
Children in Zones of Conflict

Introduced by Alyssa Lowery

The last year has been marked by military conflict and displacement across the globe. While many children's daily lived realities are actively shaped by violence, uncertainty, and even atrocity, others are influenced by awareness of these large-scale injustices, often mediated through the visceral imagery of mass media sources. The realities of global conflict do not elude the young, no matter how desperately we may yearn to insulate our children from its reach. In the introduction to their edited volume, *Representing childhood and atrocity* (2022), Victoria Nesfield and Philip Smith refer to the 'tension between... the need to inform and the need to protect', that 'lies at the heart of many discussions of atrocity and the literature of childhood' (p. 5), giving voice to two important roles played by literature about children in zones of conflict. They emphasize the role of fiction as 'a controlled space to explore what otherwise might be emotionally damaging' (p. 3) and consider the enormous, and perhaps impossible responsibility involved in crafting narratives that sensitively bear witness to the historical and contemporary tragedies that affect millions while fulfilling the societal expectation that children's literature must offer optimism and hope.

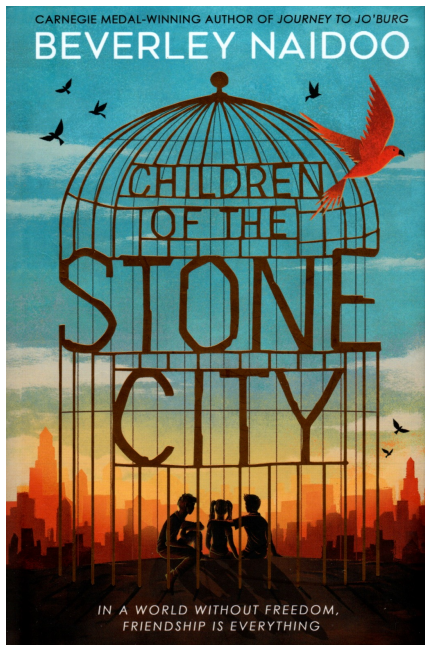
The four books recommended in this issue are thoughtful and sensitive works that balance hope and reality, and which span a variety of age ranges and genres: a novel in prose for the upper grades, a novel in verse for the middle grades, a chapter book for primary school pupils, and a picturebook for readers of all ages. They also approach the realities of global conflict in diverse ways, traversing topics from the violence of racial segregation and displacement as a result of armed conflict to peaceful protests against unjust laws and the experiences of refugees.

Bland (2022) highlights the immense importance of literature in the English language classroom that challenges readers to 'gain the perspective of others' experience, both from within the classroom and from within the text, so also gaining outside perspectives and alternative ways of seeing' (p. 15). She refers to Fullan, Gardner, and Drummy's (2019) definition of in-depth learning (p. 66), which 'helps them [the students] make connections to the world, to think critically, work collaboratively, empathize with others, and, most of all, be ready to confront the huge challenges that the world is leaving their generation' (cited in Bland, 2022, p. 25). The inclusion

of these topics in the English language classroom may seem rife with tension and challenge. Indeed, as classroom teachers aim to cultivate deep reading and facilitate engagement with compelling texts, they are met by students with a variety of lived experiences who are often steeped in media-rich environments that thrive on the representation of conflict. However, as teachers of English work to equip new generations of global citizens, there is perhaps no better tool than a compelling, empathetic work of literature that invites readers to engage emotionally and think critically.

References

- Bland, J. (2022). *Compelling stories for English language learners: Creativity, interculturality and critical literacy*. Bloomsbury.
- Fullan, M., Gardner, M., & Drummy, M. (2019). Going deeper. *Educational Leadership*, 76(8), 65–69.
- Nesfield, V., & Smith, P. (2022). Introduction. In V. Nesfield & P. Smith (Eds.), *Representing childhood and atrocity* (pp. 1–20). SUNY Press.



Naidoo, Beverley (2022)
Children of the Stone City
London: HarperCollins

Recommended by Janice Bland

Beverley Naidoo is a highly committed author, who was brought up in a regime of the acutest injustice – South Africa during apartheid. As a student Naidoo experienced being detained without trial, before escaping into exile. I seldom take the author into account when exploring a new book with the aim of weighing up its value for our language classrooms. But when a renowned critic such as Nicholas Tucker (2022) writes of Naidoo, ‘younger readers can only benefit from renewed contact with an author of such grace and moral probity’, I feel teachers should take note.

Children of the Stone City is set in a deeply segregated land. Its allegorical form suggests regimes where racial segregation is institutionalized, as it was in the second half of the twentieth century in South Africa, and in the Southern United States under the 'Jim Crow' laws from the 1870s until the 1960s. But even where *de jure* segregation has long ended, *de facto* segregation persists in the here and now in many countries throughout the world. Naidoo researched for her book with several visits to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem (before the current Israel-Hamas war on Gaza). Naidoo does not name Israel, Palestine, or East Jerusalem in her narrative, but refers instead to the Permitteds (the privileged class), the Nons (the oppressed) and the Stone City. Britain's historical role in the calamity is hinted at too – here the OverPower. Critics have, of course, noticed the parallels: 'an imaginary country with strong overtones of modern-day Israel, this searing story does not pull its punches' (Tucker, 2022). In her Author's Note, Naidoo (2022, p. 256) mentions the inspiration she received from young Palestinian readers she met, adding that thirty-five years after her *Journey to Jo'burg*, she 'felt compelled to write another novel that opens a window that has been mostly shut ... and to let readers hear voices they rarely, if ever, hear.'

Using *Children of the Stone City* in the classroom, the teacher can decide whether to explore the current parallels, or to discuss the compelling story as an allegory – for the characters remain racially ambiguous, and the topics of bravery and hope in the face of prejudice, corrupt police and an unfair judicial system could fit many situations worldwide. The injustices recounted in *Children of the Stone City* are many; they can provide numerous opportunities for reflecting on discrimination and group-focused enmity (Zick et al., 2011, p. 73) with mid- to upper-secondary school language students. The students could investigate comparable regimes and different ways of seeing and being with a gallery walk, for example. This is first prepared by groupwork on specific topics, each student group creating a poster. When the posters are ready, they are hung on the classroom wall, and the gallery walk takes place with the groups rotating 'from poster to poster, discussing the ideas of the other groups and using sticky notes to add annotations with their own reflections, before moving to the next poster' (Bland, 2022, p. 297).

The protagonist of *Children of the Stone City*, Adam, is a twelve-year-old music-loving Non, whose father dies unexpectedly at the beginning of the story. This family tragedy is exacerbated when the Permitted authorities will not allow even the closest family members (who

live in Gaza and the West Bank, though these territories are not named) to enter the Stone City (occupied East Jerusalem) for the funeral. Adam has a best friend, Zak, whose aunt is forcibly evicted from her home by Permitted settlers. Seeing her furniture dumped into the street, Zak loses control and dares to throw two small stones in the presence of Permitted police. This is the first of his impetuous (though harmless) acts that lead to both he and Adam facing arrest, and mental as well as physical torture in a Permitted prison. The story has a hopeful ending for Adam, due to the brave help of a Permitted lawyer, Ms Roth. Young Zak, however, will face several years in prison having, in desperation, signed a statement in a language he did not understand. This story is both extremely timely and extremely moving, and I believe adolescents can learn a great deal about the perils of accumulative discrimination over many years, while developing perspective-taking, empathy, and compassion.

Bibliography

Naidoo, B. (2022). *Children of the Stone City*. HarperCollins.

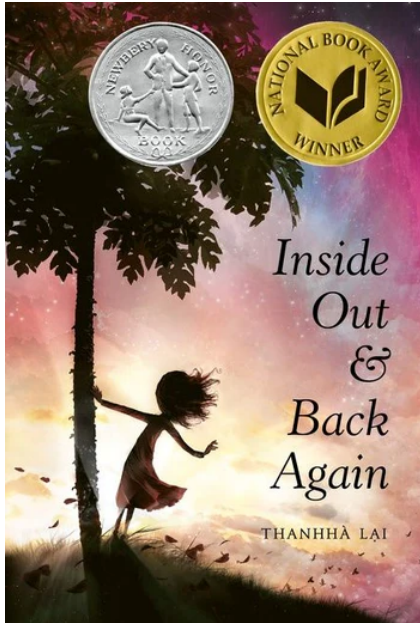
References

Bland, J. (2022). *Compelling stories for English language learners: Creativity, interculturality and critical literacy*. Bloomsbury.

Tucker, N. (2022). Children of the Stone City [Review]. *Books For Keeps*.
<https://booksforkeeps.co.uk/review/children-of-the-stone-city/>

Zick, A., Küpper, B., & Hövermann, A. (2011). *Intolerance, prejudice and discrimination: A European report*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/record/2018626>

Dr Janice Bland is Professor of English Education, Nord University, Norway, and guest professor at OsloMet University. Her research interests are children's literature from picturebooks to young adult fiction, creative writing, visual and critical literacy, English language and literature pedagogy, global issues, ecocriticism, interculturality and drama. Among her publications are two monographs and three edited volumes, and she is editor-in-chief of *Children's Literature in English Language Education* (CLELEjournal).



Lai, Thanhha (2011)

Inside Out and Back Again

London: HarperCollins

Recommended by Sarah Minslow

Inside Out and Back Again by Thanhha Lai, a verse novel intended for readers from 8–12 years old but suitable for older readers in a language learning context, received a 2011 Newbery Honor and the 2011 National Book Award. The novel centers on a family forced to flee from Vietnam just before the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Hà, the protagonist, is a ten-year-old girl

whose father is missing and whose mother ‘carr[ies] sadness’ (Lai, 2011, p. 29). One appeal is that although conflict is traumatic, the book leaves space for happiness, family, and human connection. In many children’s books about displacement, the wounded child archetype appears and violates expectations of what children’s literature should be. Often, the exploration of the emotional and psychological effects of trauma is balanced by stories of healing. This satisfies the desire to leave young readers with hope. Clementine Beauvais (2015) argues that children’s literature is ‘inherently hopeful because it implies a child-reader who is future bound’ (p. 47). Though this is a realistic historical memoir, it portrays a hopeful futurity for displaced children.

Hà is loveable and invites readers to empathize with her, but not pity her. Her understanding of the conflict is limited, but she does know that ‘The war is coming closer to home’ (Lai, 2011, p. 4) and she narrates those experiences of conflict that she and her family endure. Her best friend’s family flees to Vietnam, and she writes, ‘I would still be standing there/crying and waving’ if her brother hadn’t come to bring her inside (p. 10). Her father disappeared nine years ago, and she writes, ‘that’s all we know’ (p. 12). She is aware that ‘people can barely afford to buy food’ (p. 15), and when her teacher says they will only share ‘happy news’ on Fridays, Hà writes, ‘No one has anything to say’ (p. 18). The novel explores the ethical side of war when ‘Brother Quang says, One cannot justify war/unless each side/flaunts its own/blind conviction’ though Hà thinks he uses ‘tangled words’ (p. 25).

The family is sponsored by a 'Cowboy' and his wife in Alabama. When they arrive, Hà's mother calls a family meeting and tells her children that 'Until you children master English/you must think, do, wish for nothing else' (p. 117). Hà shares her frustrations with being an immigrant, especially learning English and experiencing racist bullying. When her teacher Misssss Wassssshington (as Hà pronounces it) realizes Hà has been eating lunch alone in the bathroom, she begins to help her with her English, and her brothers help her confront her bully.

This book may be a useful tool in the English-language classroom as it speaks openly about the frustration of trying to learn English and adapt to a new country. Hà says: 'Whoever invented English should have learned to spell,' and she often plays with how the different words and letters sound to her. Several of the poems are about the 'rules' of English. In 'Third Rule', she begins, 'Always an exception/...Why no s for two deer/but an s for two monkeys?' (p. 128). This may be relatable for English language learners, especially those who are immigrants or refugees who have fled conflict in their home countries. The verse form in short sentences is inviting rather than intimidating, and the book provides ample opportunity to explore metaphor, idioms, and symbolism. The book may be used to explore emotions and develop empathy for Hà and her family and for the 106 million displaced people in the world today. Further, it includes an informative author's note and timeline that could be used to create a research activity about the Vietnam War, Vietnamese Americans, or refugees.

When examining the role of hope in children's literature of displacement, McAdam et al. (2020) explain: 'Hope is far more than a happy ending. For it to have traction and momentum, any hopeful ending needs to be encountered alongside an element of realism that includes an examination of the root causes and possible solutions to injustice. This calls for a more nuanced and radical understanding of what is meant by hope and the ways in which it can be evoked and directed towards transformation' (p. 383). This novel can be used to explore the root causes of the Vietnam War and the push factors that force refugees from their homes while also showing examples of those who help Hà and her family resettle and adapt to life in the United States.

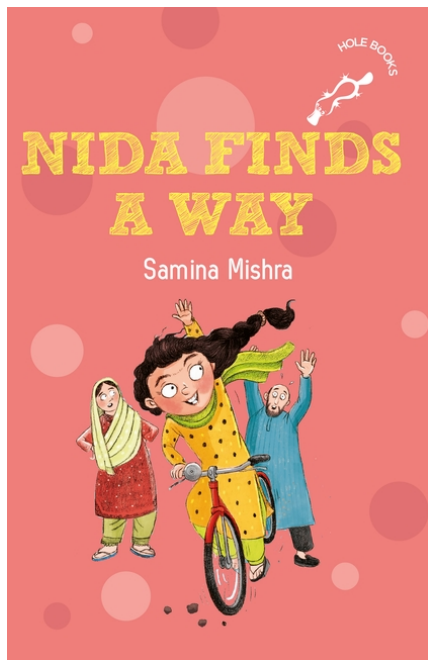
Bibliography

Lai, T. (2011). *Inside Out and Back Again*. HarperCollins.

References

- Beauvais, C. (2015). *The mighty child: Time and power in children's literature*. John Benjamins Publishing.
- McAdam, J. E., Ghaida, S.A., Arizpe, E., Hirsu, L., & Motawy, Y. (2020). Children's literature in critical contexts of displacement: Exploring the value of hope. *Education Sciences, 10*(12), 383. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10120383>

Sarah Minslow is Assistant Professor of Children's and Young Adult Literature at California State University Los Angeles. She teaches children's and British literature, practices of narrative healing, and grant writing. Her research focuses on using children's and YA literature to teach about Holocaust, genocide, and human rights. Her latest publications include two book chapters: 'Liminality and double-consciousness in Angeline Boulley's *Firekeeper's Daughter*' and 'Exploring the effects of Asian stereotypes and exclusion in the multiethnic literature classroom.'



Mishra, Samina (2021)

Nida Finds a Way

Illustrated by Priya Kuriyan

India: Duckbill (Penguin Random House India)

Recommended by Bhakti Verma

What roles can children play in politics? What do children need to know about protests? What do they need to know about citizenship? As grown-ups continue to decide what belongs in children's worlds, children continue to grow, explore, resist, and assert their rights to their own worlds. *Nida Finds A Way*

by Samina Mishra, depicts the world of 7-year-old Nida, who is her father's beloved but overprotected daughter. She wants to ride a bicycle and climb trees while her concerned father wants to protect her as much as possible from the woes of a dangerous world. One day, Nida learns about and joins a protest...

The story takes place within the context of the Shaheen Bagh peaceful protest undertaken in Delhi, India from December 2019 through March 2020. Led by women in response to the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, the protests resulted in police intervention against students of Jamia Millia Islamia who were opposing the amendment (Thakur, 2019). With this amendment, in addition to some other specific religion and nationality specifications, Muslims were excluded from being granted a swifter path to Indian citizenship.

In the author's own research project on children and citizenship, she noted a need for children's involvement in discussions of the constitution and the rights of citizens in order to build a nuanced, deeper understanding of belonging and citizenship (Mishra, 2023). *Nida Finds A Way* introduces elementary-age children to the idea of 'citizenship' and 'belonging', especially in contexts where exclusion and divisiveness are sources for conflict. Nida's experiences in the book exemplify standing up for one's rights, standing together in solidarity with the community, experiencing citizenship in a country, and actively asserting one's right to belong in a country as one of its people.

Conflicts can seriously affect one's sense of belonging in an ecosystem, and discussing feelings like exclusion and disenfranchisement early on with children could help them develop a more inclusive holistic world view. While a subset of authors and educators might shy away from including and sharing politically charged and controversial issues by way of children's books in the classroom, it is important to be aware that these issues might already be a part of the lived realities of some children (Cornell, 2010). Using this literature to kindle and support critical discussions to look at what is being read and what is being experienced in this world are essential steps towards imagining and realizing a just, equitable future.

Through the very relatable experiences of a young child in India, this book offers opportunities to discuss these big ideas with children and inspires courage for standing up for what's right, beyond fear. Yet another strand to explore within this story is the number of strong and independent women within Nida's family and around their community. This perspective challenges stereotypical gender roles and norms of a community and society.

The author uses culturally specific language to help contextualize the story within a Muslim household, and curious young readers will want to explore the meaning and usage of words they encounter that might be new to them. These authorial decisions disrupt the idea of standardized

English and reinforce the idea of language learning as a social experience (Ahearn, 2017). Additionally, font style changes emphasize emotion and urgency, adding to the drama of the story. The delightful illustrations by Priya Kuriyan are provocations for great conversations about the various adventures in Nida's life and her fascinating family members. The story offers several opportunities to make thoughtful connections and to critically reflect on individual agency in society by asking questions, resisting unfairness, and asserting oneself.

Bibliography

Mishra, Samina, illus. Priya Kuriyan. (2011). *Nida Finds a Way*. India Duckbill.

References

- Ahearn, L. M. (2017). *Living language: An introduction to linguistic anthropology*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Cornell, G. (2010). Who can stay here? Documentation and citizenship in children's literature. *Rethinking Schools*, 25(1). <https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/who-can-stay-here-documentation-and-citizenship-in-childrens-literature/>
- Mishra, S. (2023). Hum Hindustani: The Indian child citizen in school and the world. *TESF India, IIHS*. <https://doi.org/10.24943/TESEF0605.2023>
- Thakur, A. (2019, December 26). Unfazed by cold, 200 women stage sit-in at Shaheen Bagh, police seek to end protest. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/unfazed-by-cold-200-women-stage-sit-in-at-shaheen-bagh-police-seek-to-end-protest-1631797-2019-12-26>

Bhakti Verma is currently pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and her research interests include the role of children's literature to learn English, and children's engagement with social justice-themed literature. She is currently working on creating a podcast on children's literature where guests from India and the USA will dialogue on the history, current research, and the future of publication of children's literature.



Sanna, Francesca (2016)

The Journey

London: Flying Eye Books

Recommended by Wafa Pathan

The Journey by Francesca Sanna is a picturebook based on a universal story of refugee experiences beyond the limits of time and setting. The book is the collective narrative of all those refugee stories which were personally shared by refugee children with the author/illustrator in the refugee centre in Italy. The book is targeted toward a young readership (7–11 years old), though it could be suitable for English language learners through lower secondary school. *The Journey* won the UKLA book award in the 7 to 11 category (UK Literary Association, 2017), the Klaus Flugge Prize (2017) and the Amnesty CILIP Honour in 2017 (Amnesty International, 2018). It is suitable for introducing the topic of war, its consequences on people, the refugee experience, and the complexities of borders. The picturebook functions as an acknowledgment of the refugees' hardship and yet communicates its challenging experiences to the non-refugee reader so they can empathize with the journeys refugee children must make.

Within the genre of refugee narrative, *The Journey* is the story of all those people who have to leave their homes in the never-ending journey of seeking to find a new safe home. It explicitly and yet creatively defines the causes underlying the refugee crisis and shows how war affects countries, from disturbing the daily routine of people to losing loved ones, as refugees fleeing constantly are compelled to undertake dangerous journeys, facing the challenges and uncertainties of crossing state borders. Unlike some other 'happy ending' refugee tales, Sanna's *The Journey* brings the reader closer to the reality that in most cases, the refugee journey seems never to end. Nonetheless, the book concludes by movingly spotlighting the faith, hope, and resilience of refugees who continue to travel in the resolute search for a safe home.

The book is beautifully illustrated with diverse colours that embody characters, setting, hardships, and hopes with rich symbolism. The use of more simple English is tailored to the needs

of an early age readership, yet invites them to reflect on and empathize with the crises refugees are forced to endure. It is a beautiful, artistically written and illustrated multiple award-winning picturebook that manages to sensitively depict the suffering of the refugee experience, preserving the pain without compromising its authenticity. Finally, the book is the holistic picture of the refugee experience, where refugees' initial home and diverse community are described to reflect the normal life people live until forced to become refugees – without depicting them living as 'others' in purportedly 'underdeveloped' circumstances, as some other books in the refugee fiction genre unfortunately sometimes do.

Ward and Warren (2020) present three criteria for evaluating texts about refugee experiences for use in the classroom, encouraging teachers to consider whether they are educative, engaging, and appropriate. *The Journey* fulfils all the criteria and can be used in the classroom by following the strategies of Arizpe, Bagelman, et al. (2014) and Arizpe et al. (2014) to approach and develop intercultural, critical, and visual literacy. These include the 'River of Reading' strategy introduced by Bednall, Cranston, and Bearne (2008) and discussed in the work of Arizpe, Bagelman, et al. (2014) which invites students to create visual collages of their reading lives in and outside the classroom, walk-and-talk-throughs which provide space for students to co-construct meaning through image analysis and text-to-self connection, and annotations of visuals which encourage students to co-construct meaning by adding speech or thought bubbles to a particular image. The book also carries pedagogical affordances through visual literacy as well as the verbal text. For instance, the twelfth spread in the book is contradictory, with the illustration and text telling different stories about the mother's affective state. The presence of two mutually independent narratives (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2013) invites readers to interpret the book by negotiating the meaning making process with the help of contradicting visual and verbal cues. Lastly, if used creatively and responsibly, the picturebook has a great potential to generate the discussion we need the most in the present times, that find so many displaced children seeking physical, emotional, and intellectual refuge across the globe.

Bibliography

Sanna, Francesca. (2017). *The Journey*. Flying Eye Books.

References

- Amnesty International. (2018). Amnesty CILIP Honour winners 2017. *Amnesty International*.
<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/stories-rights/amnesty-cilip-honour-winners-2017>
- Arzipe, E., Bagelman, C., Devlin, A. M., Farrell, M., & McAdam, J. E. (2014). Visualizing intercultural literacy: Engaging critically with diversity and migration in the classroom through an image-based approach. *Language and Intercultural Communication* 14(3), 304–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2014.903056>
- Arzipe, E., Colomer, T., & Martínez-Roldán, C. (2014). *Visual journeys through wordless narratives: An international inquiry with immigrant children and the arrival*. A&C Black.
- Bednall, J., Cranston, L., & Bearne, E. (2008). The most wonderful adventure... going beyond the literal. *English Four to Eleven*, 32, 19–26.
- Klaus Flugge Prize (2017). 2017 Klaus Flugge Prize. <https://www.klausfluggeprize.co.uk/winner-2017/>
- Nikolajeva, M., & Scott, C. (2013). *How picturebooks work*. Routledge.
- UK Literary Association. (2017). UKLA Book Awards 2017 winners announced! *UKLA*.
<https://ukla.org/news/ukla-book-awards-2017-winners-announced/>
- Ward, N.A., & Warren, A.N. (2020). “In search of peace”: Refugee experiences in children’s literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 73(4), 405–413. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1849>

Wafa Pathan is a PhD candidate in the section for English and Foreign Languages of the Teacher Education Department at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Her doctoral dissertation project ‘Affect, Identity and Trauma in Contemporary Family Film’ aims to study the correlation of affect, identity and intergenerational trauma narrative in children’s latest animated English movies produced by Disney and Pixar. Wafa holds a BS in English Literature, a Master in Applied Linguistics and an International Master in Children’s Literature, Media & Culture. She has worked as a teacher of Urdu and Hindi as foreign languages in her capacity as a Fulbright scholar at the University of Oregon and has served as a Lecturer of English, linguistics, and literature at a number of Pakistani universities.