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## **“From where to where?” Exploring the notion of place in children’s picture books and graphic novels about refugees**

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### **Abstract**

This paper will attempt to bring out approaches to the issue of the refugees in a sample of Anglophone literary production of 2016, the year following the great refugee crisis, focusing on children’s picture books. In particular, the aspect of “place” was selected to explore its importance and function since it is a notion at the heart of the refugee transition process. “Place” is analyzed as the refugees’ sending and receiving a place in both the books’ narration and illustration. In addition, it is attempted to interpret the interrelation between “place” and characters and the possible symbolic dimension that place can have in words and images.

This paper attempts to explore how the issue of refugees is depicted in a sample of children’s picture books and graphic novels of Anglophone literary production of 2016, the year following the 2015 refugee crisis. In particular, it is the aspect of “place” that was selected to explore because of its importance and function since it is a notion at the heart of the refugee transition process. “Place” is viewed in terms of narration and illustration as the two ends of a transition: the starting point-homeland and the destination of a long fleeing journey. In addition, an interpretation of the interrelation between “place” and characters is attempted along with the analysis of the symbolic dimension that “place” can have given by words and images.

Αυτή η εργασία επιχειρεί να διερευνήσει πώς απεικονίζεται το ζήτημα των προσφύγων σε ένα δείγμα παιδικών εικονογραφημένων βιβλίων και graphic novels της αγγλόφωνης λογοτεχνικής παραγωγής του 2016, το έτος μετά την προσφυγική κρίση του 2015. Ειδικότερα, το θέμα που επιλέχθηκε να αναλυθεί είναι ο τόπος, λόγω της σημασίας και της λειτουργίας του στη διαδικασία μετάβασης των προσφύγων. Ο «τόπος» αντιμετωπίζεται από την άποψη της αφήγησης και της εικονογράφησης ως τα δύο άκρα μιας μετάβασης: η αφετηρία-πατρίδα και ο προορισμός ενός μακρινού ταξιδιού φυγής και σωτηρίας. Επιπρόσθετα, επιχειρείται η ερμηνεία της αλληλεπίδρασης μεταξύ του «τόπου» και των χαρακτήρων, καθώς και της συμβολικής διάστασής του μέσα από τις λέξεις και τις εικόνες.

*Keywords:* picture books, refugee crisis, setting, place, journey.



## Introduction

Literature and art, in general, are affected by the current social circumstances, ideology and politics. Reciprocally, they also depict ideology, politics, and part of the history of an era (Hunt, 2001: 194-195). Especially literature affects the audience in a direct or indirect way attempting to move them, to urge them to question, doubt, form attitudes and adopt behaviors. Although adult literature boldly deals with taboo issues, children's literature has been more cautious when touching upon problematic concepts because of the authors' ethical responsibility toward their audience. Concepts such as wars, civil wars, national disasters, or refugees have not always been welcomed in children's books. The children's literature author, particularly the author who writes about traumatic historical or political experiences, has to deal with the pedagogical and emotional effects books can have, with the historical accuracy they must have and with the empathy, they should cause (Gavriilidou, 2017: 1-2).

This is the reason why *The Silver Sword* by Ian Serraillier (1956) when it was first published, triggered a reaction storm because the war was not meant to be a "suitable subject for children" according to Hope (2008: 295-296). She also supports that *The Silver Sword* is "the first widely known children's book, written in English, where the refugee experience is the major theme of the narrative" (2008: 296). Until then war was considered something terrible to show to children due to the toughness of the theme, so the refugee issue as the result of war was prohibited, too.

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this attitude of "pain refusal" in children's books changed completely. Social, historical and political themes have been addressed, protagonists are not ideal, infallible or heroic, but as ordinary people they have defects, they come up against difficulties and they have inner strength (Kouraki, 2008: 26). Novels for older children or young adults have been written about Nazism, World War II, the Holocaust, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the war in Yugoslavia, and several themes about human rights in Somalia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, etc. In recent years such themes and especially the refugee experience have come up in picture books, too, aiming at younger readers, due to current political and social circumstances not only in Europe but all over the world. Some examples of this type of book could be *Brothers in Hope* (2005) about the story of the lost boys of Sudan, *Four Feet, Two Sandals* (2007) about two Afghani girls in a refugee camp in Pakistan, *My Freedom Trip* (1998) about the crossing from North Korea to South Korea, *A Song for Cambodia* (2008) about the conflicts in 1975<sup>1</sup> and many more (for an extensive list see Literature for Children and Adolescents about the Refugee and Immigrant Experience by refugee ONE, 2019). In the U.S. the trend was developed earlier with *The Lotus Seed* by Garland in 1993, probably due to the multicultural social situation, while in the UK the first picture book about refugees was not published until 2002 when Mary Hoffman wrote *The Colour of Home* (Hope, 2007). The fact is that more and more books about the refugees' experiences are published every year developing a specific genre on its own (Hope, 2017).

All the information about the causes and the process of population migration and about personal stories of refugees reaches children through the TV, internet and press, and, of course,

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<sup>1</sup>The Cambodian Civil War was a civil war in Cambodia fought between the forces of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (known as the Khmer Rouge, supported by North Vietnam and the Viet Cong) against the government forces of the Kingdom of Cambodia and, after October 1970, the Khmer Republic, which had succeeded the kingdom (both supported by the United States and South Vietnam).



through their everyday experiences with newcomers. And here is the paradox: when authors write historical fiction, even in picture books, they base their story on real events and places from the past (May, 1995: 115), in other words, the story is already a memory and it is read when the readers have a safe time distance from the event. But what happens when picture books deal with current stories of ordinary children who escape from their country under unfavourable conditions, who lose their family, their friends, and they are confronted with death and loss? In this case, picture books must present the cruelty of real events to young readers without scaring them and at the same time without embellishing the facts so that reading is turned into a painless procedure, as Giannikopoulou mentions (2015:7). This result can be achieved by the sense of hope and optimism for the future, which all children's books-according to some critics (e.g. Tucker, 1995: 163)- must hold out for the end. A multimodal text, like a picture book combining speech with images, is a good way to weaken horrible events by limiting difficult points to one code –either verbal or imagery- allowing the other to silence, according to Giannikopoulou (2015: 8).

The “synergy” of text and pictures, to use Sipe's term (1998: 98), functions in a lot of different ways adding meaning to the story being told. Words and pictures can present the following relationships proposed by Schwarcz (1982, qtd in Nikolajeva and Scott, 2013: 6-7) to explain the interaction of text and pictures: congruency, elaboration, alternation, amplification, extension, deviation, opposition, and counterpoint. Especially picture books about refugees serve as a key field for readers to explore the surface and the multiplicity of issues that surround the refugee experience, the emotions, and the reality that accompany the journeys of refugees (Crawford & Roberts 2018: 15). As far as the topic of place is concerned, a lot of details, covered or explicit, can be unfolded due to the interplay of visual and literary features. In picture books, the verbal depiction of place is almost absent, since pictures are more appropriate to describe the place (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2013: 62) and most of the information about the place is conveyed through pictures (Martinez & Harmon (2012: 323-343).

### **The Books**

In this paper, we will attempt to bring out elements of the refugees' issue depiction in a sample of Anglophone literary production of children's picture books and graphic novels. Although there are “generic differences” between picture books and graphic novels, at the same time they are kin since they come from the same literary-artistic family tree (Nel 2012: 445)<sup>2</sup>. Based on their similarities (they are visual experiences, they are based on interdependence, and they share many formal features), we will examine four picture books and one graphic novel, knowing and accepting their differences, but focusing on the pictorial depiction of place.-The joint examination of picture books and graphic novels about refugees came up because both of them use a dual code of communication: speech and illustrations. It is this visual description that saves words and makes it more appealing to young children offering unlimited possibilities as Nikolajeva and Scott notice (2013: 62).

The sample to examine, as a key study, was limited to the Anglophone production of 2016, exhibited in the Bologna Children's Book Fair after on-the-spot research, as an attempt to examine how the 2015 refugee crisis affected literary production and how it was depicted in

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<sup>2</sup>The relation between picture books and graphic novels is analyzed in detail in volume 37 of *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* (2012).



picture books and graphic novels. The year of publication chosen is 2016, just after a sharp escalation of global forced displacement that reached its highest point in 2015 characterising the refugee crisis as the worst since World War II. According to UNHCR (June 2016), there were 65.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide from which 21.3 million were officially refugees and asylum seekers. The year 2014 showed the highest annual increase due to the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Also, apart from those who were officially under the refugee definition of the Geneva Convention (1951), there were also new categories of displaced people seeking refuge due to climatic change and natural disasters. It seemed inevitable for young readers' authors not to be touched resulting in a variety of books produced aiming at depicting the refugee experience.

From the initial research, it was found that the war(s) in the Middle East and, in particular, Syria was a source of inspiration. Poverty, which is also a form of violence as it implies restricted access to resources, is a reason to flee, too. And there was also the case of global warming which produces environmental refugees although they have not yet been given the status of the refugee.

Specifically, in our content analysis we included 5 books:

Sanna, F. (2016). *The Journey*. Flying Eye Books.,

Ruurs, M. (2016). *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey* (Badr, N., artwork). Orca Book.,

Barroux. (2016). *Welcome*. Egmont Books Ltd.,

Young, R. & Ottley, M. (2016). *Teacup*. Scholastic Press,

Colfer, E. & Donkin A. (authors), (2016). *Illegal* (Rigano, G., illustrator). Hodder (graphic novel).

Each of the selected books stood out for different reasons. *Stepping Stones* had a unique illustration of stone artwork by a native Syrian artist with a story told in two languages (English and Arabic). *The Journey* was based on a true story. *Welcome* was about a different kind of refugees, the environmental refugees. *Teacup* was an allegorical story and *Illegal* was a cruel but plausible story in a graphic novel form.

Even from the book titles it is apparent that space and movement within it are vital to the topic of refugees. In particular, *The Journey* speaks for itself. *Stepping Stones* could stand for the adventurous, long and hard journey away from war, by the usage of gathered rocks depicting the hard but hopeful paths (Crawford & Roberts 2018: 15). *Welcome* implies the arrival of a person at a place. *Illegal* is an adjective suggesting a movement against the law. When used for people it means that they have been found at a place where they should not be implying a transitional movement, trespassing.

### **Theoretical framework: The Place of the stories or “Where does the story take place?”**

Setting (or time and place) is an important element in children's literature and especially in picture books, either described in words or in pictures. Although it has been given less prominence than plot or characters, Giannikopoulou advocates that setting can be of decisive importance for the children's understanding of the story and reaction to it (2008: 218).

Sometimes time and place play a crucial role in books such as historical fiction, in contrast to stories such as fairy tales, where time and space are undefined and have a secondary role (Karpozilou, 1995: 193-194). Rebecca Lukens (2007: 168-170) suggests that setting is



divided into two types: setting as “backdrop”, when the setting has no influence on the plot or on characters and the same characters or the same incidents could be or happen anywhere (e.g., *Winnie the Pooh*, *Pippi Longstocking*). The second setting type is “integral” where the setting is very important and irreplaceable. In this type values, speech, actions and characters move through and not over the setting.

More specifically, according to Lukens (2007: 172-180) setting has several functions. Firstly, it clarifies the plot by explaining the reasons why events are happening; it can reveal the conflict of the characters with one another, with society, with one self. Secondly, it highlights the characters as it is obvious that characters are formatted by the time and the place they grow and live in. Although place in general is not a feature of characterisation, it can strengthen our concept of the personality, the feelings, the beliefs, the identity, the process of maturity or the development of the hero (Papantonakis and Kotopoulos, 2011: 67-69). At the same time, setting can act as a competitor, as the hero's rival, in cases when the place is a hostile environment where the character must survive. Moreover, setting can stand for the atmosphere and the mood that reveals the untold and gives away indirect emotions. In the case of picture books and graphic novels this mood could be given by the colours and the choice of the painting technique used. Finally, according to Nikolajeva (2002: 272-273), setting as a symbol can enhance or contribute to characterization and can interpret the characters' psychological condition. For example, a storm can symbolize “a turmoil in the character psyche”, the change of seasons “marks the character's evolution” and the fog can symbolize “the character's confused mind”. At the same time, an extreme setting like a war can result in the maturity of the character's personality.

But what do we really mean by the notion of “place”? As it is quoted in Parker (2016: 74), Knox and Marston say that “place is semiotically manifested space, while space is physically and socially construed”. Lutwack (1984) separates the term ‘place’ from the term ‘space’, ‘scene’, ‘setting’ and ‘landscape’, preferring using the term ‘place’ not in a district geographical sense, but as a literary metaphoric and literal idea (Lutwack, 1984: 27-37). Malmgren (1985: 35) and Stefanou (1994: 86-87) point out that the “place” includes cultural conditions, human activity, information, ideas, feelings, memories and experiences. In this way “place” has a quality definition and interrelates with identity and material existence (Eyles, 2013: 13-19). In our case the interpretation of place includes physical, social and symbolic context, the movement within space, the transition, the journey itself.

Place often also includes the concept of home. Nicolajeva (2005: 140-141) in the context of exploring the setting in the children's literature, also studies the importance of home as a time and place point, stating that the scholars of Children's Literature have found that home is presented as a place of privilege, as a timeless refuge of the hero. Home, therefore, beyond its definition as residence contains a synthesis of experiences, myths and archetypes, political and social reality, desires, symbolism (Kouraki 2020). At home one can find one's origin, grow, shape one's identity, face justice or injustice, equality or discrimination, find love and security or violence and fear, socialize or isolate, find privacy, see it as hell or as paradise (Maher 2005: 287, Mallet, 2004).

The analysis of the notion of “place” presented a challenge as a way to explore authors' approaches to the issue since the refugee experience is strongly connected to a transition process from one place to another. Thus, within this frame, we analysed the five books exploring the importance and function of “place” as the refugees' departure point and destination from one



place to another in both the books' narration and illustration. In addition, it was attempted to interpret the interrelation between place and characters, and the symbolic dimension that place can have in words and illustrations. To sum up, the focus of the content analysis was on the potential that the notion of "place" carries in portraying the refugee experience as it can present valuable information about the pre, trans and post migration ecology (Hope, 2017).

### **Place of departure – Place of reception/destination**

In the refugee topic, place is the core of the issue, since the plot is evolving because of the movement of populations to another place. In the examined books, fictional characters are forced to move from their countries due to war or poverty or conditions that make a place uninhabitable to another unknown place, where they hope that they will find a friendly place to settle down. The place of departure, coinciding with the notion of home as was mentioned above, is given indirectly in different ways.

From the first pictures, *The Journey* gives a sense of the East from the architecture of the city and the external appearance of family friends. Even the room where the mother and her friend are placed has specific objects which testify traditions of the East, like the tea pots and the small tea cups. In particular, the protagonists begin their journey not only from a town but from a specific house. The family's home is colourful, full of books (which is probably an indirect reference to the social and educational status of the family) and a place of safety, until the time that war as a black figure with big hands enters and dominates a place where the past happiness and the present despair are imprinted on the family's portrait now and before. As Evans (2017:5) supports for *The Journey*, "the images use simple colour palette, which depict the variety of landscapes through which the family passes in order to escape conflict and seek sanctuary".

The importance of home is obvious in *Stepping Stones* too. Rama was living in a house where she could hear the rooster every morning, where she had a warm bed and flowers in her yard. As she says, it was "a soil they called home". Home in this case includes not only the sense of a house or a place of a family life but also the sense of the country. The end of Rama's journey comes when she finds a new home, a home "with new sounds and smells, with smiles and people who help", a home which we never see in the picture as a building but a home we can imagine and feel.

In *Stepping Stones*, the characters' names such as Rama, Sami, Jedo imply their origin. In the first-person narration, Rama, the protagonist of the story, remembers the days before the war, when in their village they were free to laugh, play, drink tea with the neighbours - a clue that in this country tea is a traditional habit-. In the rest of the story there is nothing else giving information about the place of origin, except maybe for the usage of stones from the artist, which conveys the atmosphere of a country which is lost for many people (Evans 2017:5). In contrast, the paratext of the book, which generally contains the prologue, the epilogue, notes, the title, the cover and the back cover, the author's and illustrator's bio and their photos (Genette 1997), is clear evidence that the author and the artist of the book were inspired by the Syrian refugees. Both in the prologue and in the creator's bionote, it becomes clear that the inspiration for the story and the characters are refugees from the Middle East.

However, in both the above books the destination is not so clear. It is a place without war, where "there are strange cities with strange forests and strange animals" (*The Journey*); a place where the literary characters are going to be safe "free from guns and bombs, free from

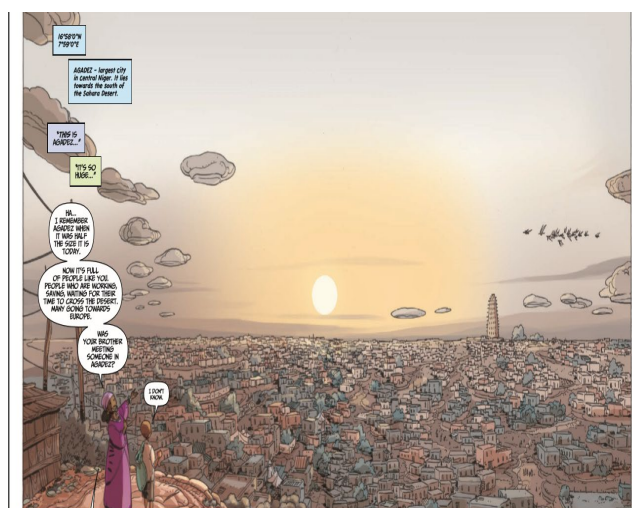


fear” (*Stepping Stones*); the place of their future. Only through paratext again is it getting clear that this place is in the West and in the case of *The Journey* it probably depicts Northern Europe, since *The Journey* is inspired by the true stories of two girls in an Italian refugee camp.

In the case of *Welcome*, three polar bears leave North Pole as a piece of ice is broken off and carried away. They end up at a place that looks tropical, and even though it is not a place that a polar bear could normally live, the bears look happy. The place of departure brings up clear associations of the issue of global warming and environmental refugees. The fact that monkeys come to join the polar bears in the final destination could imply that anyone could be turned into a refugee anytime and anywhere for no predictable cause.

*Teacup* is an allegorical book where the time and place of departure have no importance. The protagonist is in the middle of the sea without a hint about the place of destination allowing multiple possibilities for the reader’s interpretation concerning the causes of the journey. The only hint for the journey is the verbal information that “he had to go” making it clear that it was not his choice but it was imposed by outer conditions. The book was published in Australia and since the country is not directly affected by the Middle East crisis but has long been exposed to the migration issue, the context can be approached in various ways, allowing the readers to project their own experiences, surroundings and background knowledge. The reader can read the book as an inner exploration, a personal journey to maturity, a quest for physical or emotional safety.

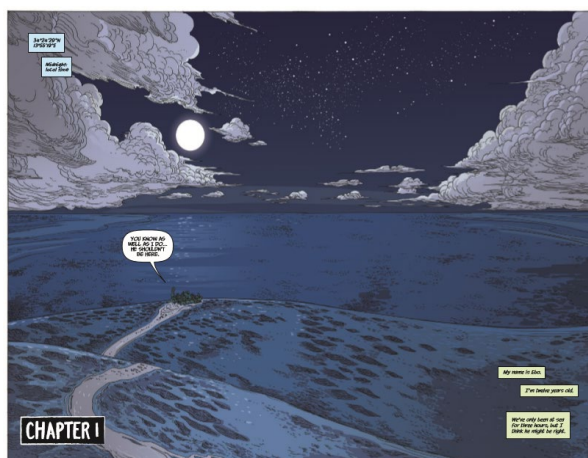
The graphic novel *Illegal* is a completely different case. The book is divided into chapters where the past alternates with the present of the narrative. In the past of the narrative, it becomes obvious from the pictures that Ebo’s (the protagonist) home is an African village, where poverty dominates (p.7). His brother leaves him a message telling him that he is going to Europe to find their sister and to send him some money so that he can then join them. So Ebo’s journey begins because of the lack of sense of home. The poverty of his “home” and people who do not help lead the protagonist to abandoning his country. From his unknown village he moves to the closest city which is named by the bus driver “Agadez”. “Agadez is the largest city in central Nigeria and it lies towards the south of the Sahara Desert” as the narrator explains. The specific place becomes more accurate with the geographic coordinates which are also cited by the omniscient narrator on the top of a double page (Picture 1, p. 24-25).



Picture 1, *Illegal*



Specific information about the exact places of the hero's journey can be spotted throughout the verbal text both in the past and the present of the narration. So Ebo and his brother cross the desert by truck and on foot, they reach Tripoli in northern Africa close to the Mediterranean Sea and, finally, when crossing the sea only Ebo survives and arrives at a refugees' camp in Italy. Geographic coordinates are also given by the narrator in the first chapter, where the protagonists are in a boat in the middle of the sea at "Midnight: local time" (Picture 2, p. 2). This author's choice for space and time explicitness probably is not accidental but very conscious, despite the fact that real places should not be confused with fictional places, since it is all about "a game of plausibility and representation" (Anagnostopoulou 154). The fact that the heroes go to the unknown but the reader has the privilege of knowing precisely their location causes tension in the narrative and an emotional contradiction to the reader. At the same time, it seems crucial for the author to make it explicit to the readers that this story is real, so that they identify with the refugee/migration problem and develop empathy.



*Picture 2, Illegal*

Moreover, in the afterword of the book, the true story of Helen (a girl from Eritrea who travelled alone through Soudan to Libya and finally arrived in Italy) is given to confirm that such stories can happen to real boys or girls from different countries, with the same survival problems and the same destiny (p. 123-127).

On the other hand, the purpose of developing empathy is served by the authors' choice in the other four books not to name home place and destination implying that anyone anywhere in the world can find themselves in such a situation. The indirect reference to the East, Europe and North Pole is enough to bring up the readers' existing schemata about the contemporary refugee crisis and global warming problems and to lead them to associating situations and information from other sources.

The common element in all five books is that the place of departure is a place of danger and death in contrast to the place of arrival, which is a place of survival. At the same time the place of departure is a place where the home of the heroes' is, a place where specific objects, memories, senses give heroes' identity. An identity that the heroes carry with them as a legacy





for the beginning of a new life. The place of origin becomes the basis that forms the place of destination and at the same time connects the past with the present and the future.

### Symbolic use of the place

The symbolic use of place both by words and images is also of great interest in all five books as it is used to convey more subtle shades of meaning. Main features such as the town, the sea, the desert, the forest obtain different interpretations across the stories.

In particular, all five stories start from a town or a village. In *The Journey* the first picture is from a town near the sea, where all the family is pictured. The town could be real, but at the same time could be a part of the sand city (between reality and fiction) which the children and their father are building. The presence of the dark sea is important (the colour is given only in the picture), because the sea on the next page stands for the war - a black monster with big hands - which destroys everything and takes away the children's father (Picture 3).

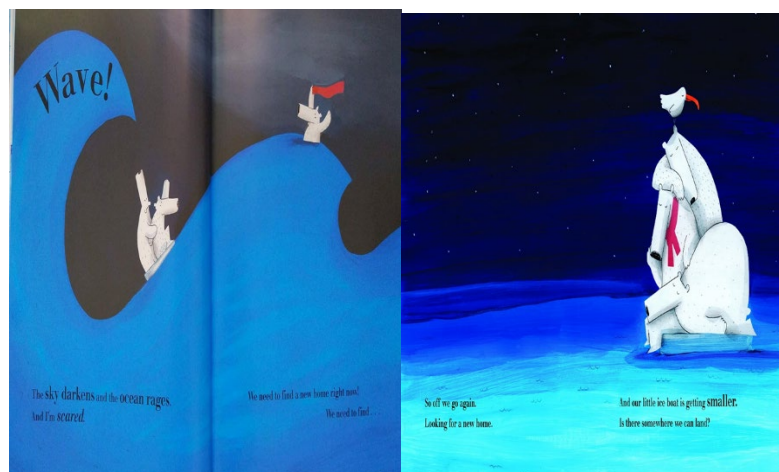


Picture 3, *The Journey*

Moreover, the sea is an important space element of the stories, too, revealing the mood of the story as Zervou (2020) observes for a collection of relevant Greek picture books. The sea is the “bridge” that brings the protagonists closer to their goal and, at the same time, it can be a dangerous place, which can act as a competitor (Lukens, 2007:172-180) and which can keep them away from their dream losing their life. In most of the pictures the sea is dark with strange creatures and big fish at the bottom (*Journey, Teacup*) or dead people (*Illegal, Stepping Stones*) referring to the sea the refugees have to cross to reach sanctuary. In *The Journey* the sea is personalized and with her hands she tries to take the people from the boat with her. The implication of the picture is frightening but it is not obvious from the first sight. Only if someone observes the picture very carefully can they find the hidden face of the sea. In

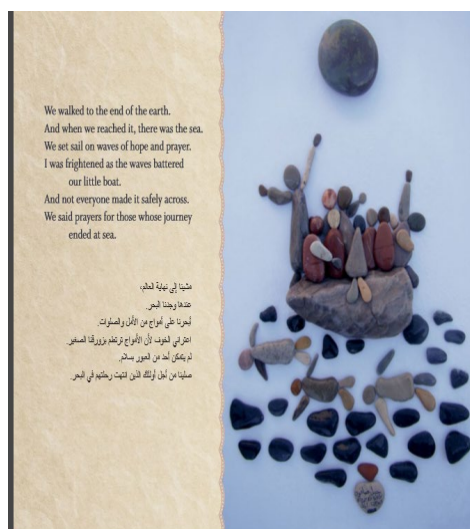


Welcome the dangerous element of the sea, both the vastness and the rage of the sea, is expressed through lexical and imagery means as well (Picture 4).



Picture 4, *Welcome*

Even in *Stepping stones* where images are made of sea stones (an element of irony in itself), the sea is made of black ones, a fact that underlines the role of the sea as an element of the setting in all books which transfers the indirect message of the dark and the unknown, expressing the characters' feelings in a metonymic way (Picture 5).



Picture 5, *Stepping Stones*

A similar metonymical function rises from the presence of the forest (*The Journey*) or the desert (*Illegal*) in the process of transition from one place to another. The desert is vast, dangerous and threatening to make protagonists feel helpless and alone in the long journey of survival, intensifying the way how they already feel. The forest, which archetypically represents peril and entrapment according to Lutwack (1984: 31), stands dark and huge in comparison to the heroes who are illustrated in the size of an ant. This correlation is probably



chosen to reflect their feelings, which are not at all expressed in the lexical text. The contrast of the size between human figures and the desert or the forest underlines the adversity of the conditions, as well as the weakness of the human existence when facing the insurmountable obstacles of abandoning the homeland.

*Teacup* is overall a symbolic narration. The protagonist of the *Teacup* has also to leave home and find another, as the external narrator informs us. The boy of the *Teacup*, takes with him a bag with books, a bottle, a blanket, and his teacup where he keeps “*some earth from where he used to play*”. Without showing the place of his departure, the place of his destination, and the causes of his journey, as was mentioned before, the narrator gives us indirectly that “home” for the protagonist is not a house but a sense. The importance of this sense of home is given by the teacup with the soil, which has obviously a metonymical use. The place in *Teacup* at the first sight looks as if it has no meaning. The sea, the sky and the horizon are the only -abstract- elements of “place”. The dark and the light colours of the sky and the sea reveal the protagonist’s feelings. But when the dark colour of the clouds gets a form, then we can see with light colours his memories, the elements of his place. An elephant and other animals, a hut and a musical instrument testify to what home means for him and, at the same time, reveal some hints about his origin (Picture 6).



Picture 6, *Teacup*

And then, the soil in the cup becomes a tree. A tree with roots that gave him “*shelter and shade, apples to eat, branches to climb and cosy nooks that he knew were just perfect for daydreaming. From high...he continued his search for a speck on the horizon*”. Although the literal place of the book is only the sea, the sky, the horizon and a piece of land, the real home place for the boy is inside him and he carries it wherever he goes. When he reaches the land (which by chance is going to be the place of his settlement), his tree gets solid roots, and the boy begins to build... He begins to build a new life and a new house -we can see the smoke from its chimney at the edge of the picture- and the boy looks happy. In this way, the abstract and symbolic place remains abstract (a land, a house, somewhere...) but, simultaneously, it becomes specific in the boy’s mind, with concrete characteristics of what home means.

### The journey



The journey as a transition from one place to another is a common, “central and vital element of children’s literature” (Hunt, 1987: 11-14) from the time of mythology, classic or folk fairy tales and classic novels. The characters are moving through difficulties to achieve a goal (Odyssey) or as a symbolic movement, to find themselves, to “get to know” their inner world, to search themselves in the world (Lutwack 1984), to get to adulthood (Alice in Wonderland). Meanwhile, heroes travel to find new places, to meet unknown worlds, civilizations (e.g. travel literature, Jules Verne) (Oktapoda, 2011:1-10), to get new experiences and to have the chance to doubt, to test their beliefs, their customs, their prejudices (Apostolidou and Hondolidou, 2004:15). The notion of “journey” is directly connected to the notion of place, time and culture and includes meanings such as “diversity, identity, change and transition” (Kotopoulos, 2011: 307). Most of the time travelling is a pleasant process, full of expectations, curiosity, and excitement, with a triple structure: departure, adventure, and return (Petkou, 2008).

In our examined books the common feeling about the journey and the narrative motif of return is missing. As Cornell (2010) notes, picture books dealing with immigration do not deal so much with the everyday life of immigrant families as with their long journeys. The refugees’ journey has an “emblematic status” (Vassiloudi 2019: 5) in these narratives. It has become a popular image that seems to deflect attention from any other implication of the refugee condition (Vassiloudi 2019: 5). The motivation of the journey is not internal. The heroes are forced to move to another place due to violent facts without having a hope of return. The unknown is not full of excitement since “travelling” is the only way to survive. The journey through the desert and the sea is not an adventure but a real event happening in the real world of peoples’ displacement. In this way, children’s books become an attestation of the reality depicting the hard conditions many people on the planet are in due to other humans’ choices.

The difficulty of the conditions the characters face is underlined. The journey is a lonely process, even if the heroes are not alone. Fears, thoughts, and the hope of seeking a new and safe home are the foremost common elements the refugees have. The hostile environment of the “transition” mirrors the heroes’ feelings. The sea and the desert are always dangerous even if they are depicted as calm and seemingly harmless. People get drowned in the sea and die in the desert. People are stopped by borders and become victims of exploitation and rejection by other people (or animals in the case of *Welcome*). Journey, in other words, becomes the transition from the characters’ past to their future and at the same time, becomes their way to rebirth. Although we are not provided with details about the characters’ new life (since the emphasis is more on their temporal emotions which are related to the travel conditions), it is certain that through their journey they mature earlier and become new, different persons because of this painful procedure which is determined by the transition from one place to another: From the place which gives them their basic identity to a place which this identity establishes their new life.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, all five books analysed deal with the current issues that force people to flee: the war(s) in the Middle East, climate change resulting in people losing their homes and farmland, extreme poverty resulting in people being taken advantage of, barely able to survive.

In the refugee topic, the place proves to be the core of the issue because the problem is caused by the movement of the population (groups or individuals) to other places. The



emphasis of the theme is on the transition from one place to another. Although in most children's books there is an archetypical pattern of the journey, in the refugee topic the journey does not stem from inner motivation but it is externally imposed. This forcefulness seems to affect the characters and it is depicted on the text, both the narrative and the imagery.

The journey is full of difficulties and obstacles which are created by the borders, either man-made borders to separate countries and cultures or natural borders with the sea being the major one. At the same time, people turn the sea into a bridge to a new life. The destination, the promise of a new life, is the optimistic touch of the books, the reason to make the journey worthwhile even if the price is a painful loss.

The concept of home often determines the place of departure in this journey. The definition of the departure country seems out of importance but the concept of home is clearly crucial for the fictional refugees. The heroes leave a place with special smells, sounds, feelings, objects and people. They seek a place to feel like home, where they are going to be welcomed, safe, hopeful, without fear, with people they love. They want some land to call it home. They want their memories to make roots and to be given a better life.

Moreover, in these books, place, either given with words or artistic choices, is used symbolically as well: it expresses the characters' inner thoughts and emotions directly revealed to the reader. Even objects, bags, or suitcases acquire a symbolic role: people sometimes leave their belongings behind with their memories and dignity. Their belongings, material or intangible, give them substance and identity. They represent the place of origin, determine the identity of the characters and shape the new reality and the "reborn" selves of the heroes. In that way, the place leaves its mark on the characters and their lives.

In this symbolic function, colours play a crucial role. Dark colours reflect danger. War, sea, sky and forest are painted dark to convey the characters' despair, fear, and loss. In contrast, the good days of the past and the future are captured with light colours, which give hope. The selected colours and illustration techniques serve the purpose of creating an atmosphere, of conveying a mood to the reader. In *Stepping Stones*, the usage of stones indirectly reveals the difficult journey of the heroes and creates a spirit of a certain hometown where the heroes' roots are. In *Illegal*, the graphic novel technique, probably because it is aimed at older children, is tougher, without hesitating to show harsh moments and situations. The described places are believable and realistic, emphasizing the plausibility of situations. On the contrary, in the rest of the books the place is rendered with techniques more accessible to children, revealing the untold and giving away indirect emotions about the refugees' painful experience.

Overall, the function of place in picture books about refugees is crucial to the story and the plot, multi-layered, indicative of the core issue of people's transition from one place to another, surpassing the borders (real or symbolic) that denote the passage from East to West, from danger to safety, from fear to relief.

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## Appendix

**Sanna, F.(2016). *The Journey*. Flying Eye Books.**

It is the journey of an ordinary family who leave their home to escape the turmoil and tragedy brought by war. During their adventurous journey they change many means of transport, they face hurdles, hide in the forest and cross the sea to reach a safe place. The book has won the 2017 Klaus Flugge prize for the most exciting newcomer to children's picture book illustration along with other awards and distinctions (e.g Ezra Jack Keats New Author Honor and New Illustrator Honor Award, Selected as an ALSC notable children's book of 2017 NOTABLE CHILDREN'S BOOK OF 2017).

**Ruurs, M. (2016). *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey* (Badr, N., artwork). Orca Book.**

This unique dual-language picture book (English and Arabic) was inspired by the stone artwork of Syrian artist Nizar Ali Badr, discovered by chance by Canadian children's writer Margriet Ruurs. The author was immediately impressed by the strong narrative quality of Badr's work (fascinating tableaux composed of stones), and, using many of Mr. Badr's already-created pieces, she set out to create a story about the Syrian refugee crisis. *Stepping Stones* tells the story of a young girl and her family, who are forced to flee their once-peaceful village to escape the civil war and make their way toward safety in Europe.

**Barroux. (2016). *Welcome*. Egmont Books Ltd.**

When a piece of ice is broken off, three lost polar bears are swept away from their icy home, hoping to find refuge in a new land. But when they are turned away from one new place after another, they start to doubt that they will ever find somewhere they will be made welcome. Finally, they found a new home until three lost monkeys who are looking for a new home come along. The bears think about it, and say that they are welcome!

**Colfer, E. & Donkin A. (authors), (2016). *Illegal* (Rigano, G., illustrator). Hodder.** A graphic novel about one boy's epic journey across Africa to Europe. A boy follows his brother in his attempt to escape poverty and to reach Europe. Throughout his journey he comes up against hardship and danger and even when he loses his brother he does not lose his hope to reunite with his sister starting a new life. Although a graphic novel is not directly categorised as a typical picture book, there is still a strong cooperation between words and pictures. Also, the particular book is an interesting example of how literary production was influenced by the current social migration ecology. As a result it was considered worth including in the content analysis.

**Young, R. & Ottley, M. (2016). *Teacup*. Scholastic Press.**

A boy must leave his home and find another. He brings with him a teacup full of earth from the place where he grew up, and sets off to sea. Some days, the journey is peaceful, and the skies are cloudless and bright. Some days, storms threaten to overturn his boat. And some days,



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the smallest amount of hope grows into something glorious. At last, the boy finds land, but he doesn't feel complete until another traveller joins him, bearing the seed to build a new home.