Seeing Themselves in a Book: A Collection of Titles to Support Refugee Children
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Abstract
In an effort to improve cultural understanding and literacy skills through the use of stories reflecting the experiences of refugees, a collection of 56 book titles for children and teens was assembled. The titles are representative of the diverse kinds of trauma refugee experience in their home countries, on their journeys to a new country, and during the resettling process. The collection includes refugee experiences from countries around the world so readers are not left with the mistaken belief that refugees only come from a few places. An emphasis was placed on biographical and fictional narratives as opposed to fantasy or traditional literature (e.g., folk tales, fairy tales, tall tales, fables, myths) in order to portray realistic experiences and facilitate readers’ connections with the characters. The goal was to ensure the books function as “mirrors” that reflect refugee’s experiences and “windows” that shed light on those experiences for the non-refugee reader.

Introduction
Both research and anecdotal evidence demonstrate the importance of seeing oneself in a book (Larrick, 1965; Sims, 1982). For refugee children and adolescents living in U.S. communities, this is a critical factor in the development of self-esteem and notions of race. But just as books act as “mirrors” for refugees by reflecting their experiences, they also act as “windows” for non-refugees by shedding light on the everyday violence and difficult relocation processes endured by millions of young people. The stories and illustrations allow readers to develop empathy and intercultural understanding, which are important factors in creating tolerance and acceptance of diversity (Corapi & Short, 2015; Goldsmith, Heras, & Corapi, 2016; Naidoo, 2012). The collection is intended to display the range of material available that librarians and educators can use to support the development of these interpersonal skills.

Importance of Refugee Stories
The books in this collection are important for several reasons. They communicate the idea of “home” for refugees in their country of origin, where they enjoyed relationships with extended family and community. The narratives also demonstrate that refugee camps are not necessarily peaceful places but are often unwelcoming, with limited resources. By reading these stories, professionals working with refugee families can develop empathy and understanding so they can develop truly effective services that support refugees. Narratives are a particularly effective tool in building empathy because they allow the reader to experience the life of a character through the imagination. This also moves the professional from pity to genuine empathy.

Book Selection Process
Books for children and adolescents about refugees are not abundant, so multiple search tools were necessary. These included the use of bibliographies of award-winning books (particularly the U.S. Board on Books for Young Readers’ annual lists of Outstanding International Books), publisher’s websites, multiple subject headings, word-of-mouth recommendations, and published lists of titles from organizations like BookTrust. Cultural authenticity was an important criterion, so emphasis was placed on stories told by refugees or stories that were carefully researched and checked for authenticity. A goal was to show the diversity of the refugee experience.

Several parameters limited the scope of the collection. The historical period covered was post-WWII to the present. The format emphasis was mainly picture books and graphic novels because of the ease of entry into the story and the communicative impact of the illustrations. Some exemplary novels were included. Effort was made to include titles that were published between 2010-2017.

Range of Refugee Experiences
Forms of Violence
• death of family members
• bombs and land mines
• political oppression
• pirates
• destruction of property
• genocide
• child soldiers

Immigration Process
• seeking safe haven in multiple places
• detention of illegal immigrants
• use of guides
• defection
• applying for asylum

Movement, Origins, & Destinations
Movement
• moving within a country
• changing countries
• changing continents
Places of Origin
• Africa, Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Caribbean, South & Central Asia
Destinations
• North America, United Kingdom, Thailand, Australia, South Korea, Africa, Pakistan

Methods of Transportation
• land, water, and air vehicles
• walking

Refugee Camps
• Thailand
• Ethiopia, Kenya
• Pakistan

Sense of Place: Home in Two Countries
Country of Origin
• Cambodia
• Vietnam
• Sudan
• China
• Somalia
• Kenya
New Home
• United States
• United Kingdom
• Australia

Language Learning
• formal language school
• tutors
• friend
• translator
• neighbors

Miscellaneous
Genres
• first-person stories
• allegories
• pictorial essays

Themes
• drain of refugees
• sense of place
• importance of names

Conclusion
Refugees are often experiencing the stress of adapting to a new culture, a new language, and new ways of learning. Through the use of global books such as the ones included in this collection, professionals can support the adaptation process and give refugee children time and space to process their experiences, learn about their new home, and feel understood.

References

Implications for Services
Telling & Reading Stories to Heal
In addition to using this book collection, having patrons’ or students’ tell their own stories, oral or written, is valuable in itself because:
• it puts value on children’s life experiences (Corapi & Short, 2015; Johnston, 2004).
• it helps children process and make sense of what has happened to them (Short, 2012).

Listening to stories can be healing on its own because:
• stories give children a sense of normalcy after a chaotic experience.
• stories give a sense of hope and help children imagine ways lives can be different. Stories in which characters triumph over obstacles are particularly helpful (Igoa, 1995).
• seeing themselves in a book helps with their changing sense of identity (Larrick, 1965; Sims, 1985).

Bilingual Books & Language Learning Tools
Librarians and educators can help refugees learn English. Signage, websites, and print materials in multiple languages are important tools for giving refugees access to materials. Other important tools include:
• bilingual books because they place value on languages other than English. Dual language books help English language learners develop vocabulary by reading English alongside their language of origin.
• books and audio recordings in various languages so children can read or hear stories in their own language which can be restful and encouraging (Igoa, 1995).
• programs like REFR or Scholastic that provide inexpensive or free books for homes. In camps, refugees may have had little access to books.