their homes. Over 72 percent of the resettled refugees are women and children. (US, 2016)

(Note that the government’s fiscal year begins on October 1 of the previous year and runs to September 30 of the stated year.) This fact sheet goes on to share that the top five states where refugees are resettled are California, Texas, New York, Michigan, and Ohio, but all states help to resettle refugees. In my state of Idaho, for example, there is a large refugee population—a fact that takes many of my students by surprise. Introducing students to state websites, like the Idaho Office for Refugees, and sharing local news

articles can show students that this is not just a global issue, it is a local one as well.

Conclusion

“No one person can do everything . . . but we can all do something.”

(Warren St. John, *Outcasts United: The Story of a Refugee Soccer Team That Changed a Town*, p. 146)

There are many wonderful titles that portray the refugee experience that were not included in this study; future research

might look at the earlier years of the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People booklists as well as other available lists, such as the NBGS (Notable Books for a Global Society), the OIB (Outstanding International Books), and the Jane Addams Peace Association Children’s Book Awards. Interviewing teachers and librarians about their own and their students’ experiences with texts that portray characters who are refugees would provide another compelling research opportunity, as would getting feedback about the books from those who have personally experienced life as a refugee.

While we cannot stop the violence, trauma, despair, confusion, frustration, and heartache that often come with the topic of refugees, we can help our students better understand the complexity of this issue. We can help them to, for a moment, feel what it might be like to be torn forcibly from one’s country and to face the unknown in the hope of a better, safer, more peaceful life. Child refugee, activist, and inspiration Malala Yousafzai said in her book *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, “One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world.” It is my conviction

It is . . . important for students to know that arrival to a new, seemingly safe country does not necessarily mean “happily ever after” for refugees. Indeed, a multitude of new and different challenges are just beginning, and once trauma is over, the effects remain.

tion that quality middle and high school literature that portrays the refugee experience can inspire readers to look past differences, to seek truth, to show compassion, to stand up for the vulnerable, and to go forth and change the world.

A former high school English teacher, Janine J. Darragh is Assistant Professor of Literacy and ESL in the University of Idaho's College of Education where she instructs courses in Secondary English Methods, Young Adult Literature, Content Area Literacy, and ESL. Her research interests center on sociocultural issues in teaching and learning, YA literature, and teacher preparation.

References

- Applegate, K. (2007). *Home of the brave*. New York, NY: Square Fish.
- BBC News Services. (2016). Syrian journey: Choose your own escape route. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32057601>.
- Bishop, R. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix–xi.
- Cambridge University Press. (2016). Cambridge dictionary. Retrieved from <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/immigrant>.
- Carleson, J. C. (2014). *The tyrant's daughter*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Dau, J. B., & Akech, M. A. (2010). *Lost boy, lost girl: Escaping civil war in Sudan*. Washington, DC: National Geographic.
- Davis, R. (n.d.). Teaching about refugees: Curriculum units and lessons. Retrieved from <https://blogs.commonsworld.org/georgetown.edu/rochelledavis/refugee-video-project/>.
- Department of Homeland Security: US Citizenship and Immigration Services. (2015). Refugees and asylum. Retrieved from <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum>.
- DePrince, M. (2014). *Taking flight: From war orphan to star ballerina*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Draper, S. (2006). *Copper sun*. New York, NY: Atheneum.
- Ehst, E. S., & Hermann-Wilmarth, J. M. (2014). Troubling the single story: Teaching international narrative through a critical literacy lens. *The ALAN Review*, 41(3), 24–30.
- Eire, C. (2010). *Learning to die in Miami: Confessions of a refugee boy*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Eire, C. (2003). *Waiting for snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban boy*. London, UK: Scribner.
- Finnerty, D. (2015). Migrant crisis: Trauma takes toll on mental health. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35102320>.
- Flores-Galbis, E. (2010). *90 miles to Havana*. New York, NY: Roaring Book Press.
- Foley, K. (2015). The migrant crisis explained. Retrieved from <https://www.yahoo.com/katiecouric/now-i-get-it-migrant-crisis-explained-millions-of-128873741918.html>.
- Gleitzman, M. (2010). *Now*. New York, NY: Henry, Holt.
- Gonzalez, C. D. (2010). *The red umbrella*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Gratz, A., Gruener, R., & Gruener, J. (2013). *Prisoner B-3087*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Idaho Office for Refugees. (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.idahorefugees.org/>.
- Kuo, N., & Alsup, J. (2010). "Why do Chinese people have weird names?": The challenges of teaching multicultural young adult literature. *The ALAN Review*, 37(2), 17–24.
- Lai, T. (2011). *Inside out and back again*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Matthews, J. (2014). *Children growing up with war*. New York, NY: Candlewick.
- Medina, C. (2010). "Reading across communities" in biliteracy practices: Examining translocal discourses and cultural flows in literature discussions. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 45, 40–60.
- Miller, D. L. (2014). Building bridges with cultural identity literature. *The ALAN Review*, 41(3), 31–38.
- Mosle, S. (2016). The new high-school outsiders. *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/09/11/magazine/refugee-students-boise.html?_r=0.
- NCSS. (2010). *National curriculum standards for social studies: A framework for teaching, learning, and assessment*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/curriculum>.
- NCSS. (2015). Notable social studies trade books for young people. Retrieved from <http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable>.
- Operation Pedro Pan Group. (2009). History: The Cuban children's exodus. Retrieved from <http://pedropan.org/category/history>.
- Oxfam Education. (n.d.). South Sudan: The unseen emergency. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/south-sudan>.
- Parsons, L. T., & Rietschlin, A. (2014). Emigrant, immigrant, and trafficked experiences. In C. Hill (Ed.), *The critical merits of young adult literature* (pp. 130–156). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Pinkney, A. D. (2014). *The red pencil*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group.
- Quinn, C. (Producer), & Quinn, C., & Walker, T. (Directors). (2006). *God grew tired of us: The story of lost boys of Sudan* [Motion picture]. Washington, DC: National Geographic Films.
- Railsback, L. (2011). *Betti on the high wire*. New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Robertson, K. (2015). Introducing and reading poetry with English language learners. Retrieved from <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/introducing-and-reading-poetry-english-language-learners>.
- Schwartz, E. (Producer), & Falardeau, P. (Director). (2014). *The good lie* [Motion picture]. Los Angeles, CA: Alcon Entertainment.
- Sepetys, R. (2011). *Between shades of gray*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Short, K. G. (2012). Story as world making. *Language Arts*, 90, 9–17.
- St. John, W. (2012). *Outcasts united: The story of a refugee soccer team that changed a town*. New York, NY: Random House.

UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency. (2014). Refugee stories: Life-threatening sea journeys. Retrieved from <http://stories.unhcr.org/>.

US Department of State. (2016). Fact sheet: Fiscal year 2016 refugee admissions. Retrieved from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/10/262776.htm>.

Vlogbrothers. (2015). Understanding the refugee crisis in Europe, Syria, and around the world. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVV6_1Sef9M.

Voorhoeve, A. C. (2012). *My family for the war*. New York, NY: Dial Books.

Wells, R., & Fernandez, S. (2010). *My Havana: Memories of a Cuban boyhood*. Summerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

Yousafzai, M. (2013). *I am Malala: The girl who stood up for education and was shot by the Taliban*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

Appendix A: Refugee-Related YA Titles Included on the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People Lists (2011–2015)

Notable year	Author	Title	Designated reading level	Genre	Refugee moved from where to where and when	Gender of refugee	Did the refugee receive outside help?	Was school depicted positively?	Has the refugee lost anyone?	Has the refugee experienced personal violence?	Has the refugee witnessed acts of violence to others?
2011	John Bul Dau & Martha Arual Akech	<i>Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan</i>	M	Nonfiction	Sudan to Ethiopia and then to Kenya 1987–2006	Both Male and Female	Yes	Yes for John; No for Martha	Yes	Yes	Yes
2011	Enrique Flores-Galbis	<i>90 Miles to Havana</i>	M	Fiction based on the author’s experiences	Havana, Cuba, to Miami, Florida 1961	Male	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
2011	Lisa Railsback	<i>Betti on the High Wire</i>	M	Modern fiction	The country is not named on purpose. The author note mentions that there are so many children in war-torn areas that she didn’t want to identify one specific place. Modern times	Female	Yes	N/A, but bullied at summer camp	Yes	Yes	Yes
2011	Rosemary Wells with Secundino Fernandez	<i>My Havana: Memories of a Cuban Boyhood</i>	M	Fiction based on true story	Havana, Cuba, to New York 1952–1959	Male	Yes	No; teacher is mean and protagonist is bullied	No	No	No
2012	Thanhha Lai	<i>Inside Out and Back Again</i>	M	Novel in verse based on author’s experiences	Saigon, Vietnam, to Alabama 1975–1976	Female	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
2013	Morris Gleitzman	<i>Now</i>	M/H	Fiction	Poland to Australia 1940s	Male	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	No
2013	Christina Diaz Gonzalez	<i>Thunderous Whisper</i>	M	Fiction	Guernica, Spain, to London, England 1937	Female	Yes	No; she is bullied	Yes	Yes	Yes

Continued on next page

2013	Warren St. John	<i>Outcasts United: The Story of a Refugee Soccer Team That Changed a Town</i>	M/H	Nonfiction	(Multiple):Sudan, Liberia, Kosovo, Somalia, Burundi, Bosnia, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan—all to Clarkston, Georgia 2003–2006	Males	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
2013	Anne Voorhoeve	<i>My Family for the War</i>	H	Fiction	Germany to London 1938–1945	Female	Yes	No; she is bullied	Yes	Yes	Yes
2014	Alan Gratz, Ruth & Jack Gruener	<i>Prisoner B-3087</i>	M	Fiction based on author's experiences	Poland to New York 1940s	Male	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes
2015	J. C. Carleson	<i>The Tyrant's Daughter</i>	H	Fiction inspired by the author's time as an undercover CIA agent in the Middle East	Unnamed place in the Middle East to Washington, DC Modern times	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
2015	Michaela DePrince	<i>Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina</i>	M/H	Nonfiction	Sierra Leone to New Jersey 1998–2013	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2015	Jenny Matthews	<i>Children Growing Up with War</i>	M/H	Nonfiction	(Multiple): Libya to Tunisia, Syria to Jordan, Sudan to Chad, Iraq to Kurdistan, Palestine to Gaza, Syria to Jordan, Rwanda to Zaire 1994–2013	Both Males and Females	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
2015	Andrea Davis Pinkney	<i>The Red Pencil</i>	M	Novel in verse	South Darfur to Kalma, Sudan* 2003–2004	Female	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes
2015	Malala Yousafzai with Christina Lamb	<i>I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban</i>	M/H	Nonfiction	Pakistan to England 2012–2015	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Note: While moving from South Darfur, Sudan, to Kalma, Sudan, does not technically fit into the definition of “refugee” that I used (leaving one’s country), the title is included as it takes place in a refugee camp.