

2018

# Seeing the human face: Refugee and asylum seeker narratives and an ethics of care in recent Australian picture books

Debra Dudek

*Edith Cowan University*, [d.dudek@ecu.edu.au](mailto:d.dudek@ecu.edu.au)

---

[10.1353/chq.2018.0044](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/5713)

Copyright © . This article first appeared in : Dudek, D. (2018). Seeing the Human Face: Refugee and Asylum Seeker Narratives and an Ethics of Care in Recent Australian Picture Books. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 43(4), 363-376. Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved February 14, 2019. Reprinted with permission by Johns Hopkins University Press. Original article available [here](#).

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/5713>

## Seeing the Human Face: Refugee and Asylum Seeker Narratives and an Ethics of Care in Recent Australian Picture Books

Debra Dudek

While working on the final stages of this essay, I went to a local children's bookstore to look for a retelling of *The Tempest* to assist the eleven-year-old in my life with a drama audition.<sup>1</sup> The audition required him to memorize the monologue in which Trinculo finds Caliban on the beach and asks, "What have we here? a man or a fish? dead or alive?" (2.2.24–25). The owner of the shop—who knows my field of research and advises me when new books arrive that she thinks would interest me—asked whether I had seen the latest Armin Greder book, *The Mediterranean*, which had arrived in her shop that week. I had not, so she brought the book over to me. The only words in the narrative appear on the first page: "After he had finished drowning, / his body sank slowly / to the bottom, / where the fish / were waiting."<sup>2</sup> The echo between Trinculo's monologue and Greder's prologue resonates with me as a haunting reminder of the proximity of life and death and the capacity of human beings and federal governments for refusing care.

That serendipitous occasion seems an appropriate introduction to this article, in which I survey eight Australian picture books that seek to redress a seeming absence of care in Australian politics in relation to refugees and asylum seekers. In Australia, the welfare of child refugees and asylum seekers has received considerable attention from various entities—governments; the United Nations; activist organizations such as ChilOut, Save the Children, and Amnesty International; and, indeed, individual citizens. Such scrutiny became particularly important after the scandalous Children Overboard incident that occurred during the lead-up to a federal election in 2001, when the conservative Liberal party was seeking another term under the

leadership of John Howard. The government notoriously misled the people by falsely claiming that asylum seekers had thrown their children overboard in order to force the Australian navy to save them (see Manne; Trioli).

Texts for young people often respond to and represent a political climate in which they are produced, so it is no surprise that over the seventeen years since the Children Overboard scandal, a substantial number of books for young people that represent the experiences of child refugees and asylum seekers has been published in Australia, with most of them overtly advocating for the rights of these children. The publication of these books occurred primarily during two political periods: 2002–06, during Howard’s leadership; and 2014–17, seemingly in response to Tony Abbott’s Liberal government, which harkened back to some of Howard’s leanings.<sup>3</sup> At least ten young adult novels and picture books about asylum seekers imprisoned in detention centers were published between 2004 and 2006, a time during which there was heated political debate around the Australian Human Rights Commission’s inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention, which found Australia’s immigration detention laws to be inconsistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Dudek, “Murmels”). The next concentration of Australian-published picture books representing children affected by war or forced migration occurred between 2014 and 2017, with five issued in 2015 alone—approximately the same number as had been published over the previous six years. Abbott was Prime Minister of Australia from September 2013 to September 2015, and his leadership was significantly defined by his “stop the boats” rhetoric, which was frighteningly akin to Howard’s 2001 federal election speech in which he claimed, “We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.”

In this article, I discuss eight picture books published or written in Australia during Abbott's prime ministership: *My Two Blankets* (2014), *Suri's Wall* (2015), *Ride, Ricardo, Ride!* (2015), *Mate and Me* (2015), *Teacup* (2015), *Flight* (2015), *Out* (2016), and *I'm Australian Too* (2017). These narratives challenge Abbott's "stop the boats" mantra by showing the necessity and precariousness of forced migration due to violent conflict. The publication of these books highlights a seeming disconnect between ordinary Australians and a government meant to act on behalf of its citizens. An editorial published in one of Australia's major newspapers on 28 January 2016 aptly summarizes this gap: "We [Australians] like to believe that we are a just people, open and honest, that we uphold the spirit of fairness and that we look out for each other. But some of the policies implemented by federal or state governments in recent years have undermined Australia's reputation as a progressive nation that upholds the highest standards of human rights" ("Human Rights Losing to Bad Policies"). This belief that Australians "look out for each other" and "for the most disadvantaged members of our community" could be characterized as a civic virtue connected to an ethics of care.

I turn to notions of civic virtue because recent—and I daresay current—political leaders in Australia seem inadequately concerned with such virtue. The picture books that I cover in this article depict the situations of people who suffer under foreign regimes, who continue to live precariously in Australia, and who might eventually flourish due to the relational well-being that can arise out of the caring acts of strangers who may eventually become friends. In *Just Love: Transforming Civic Virtue* (2009), Ann Mongoven looks to people whom she calls "ordinary moral heroes" to redefine civic virtue (7). Mongoven argues that "true civic virtue must mutually relate the moral skills of caring for particular others to the moral skills of broad political fairness" (12). The books I examine here depict a healthy community founded upon an ethics of

care, and/or a depleted community when care is absent. Although none of these books invokes structural change, all of them demonstrate how relational well-being forms a foundation for civic virtue.

When I refer to an ethics of care, I draw upon the work of Jonathan Herring, who links compassion and care through the idea of “compassionate relational care” (158). He includes compassion in his definition of care to make “clear that what is being promoted is not simply a task of care (e.g. washing someone), but that act done in a compassionate way, in a drawing-alongside and recognising the fellow humanity of the individual” (161). He suggests that there are “four markers of care: meeting needs, respect, responsibility and relationality.” Caring involves “the meetings of needs of another, in a way that respects them as a person, which involves acknowledging the responsibilities that come with caring and which must be understood in the context of a mutual relationship” (159). Although it is not feasible to consider all eight books closely in this article, I want to touch upon each of them briefly in order to provide readers with a scope of the books published during this political period. I suggest that most of them both represent an ethics of care within the narratives and invite an ethics of care as a reading position. When an ethics of care is absent, the narratives summon the reader to assume a position of potential carer.

Six of the eight books—the exceptions are *Mate and Me* and *I'm Australian Too*—contain Herring's four markers of care by focalizing a single narrative from the point of view of a character or characters who suffer due to a forced change in circumstance based upon an implied or explicit violent situation. *Mate and Me*, written by Jennifer Loakes and illustrated by Belinda Elliott, is ostensibly about a friendship between the white narrator and Matata, a black boy who has come with his family “from a faraway place” to live upstairs from the narrator. The

two boys become friends after discovering that they are both caring for a family of birds living in the basement. Although the book includes two stories of migration—that of Matata’s family and that of the family of birds—there is no suggestion that Matata’s family was forced to flee South Africa; in fact, the parallel stories problematically dehumanize Matata by aligning him with the birds. Furthermore, the narrator’s shortening of Matata’s name to Mate—a common Australian colloquial term for “friend”—erases Matata’s individuality, so that he can become any friend. The story flattens to focus on the narrator and the care for the birds rather to acknowledge respect or responsibility for Matata and his experience of moving to a different country.

*My Two Blankets* and *Out* are much more sensitive in representing the erasure of a name as a signifier of loss. Both books signal this absence on the first page and employ an object from the main character’s home country to make her uncertainty material and visual. Furthermore, they both illustrate an emotional and situational change through their verbal text and by altering the visual color palette. Winner of the 2015 Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Picture Book of the Year Award, *My Two Blankets*—written by Irena Kobald and illustrated by Freya Blackwood—begins with the main character performing a cartwheel in her home country. The double-page opening depicts the young girl balanced on one hand in a mid-cartwheel stance. Figured in the foreground, her whole body expanding across the page, the girl exudes joy and freedom. Her dress is orange and red, as are the houses and clothing of the people behind her. The color palette washes warm tones across the page. On the opposite page, black against the buttery gold sky, are the following words:

Auntie used to call me Cartwheel.

Then came the war and Auntie

didn’t call me Cartwheel any more.

The internal rhyme of “war” and “any more” accentuates the connection between war and loss, a point made more explicit because the girl remains nameless throughout the rest of the story. This erasure of her name serves as a reminder of the trauma of the war while also opening a space for readers to recognize themselves in her everyday experiences. The book pointedly makes this connection in the author’s dedication to “all the ‘Cartwheels’ of this world, past, present and future—may you find comfort and understanding in these pages.” Throughout the book, the young girl continues to wear her red and orange dress and red head covering, but the color of her clothing marks her and her aunt as different, as the only marks of brightness in an otherwise muted world of light blues, greens, and browns.

The second double-page spread exemplifies this difference and change in circumstance by featuring the young girl and her aunt crowded into a train. The perspective shows the two of them through a window, its frame a border that encloses them in harsh contrast to the girl’s unbounded cartwheel across the opening pages. The accompanying text juxtaposes safety and strangeness to highlight a disconnect between physical safety and emotional well-being:

We came to this country to be safe.

Everything was strange.

The people were strange.

The food was strange.

The animals and the plants were strange.

Even the wind felt strange.

The assonance of “safe” and “strange” connects the two words, even as the repetition of the word “strange” at the end of each subsequent line and sentence undercuts the possibility of safety.

While the girl never articulates a feeling of physical fear, her loneliness in a world full of a language she does not understand invokes an uncertainty based upon the change in her material conditions. The girl highlights her feeling of loneliness, of feeling cold “under a waterfall of strange sounds.” Her solitude is illustrated by rendering her small against the large pages when she is pictured outside. The girl admits that only when she is at home and wrapped in an orange and red “blanket / of my own words and sounds” does she again feel safe, and in these moments she becomes part of her blanket, which fills the page.

Her uncertainty begins to dissipate when, one day, another girl smiles and waves at her in a park. Slowly, the two girls become friends, and the girl once called Cartwheel makes another blanket formed of new words that she learns from her friend. The final single page shows the two girls performing cartwheels together against a landscape now accented with splashes of orange and red—a kite high in the sky, a picnic blanket, a girl’s long hair flowing behind her as she swings. Cartwheel’s new friend, whom we might consider one of Mongoven’s “ordinary moral heroes,” now wears orange-and-red-striped tights in place of the blue stripes that she had worn earlier in the book. Although this closing image may seem idealistic, it metaphorically represents a healthier diverse community, improved by the reciprocal relational well-being of this citizenry.

*Out*, written by Angela May George and illustrated by Owen Swan, also juxtaposes bright yellow with a muted blue, grey, and green world to signify corporeal difference and precariousness. The cover of the book sets up the premise: an overhead perspective shows the open bow of a boat in which people sit and lie, exhaustion apparent in their slouched bodies. The boat and its passengers appear as sketches, as though rendered as an artist’s work in progress. The only two figures standing and depicted in color are a woman and a young girl, who we soon learn are the main characters. The girl’s arm reaches over the edge of the boat and dangles a



bright yellow piece of yarn into the dark grey water, and the yarn shapes into the title of the book: *out*.

As in *My Two Blankets*, the author's dedication in *Out* links the book's content to the politics of the world in which it is produced and consumed: "For those who have tried and for those who have made it out." The first page introduces the main character, a nameless girl who feels uncertain about her sense of self in this country: "I feel different. It's the way people stare. / I'm called an asylum seeker, but that's / not my name." As with the introduction of the girl once called Cartwheel, so *Out* features a girl centered in the left side of a double-page opening. Unlike Cartwheel, however, this girl does not move joyously across the page into a hopeful future. Instead, she walks to the left, back to the beginning of the book rather than forward. Since she is portrayed in the same muted hues as the urban street upon which she walks, her only splash of color comes from the bright yellow piece of yarn that falls down the side of her backpack.

The yellow yarn marks the girl throughout the narrative. As she tells her story, the string becomes an extension of her body and a visual metaphor of a tie to her past, primarily articulated as fear for the safety of her absent father. The narrative divides into two sections: after the opening, the first half of the story relates the girl's journey, and the second half follows her day-to-day life in her new home with her mother. That life seems hopeful but still characterized by uncertainty, especially regarding the location of her father, who she believes may still be in a refugee camp. In the first part of the story, the yellow yarn streams from the girl's hair as she flees a burning building and then nestles against her hair as she snuggles with her mother while hiding from "men with guns." The girl uses the yarn as a distraction while on the boat, dangling it over the side and then using it to play cat's cradle with her mother. Once on land in her new

home, the girl still carries the yarn with her throughout the day: to mark the backpack as hers; as part of her ribbon dance; to hold out of the car window.

Twice in the narrative, both at moments of uncertainty, the yellow yarn lies static on the floor in a depiction of the girl's embodied fear. The first instance occurs in the illustration that marks the shift from the girl's journey on the boat to her transition into life in her new home:

Now that we're here, life on the boat seems so long ago.

These days, I run to win races.

These days, we camp for fun.

But some days, when there's a loud bang, I drop to the floor.

The parallel sentences beginning with the repeated phrase "these days" invite the reader to recall the juxtaposition between the girl's previous life of running from "horrible things" and camping to hide from the men with guns, and her life in which these activities are now done for fun rather than for survival. However, the internalized fear—and a need for care—remain. The accompanying picture shows the girl on her knees huddled underneath her desk, the strand of yellow curled in front of her.

The second moment uses the inert yarn to represent the girl's uncertainty and fear, to mirror the opening pages of the book, and to posit a more secure future. On these penultimate pages, the girl stands on the right-hand side of the double-page opening. She looks to the right through the open door of her bedroom, and the yarn dangles from her hand and runs in a straight line behind her. There are no words on the pages, which suggests a suspended moment of hesitation, but on the previous page, the girl sees her mother dancing and laughing and wonders what has made her so happy: "She just smiled and said, 'You'll see.'" The reader joins the girl in

this moment of hesitation and must turn the page in order to end the suspense and to see the story's resolution. The story ends with the girl hugging her father, the yarn nowhere to be seen.

This situation of a family separated by war may be specific to people living in countries devastated by conflict, but past wars also inform current nationalisms. *Ride, Ricardo, Ride!*, *Flight, Teacup*, and *Suri's Wall* all take place in a setting affected by war either in a clearly identified past or in a liminal space between past and present, reality and fantasy. All four books were also published in 2015, a year significant for Australia because it is the centenary of the landing of ANZAC (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) troops at Gallipoli, Turkey, during the First World War. Anzac Day (25 April) in Australia resembles Remembrance Day/Veterans Day (11 November) in North America, but the anniversary of this landing is also a core aspect of national identity and is commemorated as an honoring of past sacrifice, a recognition of current conflicts, and a commitment to a peaceful future. These sentiments are perhaps best summarized in the service held at the Australian War Memorial on Anzac Day 2015, when participants were greeted with these words:

We gather here with humility and immense pride, free and confident heirs to a legacy born of idealism, forged in self-sacrifice and passed now to our generation. We do so in renewed commitment to one another, our nation, and the hope of a better world.

Anzac Day goes beyond the anniversary of the Gallipoli landings of 1915. Today we remember those Australians who have served, suffered, and died in all wars, conflicts, and peacekeeping operations. Many continue to suffer as a consequence of their service. The spirit of Anzac—courage, endurance, mateship and sacrifice—infuses our sense of who we are, how we relate to one another, and how we see our place in the world.

(Australian War Memorial)

I quote this text at some length because the four books that I discuss next represent certain aspects of this “spirit of Anzac”—courage, endurance, and sacrifice—but simultaneously show the loneliness, fear, and uncertainty that exist during times of conflict. They pay homage to this spirit while also complicating it by showing the devastation experienced by the civilian population.

*Ride, Ricardo, Ride!*, written by Phil Cummings and illustrated by Shane Devries, encapsulates in sepia tones a time past, and although the time period is not explicitly stated as being that of the First World War, the setting conjures an idyllic life in an Italian village that is destroyed when an army arrives. Depicted and described as “the shadows,” the individual soldiers march as one unit, casting long, dark shadows across the streets and walls of the village. Like Cartwheel’s blanket and the yellow yarn in *Out*, Ricardo’s bike symbolizes a core aspect of the main character’s identity. The book opens with Ricardo riding “under endless / open skies, quiet and clear,” but when the army arrives, his father tells him that he must hide his bike away so that it will not be taken by the shadows and “lost / forever.”

Tragically, it is not Ricardo’s bike but rather his father who is “lost to the shadows.” Through this language of loss, the bike becomes a metonym for his father, gone but not forgotten, and care for Ricardo shifts to the community. The narrative ends years later, when the shadows finally fade, and Ricardo finds the pieces of his bike where he and his father had hidden them. He puts the bike back together and rides away from the village into the hills, with the voice of his father echoing in his mind: “Ride, Ricardo, ride!” The specificity of the naming—and the author’s dedication, “To the real ‘Ricardo’”—combine with the realism of the illustrations to create the illusion of a narrative grounded in historical fact, which invites a reflection upon current wars and their long-term effect on families and communities.

*Suri's Wall*, written by Lucy Estela and illustrated by Matt Ottley, also harkens back to a time past while commenting upon current political practices. Estela says that the idea for the book came to her after watching news stories about detention centers and a documentary about the tallest woman in the world (“Suri’s Wall”). In *Suri's Wall*, Suri lives with a group of children behind a tall stone wall whose doorways are guarded by armed soldiers—reminiscent of knights—dressed in full armor. Suri stands taller than all of the other children, and her height initially makes them afraid of her. Each month, she marks her height on the wall until one morning when she discovers she can now see over its top. When the other children notice her looking over the wall, they ask her to tell them what she sees. Each day, Suri cares for the children and tells them stories about a wondrous world beyond the wall—a world with golden bridges, butterflies, peacocks, and a “huge harbour filled with boats,” including the king’s ship.

The world Suri describes to the children, however, bears little resemblance to the world she sees. She does not tell them about the people leaving the city with all their possessions piled on horses and donkeys and carts or about the city now in rubble. Instead, Ottley’s illustrations create a lush landscape that transports the children to a sun-filled forest and a brightly colored circus. While the rest of the townspeople flee, the children are seen pictured amid circus tents and towering tree trunks, a world of wonder and not war. The book ends with the children asking Suri about the “big bangs” that they heard from beyond the wall. She pauses and looks over the wall at the half-sunken ship and the huge column of smoke billowing from the ruined city, and she says, “Oh, it’s beautiful, let me tell you all about it.” The book invites a consideration of children’s ability to cope with uncertainty and unpredictability and adults’ tendency to protect children from harshness and suffering. Although Suri is the same age as the other children, due

to her height she assumes the role of caregiver rather than peer. She stands in for the absent adults, who might have tried to protect the children from suffering.

Of the eight books, Rebecca Young's *Teacup*, also illustrated by Ottley, exists most overtly in a liminal space between reality and fantasy, between truth and fable, between childhood and adulthood. By invoking a fairy tale, the opening sentence calls to readers to recognize the trope and to recognize the uncertainty, even if they have not had to emigrate: "Once there was a boy who had to leave home . . . and find another" (ellipsis in original). Ottley's expansive double-page illustrations set the boy against a landscape that renders him vulnerable yet powerful: he appears small against billowing clouds and an infinite sea, but his imagination also shapes the natural world into memories of home. An albatross reminds him of flying kites; the taste of salt recalls "the sea breeze, / whistling through his favourite tree"; the sounds of whales calling remind him of his mother's voice; "And the way the clouds slowly swam into view / reminded him of how things / can change / with a whisper." In this illustration, the boy and his boat disappear for the only time in the narrative. Instead, white cottony clouds become fish, birds, a house, a butterfly, a mouse, an elephant, a mandolin, a teddy bear, and a dog falling diagonally across the page. The dog then turns into a dark grey steed and a dragon whose tail emerges from a foreboding mountain of a thundercloud that fills the page and pushes back across it.

The story next shifts from the boy's journey to the tree that grows inside his teacup and offers him shelter, shade, food, and play until he arrives on land and begins to build and to wait "for a whisper." The story's conclusion rather disappointingly settles for a heteronormative happy ending—which I suppose one might expect from a fairy tale—when the "girl with the broken eggcup arrived." More perplexing is the final image of the book, which shows two sets of

larger footprints and one set of baby footprints in the sand, facing a group of objects: a pear nuzzling an apple, flanked by the broken-off handle of a teacup and a piece of an eggcup. I can only surmise that broken teacup boy and broken eggcup girl become fruitful and multiply. In the end, compassionate relational care becomes ambiguous heteronormativity as the child seemingly becomes an adult.

Nadia Wheatley's *Flight*, illustrated by Greder and winner of the 2016 CBCA Picture Book of the Year Award, contains a similar story of being forced to leave one's home. *Flight*, however, transforms a biblical story into a contemporary refugee narrative. As Wheatley says, "I knew that what I wanted to do was to write the story of the Flight into Egypt in a way that initially lulls readers into thinking that it is set 2000 years ago; then suddenly, by introducing a bombardment and tanks, the story would become something that could be happening on the evening television news" ("Meet Nadia Wheatley"). The story follows a family—mother, father, baby boy—forced to flee their desert home because "They've been tipped off that the authorities / are after their blood." Page after page shows the family traveling across a vast wasteland, using the stars as their guide. They avoid the "night's bombardment" and the tanks, but their donkey bolts from the noise, so the family is forced to walk the rest of the way without the goods that were lost with the donkey. Finally, on the penultimate page of the book, the family reaches the refugee camp, where "There is nothing to do but wait, until their cry for / help is heard." Years pass in the space of a paragraph. The final page shows the baby now grown into a young boy: "'One day,' he promises his mother, / 'we will reach our new home.'" Compassionate relational care exists within the nuclear family, but the "cry for help" implores the reader to care as well.

Perhaps more emotionally evocative than Wheatley's sparse narrative are Greder's stark illustrations. *Flight* is very much in keeping with Greder's bare style, his haunting harsh

monotones, and his use of dense black charcoal strokes against glaring white backgrounds. As with *Teacup*, the landscape overwhelms the narrative, looming above and stretching before the family. Unlike the soothing blue-green palette of *Teacup*, however, the hues in *Flight* are grounded in earth tones, which suit the bare severity of the desert landscape, the precarious journey, and the heavy fear.

Picture books often rely upon an interplay between verbal and visual texts, and *Flight* is especially evocative in its use of illustrations to supplement the verbal story rather than to represent it directly. *Flight* limits the verbal narrative to small boxes of text, all located on the top half of the right-hand side of the double-page spread with the exception of the final page, which I shall examine below. The position on the page implies a future-oriented forward narrative momentum. As readers turn the page from right to left, the verbal story appears regularly, reliably at eye level, which makes the verbal text predominant. While the illustrations exist primarily as background landscape, at least initially, the pitch-black sky and never-ending desert stretch relentlessly behind the words to mimic the darkness in which the family traverses the landscape.

As their journey continues and as their fear grows, the family's proximity to the reader and to the verbal text increases. For the first four double-page spreads, the words tell the story of the family fleeing their home and traveling across the desert with only the stars as their guide. On these pages, readers must cast their eyes back across the desert to the left-hand side of the illustration in order to see the family. As the story progresses, the family moves from hiding behind buildings in the far left corner of the page, to walking across the bottom left page, to emerging mid-left page to gaze at the stars, to stopping to stare at the fires burning in the



distance. Then, as the rumbling of the tanks grows closer, the family moves to the middle of the right-hand side of the page.

In this opening, the verbal and visual texts tell different aspects of the family's story, as they map precariousness and a need for care onto the page. The words explain the loss of a donkey while the illustrations show the head of the donkey pulling at the man's hand; the man looks back across the desert into the past from which they have come; and, most tellingly, the mother gazes directly but ambiguously at the reader—either appealing for acknowledgement or cowering in fear—instead of looking down to soothe the baby, as the words imply.

The mother's direct gaze also ends the book, in a startling departure from the previous illustrations. Instead of the double-page full landscape bleeds that saturate the rest of the book, in this final image the background disappears to feature the people without distraction. Pictured here are those people coded as the most vulnerable, a woman and a child, but now the baby is a boy with a voice, who consoles his mother with promises for a less precarious future. Here child and mother look at and to the implied child and perhaps adult reader in a direct appeal, or a *demand gaze*, to use Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen's term. The mother and child's gaze "demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her" (122). The gaze here demands respect, responsibility, relationality, and that needs be met. This gaze demands care from the reader in the absence of a depicted care. The material precariousness disappears to highlight the emotional need for belonging in a new home, still out of reach. Whereas *Teacup* begins with "Once there was a boy who had to leave home and find another," *Flight* begins and ends with the family still living in a state of uncertainty and in need of care.

Many of these books draw upon and represent a world made precarious due to violent conflict and the fear that uncertainty breeds—or perhaps the uncertainty that fear breeds. Mem Fox makes this point emphatically in a blog post on her Web site in which she speaks about what moved her to write her latest picture book, *I'm Australian Too*, illustrated by Ronojoy Ghosh and published 1 March 2017. In late 2014, Fox was listening to a news report on Radio National about

something ghastly about our immigration system, and I found myself reflecting on the less-than-positive attitude we have always had to newcomers in Australia. . . . So I decided to write a very rhythmic, loving, friendly *Australian* book, (going back to my *Possum Magic* roots) about all the people who have come here to make Australia the lovely place it is. . . . The last three verses. . . . contain a scream on behalf of refugees, and a longing for a kinder Australia—the country we used to be, before high-profile racists in politics and the media were granted the power to make heart-breaking decisions and speak detestable words against many of the decent, inspiring people who populate this beautiful land. (“Gossip”)

I shall not spend too much time pointing to some of the troubling aspects of this explanation, such as the contradiction between the “less-than-positive attitude we have always had to newcomers” and “a longing for a kinder Australia—the country we used to be.” *I'm Australian Too* contains similar contradictions.

It is obvious from her blog that Fox wrote this book to celebrate overtly an optimistic, ideal view of Australia—as a peaceful country that welcomes people from across the world—and to criticize covertly the people who do not work to make the country a safe place for everyone, those “high-profile racists” whom she names in her blog. Unfortunately, *I'm Australian Too*

harkens back to earlier books that intend to promote cultural diversity and a respect for difference but do so by relying upon a rhetoric of sameness rather than by demonstrating respect and responsibility for all people regardless of difference. (It is telling that the back cover of the book claims, “Mem Fox celebrates Australia’s incredible multicultural heritage.”) Fox’s book does this work in both form and content. Most of the book is structured around a double-page opening that uses a rhyming quatrain to tell the story of one Australian family, and each page ends with the question, “How about you?” The Australians in the book are diverse; they include Indigenous peoples as well as immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Greece, England, Lebanon, Vietnam, China, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Syria. The repeated question “How about you?” invites readers into the text via second-person address and asks them to think about their own stories, thereby creating a positive inclusivity. The rhyming pattern links each person’s story as a way to build connectivity, as does the repeated question “How about you?”

A shift in the repeating rhyme content and question occurs over the last three verses, beginning with the page that shows a little girl in a detention center. While the previous verses name specific cities or countries from which each speaker came, and celebrate a state of happiness or inclusion—often after a period of sadness or hardship—this page identifies the girl only as a refugee who wants to be a veterinarian. The previous pages tell a similar story over and over again, one based on similarities and assimilation: one speaker is in Adelaide because it is “so like Greece”; the family from Lebanon now sings the national anthem, “Advance Australia Fair!”; the person from Vietnam speaks “just like an Aussie”; and the Chinese family in Canberra “call out, ‘G’day mate!” The figure of the refugee, however, stops the repetition, and in this stoppage calls attention to where Australia fails. This page, and only this page, criticizes

Australia as a nation and shifts the second-person address from “you” to “your country,” which may still be read as an appeal to Australians.

Problematically, the sadness in this scene is attached to being a refugee rather than to being in a country—or more likely offshore from a country—that imprisons refugees and asylum seekers. The book might have been more successful had it ended here, but it does not. The final two verses and three pages turn away from criticism and move back into empty nationalistic jingoism: “We open doors to strangers. / Yes, everyone’s a friend. / Australia Fair is ours to share, / where broken hearts can mend.” According to the previous page, however, Australia does not welcome all strangers as friends. The white-picket-fenced neighborhood pictured with this verse is a cruel juxtaposition to the cement walls and razor wire of the detention center shown on the previous page, as is the final verse, which claims, “Together now, we live in peace, / beneath the Southern Star.” Children and adults in detention centers may indeed live beneath the Southern Star, but to say that we all live in peace is to deny the repeated trauma of detention and to understand living in peace to mean only living without war. To return to Mangoven’s phrase, *I’m Australian Too* shows little evidence of “caring for particular others”—unless we return via this second-person question to the implied reader. The verses and the illustrations, however, do not depict friendship at all, so by the time we reach the verse claiming that we “open doors to strangers. Yes, everyone’s a friend,” it seems at odds with the rest of the book. Indeed, children are mostly told *not* to open doors to strangers.

Unfortunately, messages about civic virtue, about how a nation and its citizenry should treat strangers, continue to lack an ethics of care. As I finished a draft of this article, one of the major news stories in Australia was focusing on how Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull refused to accept New Zealand’s offer to resettle 150 asylum seekers currently in Australia’s offshore

detention center (Belot). Turnbull based his refusal upon a belief that this resettlement deal would encourage people smugglers. In other words, he continued to practice a version of Abbott's "stop the boats" campaign. When asked her stance on the issue, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said that anyone could see the "human face" of the issue ("Ardern"). Overall, these picture books encourage readers to see the human faces of the stories within the books and beyond. They invite readers to bear witness to stories about families who have suffered and persevered under extreme conditions brought about by political powers in their home countries and in the country where they seek refuge. They position readers to consider how they would act under similar circumstances, and to think about the friendships we offer, both personally and civically.

## Notes

1. Thank you to Jennifer Jackson, Director of Paper Bird Children's Books & Arts in Fremantle, Western Australia.
2. The rest of Greder's wordless narrative contains seventeen double-page illustrations sketching the death cycle of refugees (please note that this text and the others cited in this essay are unpaginated). First published in 2017 in Italy and the UK and then in 2018 in Australia and New Zealand, *The Mediterranean* continues to illustrate the story that Greder published ten years earlier in *The Island*. The copy on the back of *The Mediterranean* makes this connection: "With eloquent and devastating imagery, the creator of the multi-award-winning book *The Island* again asks us to examine our responses to the plight of refugees." Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss *The Mediterranean* in detail, it is worth highlighting that *The Island* and *The Mediterranean* bookend this essay. See Dudek, "Thoughts" for an analysis of the representation

of compassion in *The Island* and for a summary of the Australian political context that informed it.

3. The Labour government was in power during the period (2007–14) between Howard’s and Abbott’s conservative governments.

### Works Cited

“Ardern Sees ‘Human Face’ of Manus Island Refugees.” *Radio New Zealand*. 2 Nov. 2017. 30

June 2018. <<https://www.radionz.co.nz/news/political/342955/ardern-sees-human-face-of-manus-island-refugees>>.

Australian War Memorial. *Anzac Day 2015: 100th Anniversary of the Gallipoli Landings*. 31

Oct. 2017. <<https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/2015-anzac-day-commemorative-program.pdf>>.

Belot, Henry. “Manus Island: Bill Shorten Urges PM Malcolm Turnbull to Consider Jacinda Ardern’s Offer to Help Resolve Crisis.” *ABC News*. 3 Nov. 2017.

<<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-03/manus-island-shorten-calls-on-turnbull-to-consider-nz-offer/9116438>>.

Cummings, Phil. *Ride, Ricardo, Ride!* Illus. Shane Devries. Parkside, SA: Omnibus, 2015.

Dudek, Debra. “Disturbing Thoughts: Representations of Compassion in Two Picture Books Entitled *The Island*.” *Jeunesse* 3.2 (2011): 11–29.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Of Murels and Snigs: Detention-Centre Narratives in Australian Literature for Children.” *Overland* 185 (2006): 38–42.

Estela, Lucy. *Suri’s Wall*. Illus. Matt Ottley. Melbourne: Penguin, 2015.

Fox, Mem. “The Gossip Behind *I’m Australian Too*.” Mem Fox Blog. 24 Feb. 2017.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *I'm Australian Too*. Illus. Ronojoy Ghosh. Gosford, NSW: Scholastic, 2017.
- George, Angela May. *Out*. Illus. Owen Swan. Sydney: Scholastic, 2016.
- Greder, Armin. *The Mediterranean*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2018.
- Herring, Jonathan. "Compassion, Ethics of Care and Legal Rights." *International Journal of Law in Context* 13.2 (2017): 158–71.
- "Human Rights Losing to Bad Policies." Editorial. *The Age* 28 Jan. 2016.  
<<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/human-rights-losing-to-bad-policies-20160128-gmg4aa.html>>.
- Kobald, Irena. *My Two Blankets*. Illus. Freya Blackwood. Melbourne: Little Hare, 2014.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo Van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Loakes, Jennifer. *Mate and Me*. Illus. Belinda Elliott. East Kew, VIC: Windy Hollow, 2015.
- Manne, Robert. "How Tampa Sailed into 2002." *The Age*. 30 Dec. 2002.  
<<https://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/12/29/1040511254630.html>>.
- Mongoven, Ann. *Just Love: Transforming Civic Virtue*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009.
- "Suri's Wall." Teacher's notes.  
<[http://resource.scholastic.com.au/resourcefiles/8379991\\_37603.pdf](http://resource.scholastic.com.au/resourcefiles/8379991_37603.pdf)>.
- Trioli, Virginia. "Reith Rewrites History to Hide the Shame of the Children Overboard Lie." *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 Sept. 2012. <<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/reith-rewrites-history-to-hide-the-shame-of-children-overboard-lie-20120831-255u3.html>>.
- Wheatley, Nadia. *Flight*. Illus. Armin Greder. East Kew, VIC: Windy Hollow, 2015.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Meet Nadia Wheatley." Interview. *The Children's Book Council of Australia Reading Time*. 26 June 2015. <<http://readingtime.com.au/meet-nadia-wheatley/>>.

Young, Rebecca. *Teacup*. Illus. Matt Ottley. Melbourne: Penguin, 2015.